

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Tuesday, May 29, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I’m in the home today of Admiral Nils Ron Thunman, and you always go by Ron, don’t you?

Thunman: Yeah, it’s not Nils Ronald Thunman.

DePue: Nils Ronald.

Thunman: And I go by Ron; you’re correct.

DePue: Or Admiral or sir.

Thunman: Just about anything. (laughs)

DePue: Well, it’s quite an honor to talk to you. I know we’re going to have at least two or three sessions—that would be my guess—because you had a long and illustrious career in the Navy, and you went to the Naval Academy. But we always start at the beginning of our stories here, and that, in your case, is when and where you were born.

Thunman: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1932, February 26, 1932. My family moved around the country quite a bit in the ‘39s, as I’m sure many families did, because that was how my father was able to have a job.

DePue: I wanted to give you an opportunity to take quite a bit of time talking about your parents. Let's start out with your father, because he had quite a story of his own to tell.

Thunman: Yes. My father, from Sweden, Sandviken, Sweden, one of a family of ten, the oldest. He left home when he was twenty-one, illegally went into Norway, across the border, to Oslo, broke a shipping strike and got a job on a Norwegian steamer and shoveled coal, in the stoke hole, as they called it in those days, and that's a story in itself. [There were] terrible conditions that they operated in. Got to the United States, New York City. He and a friend jumped ship and were illegal entries.



*Carl E. Thunman and his family in Sweden, circa 1919.*

DePue: What year was that?

Thunman: That was 1921. He, in Sweden, had done reasonably well, working in a steel mill. He'd taught himself German and Italian and was involved with the marketing in the steel mill. But he couldn't go on to higher education, because he didn't have the money. He was a pretty smart guy, as I understand it, as a youngster in Sweden.

So he came to America. His mother had sewn a few crowns [Swedish coins] into his coat, and he had planned this, jumping ship.

DePue: Why the United States?

Thunman: Well, he just felt that America was the opportunity of the world and always believed that, a great American, great nationalist. But he got here. His friend went back to the ship. They were swindled out of their money. It's a funny story. They were there in New York City at night, and they spotted \$100 bill on the ground and picked it up. Someone came out from the shadows and said, "I saw you pick that up, I'm going to call the police." So they offered to give him the \$100. They certainly didn't want to talk to police. He



*Carl Thunman as a Marine Corp, 1921*

said, "Well, if you can give me a few dollars, I'll let you keep the hundred." So he gave up the few crowns that he had in his coat and subsequently learned that the \$100 was a \$100 confederate bill. So there he was; he had one dollar, because pasted on the back of that dollar was a real U.S. dollar. That was how they had put it together. So he had \$1.00, and his friend panicked and went back.

I know that he had to sleep in flophouses. He was homeless in New York City. But somehow he got to the Marine Corps recruiting station, there in New York. They saw this big, strong Swede, and I guess in 1921, you didn't need much paperwork to support your enlistment, other than that you looked like you were capable.

DePue: How old was he at the time?

Thunman: He was twenty-one.

DePue: How much English did he speak?

Thunman: Interestingly, I was reading a paper, written by my niece, and she said that he didn't speak very much English when he came, but he spoke some. I never knew my dad to be wanting in English. Of course, he studied every day of his life, something; he was studying something. So I'm sure that if he was short in English when he got here, he fixed that in a few years.

But anyway, they enlisted him. The reason he had come to America was he was chasing my mother, who had come to America earlier, when she was fifteen and become a lady's maid in New York City, in a distinguished family. She had been here five, six, seven years, went back to Sweden to visit her parents, same hometown, Sandviken, and my father met her then. She came back to America. He wanted, of course, to continue their relationship here in America and came to call on her, right after he got off the ship. Of course, she looked at him, and he was just a mess, with coal dust in his skin and in his hands. He looked pretty much emaciated. I don't think they fed him very much on that steamer. So, she didn't think he looked all that good and let him go off on his own.

He was in the Marine Corps. He had an interesting career in the Marine Corps. He became the heavyweight boxing champion of the U.S.S. Maryland, a battleship, which was what they had in those days. They had boxing teams, and they competed against each other. Then, he said he did fine with that, until he said, some little sailor knocked him out.

Then he was able to get on the Marine Corps rifle team, which was quite an achievement in those days and I think today. If you're on the military service rifle team, you're something special, because they don't want to lose. He traveled around the world on the rifle team, came back to America and

went back to see my mother again. It had been a year or two. Now he looked a lot more presentable.

DePue: Was he wearing a uniform?

Thunman: Oh, yes, he was wearing a uniform, and I've got a wonderful picture of him up there that he's... Anyway, they decided to be married. The family that my mother worked for was a pretty powerful family, the Burden family. I think they were powerful in U.S. Steel.

I know, this paper that I recently read, my mother talked about watching Teddy Roosevelt having dinner in the family household. I thought it would have been Teddy Roosevelt Jr., but then I got looking at the timing. No, it could have been Teddy Roosevelt himself, because she came over in about 1905, 1904. I do know that she told Mrs. Burden that she wanted to be married, and Mrs. Burden said, "Well, you can't marry a military person, nobody should be married to a military person."

So, she picked up the phone or however she was able to communicate and talked to, I think, Teddy Roosevelt Jr., who was the assistant secretary of the Navy and said, "I'd like this young man to be discharged from the Marine Corps a year early." And he was, with an honorable discharge and all, with a good record. Somewhere in all of my records, I've got a copy of his discharge and the comments.

DePue: But he was okay with that, kind of being forced out?

Thunman: Yeah, I think he was. Well, I think he was okay with it. I think he was head over heels in love with this gal, and after all, he traveled halfway around the world to follow her.

DePue: Well, your mom must be quite the looker.

Thunman: Well, she was in those days. She really was, a very, very stylish lady. I think she learned all that from Mrs. Burden. She talked about this paper that I read a bit, being up in Maine in the summertime. The one story that I was able to validate was how she slammed the door in Vanderbilt's face. The family had gone, and it was rainy and black, and somebody was beating on the door. She opened the door and slammed the door, and the guy started shouting at her. She opened the door and looked at him again and slammed it, and it was Vanderbilt. (both laugh) She thought he was a burglar of some sort.

DePue: Well, you didn't tell me the name for either of your parents. Could you do that?

Thunman: My father is Carl Erik Thunman, E-r-i-k, and she was Julia Thunman, Lindblom.

DePue: Lindblom was her maiden name?

Thunman: Yes. She had people in her background who were authors—I can't recall the names—but who were distinguished in Sweden. Her father was the mayor of the city, Sandviken, and as I understand it, had a drinking problem and lost a lot of his wealth. That's one of the reasons he decided to come to America.

DePue: A new start.

Thunman: A new start. Well, she didn't come with him. She came here by herself, when she was fifteen years old, in third class steerage. You can imagine that. If you watch the movie, *The Titanic*, the third class steerage, and even in the movie they showed the men stoking the boilers. But she was a great lady and had set high standards for all of us. So anyway, they were married, and my brother Carl, Carl Erik Jr—

DePue: Is this with a K or a C?

Thunman: C. He was born about a year, year and a half later. My father was a wonderful carpenter. He's a wonderful engineer, I mean he was a born engineer, but he started out as a carpenter apprentice and a carpenter, very quickly became a carpenter foreman and in many cases, superintendent of construction of different projects around the country.

DePue: What year did they get married?

Thunman: It would have been about 1923 or '24.

DePue: So was he basically an independent contractor during these early years?

Thunman: No, no. He went to work for a company. I read the other day, CB Moon Company. They had jobs all around the country, mainly in the Midwest, Ohio, New York, Illinois. We also lived in Tennessee, and he may have worked for the John Felmly Company at that time. He was at least the carpenter foreman in these jobs, which was pretty good for a young fellow like that, but he was very, very capable.

The interesting part of it was that in the '30s, the then immigration authorities used to come to the jobs and say, "Now, do you have any illegal immigrants working for you?" He was still an illegal immigrant at that time.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Hold on. I need to get us started here again. We took a very quick break, and we're back at it.

Thunman: Well, we were talking about my father working in the '30s as a carpenter foreman and the immigration authorities coming and asking him if he had any

illegal immigrants. They were pretty tough in those days; they took them immediately and sent them back. There wasn't any sort of a amnesty program. I know this worried my father. I was the youngest now of three children. My brother, as I said, was born in about 1924, and I was born in 1932. My sister was two years older than my brother, so I was the baby of the family. I didn't see a lot of what had gone on in the '20s.

DePue: My question, before you get too much farther, how did he get into the Marines?

Thunman: Well, as I said earlier, I guess in 1921 there weren't many standards. I think I can understand that, because 1921, the war was over, prosperity in the country was starting to come, and they were probably having a hard time making their recruiting quotas. That's the only thing I can think of.

DePue: Plus, this big, handsome, strapping Swede. (both laugh)

Thunman: Big strong Swede. But, on the other side of it, the immigration officials were very thorough. I remember vaguely, in the '30s, discussions about his citizenship, about he was worried. It seems to me, I can recall discussions, him talking with my wife in low tones, about—

DePue: You mean your mom.

Thunman: Yeah, excuse me, with my mother, talking about the citizenship problem. I don't have these times set. I've got to get this information. But it was about 1939, when he finally decided that he had to make an official effort to get his citizenship, and he did. I know that he had to write and get recommendations from every place he had lived, from people, and every place he had worked. It just wasn't a standard effort and fill out one form. He had to put together a whole history and have it documented. He did that, and I do recall him coming home the day that he was naturalized. He had a little flag. My sister still has that flag. I remember him sitting down at the dining room table, and he had tears coming down his cheeks. He had gotten that monkey off his back. It was quite a problem, I'm sure, for him, for all those years.

DePue: Nineteen thirty-nine was the year?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Was that prior to September?

Thunman: I don't know. I can find that out. I didn't get to these records, as I said. I should have.

DePue: The only reason I'm asking, because of course, September first, I think, was the date that Germany invaded Poland.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: And Europe is once again in turmoil.

Thunman: Yes. Well, there's a good story about him in the military in World War II. As I said, there was no better American than my father, as far as being a strong, patriotic man. He **loved** America. God, nobody ever loved America like my father did and taught us, his children, to love America. When the war started, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, he came out on the front step of the house. I can still look at him. I was up in a cherry tree. I looked at him, and he was absolutely dark with rage. I just thought I had done something terrible, like leaving one of the saws out in the rain or something. But he had to talk to somebody about it, and he yelled up at me, "The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor." I didn't even know what Pearl Harbor was.

But he immediately tried to join. The new corps that the Navy was forming was the Seabees, a construction battalion. He put together all the things that are necessary. They were delighted to have him, because he had so much experience in building and leading men to build things, right down where the rubber meets the road, right down at the project level. It was all set up, and they were going to make him a lieutenant commander. He was really pleased with it. I remember that. This was in the early '40s. My mother was really concerned about it. Then, when he took his physical, they wouldn't pass him, because he didn't have any teeth. He'd lost all his teeth, as people did in those days, in the '30s. My mother didn't have any teeth either. But they would not take him because...He was furious about that, because he wanted to serve.

And he did serve. If you go around Illinois, you'll find an awful lot of the factories that were built in that time, he was involved in. Illiopolis, they built Illiopolis, for example. They built, I know, Galesburg. He would come home once a week. They were working ten, twelve, fourteen hours, then he'd drive home. I remember that in the '40s really was when he became part of the executive part of organization of the construction companies that he was working for.

He ended up working for the Alzina Construction Company, here in Springfield. Mr. Mueth, he owned the company. He [Carl] worked directly for Mr. Mueth. He had worked with the John Felmlly Company. They built the hospital, Springfield Memorial Hospital.

DePue: What was the last name?

Thunman: Felmlly. F-e-l-m-l-y. They built the Springfield hospital; they built the John Jay Homes; they built the power plant, the Springfield Power Plant. He [Carl] was superintendent of construction of all those big efforts. He started as a carpenter apprentice, and he made his way up to that.

DePue: I know that you were born in '32, and you got to Springfield in '39. Where was the family living between that timeframe?

Thunman: Well, as I said, they moved about every six months. Of course, I was born in Ohio. We lived in a couple of places in Ohio. I vaguely remember being in a boat, in a flood, wherever that could have been, but I remember that. We lived in Springfield when the lake was built—They were here the first time—in Tennessee, in Richmond, Virginia, where they built the big model tobacco company, which went on to be the Lucky Strike company, and in New York City. He worked on some of the skyscrapers in New York City.

DePue: But this is always with CB Moon? They were sending him to different projects?

Thunman: Yes, CB Moon would.

DePue: One other question, before we get into the Springfield years. You mentioned that you could remember hearing your parents talking in low tones, about his citizenship problem.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Did they speak Swedish at home?

Thunman: Oh, yes. Not much, not much, only when they didn't want us to hear. Sadly, none of us can speak Swedish. My brother can, more than anybody else.

DePue: Was that a conscious effort on their part, to make sure—

Thunman: Yes, it was a conscious effort. They did not want us to have an accent, so that was just the way they ran the household. The only thing I can do in Swedish, beautifully, is swear.

DePue: I'm sure that comes in handy. (both laugh)

Thunman: Well, it did. It got so, when I was skipper of a submarine, I would swear in Swedish. It got so that some of my crew would start swearing in Swedish. (laughs)

I went out and played golf one day with a Swedish naval attaché in Washington, and he said to me, "Well surely you can speak some Swedish." I said, "Well, I'll speak pretty much all the Swedish I know, (curses in Swedish). I started off with this. He listened to it, and he said, "Gosh, you've done that so well, wonderful pronunciation and all." He said, "But you have said some terrible things." (both laugh)

But that was their... They did not want us to be discriminated against. In those days, there were a lot of immigrants, and there was a lot of



discrimination. People stayed together, the different ethnic groups. The Scandinavian Society, here in Springfield, was a big society. I remember Mayor Ileson was a Swede, and we went to various affairs with the mayor and others. A couple of Springfield's most distinguished lawyers were Swedes. They would have meetings, they would have a lot of entertainment sessions, one way or another, picnics, dances.

DePue: How did the family end up settling and staying in Springfield?

Thunman: My mother, when she got here, she said, "We're not moving anymore." She said that to him. Plus, I think he was promoted in the organization, because he was... I think the first job he worked here in Springfield in '39, was the John Jay Homes facility, which was probably part of the Depression.

DePue: The John Hay Homes, you say?

Thunman: Yes. I think that was part of the Depression. These were, of course, the homes that were given to the homeless. He was the superintendent of construction for that project, and it was a big project. Today it exists in a different form. They've completely taken those down and put it in a different style. I guess they're now apartments or they're duplexes. He built that entire facility, as the leader in the construction effort. From there, then there was reason for him to stay, the Memorial Hospital, the lake project and—

DePue: Was there something about Springfield that your mother found especially attractive, or was she just tired of moving?

Thunman: She was not going to move any more. I guess in the '30s, they probably—and I don't know—but moved every couple of months, so that he could have a job. He was not about to take any sort of handout from anybody, any sort of charity from anybody. He didn't believe in that at all.

DePue: Well, by 1940, '41, the economy is starting to turn around, as well.

Thunman: Yes, yes, yes, for the first time. He made a lot of money. Now, today, I don't think people would call it an extreme amount of money, but he made a lot of money during the war, but he worked very hard. They built a couple of those tank factories in Illiopolis, I think, in a couple of months.

DePue: Well I know they had an ammunition plant there. Was that something he was involved in?

Thunman: He was involved with these things, all across the state. I think the company that he was working for at that time was the John Felmy Company, which still goes on. Its headquarters are in Bloomington. He was their number one superintendent of construction. They had a number of things going on.

DePue: And superintendent, meaning he's the guy on the site, managing the rest of the—

Thunman: He's the guy who's running the whole job. I mean that's... He's the one... Everything that goes on, in that jobsite, he's responsible for. And he reports in to whoever owns the company. He made a lot of money for some people I've always felt that maybe he shouldn't have gotten hands into. My dad was not a very good businessman. He wasn't interested in making a lot of money, other than what he needed to run his family.

DePue: Was the family religious, when you guys were growing up?

Thunman: Oh, yes. We went to church every Sunday, and that was an important thing, especially to my mother. I was confirmed here, at the Grace Lutheran Church, here in Springfield. As a matter of fact, I got a nice letter from a lady in the church, saying that she recalls when I was confirmed at the church.

DePue: Was Grace, at that time, Swedish and Norwegian?

Thunman: It was the Augustana Lutheran, which is frankly, the looser Lutheran. It was not the strict German Lutheran and other Lutherans—

DePue: So the Germans and the Swedes didn't mix back then, huh?

Thunman: No. Certainly not in the church. We lived in Richmond, Virginia, in a little community where everything revolved around the church. That was an interesting experience, because the young pastor, his name was Bailey, he was only in his early '20s. He played baseball with the congregation. I was a little guy running around and he became a good friend. All my life, interestingly, he would send me a birthday card and write me a note.

Then, we kind of hooked up again when I was in the military, and he became the chief of chaplains for his denomination. He was a Methodist. But, you know, each denomination has their own person who administrates their chaplain community, and he became the chief of the Methodists.

Then he started to use me as kind of a... Whenever he had anything he wanted to do with the military, he'd write me a letter, and I was obliged to do it for him, whether I wanted to do it or not. He was a wonderful guy. He ended up with a daily column in the *Los Angeles Times*. He's a well-known pastor in America.

DePue: When you first came to Springfield, and the family came here, where did you end up living, to begin with?

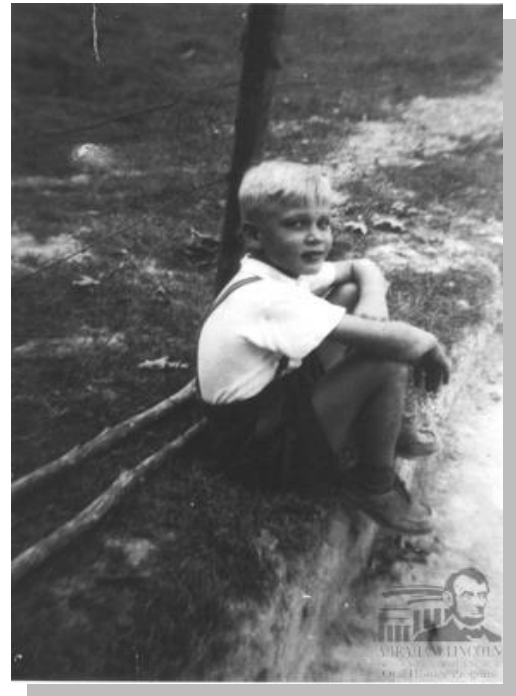
Thunman: We started off at 1819 West Jefferson. At that time West Jefferson was two-lane. There were no commercial facilities. There was one grocery store at the corner of Amos and West Jefferson, and down at Bruns Lane, where it

intercepted Jefferson, there was a gas station. That was about it. The rest were a few homes, mostly farm or orchards. We lived in an orchard, a nice little house, set away from the road, and a pretty big farm area.

My dad always liked to do that. He always looked for a place outside of the city. I remember in Tennessee, we lived on a farm, in a farm-like community. In Virginia, we lived on a farm. He would go out and find them and rent them. Of course they didn't buy them. But we always lived out and around.

I remember, in Virginia, I would wander through the woods by myself and find graves from the Civil War, little graveyards that had been put together then. I went everywhere. I had a couple of big Chow dogs that went with me, and nobody was ever worried about me, because of these Chows. Everybody stood away from us because of those dogs.

We were there on West Jefferson, and I started out in a one-room schoolhouse on Bruns Lane. You went down Bruns Lane, and you went off the road—all I can recall is maybe half a block—and there was a one-room schoolhouse. It was a good school; I really liked it. I still remember some of the books we read.



*Young Ron Thunman, at age six, when the family lived outside of Nashville, Tennessee, circa 1938.*

DePue: This would have been right when you got here, probably in first or second grade?

Thunman: It was the fourth grade. I had skipped the second grade. When we moved to Virginia, apparently we moved from New York City to Drewry's Bluff, Virginia, which is just outside of Richmond. I came home from school the first day, and my mother, who was always so interested in my education... My mother was fanatic about it. I can recall, she said, "Well now tell me about the school. How was it? What did you learn? What are you studying?" Apparently I said to her, "This is a wonderful school, because everything I'm studying, I studied last year."

That infuriated her, I guess, because the next thing I know, she's going down to see the principal of the school. Now this is this little immigrant lady,

that's gone down and convinced that principal that I should be moved ahead. And he did.

All I know is I was in the second grade, and the teacher came in and said, "No, you've got to go sit with the third graders." So, I was in the third grade, and I remember sitting next to a boy—I still remember his name, Bobby—in one of these two-seaters that you had in those days. Two of you sat together in a little bench-like thing. And I said to him, I said, "What are we studying?" He said, "We're studying multiplication." I said, "What's that?" (both laugh)

I say that, and it's kind of funny, but it was kind of the story of the rest of my time through my grade school and high school years. I was always a little behind, not so much academically, I could handle the academics, but I was always a little bit behind the age group.

DePue: Not mature enough.

Thunman: It probably would have been better, had I not skipped a grade.

DePue: Yeah, but your mother had different notions about it.

Thunman: Oh, yes. My father, his interest in academics was mathematics. He said you had to make an A in mathematics. If I didn't make an A in mathematics, there was hell to pay. That was all the way through high school. Now, he didn't press on anything else, but anything that had to do with mathematics, I had to.

DePue: What was the reason for that, do you know?

Thunman: Well, it could be his incredible interest in math. My dad was a mathematician, loved it, spent his whole life... I can recall coming home late from a date, hoping that he was in bed. He'd be sitting there, at 1:00 in the morning, with some sort of a math book in front of him or a book on applications of math in construction. He was a wonderful mathematician.

He invented a slide rule. I remember when he did this, in the '40s. He did the whole thing. My father was a wonderful artist too. I've got none of that ability, but his brothers and sisters were good artists. One of them, I think, was recognized in Sweden later on. But he built the slide rule out of cardboard, hard cardboard. He did all the marking and etching of it himself, with India ink. It was a slide rule that you would use to determine how much steel you would have to use in the construction of a concrete road or bridge or structure. It got published in McGraw-Hill, in a McGraw-Hill book on this subject. He was so pleased with that. He was so pleased and proud of that, that he had done this. It turns out, he did not patent it. It was immediately picked up, and they were sold for years.

DePue: Another missed opportunity.

Thunman: (both laugh) As I told you earlier on, he was not a man who was interested in making a lot...He was so proud of the fact that he had been published by McGraw-Hill, in this book. So, he was a mathematician, and that's where his stress went.

I can recall in high school, sitting with him at the dining room table, arguing with him about how to solve...Do you remember the word problems that we still worked in algebra? We would sit there and work those things. But they were both very much interested in my education. I think they felt that I had great ability. In fact, I know that.

DePue: Did they have the same expectations for your other siblings?

Thunman: They did. My other siblings, I don't think got the same attention I did, because first, I was the youngest. They used to say I was the Depression baby, of course, born in the very depths of the Depression, in '32. I don't think we ever went any further down than we did in '32. I heard my mother say, "You were the person who entertained us. We had no entertainment, other than you." I didn't realize that, but they put a lot of attention to me.

DePue: Does that mean that your other brothers...brother or sister or both?

Thunman: Brother and sister.

DePue: They figured that you were the spoiled one, maybe?

Thunman: I did, but we had...They were so good to me all my life. They never treated me as if I was spoiled. I probably was spoiled. I was, not probably. But we always so close. My brother was like my father; he was so many years older than I was. Everything I learned about sports and things like that, I learned from my brother.

My brother, it was funny, he was left-handed. So, when he taught me how to play basketball, I thought I had to do everything with my left hand. I'd watch him, and I got it all screwed up, between my legs and my hands. The coach had a hard time getting it arranged so that when I went up to shoot with my right hand, my right leg came up. (DePue laughs) But it turned out good, because then I became a little bit ambidextrous.

But my brother and I were very close. He was, frankly, a lot smarter than I was, my brother. He went on to the University of Illinois and was designated, in the '80s, as a Distinguished Engineering Graduate of the University of Illinois. Not many people get that **distinguished** recognition.

DePue: And that's, at least today, it's a very elite engineering school.

Thunman: Very elite, yes. His was a sad story, in that in about 1935 or so, he picked up a firecracker. He picked up what they called a torpedo, and it blew up, in his

eye. It must have been something. My mother, I don't know that they had the money to take him into the medical treatment that he should of. But in any case, he lost the use of that eye. It was looking askance. He could not synchronize it with his other eye. He really went on in his life with one eye. He, amazingly, did all that he did with that one eye.

In World War II, though, is where it was bad, because all of his buddies went into the military. He wanted so much to go, and he was left behind. As a matter of fact, he had put together a plan, where he got people to help him go back through the interview and take the eye exam again, where he used his one eye, and then he used the same eye the second time. He had some people there that they were jostling around. He got through the exam, got down to the train station...He had flunked the exam earlier.

So he was down at the train station with everybody, getting ready to go, and the sergeant saw him and says, "Hey, wait a minute; what are you doing here?" It's too bad, because he was a very capable man with one eye. So anyway, he did not go off to war, and that hurt him, that hurt his feelings. He always felt that he was not one of the guys, as you can imagine, you especially would imagine. You know, all of your friends go, and you can't go.

He went off to the University of Illinois and graduated and went to work for the state and always worked for the state. He was offered...I know Hanson Engineers, old Mr. Hanson—not old, he was young then—wanted him to...They were contemporaries, and he wanted my brother to work with him. He stayed with the state and became a world expert in pre-stressed concrete and, later, was on the National Academy of Sciences, was a member of the board. They used to send him out around the world to investigate new pre-stressed concrete designs and to comment on them.

He had a great life. He loved to sail, a great sailor, a racer, sailing. I was afraid to sail with him, because I used to tell him that I spent my whole life trying to keep from hitting other ships, and he didn't care.

DePue: (both laugh) Well, I would think that's a bit of a problem with depth perception, because you—

Thunman: Well, I used to play handball with my brother, and I used to feel so sorry for him, because he'd get up to the wall, and he'd smash the wall with his hand, because he didn't have the depth perception. He only had the one eye visible. But he really lived a normal life. He was a good golfer and a very smart guy.

DePue: What's his name?

Thunman: Carl Erik, Jr.

DePue: I guess you'd had mentioned that before.

Thunman: My sister, Phyllis, who I think was the best of the three, beautiful girl, absolutely perfect A student, needed no help anywhere, very, very popular in high school and graduated, but graduated at a point when they didn't have—and my brother was in college, was at the University of Illinois—They didn't have the money to send her on to complete her college education.

She went to William Woods College in Missouri, Fulton, Missouri, where Churchill made his famous Westminster speech about the Iron Curtain. She got her degree there but didn't go on to four years. She always felt bad that she couldn't go on and get her four-year degree. She got her two-year degree.

A wonderful girl, just absolutely wonderful. [She] married a young naval officer, who had gone through the V-12 program there at Westminster. They sent him on to Northwestern, and then he was in the Pacific for a couple of years, on a patrol craft, and came back. They had a great life, two wonderful kids and all kinds of grandchildren. You couldn't have met a finer family. But she was really talented. There wasn't any place she didn't go that she immediately was moved into the better part of whatever they were involved with.

In later years, I found...She and my father would talk a lot. She'll say, well daddy used to say this or daddy used to say that, and give me this advice and that advice. I never had that from my father. I don't recall ever him...Every once in a while, he gave me just a little bit of advice, but it wasn't...He'd say, "If I were you, I'd do this," and that was the end of it.

DePue: Was that just a different stage of his life, or he's busier with his career?

Thunman: I don't know. I always used to think that maybe he was training me. I do know...I went to work for him when I was fourteen, when they were building the power plant out at the lake. He had broke somebody's arm, I'm sure, in the union, because you were supposed to be fifteen to join the union. I became the water boy on the site. It was a site of a couple of hundred men and one water boy. I never in my whole life, trying to get around that site in the hot Illinois sun, to get water to those men. He'd done the same thing to my brother. My brother was the water boy on the John Hay Homes. My brother used to say, "When I left that job they hired three water boys." But he would only have the one, and he felt that was enough.

Then I worked when the Bressmer Building downtown burned down. I worked on that one summer, as a common laborer. They had a process where they knocked all the tile, and everything came down. You ended up with nothing but a steel structure, six-story structure of steel beams. The plan was, you first brought forms up around each beam and laid concrete beams, and then you put flooring across. To do that, you had machines. I think he had designed those machines to lift those beam enclosures up. But, to move these

machines around, you had to have pathways. The pathways were set by two-by-tens, two-inch by ten-inch planks, about twelve foot long, twelve feet long. I talk like my father; it was always twelve foot long.

All of a sudden I was given the job of setting up these twelve-foot two-by-tens, up in these beams. They gave me a day—I didn't work for him, I worked for the carpenter foreman—gave me a day to practice in an area where it was fairly close to the ground. I was scared to death, walking these four-inch I-beams, especially carrying a twelve-foot two-by-ten.

DePue: Those aren't light.

Thunman: It turns out, they're pretty good to have, because then you could balance with them, but I didn't realize it at the time. So initially, I started the job. I would scoot along, and everybody would laugh at me, the whole job. I finally got up, and I learned to walk those four-inch I-beams. It was great training for you. I always felt that he always had something like that. He would say, "Yeah, that's okay; you can do that."

DePue: Your mother didn't intervene on your behalf?

Thunman: No. I don't know if she did or not, but that's what I did. I would do it. I walked those I-beams, except I would not walk them on top, on the very top floor, where you didn't have another column to go to. I always scooted up there. He always had that kind of a thing. He never understood the athletics. He didn't understand football and what was football all about, or basketball, the rules. But he would go. He wouldn't say much about it; he would just always try to be there.

DePue: Did your mother work then?

Thunman: My mother worked during the war, in a canning factory. I remember that. At that time, we lived over on South Douglas Street. We went from West Jefferson and my school years. I'll kind of go over them. I was at the one-room schoolhouse, and then they had to pay the money to get me to go to Dubois School, from West Jefferson. They paid that tax, whatever it was. And then she made my father move to South Douglas, although it wasn't as nice a place we had out at West Jefferson. We moved to South Douglas, so I could go to Butler. In those days, Butler was the best elementary school in the city. Then, of course, I went on to Springfield High School. We moved again, to South Walnut. So, we lived in three different places here in Springfield.

DePue: Did you go to middle school at Butler as well?

Thunman: Well, I got to Butler in about the sixth grade. Got into a little trouble to begin with. I remember the principal, Mr. Head, was a nice man, called me and my mother in. I'd been there about a month or two. He said that Ronnie plays too rough. Well, I was just playing the way we played over at Dubois. Dubois in



those days, that's where the tough guys... (both laugh). I was scared to death about it. But I'll never forget, he said, "We want Ronnie to play, but we want him to play organized sports." He brought out a uniform—I thought this is the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me—a Butler Grade School basketball team uniform, which was a jacket that said Butler on the back of it. He said, "He'll go on the basketball team, but he's got to be careful. He plays too rough."

DePue: How tall were you back then?

Thunman: I didn't really grow up to be a lot taller than the average until I was about a freshman in high school. I was an average... I was maybe a little bit taller. But that was a big day, when I got that uniform. I thought that was... I was willing to agree to anything.

DePue: You've talked a lot about both your mother and your father. Who would you say, looking back at it now, had the bigger influence on you?

Thunman: Well, it's a hard thing to distinguish, because my mother, I think, had a bigger influence in developing me to deal with other people and to deal with the culture, and to have high standards in my character, as well as in whatever professional ability I had. She had learned a lot, I think, living with that lady.

Well, in this paper I've got, it talks about this Mrs. Burden had kind of considered my mother as a daughter. They had no family, so wherever they went, my mother went with them. I think she learned a lot from those many years of experience with her. Most people here, that I've seen in Springfield, who knew her just loved her. She was such a lovely, gracious person.

She was always worried that her handwriting wasn't very good. She taught herself English and how to write English. It's interesting; I still have some of her letters. They were maybe a little difficult to read, but her English composition was excellent. She was always worried about that.

My father, though, he's the one who imbued me with the high professional standards and the importance of those standards in whatever you did. Maybe on the negative side, my dad had a terrible temper. I had his temper as well. I'm not sure I could have changed that. I tried to, but I got a feeling that are genes involved with that, that you cannot get rid of. My father, the one thing he hated more than anything else, if anybody ever lied to him. I was the same way, all through my career. If I found somebody who was lying at all, it was "Katy bar the gate" for that poor guy.

DePue: You mentioned Pearl Harbor before. Do you have any personal memories about that, other than your experience with your dad?

Thunman: No, other than I was very interested in the military, playing soldiers, being soldiers, playing with toy soldiers.

DePue: After Pearl Harbor or even before that?

Thunman: I think even before, but it certainly amplified. During World War II, when my dad started to make some money, I remember one Christmas he bought me three companies of West Point cadets in toy soldiers that I had. I remember those. I still have one of them left.

DePue: In their dress uniforms?

Thunman: In their dress uniforms, uh-huh. I still have one left.

DePue: Were you one of those kids who was following what was going on in the war?

Thunman: Yes. I remember reading Richard Tregaskis' books on *Guadalcanal Diary*, and I think he had a couple of other books about what was going on in the Pacific. And I had an airplane spotter book. I could tell you everything there was to know about everybody's airplanes. I mean, I could tell you how far, what caliber of weapons they had. I was into that, loved it. But, as far as following it step-by-step-by-step, I don't recall doing that so much as picking out certain areas and kind of dwelling on them.

DePue: Why did your mom get a job during that timeframe?

Thunman: Well, I don't think the money really started rolling in. Of course, my brother was at University of Illinois. I think she got a job because she could. My brother was gone; my sister was at William Woods, and I was there. I think it was to get some extra money. They were trying to buy a house, I guess. They were getting ready to, I guess, to reach the retirement age. They were a little older at that point. My dad really didn't rake in the big dollars until the latter part of the early '40s.

DePue: Do you remember things like rationing?

Thunman: Oh, yes.

DePue: And bond drives and metal drives, things like that?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, paper drives. I was in the middle of those paper drives and coat hanger drives. Paper drives were wonderful. I used to sit in people's attics and read their *Esquires*. (both laugh) They'd have them stacked four or five feet high, with all the pretty girls in them. We thought that was a great thing to do. Paper drives, and we had coat hangers and rationing. My father had an "A" card [gas ration card] for his car, which he drove all around the state. Then we had a car at home that my sister had, with a "C" card, which you certainly didn't have as much gas in.

It was a Lincoln Zephyr. My dad had bought it in 1936, the first year ever manufactured. It was a sloped back car, you know. I think it was the first

sloped back car, a **beautiful** car. It had been a demonstrator, twelve cylinders, imagine. He bought that car, and he had it all the way up until I left for the Naval Academy. I don't know how many hundreds or thousands of dollars he put in it, to try to keep it running. He loved it. My brother used to drive it back and forth from the University of Illinois and brag that he would drive a hundred miles an hour. It was only a two lane road between here and Champaign, but he could make a hundred in that car.

DePue: There were probably a few stop signs in between too, huh?

Thunman: I don't know if he saw them or not. (both laugh)

DePue: Well, your dad must have been doing a lot of traveling. The places you've talked about him just moving around the state, doing a lot of construction jobs.

Thunman: Yes, he did. During the war, he was really involved almost seven days a week. Of course it was a time, when you go back, boy it's really fun to read, if you get a chance, what went on in the country to prepare for the war, to prepare industry to fight the war. It was incredible, some of the things that were done. I'm not sure we could do them today. The government would pick a company and say, you're going to build this, and you're going to build this many, and you're going to get it done by this time, and we'll pay you this, and that was it.

DePue: I was thinking earlier that maybe the government might frown on a fourteen or fifteen year-old kid balancing a two-by-four.

Thunman: A two-by-ten.

DePue: A two-by-ten, on an I-beam, walking around there. They might not like that.

Thunman: You know, one other point about my father, to prove that he was kind of training me, was we had this carpenter foreman; Carter Hall was his name. He couldn't read, and he wasn't a carpenter foreman; he was a labor foreman. He ran the laborers. He would have me around whenever they delivered concrete or things, and I would sign for it. He never told me he couldn't read, but he'd say, "Look at that, and see if that looks okay." But he was always so mean to me. God he was always on my back about not moving fast enough or getting enough done. In later years, I saw him one time, and I said, "Carter, you were a tough guy to work for." He said, "Oh, no, no, you've got that all wrong." He said, "Your father made me do that." So that's why I think he had me in training. (laughs)

DePue: He was grooming you all along.

Thunman: That's right.

DePue: Were they telling you what their aspirations were for you?

Thunman: No, no, other than you're going to go to college. You are **going** to go to college. That was there; that was set from the very beginning. It wasn't until the Naval Academy contacted me about coming to the academy that that even came on the horizon.

DePue: Well, that's a little bit ahead of our story. I want to ask a couple more questions about growing up, especially during the war itself. You were a teenager at that time, early teens, I think. Were you one of those kids who was watching the movies and paying attention to the newsreels and reading the papers?

Thunman: Oh yes, oh yes. Well, really, the movies, but I can recall reading the papers. I didn't follow the war in a logical process, like the Germans have now been moved back to here to here to here, but I was always very interested. I was always very interested in the military and frankly, more interested in the Army than I was the Navy. The Navy, of course that wasn't... I don't they had that much in the newsreels about the Navy.

The war years to me, if I was going to sum them up, were years of a great change in my family, because the family became more prosperous, because of what my father was doing. And, of course, I was growing into those years where I was doing a lot of interesting thing. Athletics came into my life in a big way.

DePue: When did your interest in going to a military academy start?

Thunman: Well, I was interested in the Naval Academy because of the wonderful Army-Navy football games in the late '40s. I can remember my junior year in high school, sitting in my coach's car. We were traveling to a basketball game. In those days, they had three or four cars, and they'd put the teams in, listening to those great Army-Navy football games. Navy, for some reason, sounded more romantic to me in those games—I can't tell you why—than the Army did, although the Army would win. (laughs)

DePue: I was going to say, that was the heyday of Army football, with Blanchard and Davis.<sup>1</sup>

Thunman: Blanchard and Davis, yes it was.<sup>2</sup> But that's when I first got interested in it. I thought, That's so far away; forget it. There's nothing like that, that I could

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Anthony "Doc" Blanchard (December 11, 1924 – April 19, 2009) is best known as the college football player who became the first ever junior to win the Heisman Trophy, Maxwell Award and was the first ever football player to win the James E. Sullivan Award, all in 1945. He played football for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where he was known as "Mr. Inside." After football, he served in the U.S. Air Force from 1947 until 1971 when he retired with the rank of colonel.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Woodward Davis (December 26, 1924 – March 9, 2005) was a professional football player for the Los Angeles Rams. He is best known for his college football career for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point,

ever do. My thought was, I guess I'll go to the University of Illinois, like my brother. That was what was going to happen.

DePue: So you were in high school from 1945 to 1949?

Thunman: That's right. I graduated in the summer of 1949. It was my senior year of high school, when a young Naval Academy midshipman came to the door one night, rang the doorbell. I opened it up, and there he was, in his uniform. He said that he would like to talk to me about going to the Naval Academy. The rules were, at that point, that the academy could not contact you directly, but they could respond to you if you wrote them a letter, if you made some contact with them on your own. He sat down and talked with me and said, you know, "The academy would really like for you to write them, and tell them that you might be interested in coming."

DePue: Why was he interested in you?

Thunman: Well, the academy, of course, had the Naval Academy Foundation, which I'm a big member. I'm now retired, semi-retired, but I've been on the board for several years. But the foundation, still spread across the country, looking for athletes who could make it through the Naval Academy and who would fit the mold; just like the Army. So my name had come up on the radar screen somehow, I don't know, but Rip Miller—

DePue: Rip Miller?

Thunman: Rip Miller, a spectacular guy. E.E. [Edgar E. "Rip"] Miller had been one of the seven mules with the four horsemen at Notre Dame and had become the assistant athletic director at the Naval Academy, responsible for recruiting. He had dispatched this young midshipman to come and see me with that information. Of course, I just thought it was incredibly...It was wonderful.

I wrote to him, and the wheels started turning. The next thing I know is that Rip Miller's secretary was a good friend of Peter Mack who was the congressman here in town, the local congressman.<sup>3</sup> He was a good friend of the secretary of Peter Mack. They started negotiating. What was required to get an appointment for this young man?

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from 1943 to 1946, where he was known as "Mr. Outside." He was named a consensus All-American three times, and in 1946 won the Heisman Trophy and was named *Sporting News* Player of the Year and Associated Press Athlete of the Year.

<sup>3</sup> Born in Carlinville, IL, Peter Mack attended the public schools and Blackburn College in Carlinville and St. Louis (MO) University, took special courses in aviation at Springfield (Illinois) Junior College and St. Louis University. He engaged in the automotive sales and service business in Carlinville. A licensed commercial pilot, he enlisted in U.S. Navy in 1942 and served four years in naval air force as a Naval Reserve officer, with rank of commander.

Well, Mack said, he was a Democrat, and of course my father was always a Republican, interestingly, considering his working background. But they talked, and they said well, he's going to have to pass the exam before we'll even consider him. Rip Miller got me an appointment from the Honorable something Sasser, of Maryland, an alternate appointment. In those days you had a primary appointment, then several alternates—I don't know how many the congressman got—so that I could take the exam.

I can remember being notified that the exam was going to be given. It was in like the March timeframe. I was still a senior in high school. I hadn't finished up. I went down to the post office here in town. There must have been twenty young men there, all taking the exams.

DePue: For both academies?

Thunman: I think it was only the Naval Academy. In fact, I'm sure now, only the Naval Academy that day. They were very careful to tell you, "Now look, don't guess." It was multiple choice. "Don't guess. If you know the answer, then answer it, but if you put the wrong answer down, you pick the wrong answer, then you lose twice as much in the grading scheme than if you just left it blank." I went the first day. It was two days of exams, two full days. The Navy—and I think each service did—they created their own examination; it wasn't a SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test] score<sup>4</sup>. There was no such thing in those days.

I came home the first day, and I said to my mother, I said, "I'm not going back." I said, "The other people down there, many of them were one or two years of college, and during the breaks they'd talk about how many they got done. They'd get 130 or 150. I did 80. I'm just nowhere near these people. I can remember, "You're going to go back, by God, you can do it."

So I went back and passed. I still have the grade slips upstairs. I got a feeling that they may have been adjusted. I don't know, because there were a couple of 2.5s in there. And as you recall, from your days, our days, 2.5 in those days was just barely passing.

DePue: That was a C?

Thunman: On a 4.0 scale. So I had a couple of...I'd done 2.8s in mathematics, but the 2.5s, one of them was in physics—I hadn't finished high school physics yet—and the other one, I think was in...I forget what it was in, maybe history. But I passed, and it turned out I was the only one who passed in the whole group. Mack's appointments were open, because his principal appointees had failed.

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<sup>4</sup>The SAT is one of two standardized college admissions tests in the U.S. (The other is the ACT.) The test was originally adapted from an Army IQ test and administered as a college admissions test for the first time in 1926.

There was a skirmish that, I don't know, that went on. I got a letter from Rip Miller. He said he wanted me to come to Annapolis.

So, at the end of the year, I didn't go to my high school graduation. He sent me a ticket on a train to Washington, D.C., and then down to Annapolis, and stayed in Rip Miller's house, a wonderful house he had, up on the hill there. We went to Washington to meet different congressmen, to see if they could get me an appointment. I met three or four, walked through the halls of the House buildings there at the time and talked to some congressmen. Came home, didn't get the appointment. Mack had backed out of his deal that if I passed he'd give me one. So that was over. I thought, Well, it's done; it's too bad; it's a good try.

DePue: Before we get too far ahead of the story though, one of the things that caught their attention in the first place was your high school athletic prowess, apparently.

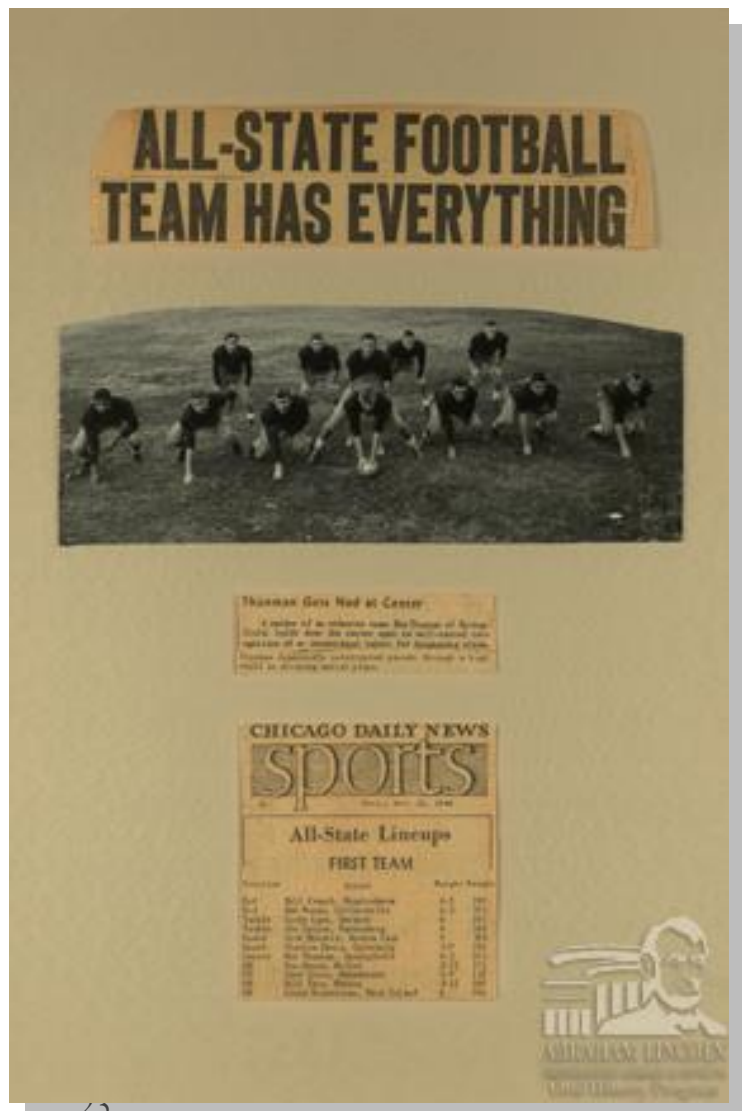
Thunman: Yes.

DePue: And you'd skip right over that. Since you're a member of the Springfield High School Hall of Fame, we need to talk about that a little bit.

Thunman: Well, in football and basketball, a little bit of track—

DePue: Where were you going to school?

Thunman: Springfield High School. I went out for football. Of course, I was into athletics in those days, mainly football, the magazines and the games and all and started playing football. I had a great coach, Bill Roellig, who was well known throughout Illinois.



A composite of newspaper clippings from the November 23, 1948 Chicago Tribune, reporting that Ron Thunman was on the All-State team.

His experience had been... He had run the physical training at Great Lakes during World War II, of all the recruits. Here again, I was a year younger than everybody else, contemporaries. But I started, and I had a couple funny things happen.

When I was a sophomore, I went out, stood in line to get my uniform, a hot August day, got the pads and the uniform. We were out, starting the practices, and they'd been practicing a couple of weeks. In those days, we practiced most of August, in high school. Bill Roellig came up to me one day. He was a tough guy, and he said, "You guys," he said, "I tell you guys to wear your pads, and you don't wear them." He chewed on me about it, and he said, "Where are your pads, hip pads?" I said, "I don't have any." He said, "Why not?" I said, "Well, they didn't give me any. They didn't have any left when I got in the line." That kind of brought me to his attention, because I'd been playing for a couple of weeks without any pads. (both laugh)

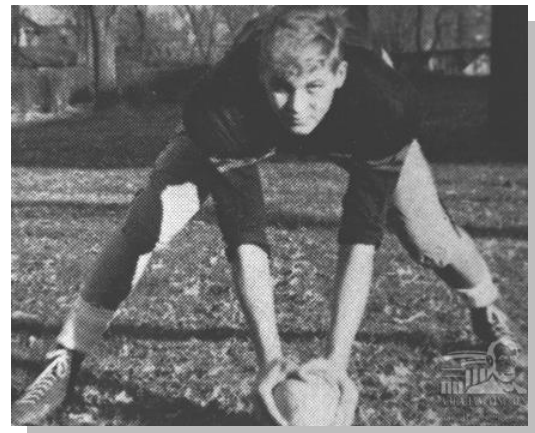
DePue: He said, "This is a tough kid." Is that right?

Thunman: He is a tough kid. I played my junior year and really started to play reasonably well. Then my senior year, I had a great year in football. The team was undefeated. We had seven wins and two ties. It was a great season, and I had a good year. I was the center on the team. But Roellig—this was interesting to me—he would have the regular huddle, but before the huddle, he would have



*Ron Thunman made the All-State Football Team during his senior year at Springfield High School in 1948. Thunman held down the center spot on the Springfield High School team, and earned a reputation for diagnosing plays and intercepting passes.*

me and the quarterback get together and talk about the play. Then, I would go up to the line by myself, and Bobby Slack, who was the quarterback, would go in to call the play. Well, the play had already been called. You couldn't change it. So I was kind of involved with setting the plays. I think Roellig did that purposely. It was an unusual thing to do. But I had a great year. I was



*Thunman played center on the Springfield High School football squad in 1949, the year he was selected to the All-State Team*



all-state, first team. I'd made several interceptions during the different games.

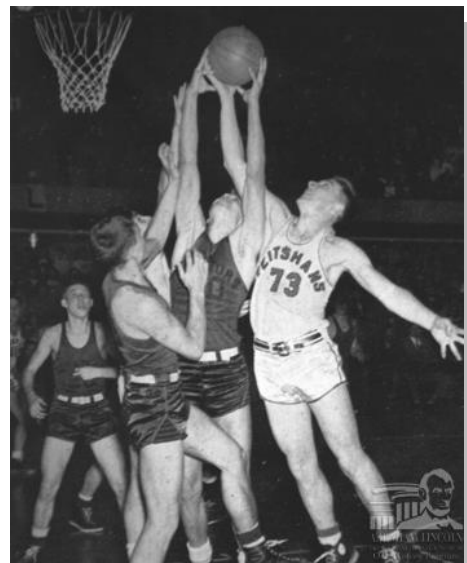
DePue: You were playing both directions then?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, offensive. I played all but two minutes of the entire season; the coach never took me out. He used to take everybody else out [when] we'd get ahead and everything, but I would stay. I think he did that to add that into my resume.

DePue: What position did you play on defense?

Thunman: Linebacker. That was where I really made...I got a lot of publicity at linebacker, mainly interceptions. Even the article there in the *Chicago Daily News* talked about skill, divining aerial plays, or words to that effect. I played well. But I was a big guy, and I was used to playing in a tough environment. So it was a great year.

My basketball...My sophomore year, I was afraid to go out. I thought I was too clumsy. The coach, who was also a wonderful man, Herb Scheffler...I think the Scheffler boys, his kids, ended up as principals at Springfield. It was his first year as a coach. My junior year, he made me come out and really taught me how to play basketball. We had a great team my junior year. We were upset. We should have gone on to win the state. But, my senior year, we had a good team. We won the city championship. We won the regional championship, almost went to the state. I was All-City in basketball.<sup>5</sup> I was also All-City in football as well. I was on a couple of the honorable mention teams in the state for basketball.



*Thunman goes up for a rebound in a Springfield High School Senators game against rival Feitshans High School in the late 1940s.*

DePue: What position there?

Thunman: Center.

DePue: How tall were you?

Thunman: At that point, I'd gone up to about six-three [six feet, three inches]. I grew in my freshman and sophomore years in school. I remember, when I worked out at the lake, in the power plant, I was growing so fast. I would eat lunch with the ironworkers, the tough ironworkers, and I would eat everything in sight.

<sup>5</sup> Generally news outlets or coaches in a certain sport will select the best team of players within a certain region. So in Springfield football, the All City team would be the best player in the city at each position.

They'd feel sorry for me, although my mother...I carried a big grocery bag of four or five sandwiches. They would end up giving me their sandwiches too. (both laugh) I grew a foot in about a year.

DePue: It sounded like they adopted you.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. Well, I learned so much from those men—it stood me in great stead all my career—from those laborers and from those ironworkers. I remember, I came home, during my plebe year at the Naval Academy, that Christmas.<sup>6</sup> I came home; I was all decked out in my uniform, my big blue coat, you know, all of that stuff. I went down, where the company was working on...At that point, they had a company called The Bootery that had burned down. I walked to the edge of the site, and a couple of these dirty old laborers came out, picked me up and hugged me. (DePue laughs) I was adopted by those guys; you're right.

DePue: You had mentioned earlier though, that one of the things you learned from your mother was how to deal with people, about human relations. Yet your father threw you into this mix, and it sounds like you learned just as much or more there.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, of course I did. You're absolutely right. I think my mother's was more of understanding people and understanding situations. Probably, her contribution was teaching me to be a politician. I think that's where that came from.

DePue: Speaking of that, you mentioned your father's political leanings. Was politics ever a part of the discussion, growing up?

Thunman: Oh, yes. Oh, gosh, my father hated Roosevelt. I thought it was all one word, "Thatgoddamnedroosevelt." (DePue laughs)

DePue: What was it that he didn't like about Roosevelt?

Thunman: I don't know. He never really said, other than he would yell at the radio, kind of the way I yell at the television today. (both laugh) It's interesting, because he came up through the labor route.

Now, my father was trying to stop a strike in the '30s, when he was hit over the head with a lead pipe. He had a crease in his skull, up here. I remember that. When he was a foreman, and he was up on a platform, trying to stop the strike, and somebody hit him. So the story went was, he turned around and knocked the guy out, and then he fell himself.

DePue: The old Navy boxing career kicked in.

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<sup>6</sup> Plebe summer is the summer training program that is required of all incoming freshmen to the U.S. Naval Academy.

Thunman: (laughs) Yes, that's right.

DePue: Was he in the union himself?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, Daddy was always in the union. As a matter of fact, when he retired, he got a check from the union. I was in the union. I had to join the union, Local Hod Carriers 477.<sup>7</sup> I'm not so sure, I may still be in it.

DePue: You may still be a union member, huh? (Thunman laughs) In high school, you had this thing going on with the Naval Academy, where you were hoping to get there. But if that didn't go through, what did you see yourself doing as a career?

Thunman: Really nothing, other than being an engineer, whatever that was. I didn't quite understand what an engineer was.

DePue: But did you like the math and sciences more than anything else?

Thunman: Oh, yes, yes. I was good at math.

DePue: You didn't have any choice but to be good at math.

Thunman: No, that's right. But I was good at it. You know, this is a session where you brag about yourself. There's a doctor/dentist here in town who went to high school with me. He said "God," he said, "I always hated it when"—we took geometry together—"I always hated to have to follow you to the board." In those days, they would have you man the board. You would go through something, and then the next person would be called to come up. He said, "God, I hated when I had to follow you." He said, "I always disappointed the teacher after you'd made your presentation." (laughs)

DePue: Well, one other question about high school. Here you are, this big athlete, star of the football team, it sounds like, good at basketball as well, making a name for yourself in the school. Did you have a girlfriend to go along with that?

Thunman: Oh, gosh, I had... This is an interesting part of the story, probably. Her name was Catherine Brown. She was the high school beauty. She was a year younger than I was. All through high school, she was my girlfriend. Later on, right after I graduated from the academy, I asked her to marry me. She said, "Not now, maybe someday." Well, that kind of ended that.

The interesting part of the story, though, is my wife, Owsley, is her little sister. When I went with Catherine, I was sixteen; Owsley was ten. Elizabeth Owsley is her full name. I remember sitting in the living room of her house. Whenever I came over to see Catherine or pick her up, Owsley

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<sup>7</sup> Labor organization for those employed in carrying supplies to bricklayers, stonemasons, cement finishers, or plasterers on the job.

would come downstairs, and Catherine would yell at her to, you know, “Mother, please make Owsley leave.” (both laugh)

DePue: So, Owsley was more interested in you than you were in her at the time?

Thunman: Well, I remember kind of saying this; I think I said it in jest, “Owsley, one day I’m going to come back and marry you.” Owsley doesn’t remember that. She said, “But you sure took a long time to come back.” (both laugh) She came from a wonderful **old** family here in Springfield. There is no older family than her family in Springfield, I don’t think.

DePue: So, you graduate from high school in 1949, pretty much knew that you were heading to the University of Illinois. You’d already been accepted?

Thunman: Yes. I had a scholarship.

DePue: Athletic scholarship?

Thunman: Athletic scholarship. I’d had several others, good ones. One good one, which I almost went to, but I was afraid, I think, because it was so far away, was Georgia Tech, which was a big football power in those days. The coach, Bobby Dodd, contacted me and wanted me to come. I had some others, Arkansas, as I recall, Louisiana, different schools had contacted me, but I was Illinois.

The first thing that happened to me, though, was that summer, before I went to Illinois, I was working on the Old Jacksonville Road out here. They had just refurbished it, recovered it, and I was working as a laborer that summer. We were picking it up before they turned it over to the state. I was going along the road, and there was a bit of glass showing through the dirt. I kicked away at it to try to pick up the glass. It was dug down in the dirt. So I thought, Well, what I’ll do is I’ll break the glass, and then I’ll be able to get at it. There was a stone there, and I picked up the stone, I threw it, and it hit the glass. It blew up like a hand grenade. It had been a jug of beer, and of course, the pressure had all—

DePue: Buried in the dirt?

Thunman: Buried in the dirt. When I hit it with a rock, it blew up. I wasn’t fooling around, although everybody said, “You probably were fooling around.” I really wasn’t. In my mind, I thought if I broke it, I would be able to get the pieces and pick up the pieces and then fill in the hole. That’s what went through my mind. Anyway, the handle came out. I got my arms like this. It went right into this arm.

DePue: So, right in front of your face, to protect your face.

Thunman: Yeah, I was lucky. It went right in here. There's still the scar from that thing. So, there I was. It cut the muscle, and they had to sew up the muscle. They kept me on the scholarship, but I was kind of limited for a while, because of the hand and the healing in the hand.

DePue: This was your left hand?

Thunman: Yeah, it was this one, my left hand. So, I started off my college football career in a bad way. But came the spring, I was pretty much healed up and was playing pretty well in spring football, getting ready for the varsity season. I get a call again. I guess that foundation was out there, looking around.

DePue: But it sounds like you weren't the great football prospect that you had been the year before.

Thunman: No, no, not until somehow the academy got word that I was doing pretty well, there in spring football, I think. Anyway, they all of the sudden contacted me. I hadn't heard from them until the spring season had started. So, they started this negotiation between secretaries again.

DePue: Does this mean that you had kind of given up on the notion of going to the Naval Academy?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, I thought it was over, clearly over, yeah. I was done. The negotiations started, and my mother got into it, God bless her. This Swedish community I was talking about, there was a gentleman here in town who ran the Hobbs Electric Company, John W. Hobbs, I think it is, a pretty powerful man here in Springfield. His wife was Swedish, and her mother had come from Sweden. She just loved my mother. As I said, most people did. She just loved my mother. I had said to my mother, "Gee, I wish I could have gone to the Naval Academy."

So, the negotiations started again. They started talking again, and Peter Mack would have none of it. He wasn't interested. My mother and Mrs. Hobbs got together somehow, and the next thing I know, I get a telegram. There it is, in May, the first of May, "Congratulations, you've been appointed to West Point." Bang! I called home, and I called my mother. She said, "Isn't that wonderful!" I said, "Well it is. I was surprised though, West Point, I thought it was the Naval Academy." She goes, "Oh, well wait a minute, I'll have to look at that." There were some more discussions, I think, between her and Mrs. Hobbs. The next thing I know, I get a telegram, "Correct that. You've been appointed to the Naval Academy."

DePue: From Mack's office?

Thunman: Yeah. In both cases, they'd come from Mack's office.

DePue: I'm assuming he was an FDR Democrat.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, I'm sure he was. So I've heard—and I can't tell you where I got that information—but apparently John Hobbs funded his trip around the world. At that point, during the off season, during the summer, Peter Mack took a trip around the world to do what congressmen do. But in those days, I guess you couldn't charge like they do today. Hobbs paid for it. That's how I got my appointment. So when they go back, and they say my mother taught me the politics, that I think, is where that comes from.

DePue: So she was your person behind the scenes.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Do you suppose she was the one who approached the Naval Academy, in that year that you were at Illinois?

Thunman: No, no, it was when I came... I told her that I'd had the call and that Peter Mack's office was talking with the Naval Academy, but I'm not sure it's going to work very well. I think she then... They didn't tell me what she did, but I think she called, (phone rings in the background) Ellen Hobbs was her name, and said to her, "Hey can you help?"

DePue: Do we need to take a break here?

Thunman: No, that's okay; go ahead.

DePue: Well that puts us into the spring of 1950.

Thunman: That's right, spring of 1950. Off I went. It was in June of 1950. About June 15 or 18 of 1950, off I went to the Naval Academy. It was the happiest day of my life, my gosh, and I was bound and determined I was going to do well.

DePue: Did you know what to expect when you went to Annapolis?

Thunman: No. I knew it was going to be rigorous and tough, but I'd been in college; I'd been in a fraternity. In those days, fraternity life was tougher than it is today. Most of the people in the fraternity were ex-World War II veterans, so they were tough on the young guys.

DePue: So you knew a little bit about hazing already.

Thunman: Oh, I knew. Hazing in the fraternities was fairly severe. Frankly, I never found the hazing in the Naval Academy very difficult. You just kind of did what they wanted. It was only if you demurred in any way, then you got it. But as long as you did what they wanted, everything was fine.

That year at the University of Illinois was really good for me, because now I had caught up with everybody. I was the same age as everybody else.

Well, my entry in the academy is quite a story, but I don't know if you want to go on to that or not.

DePue: Oh, absolutely.

Thunman: I get there in June, and I start to take the physical. You didn't take a physical beforehand. You had to take a dental exam, I recall, that you carried along with you. They had to hurry up and get one done for me. Initially, they were concerned about my teeth, because I had an overbite. I remember the dental captain pulling out a sheet and saw my name on his sheet. He said, "Well, you're okay, and you pass."

DePue: Maybe an overbite isn't such an issue if you can play football, huh?

Thunman: If you can play football, right. So I take the colorblind exam, fail the colorblind exam.

DePue: Did you suspect this was going to be a problem going in?

Thunman: No, I had no idea. You were supposed to read... There are twenty-one cards. These dots, different colored dots, you pick out numbers. I could read about fourteen or fifteen of them. I couldn't read them all. You're supposed to read all of them. Bam, fail, that's it! I go back to the room, and I pack everything up. It's a hot summer day, a big bag I put it on my shoulder, and I'm going off the campus, just really disappointed.

I thought, Well, I ought to go back and thank Mr. Miller for all he did for me and to tell him that I was leaving. But I really went back to thank him. I thought, God, it's so hot, why don't I call him or something [rather] than carry this stuff across the academy. I thought, No, I'd better go back. Mother will ask me, have you gone and talked with him? That's kind of the politics from my mother.

So I went back to see him. I went into his office, and I said, "Mr. Miller, I've got to tell you that I failed the exam." "What do you mean you failed the exam?" He jumped up, "What do you mean? What happened? Tell me." I said, "Well, I couldn't read the cards." "Did they tell you how to do it? Did they tell you what they wanted you to do?" And I said, "Well, yeah, I understood." "No, I can't imagine. They've screwed up." He picks up the phone, calls the naval hospital there, says, "These guys have..." He gets a hold of whoever, some commander. "They've screwed up, and they told this kid he failed, and that's wrong. You've got to give him another exam."

So, I go over to the hospital. I go in there, and I sit down with this commander. He takes me through the cards. I had no difference. I couldn't read any more than the others. He said, "Okay, you take the exam. Here are the numbers. You study the sequence." This is the God's truth. "You study the sequence, and I'll give you a re-exam here in a couple of days. We'll also give

you an examination where you'll have to pick out colors. There will be a white light, and it will be either green, red or white, and your shoulders will be..." I forget; it was either red, white, green. "I'll tap you on the shoulder." That's the truth.

I went and memorized the sequence of how the cards were given and went there and took the exam that day and got through the sequence. They had a couple other—I think they were commanders—there too. They go "Gosh, he can read those." Then they sat you in what was like a dental chair, and they had a point of light that you were looking at. They turned out all the lights in the room—it was absolutely black—and went through this sequence. He's smacking me on the head and the shoulders. But I could read that. I really didn't need the help. I could read it. I never had any difficulty with colors, telling red or green. I never had any problem. So, "Well, he passes." So, I started at the Naval Academy.

DePue: Was this before you'd actually been issued your uniforms and started the training?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah, everything. The first thing you did when you got there was you took the physical. It was a blessing, and it wasn't a blessing, because it was a weight that I had to carry for a number of years, that I knew I was going to have to face the truth sooner or later, and I did.

DePue: Well, that part of the story, I think, will come a little later.

Thunman: Yeah, that's later on. But it was, you know, football was a big deal, and it still is a big deal. I think you can question your integrity or your character, and maybe it certainly was questionable. But it was something I really wanted to do, and I thought I'd make my way through it. Plus, I didn't have any trouble reading colors, which was later shown why.

DePue: What was the issue, as far as the Navy was concerned, about not being colorblind? Were there certain things that sailors were expected to do or officers were expected to do?

Thunman: Well, I know they've got some...I'll tell you, a real famous football player who was colorblind was Roger Staubach.

DePue: (laughs) You don't get more famous than Roger Staubach.

Thunman: (both laugh) And Roger, strangely enough, turned up colorblind when he graduated.

DePue: But he also was a Heisman Trophy winner, wasn't he?



Thunman: That's right. You could say this for...Staubach got commissioned as a supply officer, went out and served in Vietnam. But the Naval Academy knew he was colorblind. (both laugh)

DePue: I suspect it would be more of an issue if you're a pilot or something like that.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. And certainly, as a submariner. One of the first things you do in a submarine, when you dive a submarine, is after you slam that hatch, you look over at the diving control panel. It has a line of green lights and red lights. You look at it and be sure the right ones were green, and the right ones were red, before you continued the dive. So, if you had any problems in that area, it would have been a disaster.

DePue: And again, I don't want to get too far ahead of the story, because we'll talk about this later, but apparently, you didn't have a problem with identifying green from red.

Thunman: No.

DePue: So, you've gotten through the physical. Now the training begins, huh?

Thunman: Well, plebe summer and I was bound and determined that I was going to be the best midshipman that ever was. I did well. We were arranged in companies, and they made me the company commander. I think possibly...

At the University of Illinois, I was in the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps].<sup>8</sup> I liked ROTC. I liked marching. I hate to admit that, but I liked marching. I learned how to left face and right face and those things. That summer, I did well, I think, in the group, in the company. It was a good experience. I found no problem with it. We did all of the things...a lot of physical things involved.

DePue: Do you remember your first day there?

Thunman: Yes, I do. I remember going down and picking up all of the uniform stuff and then stenciling it. I don't know if you remember, but how you had to stencil every item of clothing you had. It had to be done properly, and you had a big sheath of instructions of where the fifty-four went on the pocket of the white works [white uniform], the name across the front, a couple of inches below the V. Everything had to be done perfectly.

DePue: It sounds like they're beginning to train you the importance of precision.

Thunman: Yes.

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<sup>8</sup> A program that provides the opportunity to get military experience, while earning a college degree. Those enrolled in ROTC learn and develop leadership skills and prepare for careers as U.S. military officers.

DePue: Were you Nils?

Thunman: Ron. I've always gone by Ron.

DePue: And the Navy didn't have an issue with that?

Thunman: No. I was Nils on any piece of official paper, but it was Ron among my friends and others. We did the whole thing, the rowing, the weapon firing. It was a good summer of training. Of course, there were academics involved. It was interesting—I wonder if they do it today—at nights they would march us over to the movie theater. There was a theater there in the library there. They would show us movies, Hollywood movies, on pirates and Navy stories.

DePue: This was during your Plebe Summer?

Thunman: Plebe Summer. They did that at night. I don't know if anything like that went on at West Point. I guess this was supposed to enthrone you. And we all thought that was great.

DePue: I can state emphatically that we weren't watching movies. (both laugh) One of the things that happened shortly after you got there was the start of the Korean War, June 25.

Thunman: Yeah, June 25, and I was sworn in on June 22.

DePue: Was that a topic of discussion? Were you guys aware that had happened?

Thunman: Yeah, we knew it had happened, and it was a topic of discussion when some of these guys entered late during the year. Of course, everybody was supposed to enter by...I forget what it was; the first of July, I think it was.

DePue: You mean the cadets were still arriving by that time?

Thunman: Yeah. There were some who kind of looked down on those who got there in the August timeframe, like somebody had made a move to get those kids into the Naval Academy, rather than to get drafted and have to go to Korea.

DePue: So these weren't people who were on active duty coming late.

Thunman: No. These were midshipmen; these were plebes. But no, no, when I entered, there was no Korean War. I always felt pretty clean about that.

DePue: Was there ever a moment in your first few months there that you thought, Man, this is tougher than I thought?

Thunman: Well, I hate to be overconfident, but no. I never found the Naval Academy to be very difficult for me. But I worked hard. The day I entered, after I'd gone through these things to get there, I said to myself...And I'd had a good time in

college. I'd had a very good time in college. I was a "jockstrap," and I had girlfriends.<sup>9</sup> I wore the red hat, which all the football players wore, and I drank as much beer as I think I could possibly find and just had a good time. So I was very serious about the Naval Academy, very serious.

DePue: Were you also destined to be playing football when you got there?

Thunman: I was going to play football, but that was not the biggest deal in my life. I said to myself, I'm going to graduate from this school.

DePue: Were you seeing some of the other kids that you got there with—if I can use the term kids—that were dropping out?

Thunman: We lost 30 percent, I guess. A lot of them there were not qualified to be there.

DePue: Qualified in what respect?

Thunman: Well, really didn't have the capability or judgment to be prepared to be a naval officer. In those days... Nowadays it's different. The congressional appointees are examined by the academy. Well, [then] it wasn't true. You took the mental examinations; you took the physical examination, and whatever you got is what you got, as long as those examinations were passed.

I remember there was this one guy there whose father was some sort of a politician. I remember his name, Edson. We were on the pistol range, shooting .45s. You would fire, and if you had a problem, you were told to raise your hand and bring the weapon to the forty-five degree angle. Then somebody would come up and clear it, but you would stand there like that. The Marine would come up alongside you and clear it, while you held it like this. This one kid, this Edson, was standing there with his arm up. The Marine came up, and he goes... like if the Marine were you, he turned and he starts—(laughs).

DePue: Pointing the pistol at the Marine.

Thunman: He pointed it right at him, after they'd lectured us 100 times about how to do it. Some of them initially, maybe ten, fifteen percent of those who first came in, were cut immediately. The rest, by the time we graduated—

DePue: On their own volition, or they were booted?

Thunman: Booted, booted out. Very few dropped out under their own volition, that I knew of. Then, there were a large number lost the first year in academics.

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<sup>9</sup> Jockstrap is colloquial for an enthusiastic athlete or sports fan, especially one with few other interests.

That's how I ended my football career. [It] was because I did too well in academics.

DePue: You did too well in academics?

Thunman: They had put together a pretty good football team, my freshman year. We lost a lot in that team. As a matter of fact, I think there are only maybe two in the first team—myself and another player who ended up as Navy's captain—who graduated in that first team of that freshman football team.

DePue: The rest of them washed out somewhere along the line?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah. I sprained my knee that summer, playing basketball. I didn't want to tell anybody. We were playing basketball at the time, and the coach was watching me, the basketball coach, Ben Carnival. No, that's wrong. I started off, I sprained my ankle. But he was watching me, and I thought, Well, I'll get it wrapped. I'll be okay. We had a professional there who would wrap you. So I was playing basketball with a sprained ankle, and bolt out of the blue, I sprained my knee. I never sprained a knee before in my life. Looking back, I think it was because [of] the ankle, because I was favoring the ankle.

So I sprained the knee, and I ended up in the hospital for a couple of days. But the swelling went down, and I got it back up to where it was okay. I was put on what they called the excused squad for a couple of weeks. This is the end of the Plebe Summer, and football season started. I started the season. I probably should have stayed away from it for a while, but there wasn't anybody to advise you, and I didn't ask anybody. I would go in and get my leg wrapped, taped. Then it was both the ankle and the knee.

Here's where I made one of the biggest mistakes of my life. The coach of the crew [rowing] called me and two others aside one day. He said, "You guys," he says, "I'm just new here." This was Rusty Callow, world famous crew coach. He said, "I'm new here, and I'm going to form a world championship crew team. I'd like you boys to join. You've got the size and the build, the ability to do it. I'd like you to come with me, and be a member of the crew." He looked at me and he said, "Look at you." He pointed to my tape, and he said, "You're already hurt playing football." I was not smart enough to realize that he'd already had a discussion, probably with the coach.

DePue: [technical difficulties] We lost our mike here. It will take but a second.

Thunman: You can imagine, one coach at a school would not go to another sport and recruit people. Callow had talked with the freshman football coach, and they said, "Well, you know, these guys, big, tall, long, rangy, athletic kids, why don't you let me have them? I'm sure that kind of discussion went on.

So the other two guys said, “Okay, we’ll go.” I looked at him and said, “I don’t know, crew.” I said, “I play football. I don’t know about crew.” He said, “Well, think about it.” I said, “Well, I will.”

So the next day the coach comes out—we’d started our first academic year—Vito Vittuchi, I remember, a commander, submariner. He came out and he called the team together. We’d been playing for a couple of weeks. I was playing first team center.

DePue: On the plebe squad?

Thunman: Yeah, on the plebe squad. He called everybody together, and he was purple in rage. He said, “You dumb, God-damned... All of you guys are on SAT!” The first grades came out, and something like half or three quarters of everybody was on what we called the tree at the academy, which means you were on SAT in one course or another. “You get the hell out of here and get the extra instruction and get to working on that. You’ve got to become SAT or you can’t play...” Boy, he went on and on and on, stopped the practice. Everybody went in but maybe ten or fifteen of us.

I wasn’t on SAT. My God, I had incredible grades. I remember the first grades I got were just incredible. I mean the highest I ever got in anything, across the board, because I had broken my neck studying. So I thought, Well, boy that’s nice. My knee kind of hurt, and I kind of hurt. I think I’ll take a few laps and go in.

So I’m running around the varsity practice field. They had a fenced in area. [The] Navy had an All-American center, who was my idol, a fellow by the name of Dick Scott. He was now a coach, an assistant coach, at the academy. The doors opened to this...I’ll always remember this. Scott comes out, and he looks at me. He says, “Thunman, get in here!” So I go in, and the varsity is scrimmaging, the first team is scrimmaging the poolees in the fourth team.<sup>10</sup> “We need a center. You play center.” “Sure.”

So I’m in there playing center, and Navy had a third team, the guy who ultimately ended up, I think, second or third team, All-American guard. I’m trying to think of his name now. Anyway, we’re playing along, and we end up on the ground. He looks at me, and he says, “Kid, don’t hold me again.” And I, dumb as can be, I said, “Why you son of a bitch, if you can’t hold your position, don’t blame it on me.” Bad things. (both laugh)

So we’re playing, and now I’m on defense, playing linebacker. There’s a sweep. I remember the sweep. I’m moving toward the sweep. It was like a bowling ball hit me from the side, and it was this guy. It was a clean tackle. It was a block, but it was...Boy, it just took that knee right out. I remember, I

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<sup>10</sup> A poolee is an individual who has already signed up to become a Marine but has not yet left for the thirteen weeks of recruit training at boot camp in San Diego or Parris Island.

kind of came around, laying there, and everybody's standing around going, "Ooh, ooh," looking down. Apparently, the knee was off like this. I dug holes in the ground. It ended up, I lost some of my fingernails, where the dirt had gone up under the fingernails from digging holes in the ground. They had an ambulance come, and away I went. That was the end of my football career. So I wouldn't have been there if my grades hadn't have been so good.

DePue: Was that also the end of your crew career that never got started?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. Well, no I tried. I got myself into shape by my junior year. I tried crew, but my knee really wouldn't take it. I went through the rest of the academy, favoring that knee in everything I did. My classmates would protect me in swimming. I couldn't do the frog kick. I never got to where I could do it to the extent that they wanted, where you used it as your kick for a rescue, where you put your hands under a chin, and all you do is frog kick. I'd gone from a point where I was in the top few percent in the obstacle course, to just barely able to...I hurt myself again on the obstacle course once, going down a big ramp.

I remember this one commander there who liked me, telling me that you're just going to forget it. In those days they didn't operate on knees. I forget what you would call it today, but today it was be an interior cruciate separation, which it's the big deal when they do it today, the guy takes out a year, the operation, with everything going on. They take a piece out of your tail, and put in there. But it was, it was over.

DePue: This many years removed from that event and that experience, was not being able to play football, was that a big downer for you?

Thunman: Oh yeah. It was an incredible disappointment. I wanted to win a letter. That's really all I really ever wanted to do is football there, was to win a letter playing football. It was a terrible disappointment. It was a real downer. I just wanted that. Of course, looking back on it, the crew part of it, the stupidity, that crew went on to win the Olympics in 1952. Those two classmates who went were Olympic crewmen.

DePue: You could have been a gold medal winner.

Thunman: Well, it's kind of like that movie with Marlon Brando, you know, "I could have been somebody."

DePue: "I could have been a contender." [quote from the film, *On the Waterfront*]

Thunman: "I could have been a contender." Who knows? So, all of a sudden another one is added to your back. You're wearing the colorblind thing, and now you're trying to make your way through the bad knee problem.

DePue: Would you have been able to overcome the colorblind issue had you not been destined to be playing Navy football?

Thunman: Oh, no. I would have been gone. I remember having Rickover ask me once... Rickover was upset with me, because I had played football or tried to play football. These were his exact words when I was trying to get into the Navy's nuclear power program. In his interview he said, "Thunman," he said, "You're nothing but a big, dumb football player." And he said, "You're nothing but a big punching bag." I remember he used that word. He said, "You weren't even a good football player." That bothered me, but I didn't react to it. He said, "If you had it to do over again, would you have played football?" Because Rickover believed that everybody should do nothing but study.

DePue: So he wasn't just trying to goad you. This is what he actually believed.

Thunman: Yeah. Some of the goading was there, but he actually believed it, that I shouldn't have been wasting my time playing it. He looked at me, and then I said, "Yes, sir." I hesitated, and I said, "Yes, sir." I remember, reacting, he said, "Why! Why!" I said, "Admiral, if I hadn't played football, I would have never gotten into the Naval Academy." He says, "That's all." (DePue laughs) That was the end of the interview, and he selected me.

DePue: I wondered if you could tell us about Annapolis, the place physically, and a little bit about the plebe system, if there was such a thing.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, there was. In those days it was a beautiful, little town. Today it's a big resort, Mecca.

DePue: I guess I mean the academy grounds itself.

Thunman: The academy is beautiful. The buildings there, they all match; they all have history and names and statues. The chapel is, I think, probably the most beautiful of any of the academies by far. John Paul Jones is buried there, the Golden Chapel Dome. Bancroft Hall, where all the midshipmen live, it houses 4,000 young men, now women, in rooms, two or three to a room, a huge mess hall underneath, which feeds this brigade of midshipmen of 4,000 within thirty minutes. It has the facilities and the people there to do that. In those days they were enlisted people who served you. They were black sailors mainly, and that's what they did. They were drafted and came into the Navy and served meals at the Naval Academy. Of course remember, this is back in the '50s.

DePue: But that was just shortly after Truman integrated the services too.

Thunman: Yeah, but those, they were all those black sailors were there. They lived in a ship, the *Reina Mercedes*.

DePue: The *Reina Mercedes*.

Thunman: R-e-i-n-a, Mercedes, which I think was one of our battleships during the Spanish-American War. That's where the black sailors lived. Certainly, the segregation part of it and the racial part of it was still present. We called them mokes, you know; they were mokes, m-o-k-e-s. They had a special... They were really quite colorful. They had a special way of marching, their own marching, kind of a swinging, with the arms out. Every once in a while, we would for fun, go into what we called, "moke step march." (both laugh)

DePue: Did you have any black classmates?

Thunman: We had, I think, one or two, not very good midshipmen. Nobody was against them. They just weren't well qualified for it.

DePue: Were they there because of their athletic skills?

Thunman: No. Neither one of them was an athlete. In those days, there weren't many black athletes anywhere, black football players. Around the country, it had not started. So, I don't say we were racist, but this was our feeling against these young... They were young kids, and they were all good kids. There was nothing mean about any of them. They served the tables with pleasure and would laugh, but they were very, very strict with regards to what they did and what they could do.

DePue: One of the things that distinguishes West Point that first year is eating square meals and things like that. Did you do that?

Thunman: Yes. Oh, yes, you had squared corners. You always went outside, up the ladders, stairways, and you chopped. Everywhere you went, you went at the run. It was called chopped, up and down the ladders, and you squared every corner. You ate square meals.<sup>11</sup>

You were never out of your room without a full uniform. There were certain hours of the day you could be out later in the evening, in a bathrobe and your slippers. You had to wear your garters and your suspenders. Your shirts had a white collar that you buttoned on to the shirt. You were always in a complete uniform, generally blue uniform, except if you were going to any sort of athletic course you were involved with. Then you put on these white sailor suits, as you've seen them.

The uniform part of it was strict. You had very little time in the morning. You were up at 6:15. You had to be in formation at 6:45. In that thirty minutes you had to have the bed made; you had the room clean, ready for an inspection. You had to shower and shave, and that was done in the room. Each room had a shower basin. Generally, you had to get up earlier than that, because you had to go around, close the upper classmen's windows

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<sup>11</sup> Eating square means loading a bite of food onto the fork, raising the fork perpendicularly from the plate until level with the mouth, then conveying the food horizontally to its destination.



before they got up. They had different kinds of things like that that you had to do. So, I mean 6:15 was crazy.

You had to know the meals for the day, for breakfast, lunch and dinner, so you could recite them. You had to know the midshipmen and the regular officers of the day. You had to know the schedule for the week. All of these things you had to know. If you missed on any of them, then they would make you “come around.” They’d call you at night, which would mean, come around to the upperclassmen’s room for hazing, between about 10:00 and 11:00, which generally consisted of pushups and learning different things.

I remember, I had to learn the—I still know it well—the French national anthem, one night, because the president of France was coming the next day, and we had to sing it at the meal table. I don’t know French. I don’t know a word of French, but I can give you my version of the French national anthem.”

DePue: Well, let’s hear it.

Thunman: (sings) “*Le jour de gloire est arrive. Contre nous de la tyrannie, L’étendard sanglant est levé... Marchons, marchons! Qu’un sang impur. Marchon! Da da de da.*”

DePue: That’s close enough. (both laugh)

Thunman: You had to learn that. I haven’t the slightest idea what I...But that’s the kind of stuff you had to do.

DePue: What struck me here, when you talked about the brigade of midshipmen...The thing that struck me is brigade; that’s an Army term. How did that get in there?

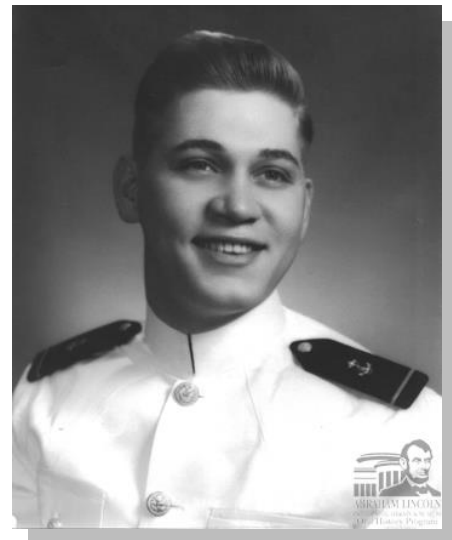
Thunman: I don’t know; it’s always been the brigade, the brigade of midshipmen, six companies.

DePue: There’s another Army term.

Thunman: Or six battalions, I mean. In my day, twenty-four companies.

DePue: When did you first get a taste of what it was to be in the Navy, get a little bit of exposure to the water?

Thunman: Well, that was your first summer, and it was good.



Portrait of Midshipman First Class Ronald Thunman, U.S. Naval Academy Class of 1954, taken in 1953 at Annapolis.

DePue: You mean after your plebe year. 1954

Thunman: Yeah, after your plebe year. You went to a ship. [technical difficulties] Your first midshipman cruise, you packed your stuff in a sea bag, and everybody went down and got into big, what we called "Mike Boats." They brought transports, Navy transports, up into Annapolis, into Annapolis roads. You got into those transports, which were troopships, which were just jammed full.

DePue: Like World War II, those liberty ships?

Thunman: Oh, yeah; they were. They were World War II troopships is what they were. They brought them up, and you were up there. The heads [toilets] were all together; the eating facilities were all... You stood up to eat, and you went and got your food in trays. You lived like sailors. You went down to Norfolk, and there you left, and you went to specific ships where you were assigned.

My first ship was a cruiser, the *Albany*. I spent the next two months aboard the *Albany*, as a sailor, scrubbing the decks—holystoning, they used to call it—on those wooden decks. It's the way you scrubbed them. [I] worked in the fire rooms. I was a three inch gun loader during actual firings. You spent a certain amount of time in each engineering, navigation. It was quite a summer. We went off to Denmark, Holland. It was a great cruise.

DePue: How long did it take you to get your sea legs?

Thunman: I was never bothered with seasickness. The only time I was ever seasick was when I was on that little patrol craft once, when I was in a full-blown gale.

DePue: Were there some of the cadets that found out, boy?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, found out and that was it. They couldn't do it.

DePue: So they would wash out [be eliminated from the training program] after that?

Thunman: Yeah. One thing you've got to say is midshipmen, not cadets.

DePue: It will take a little while.

Thunman: But the way you write it up.

DePue: Absolutely.

Thunman: It was a great training cruise. They don't do it today as much. Those two months, you learned what a sailor lived like. And the crew treated you like a sailor. Nobody treated you disrespectfully, but you were expected to carry out the duties of a sailor onboard. Those were your prerequisites. You weren't anybody but a guy to carry out those duties.

DePue: Was this your first exposure to petty officers as well?

Thunman: Yeah, but I never found I had a problem with any of them. I go back, what you said earlier, my days with the laborers and those ironworkers, and I never had a problem working with any of them. It was not hard. I didn't find anything that scared me or that I couldn't handle. Of course going to Copenhagen was a great experience, and Rotterdam.

DePue: What was the first one?

Thunman: Copenhagen and Rotterdam. We went to Paris.

DePue: That's not anywhere close to water.

Thunman: No. We took a train down there from... It was a great experience, a wonderful experience.

DePue: So it confirmed your decision to go to Annapolis in the first place.

Thunman: Yes, it did. I enjoyed all of it, and I enjoyed being at sea. I enjoyed... I got up on the bridge and watched those officers. I went up as a lookout, of course, and I'd watch those officers control the ship and con the ship, as you call it. I thought that was pretty good stuff. I thought, "Gee, that's something I'd really like to learn to do."

I liked navigation; that was fascinating to me. Of course, in my day—I don't know if it's true now—in the Naval Academy, you really learned navigation. You learned it from the beginning. You started with plane trigonometry and went to spherical trigonometry, and then you developed everything that goes into making a star sight. I mean, you were an expert.

DePue: So you knew navigation from the celestial standpoint.

Thunman: Yes, yes. I'm sure they don't know that today. I don't think anybody knows it today. I don't think you have to, with all the... But in my career, it turned out one time to be a very important thing, that I could go out and get a celestial sight.

DePue: Well, certainly an old salt like you bemoans the fact that everybody relies on GPS now, and you're thinking, what happens when they don't have GPS?<sup>12</sup>

Thunman: Well, I tell the young guys today, I say, "You don't have any fun anymore." When I was skipper of a submarine, there was no GPS; there was no satellite.

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<sup>12</sup> GPS, Global Positioning System, is a radio navigation system that allows land, sea and airborne users to determine their exact location, velocity and time, 24 hours a day, in all weather conditions, anywhere in the world.

We had LORAN, and LORAN was not all that good.<sup>13</sup> There were times when I didn't know my position any better than sixty miles, and I'm trying to make my way through a channel a mile wide. That was the fun of operating at sea.

DePue: Well, let's go back to the academy days. We got you pretty much through your first year, your plebe year. Do you have any other memorable moments that year?

Thunman: Not my plebe year. I was pleased that I was...At the end of the year, you were called in by your company officer, and we have what we call the "grease system," where everybody made out what they called "grease chits." They were kind of like, you rated your classmates. Everybody graded you, the instructors, your officers. I stood very high in that system, and I was very pleased with that.

DePue: Was this based on your leadership potential?

Thunman: Yes. It was all leadership. The next two years, really nothing remarkable. I just steamed right along. I was never close to ever having a problem, except with my knee. Some of the instructors there knew I had a bad knee, and they kind of let up on me, like in the obstacle course and all. They kind of helped me along.

DePue: Did the fact that this is during wartime change the—

Thunman: I think it was all due to personality. I think they saw that I had the potential to be a pretty good officer.

DePue: No, I mean just in terms of setting the tone for the academy overall, that it was wartime versus peacetime. I would think that that was very much the case during World War II.

Thunman: Well, it was, but the academics were heavily stressed. We took the full range. We took weapons, we called it. You learned every piece of a 16-inch gun. You knew every element of a Mark 1A Computer, which was the first computer a ship ever had, that was for firing the 16-inches all mechanical.<sup>14</sup> The navigation, the courses in the weather, the aviation, as well as English and history and government and those things, everything was keyed. An awful lot of the courses were keyed to make you a capable officer when you joined the fleet. Of course, that was a big deal, because when I joined the fleet, it was within a month [that] I was an officer of the deck of a destroyer.

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<sup>13</sup> LORAN, Long Range Navigation, was a hyperbolic radio navigation system that allowed a receiver to determine its position by listening to low frequency radio signals transmitted by fixed, land-based radio beacons.

<sup>14</sup> The Mark 1, and later the Mark 1A, Fire Control Computer was a component of the Mark 37 Gun Fire Control System deployed by Hannibal Ford of the Ford Instrument Company for the United States Navy during World War II and up to 1969 or later.

DePue: How much choice did you have in the classes that you took?

Thunman: They had two accelerated courses. This surprised me. Well, this was University of Illinois. I was selected... Plebe Summer, they gave you examinations. I was put in the advanced Spanish class and in the advanced English class. Everybody else then took the same. I had a little trouble with the English class, because I had never read any Shakespeare before. It seemed to me, they spent an awful lot of time reading Shakespeare. (DePue laughs)

DePue: Were you thinking, why do I need to learn this, when I'm going to be in the Navy?

Thunman: (laughing) That's right. But it was a general course, a great course in electricity. You ended up with a general engineering degree, with a major in electrical engineering, I think is what it was. It was a good electrical engineering...I still rely on it in the stuff I do today, basic electrical engineering. I'm surprised; some of the engineers I deal with don't know the basics.

DePue: Did you end up with an engineering degree when you graduated?

Thunman: No, it was a general engineering. It was an engineering degree. The category was general engineering, electrical engineering major, I think, is how it is put up. You had an engineering degree.

DePue: Something else that distinguishes the academy is the name for each one of the classes that you had.

Thunman: Yes. The plebe class is your first year. Your second year, you're youngsters. You're a third classman, but you're called a youngster. Your junior year, I guess we were called segundos, second classmen. Your first class, your senior year, you were called firsties.

DePue: Segundos. Where in the world did that term come from?

Thunman: Well, that's "second" in Spanish.

DePue: Oh.

Thunman: My final year, first class year, was when you attained rank. They had three different segments. You got rank in one of the first two segments. Then there was a final segment



*First class Midshipman Thunman was front and center as regimental commander in 1954 at Annapolis, Maryland. Others on the staff included Ed Saunders, Wes Hogan and Pete Vogelberger*

where they took a compilation of everybody. I didn't have any rank in the first segment. The second segment, I was a battalion commander. We had six battalions. Then the third segment, I was a regimental commander. You had two regiments; the brigade was separated into two regiments. I was the...I stood number two in aptitude at the Naval Academy, at my graduation.

DePue: Aptitude is a combination of academics and—

Thunman: No, it's aptitude for the service.

DePue: So that would strictly be on leadership.

Thunman: Yes. Then I stood 113 out of a class of 852, in academics.

DePue: You did very well for yourself.

Thunman: Well, as I say, of course, I was fortunate that University of Illinois [is] here. One of the things I did at University of Illinois, which was smart, was...I didn't have to, but I took engineering at Illinois. I couldn't take the full course, because I was playing football, but I took most of it. All of that helped me.

DePue: You say you didn't have to, but wasn't your father expecting you to do it?

Thunman: Well, my father expected me [to]. But I remember the coaches at Illinois [U of I], they told us, they said, "We can protect you if you're in physical training, if you take the PE [physical education] course, we can protect you. We can't protect you if you're not in the PE course." But I chose... You're right. I would certainly not have been able to come back to Springfield, to my father, and say, "I'm taking physical education." (both laugh) That would have been a **bad** day.

DePue: You mentioned what you did the first couple months. Obviously, you were just learning how to be in the Navy. That second on, you had that great cruise you talked about. How about that third summer you were there?

Thunman: Well, let's see, the next summer was Second Class Summer. We spent a lot of time involved with damage control training, involved with learning about different ships. We learned about amphibious training. We went down to Little Creek with the Army cadets. You may remember that. We had the amphibious landings down there. We were aboard troopships.

DePue: Where was this again?

Thunman: Down in Little Creek, Virginia. We loaded the Army cadets into M-boats.<sup>15</sup> I was an M-boat coxswain. We went out, and we hit the beach at Little Creek. It was D-Day.<sup>16</sup> The whole thing was run like D-Day. The only thing that was different was, after we dumped the cadets on the beach, we went back to the ships and got up and got into their K-rations and stole all of the chocolate bars. (DePue laughs)

DePue: That's a dastardly deed.

Thunman: (laughing) A dastardly deed. The one thing that happened was they kept about fifty of us there. They'd given us examinations to stay at the academy for two weeks and fly what we called the "yellow perils." They had these little planes called N3Ns.<sup>17</sup> They were biplane, open cockpit seaplanes, wonderful little airplanes. We used to call them "Navy three nuclears." They kept fifty of you or so, who they thought would have the aptitude to fly. So I spent two weeks flying. That was just plain fun, flying those things. The rules, of course, I guess, were different in those.

I remember I had this instructor who was a lieutenant commander, great guy. I knew him in later years, aviator, typical aviator. They had these apartment houses there in Annapolis, where a lot of the secretaries lived. On weekends they'd get up on top of the buildings, and they'd sun themselves. They'd get up there, and they'd take the top strap off. And old [name unintelligible-??], he'd say, "Okay, now we get up sun." We'd climb up sun. We'd come down, and we'd cut power and come swooping over those things at about fifty feet. It was typical naval aviation and an introduction into naval aviation.

My class was the first class that could have gone into naval aviation directly from the academy. Previous classes, you had to go out and qualify at sea first. I would have done it because I liked it, except I knew that being colorblind would kill me. I'd be dead. I had to avoid that, but I would have passed. By then, they carried me through the entire process. I would have passed, and I would have been an aviator. I loved it; I loved flying that little airplane.

DePue: Is there a different profile though, for the Navy aviators, from the guys who are "brown shoe versus black shoe?"

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<sup>15</sup> An inflatable boats that is further advanced in comparison with common inflatable boats, especially developed and designed to be used with electric trolling.

<sup>16</sup> During World War II (1939-1945), the Battle of Normandy, which lasted from June 1944 (since referred to as D-Day) to August 1944, resulted in the Allied liberation of Western Europe from Nazi Germany's control.

<sup>17</sup> An American tandem-seat, open cockpit, primary training biplane, built by the Naval Aircraft Factory (NAF) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, during the 1930s.

- Thunman: Oh, yeah. Well, the black shoe, submariners never considered themselves to be a black shoe. A black shoe is a separate community. They're pretty restricted and limited and everything's got to be set down for them.
- DePue: Toward the end of your first year, was there a process where you all sort yourselves out, in terms of what branch... I don't know what the terminology is, what you would end up doing?
- Thunman: Interestingly, everybody by then had decided what they wanted to do, but you had to draw a number. You made your applications by number. Now, 20 percent of you or so could go in the Marine Corps.
- DePue: Was that a popular thing to do?
- Thunman: There were some, yeah. Today it's very popular, more than... Well, I don't know, but very popular. I'll put it that way.
- DePue: No more than 20 percent, or you've got to have 20 percent?
- Thunman: No, there was a limit. It wasn't a requirement. It was, this is the cap. In my day, they did permit some to go directly into naval aviation. In my day, which was new, they let, I think, a third of the class go into the Air Force. They had just started the Air Force Academy. They did the same thing at West Point. The rest of you drew numbers to see what ships you went to. There were various numbers of ship billet openings. To see which billet you would take, you took that from just a plan draw. I picked a destroyer, which was pretty good. A lot of the guys had to go to cruisers or battleships or to oilers or things like that. That would have been terrible, but I was able to get to a destroyer.
- DePue: Is this strictly by chance?
- Thunman: By chance, those picks.
- DePue: You kind of alluded to this. Go down the pecking order of what kind of ship was at the top of everybody's list, and what's at the bottom.
- Thunman: Well, the top was a destroyer.
- DePue: Because?
- Thunman: Well, you had more responsibility. A smaller ship, you had more responsibility; you learned more. You get up on an oiler... They didn't stay on those oilers long. I spent three years on the destroyer, but most of those guys who went to the oilers or a big cruiser got a transfer to a destroyer or into one of the other services, as soon as they could.
- DePue: I would have thought that the battleship was the premiere position to get.



Thunman: No, by that time, no. You didn't learn that much in a battleship. It's a big ship. You're in the engineering department, and you're not learning the basic skills of a seaman there.

DePue: Well, how about an aircraft carrier? You didn't even mention that.

Thunman: Well, I think there were a few billets open in aircraft carriers. But there again, the people who went to those billets, they were probably billets that had to be filled, and they went. They kept a guy there for a year or two. Then they sent him off, maybe into submarine duty. Of course, you couldn't go directly into submarines. You had to qualify as an officer of the deck on a surface ship.

DePue: Why couldn't you go directly to submarines?

Thunman: Well, it was limited. The submarine force wouldn't take you until you had qualified as an officer of the deck on a surface ship.

DePue: Because it was so small, because it was that much more elite?

Thunman: They wanted you to demonstrate that capability, before they would take you into the force. That was the submarine force policy.

DePue: So they were setting themselves up as being elite or different?

Thunman: Yes. Oh, yeah, the submarine force always considered themselves to be elite, always. You go back to the '20s, and you go through the history of the submarine force. It started off... I remember Rickover told me one day, he said, "It started off, only the bums went into submarines, in the late '20s and in the early '30s, and we had to clean them all out." He said, "You make sure you keep the submarine force the best. It's the number one service in the Navy." He told me that little story about only the bums went in. I was surprised to hear that.

DePue: Was that the attitude of the midshipmen, the reason a lot of them wanted to become submariners eventually?

Thunman: Yes. Many of my classmates, the whole time they were there, oh they were going to go into submarines as soon as they could. They announced it when they got to their first ship. They announced that to their captain that they were going to apply for submarine duty as soon as they were qualified.

DePue: You're going to have to explain to me the psychology of making this decision of whether or not you want to be a Navy aviator or a submariner, or a black shoe?

Thunman: Surface ship. Today they're called surface warfare officers.

DePue: How does that all work? Why was the submarine force so attractive to people? To the land lovers, it doesn't sound like much fun, being stuck under the water all the time.

Thunman: Well, you had the best people. All of your people who work for you, the only reason they're not officers is because they didn't go to college. They're all just as smart as you are. You don't have any leadership problems in submarines. It's a lot more exciting. There's not a lot of excitement on a surface ship. There's a lot of time, standing on the bridge. I've stood my hours on the bridge of that destroyer.

DePue: Standing watch?

Thunman: Standing watch up there, with not a lot going on but just steaming or keeping station. There's some excitement. In my day, [it was] probably more exciting than today, because we had so many surface ships. We steamed in big task groups. I remember groups of twenty destroyers and three aircraft carriers and three cruisers and all in the black of night. That was exciting, some of that. A young ensign is up there, the officer of the deck, and the poor captain. Then he's sleeping for days.

But the submarine people, it's more exciting. You felt superior to the surface ships, because you could beat the surface ship. We always said there were two types of ships in the Navy. There are submarines, and then there are targets. (DePue laughs)

And then, what the submarine force did in the normal scheme of things, which, in my day, it started off with intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. So, you were off in Indian country, as we called it. You were off, right at the edges, around the world. You had to be self-reliant to be a submariner.

In my day, to qualify in submarines, to earn those dolphins<sup>18</sup>...I earned mine on the old diesel boats, the World War II submarine. I had to learn how to operate every piece of equipment on that ship. I had to be able to start those diesel engines. I had to be able to operate the electrical control panels. I had to be able to dive the ship by myself, with nobody helping. I had to be able to carry out every station of a submarine approaching attack. I had to make my own torpedo ready. I had to go recover my own torpedo, shoot it, jump overboard and get it, bring it back aboard. It was quite a process. It was a year, about a year, of what they called qualifying submarines. This is after you'd gone to submarine school for six months. This wasn't, you know...

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<sup>18</sup>A uniform breast pin worn by enlisted Sailors and Naval Officers, indicating that they are qualified in submarines. The dolphin insignia is considered one of the Navy's three major enlisted warfare pins, along with the Surface Warfare Badge and the Enlisted Aviation Warfare Specialist insignia.

The day they pinned the... Your examination was you're examined by your own captain and everything practical on the submarine, everything involved with the force. You filled out a notebook, a qualification notebook. That was standard. Then you had to convince your own captain that he would qualify you. Then he would transfer you to another submarine that you'd never been on, didn't know the captain, and spend a week or so, and let him test you on various things. If you convinced him, then you went to the division commander, who finally signed off on it. When you wore those dolphins, you kind of looked down at anybody else in the black shoe fleet.

Now, we didn't look down at the aviators, because they had similar... By the time they got through flight group training and the readiness air group training and the carrier, those guys are really something. The black shoe never had that test.

DePue: If you had aspirations someday to become the chief of naval operations, what's the best route to take?

Thunman: Well, most of the time it's been naval aviation, because of the carriers. The naval aviators also have a flare about them. They're a pretty impressive group. I've worked for some of the greatest naval aviators the Navy's had in the last thirty years. I've gotten to know some of them, really impressive guys. They're special. They have a special ability to make the right decision. I'm not just talking about technical; I'm talking about political decisions that involve the future of the Navy. They're a special group.

Now, we've had some submarines who... Right now, the chief of naval operations is a submariner, a really slick guy. I'd put him up there with the best of the aviators now. Surface warfare officers from recent years have had the job. I don't think they've been real impressive. Of course, one of them went on to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs [Admiral Jonathan Greenert]. I didn't think he was that impressive, as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. I didn't think he had that same... I go back to guys like Admiral Moore, when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Hayward. They were always a little bit special. They always had a little bit difference to them that made you really want to follow them, whatever they wanted to do.

DePue: Let's finish off with this one, because technically, we still have you in the academy. (Thunman laughs) Tell us about your graduation. Is there anything special that you remember about?

Thunman: No. I didn't have a steady girlfriend. I had a couple of girls who were interested in me, one whose father drove his yacht up to the academy for "June Week," so that we could be together, but I wasn't all that interested in

her.<sup>19</sup> She was very wealthy. I don't know why I wasn't all that interested in her. (laughs)

June Week was not some big, romantic thing for me. My parents came. I was very proud to march in front of my parents. My father... I don't have this; he put together a wonderful film—my father was an 8mm camera buff—of the June Week; he put it all together. I've got to find it one day, of the whole week and of the parades and different things.

The only thing I remember about June Week was standing in the line, getting ready to go over into where we graduated, which was Baldwin Hall. We were all in the line and had our hats in our hands. I kept walking ahead as people were entering in. We weren't marching; it was just getting arranged before the graduation. I kept looking very carefully at the ground ahead of me to be sure that I didn't fall down and break my leg.

DePue: (laughs) Well, that wasn't the story I was expecting to hear.

Thunman: (laughs) To me, that was the high point of my June Week, was to... I went up and picked up the diplomas for my company. I was so proud. The academy to me was something that, by God, I was going to do it if it killed me. I loved it.

DePue: It didn't kill you.

Thunman: No. I just never, ever took my off at the end of it. I said to my grandson, when he started in Princeton—he's graduated from Princeton—and I said to him, I said, "Look, you have great opportunities, like I do." He's a world class oarsman, incidentally, with the Princeton crew. He really is world class. I said, "You have a great opportunity to be somebody, to go to **Princeton** and graduate. So few people have that opportunity." I said, "That should be your number one goal, graduate from Princeton. The rest of it's all important, but what's important is graduate. Always have that in the back of your mind." I told him, I said, "I did that every day of my life at the Naval Academy. Before I decided to make any move, anywhere, from doing something dumb on Liberty in Baltimore; I didn't do that. Nothing was going to stop me from getting that done."

DePue: I think that's probably a great way to finish for today. We've got a lot more to come. Thank you, Admiral.

Thunman: Well, it's fun. I don't expect you to publish all this baloney, but it's fun to come out with it.

(end of session #1)

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<sup>19</sup> Commissioning Week, May 20 through May 27, is also known as "June Week." For decades, the Naval Academy's graduation festivities occurred in early June. Since 1979, when changes in the academic calendar shortened the school year, it has been known officially as Commissioning Week.

Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

#VRC-A-L-2012-023.02

Interview # 2: June 4, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, June 4, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm in the home of Admiral Ron Thunman. Good morning, Admiral, how are you?

Thunman: Good morning, sir, how are you?

DePue: Great. What we wanted to start with, is to give you an opportunity to mention a couple things, perhaps correct the record a little bit about your father's life and career. So I'm going to turn it over to you for a couple minutes.

Thunman: Well, thank you very much. I had not done my homework properly before the first interview. But digging through the records, I found the information that my dad had put together back in 1953, when I was graduating from the academy. I had to submit all of my background information in order to get my clearance. I found a lot of the information, or some of the information, that I

talked about before, with Mark, was not quite correct. So, let me just read from this document. I'll leave it with him. It does have a complete background of my father and me and where we lived and where he worked.

My father, Carl Erik Thunman, was born December 5, 1900, in Sandviken, Sweden, immigrated to the United States in June, 1921. As I said in the interview, he was an illegal immigrant and told the story of his jumping ship in New York City. He enlisted in the Marine Corps on November 22, 1921. So he obviously wandered around penniless in New York City for almost six months.

He was married November 29, 1922, to my mother, Julia Lindblom. He received an honorable discharge from the Marine Corps on May 22, 1923. He was employed as a construction worker, engineer, building superintendent on various major construction projects in the state of New York, Ohio, Alabama, Virginia, Tennessee and Illinois. This, of course, was during the '30s, when you had to move often in order to keep your job.

As I mentioned earlier, he was often questioned about whether there were illegal immigrants working for him. Nobody asked him whether he was one, and he was. He obtained his naturalization papers on June 5, 1943, in the Southern District Court of Illinois, and became a citizen. In 1953, when he wrote this paper, he was the engineer for the Department of Conservation in the State of Illinois.

My mother immigrated to the United States in 1911, when she was sixteen. She lived in New York with a distinguished family, as a companion and ladies maid, until she was married. She was in that capacity for eleven years, a long time. She was naturalized in 1935 in Springfield, Illinois. We lived in Springfield back at that time, as well.

The paper discusses all the people. My brother, Carl Thunman, Jr., was born in 1923, who subsequently became a distinguished engineering graduate, University of Illinois. My sister, who was born in 1926, graduate of William Woods College. Many of my relatives in Sweden...I won't go through them, but if somebody was interested, they could look at this document. Most of those relatives are gone now, except there is a Carl Gunnar Thunman who is a cousin, directly a cousin.

DePue: In the United States or back in Sweden?

Thunman: No, he's back in Sweden. I have another cousin, Per Thunman, who is also in Sweden. He was adopted; so he's not a blood cousin, but as far as I'm concerned, he's a cousin. Those are about the only two. So, if you want to make a copy of that document—

DePue: We sure will.

Thunman: In my own case, I found a document which showed the various addresses that I personally had, up to 1954, when I graduated. I lived in fifteen different places in my lifetime, from 1932 up to 1954.

DePue: I'm sure that wasn't easy for you to put together at the time either.

Thunman: No. These had to be put together, because again, I was getting my clearance. There was a little bit of concern at the time, that my parents, especially my father, was not a natural born citizen. So I had to put all this together. Interestingly, subsequent to that, after I graduated, I lived in—just a minute here—thirty different addresses, and this was as of 1981.

DePue: So thirty addresses. Welcome to the Navy, huh?

Thunman: Yeah, welcome to the Navy.

DePue: And that doesn't count sailing all across the seven seas.

Thunman: No, not the two-week visits here and there in the Navy.

DePue: Last time, when we finished up, we got through your time at Annapolis, at the United States Naval Academy. You graduated in the spring of 1954. So, the logical step next is what happens to young Ensign Thunman at that time?

Thunman: Well, I was lucky enough to be chosen to stay back at the Naval Academy, from June 1954 until September, 1954, to do what we call "pushing the plebes." The new plebe class arrived in June. I was made a company officer for thirty of the midshipmen, brand new midshipmen, and took them through the Plebe Summer, which was a very difficult session that we have, similar to West Point's, "Beast Barracks," when you really lay down the first difficult discipline on the new midshipmen.

That was quite an experience. I was very proud, over the years, of the performance of some of those plebes. I know at least two of them became admirals, of that thirty, which I think was pretty good. One of them was John Sidney McCain, a brand new graduate of high school, young, feisty, always lived on the edge of the rules. I didn't know his family were distinguished naval officers. His father, of course, was a submariner, later became a four-star admiral, his grandfather was a four-star admiral. I just knew him as John Sidney McCain, and trying to keep him out of trouble was sometimes difficult.

Everybody had to participate in sports. Participation was graded, and at the end of the year, the battalion that did the best got an extra day off. We worked pretty hard to put everybody into a sport that we thought they were good at. We put John [McCain] into boxing. Boxing was big at the Naval Academy. I used to say that he'd get in that ring, and he'd swing at everything

that moved, until something went down, including himself. He was about as tough and as feisty as you could be, always kind of on the edge of the rules.

One occasion, he was placed on report by a more senior officer there at the academy, a Marine captain, and by report. He was going to be disciplined because this captain had seen him run across a corridor without his bathrobe, which in those days, you could either be in full uniform or in your bathrobe, but nothing in between.

DePue: What was he wearing?

Thunman: John said that he hadn't run across the corridor. Those long corridors at the Naval Academy, you could look down and maybe miss the room by one or two; that's possible. He said he hadn't done it. This Marine said he had seen him, looking down this long corridor, and wanted to put him on report for the entire affair. Young John was very concerned, seventeen years old. [He] met me at my office the next morning, after this had happened, in tears. I was half hungover, because I'd just graduated from the academy. (both laugh) We were going out every night until 2:00 in the morning.

So I went down to see this captain. As a matter of fact, I remember his name now. I don't know whether I should give it to you or not, probably not.

DePue: That's up to you.

Thunman: His name was Rhodes; I'll give you that. Naturally, nicknamed Dusty Rhodes, as all of them are, a distinguished Marine captain, been in Korea, fighting in Korea. But I went around to see him and tell him that young John says he wasn't the one who did that. The Marine said, "Well, I'm putting him on report for it, because he's the one I thought I saw." He admitted that it was a long way down the corridor, and that's true.

So I went back to see my boss, who was a lieutenant commander, submariner, Larry Frahm, wonderful guy, and told him that I thought this was wrong. Of course, McCain had only been there a couple of weeks, so the Marine was getting a little bit, I think, too tough with the rules and regulations for a youngster at that time. Fortunately, Larry Frahm called this Marine and says, "Tear this up, and don't ever come into my battalion area again." That was the end of it.

John McCain and I stayed friends across the years. I would see him as a young naval aviator, out in the Western Pacific. We had a relationship. After he came back from being in prison in Vietnam, he ended up in the Office of Legislative Affairs.<sup>20</sup> He was the Navy's representative, which is a big job,

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<sup>20</sup> [John McCain](#) spent 5½ years in captivity as a POW in North Vietnam. Shot down in his Skyhawk dive bomber on Oct. 26, 1967, Navy flier McCain was taken prisoner with fractures in his right leg and both arms.



because you were representing the Navy to the Congress. He was a captain; they made him a captain. He'd had a job to be the commanding officer of a training squadron, I think, on the East Coast. He did very well as a representative for the Navy to the Congress.

He came out to Pearl Harbor when I was commander of a submarine for the Pacific, escorting Gary Hart. Gary Hart was anxious to stop building nuclear submarines and go back to building diesel submarines, because they were a lot cheaper.

DePue: Is this before Hart's run for the presidency?

Thunman: Yeah, it was before his run. He was a senator then. I recall briefing Senator Hart about it, telling him how much we in the Navy were against that and how the diesel powered submarine could not do what we needed to do. We could not carry out our mission, and our mission was to get to trouble spots a long way away, quickly and to stay there undetected and to be effective with adequate firepower to do what we had to do.

I recall John, he kind of entered into the conversation about it, John being an aviator. Afterwards, as we had finished the interviews and Hart was walking ahead of me, I grabbed John and said, "Don't ever get involved in this. That's not your job. Your job is to escort and work with the Congress, not to make decisions about how we're going to run submarines." I made that very clear to him.

But later on, when he got into the Congress, we remained friends. Interestingly, when I retired, he offered me a pretty good job, to be the head of the Hopi-Navajo Indian Commission in Arizona. It would have been fun. I went out there with his executive assistant. There were a lot of issues between the two tribes and with the state, a lot of money involved, had been for a number of years, as they tried to keep these two tribes from tearing into each other.

DePue: What was the other tribe, do you recall?

Thunman: The Hopi Tribe and the Navajo, really interesting. I remember, I went into the little huts that the Navajos had, sitting in those huts. The women were the matriarchs, the Navajo women. They ran the show. The men, at that point, about 75 percent of them were drunk. It was interesting seeing that relationship. But sitting in there...A goat would come in and look at us for a while and walk out. I remember John's executive assistant saying, "Will that bother you, in this kind of an environment?" I said, "Hey, I lived in

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He received minimal care and was kept in wretched conditions, until his release on March 14, 1973. His wartime injuries left him permanently incapable of raising his arms above his head.

submarines for thirty years. Having a goat march in and out is not going to make any difference to me.” (laughs)

DePue: That’s the Navy’s mascot, after all.

Thunman: Even though he does smell bad. But I couldn’t take it, because of the physical problem I had. There was just no way. The problem I had, that came to a head as I retired, where I have to self-catheterize myself every four hours, because of a neuropathy that they were not able to detect its cause, although they worked very hard, when I was getting ready to retire, to find out what the problem was that created a neurogenic bladder.

I had some good people. Tom Clancy, as a matter of fact, weighed in to get Johns Hopkins Hospital involved with trying to determine what the problem was. Johns Hopkins, as I understand it, brought an expert from Austria, in radiography, to see if they could detect where the problem was. There were some thoughts that maybe there was a growth on my spine, but they weren’t able to find it. At the time, they said, “Well maybe in a few years it will show up in an MRI, [Magnetic Resonance Imaging] as it grows.”<sup>21</sup> But I had to stop taking MRIs because I got a pacemaker. You can’t take an MRI any more when you have a pacemaker. So, there was never any further effort to try and locate the problem.

There were some neurologists who said it had to do with the Bikini bomb test that I had been involved with, that I’ll start talking about here in a minute, where some thirty nuclear detonations had been tested, back in about 1956.

So anyway, that was going back, graduated there at the academy. I met my first wife there. We were married on June 6, 1954.

DePue: June, or you said—

Thunman: Excuse me, September 6, 1954.

DePue: So this was a bit of a whirlwind romance for you.

Thunman: Yeah, it was a whirlwind romance. Yes it was, but that’s a story for another time.

DePue: Do you mind if we mention her name in the record though?

Thunman: Oh, yes, Elizabeth Chase Caldwell, of course, then Thunman.

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<sup>21</sup> An MRI is a noninvasive medical test that employs a powerful magnetic field, radio frequency pulses and a computer to produce detailed pictures of organs, soft tissues, bone and virtually all other internal body structures for use by physicians in diagnosing medical conditions.

DePue: Before we leave John McCain. At the time he was a plebe, did you have any notion that this young man was destined for something big?

Thunman: I don't know that I was smart enough at that time to look at anybody. Interestingly, I look back at some of those youngsters. I remember the young man that I picked to be the company commander. He retired as a Navy captain and had a good career. As I said, two of my youngsters, who had done well, ended up as admirals. But John was always kind of on the edge of the rules, of the regulation book.

DePue: That was just his nature to be that way?

Thunman: That was his nature, and he says that in his... He talks about graduating fourth or so, from the bottom of his class. Now, he was a lot smarter than that. There was no question about that. As he says in his own books, he tried to stay as close to the bottom as he possibly could. (DePue laughs)

DePue: Well, not only admirals, but I think a couple others have distinguished themselves from that class. As I understand, John Poindexter, was he a member of that class?

Thunman: He was class of '58. I was class of '54.

DePue: So he would have been in the same class as McCain.

Thunman: Yes. I knew John in later years, a wonderful guy. I thought he was treated badly in that whole affair, Iran Contra.<sup>22</sup> [He was] very loyal, of course, to President [Ronald] Reagan and a brilliant guy, brilliant. But he was not one of my plebes. He didn't come up in front of me in any close way.

DePue: Did you enjoy that time, when you got to be on the other end of the system?

Thunman: Yeah, I did, and we did very well. Our company won what they called "The Colors." I think there were eight companies, and we stood first at the end of it. I lived with two other of my classmates, Herb Trenham and John Woodward, very close dear friends today. Both of them distinguished themselves, retired as captains in the Navy, stayed. Herb was a diesel electric submariner, became a distinguished engineer. Johnny was a naval aviator, became a helicopter squadron commander. I just got a call the other day from Herb, and we talked about old times.

DePue: What's next then, after that stint at the Naval Academy?

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<sup>22</sup> A political scandal in the U.S. that occurred during the second term of the Reagan Administration. Senior administration officials secretly facilitated the sale of arms to Iran, which was the subject of an arms embargo, hoping to fund the Contras in Nicaragua, while at the same time negotiating the release of several U.S. hostages.

Thunman: Well, I went off to my first ship, the U.S.S. *Shelton*, DD-790, a destroyer, a great training ground. I'd thought about going into submarines. Of course, I was worried about being found to be colorblind. I'd thought about going into the aviation as well. Again, the colorblindness scare was there.

I did a pretty good job on the destroyer. I was aboard for three years. After a year and a half, I became the chief engineer, which was a very important job on the ship. A 60,000 shaft horsepower ship had a department of about 100. I was a lieutenant, junior grade, at that time. We were gone, deployed... We were gone more than this, of course, but deployed (phone rings in the background) half the time of those three years.

We were deployed on three different six-month deployments in the Pacific and went everywhere, of course, Japan, Australia, Fiji Islands, the Philippines, Hong Kong. We really saw the Pacific. Life aboard a destroyer is tough. There's about twelve officers and, as I recall, about 300 men or 250 men, and you got responsibility early.

It was interesting, in those days, we were traveling in huge taskforces. There were still a lot of the ships left over from World War II, taskforces with twenty-five destroyers, two or three aircraft carriers, two or three oilers and ammunition ships, two or three cruisers that ran around the Pacific and out west. We were involved with the protection of Taiwan from the Chinese. We ran in those waters.

DePue: The Straits of Taiwan?

Thunman: Yes and the Quemoy Matsu Operation.<sup>23</sup> We got involved in some very heavy seas, lost a man overboard.

DePue: From your destroyer?

Thunman: Mm-hmm. Did an emergency appendectomy onboard, a young lieutenant doctor. That's a story in itself.

The skipper I had was a great skipper, Earl Buckwalter. He was relieved, toward the end of my tour, by another officer who was somewhat incompetent. He [the new skipper] had been in the Bureau of Ships for three or four or five years, hadn't been to sea and was a fine man, but he made some serious mistakes.

The man overboard, it was a little bit like *The Caine Mutiny*. We were in heavy seas on the edge of a typhoon. I was going up to the bridge to relieve, as the officer of the deck. Another officer, lieutenant junior grade, was up

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<sup>23</sup> Also called the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis, this was a conflict that took place between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China in which the People's Republic shelled the islands of Kinmen and the nearby Matsu Islands, along its own east coast.

there. I got up there, and I was standing on the wing of the bridge, trying to figure out, what were we doing? And what were our orders? The captain was in the conn.<sup>24</sup> This giant wave—it almost could have been a tsunami—hit the starboard quarter of the ship, rolled us to port. I was up in the wing of the bridge now, that's probably thirty, forty feet above the waterline, maybe fifty feet, a bit more like fifty feet, I guess.

We rolled. I was hanging on to the portside of the bridge. I was looking down, and the water was a couple of feet away. We had rolled probably eighty degrees, somewhere like that, hung at that attitude, came back. The starboard quarter was caved in, of the deckhouse. A few minutes later, a Filipino steward had come up from below. He was speaking half Filipino, saying, "Man overboard! Man overboard!"

The officer of the deck did the right thing. Then the Filipino steward pointed down the portside, and he [the officer of the deck] ordered, "Left, full rudder!" to turn the ship around. The captain said, "No," countermanded the order. I got into it, and I said, "Captain, he's back in our wake; we've got to reverse course." He said, "It's too rough." And I said, "I don't think so." Because we'd been hit by an unusual wave; the rest of the seas were not like that. He said, "No." So we proceeded along about five miles, until we got into the lee of an island. We were southwest of Japan at the time, turned around and came back and never found the man who went overboard.

Unfortunately, what had happened was the crew would come up after dinner and get out on the portside, where there wasn't any heavy sea effects. Then, of course, when the ship went down on the portside, he was washed overboard. This brought about a court-martial later. I was called in to testify, scared to death. I remember there was our squadron commander, who ran the court. Well, I say court-martial. It certainly was an investigation of some sort.

DePue: A court of inquiry or something?

Thunman: Yeah. It was not an official court-martial. I remember the squadron commander asking me, he said, "Do you think the ship could have turned around?" I remember, I hung for a few seconds, because I knew that I was countering what the captain said. Nobody else said it. The other officer didn't say it. I said I thought it could. The captain was relieved of the command.

He had also, in that timeframe, had hit a buoy going into Hong Kong, which was another story where he claimed he had not hit it. Again, I was in the midst of that. I said, "Somebody hit that buoy, because the propeller was bent over. I had to go in the water to inspect it."

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<sup>24</sup> The conn (also spelled cun, conne, cond, conde and cund) is the act of controlling a ship's movements while at sea. One person gives orders to the ship's engine, rudder, lines and ground tackle. This person is said to have the "conn."

But that [man overboard incident] was a real shocker to me, that whole thing. I realized that we, the ship, had been wrong, by letting those people out on deck, not knowing that they were... The word had been passed that you couldn't go out on deck, but then it was sloppily administered. We should have been tougher and said nobody on deck. But then, the captain, because of his, I guess, lack of experience, he wasn't willing to take the chance to turn around. Maybe he was right, but certainly to me... I'd been on the ship three years, been deployed three times on the ship, stood a lot of hours of watch on the bridge, seen a lot of seas; I had to step forward and say that we should have turned around.

The morale on the ship just dropped down immediately when we didn't turn around, as you can imagine, the crew... I suppose it's like not going back on the battlefield when somebody is wounded and getting him.

DePue: Which is about the worst thing to do if you're a Marine, to leave one of your men behind.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: You mentioned earlier that Earl Buckwalter was relieved. You've not been talking about Earl Buckwalter?

Thunman: No, no, I was talking about... I don't have it, the captain's name. I don't think I'd mention it anyway. I can't recall.

DePue: But why was... "Relieved" suggests that something bad happened with him.

Thunman: No, no, he finished his tour. He had had command for over two years, and normally, command tour length was about two years.

DePue: So, relief would be the term used for that as well?

Thunman: Yeah, but I would say, "summarily relieved" was the skipper who had the problem with the man overboard.

DePue: What's the ship's complement for the U.S.S. *Shelton*?

Thunman: About 300 and 12 officers. It was the old Navy. We had white tablecloths and white napkins. We had stewards who served us, silverware. You came to dinner every day in a uniform with a tie. It was the old Navy.

DePue: Were the stewards primarily black still, at that time?

Thunman: Filipinos or blacks. Of course, we had the agreement with the Philippines that we would bring so many Filipinos into America each year, as citizens, potential citizens, if they would serve in the Navy as stewards. So many times, interestingly, in those days, you had stewards, and they had college degrees

from the Philippines. But they were good. Every one of them did their job the very best that they could, regardless of how demeaning it was.

DePue: You mentioned this was the old Navy, but it's also eight, ten years beyond the time that the Armed Forces were integrated. Did they have African Americans serving in other billets on the ship?<sup>25</sup>

Thunman: Other billets, not many. I don't recall any on that ship or on my second ship. It wasn't until I got on a submarine that I think I first served with an African American—not that I had any problem about it—outside of being a steward. We had stewards who were black.

One story, interestingly... Maybe I told it to you. It was kind of an emotional thing. Later on, when I was chief of naval education and training, they had a big accommodation ceremony at one of the major rework sites in Pensacola, where aircraft are overhauled, a big organization and lots of airplanes involved. They had me come to participate and say a few words, and I did.

I walked off the podium and was walking down among all the people... They had 1,000 people there. This was a huge rework facility, maybe 700, but a fairly good size group. And this big, black, distinguished looking man came out of the group, ran over to me. He had been a steward on the destroyer when I was there. Everybody kind of went like... They kind of looked like, what's he doing? He ran over, threw his arms around me, and I threw my arms around him. We had nicknamed him "Stretch." He was this big, tall drink of water. I said, "My God, it's Stretch!" (DePue laughs) Everybody around wondered what this was all about. He had stayed in the Navy and had learned to be an aircraft mechanic, and then retired from that and got involved with the rework facility. So, it was a great story.

DePue: I wonder if you can take a little time here and lay out the nature of the Cold War struggle that was going on at the time, and what your part in it would have been.

Thunman: Well, in those days we didn't really understand the Cold War. We deployed in an emergency when the Suez Crisis occurred, in about 1956 or '57.<sup>26</sup> We had to get underway immediately. The whole Navy went to a higher condition when that happened. That was a foggy situation, because not only the Soviets were involved, but the Brits were involved, and the Jewish nation was involved.

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<sup>25</sup> On a ship, a billet is a place assigned, as a bunk, berth, or the like, to a member of a ship's crew.

<sup>26</sup> The Suez Crisis or the Second Arab-Israeli War was an invasion of Egypt in late 1956 by Israel, followed by the United Kingdom and France. The aims were to regain Western control of the Suez Canal and to remove Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had just nationalized the canal.

We were nose-to-nose with the Chinese Communists over Taiwan. We participated in that. Formosa straits were patrolled. We were to be in a line, steaming up and down the straits, in a condition three watch, which meant your guns were manned, steaming along those islands there. [They] had British ships involved. I remember standing watch, as the officer of the deck, behind the British ship, the British destroyer. The typical Brits, they not only had their guns manned, but they would train them. As they went by, they would be training their guns toward these islands. We didn't do that. I stood up there and thought, that's not real smart. (both laugh) You're kind of tempting them to shoot at you. I didn't have much of a feeling about the Soviet Union at that time.

DePue: There wasn't much of a Soviet presence in the Pacific?

Thunman: No, not that I recall, that I was involved with. It was the Chinese and us showing... The fact that we had these big taskforces roaming the Pacific was really to show the Soviets that we own the Pacific; stay out of here.

DePue: And I would think, whatever Chinese navy there might have been, would be hard-pressed to get beyond twenty or thirty miles from the shoreline.

Thunman: They had no navy to speak of. All they had were the guns on those islands. So we owned the Pacific. That's an issue today now, that we're having trouble with the Chinese about who owns the South China Sea. In those days we owned it. There was nothing that went on out there that we couldn't have stopped by simply blockading the whole effort.

We had a highly experienced Naval Air Force, which was created during the Korean War. We had an extremely capable amphibious force, which MacArthur used in the Korean War and had great success, Inchon landings.<sup>27</sup>

I only came face to face with a potential enemy... We were in one of these big taskforces at night, foggy. You always had thousands of fishing boats around you. So, the fleet commander finally ordered every ship to steam independently, because of the fog and all these fishing boats, so that you could keep from hitting somebody. We were actually lying two when a fishing boat came up and hit us, a junk.<sup>28</sup> They all were junks, like *Terry and the Pirates*.<sup>29</sup>

DePue: Where were you at that time, the South China Sea?

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<sup>27</sup> The Battle of Inchon was an amphibious invasion and battle of the Korean War that resulted in a decisive victory and strategic reversal, in favor of the United Nations. The operation involved some 75,000 troops and 261 naval vessels. It led to the recapture of the South Korean capital of Seoul two weeks later.

<sup>28</sup> A seagoing ship with a traditional Chinese design, used primarily in Chinese waters, having square sails spread by battens, a high stern and usually a flat bottom.

<sup>29</sup> An action-adventure comic strip created by cartoonist Milton Caniff. The daily strip began October 22, 1934.



Thunman: We were, as I recall, in the South China Sea, yes, southeast, down near the Bashi Channel. I was also the boat officer, that is, whenever the motor whaleboat was released there had to be an officer onboard.<sup>30</sup> I was the boat officer.

DePue: That's the boat that would go between the ship and the shore?

Thunman: Yeah, or if you had a man overboard or anything that caused you to use the twenty-six foot motor whaleboat. I hated that job.

I remember, they called away the boat and the captain, Earl Buckwalter. He said, "Now you go; you wear a gun, and carry these guns."—A couple of the crewmen had rifles—and, "Be careful. You've got to go over there and inspect that boat, because we need to report its condition."

DePue: The Chinese junk you're talking about.

Thunman: Yeah. So, I got in the boat, and we steamed over there. There was this junk, and they had half a dozen guys on the side, looking at me. A couple of them had what they used to call machinegun pistols. I don't know if you remember what...but they were long pistols with a magazine. They were waving those things around at me. I looked at all that. I couldn't see anything wrong with the boat. I decided I'd conducted enough of an inspection. (both laugh) We went back to the ship. I told the captain, I said, "Well, it looked okay to me," and I said, "Frankly, I didn't think it was a good idea to try to get onboard." He said that was fine.

DePue: I assume that you knew no Chinese, and they knew no English.

Thunman: No, no. All you heard was the jitter of the Chinese going on. That was my closest combat at that time. Discretion became the better part of valor. (both laugh)

DePue: Did you have any favorite ports while you were on that cruise?

Thunman: Well, Hong Kong, of course, was incredible, as it is today. But in those days, it was a different world. You could buy anything in Hong Kong for hardly any money at all. They made shoes, suits, shirts. You completely refurbished your entire civilian wardrobe for about twenty-five bucks. I watched Japan grow. We were there every year.

DePue: The first time you were there, what were your impressions of Japan?

Thunman: I was very much impressed with the Japanese. They were such an industrious group, honest, hardworking. We would go into the shipyard there, and we

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<sup>30</sup> A whaleboat or whaler is a type of open boat that is relatively narrow and pointed at both ends, enabling it to move either forwards or backwards equally well.

wanted to...All of the people who worked in that shipyard were real professionals. They were good ship engineers and repairmen. They'd work hard all day, do the very best they could to fix whatever problem you had.

Then at night they'd stay aboard—this is now starting in 1954, late that year—and clean the bilges.<sup>31</sup> We would give them our garbage, what was left over from the meals, the mash potatoes, the gravies, the chicken, whatever, gave it to them. That's what they got for cleaning the...Cleaning the bilges in a ship isn't a lot of fun.

DePue: For a landlubber a bilge would be?

Thunman: Well, that's down in the engine room, in the bottom of the ship, where all kinds of oil, dirt accumulated. To clean it, in order to get down in it, you're down in kind of the muck, and it's just not fun. But they would do it and religiously do a good job, without a complaint. So you just couldn't hate them.

None of them showed any animosity from the war, even though we were what, nine years away from the war. Wherever you went in Japan, you never were worried about anybody bothering you. Tokyo was a extraordinary city. There was still a lot of damage.

We went to several different ports in Japan. We were in Yokosuka, of course; that was the major port. Tokyo, we visited. I remember, we went into Kobe; we went into Nagoya. We really got to know the Japanese because, as I said, with three deployments, six months each, we were in and out of Japan a lot.

DePue: When you would stop at these various ports, how long would you spend in the ports?

Thunman: About two weeks.

DePue: That long?

Thunman: Mm-hmm, about two weeks, maybe a week sometimes, but generally about two weeks.

DePue: How did you keep in touch with your family during this time?

Thunman: Well, it was just by writing letters. That was it.

DePue: No phone calls, even when you got to a port?

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<sup>31</sup> The enclosed area of a boat, between frames at each side of the floors, where seepage collects.

Thunman: Yeah, but it was pretty hard to do. It was very expensive, and it was pretty hard to find a telephone. Mail call was a big deal. That was the most important thing that the senior people in the Navy did in those days, was to ensure that the mail moved quickly to the ships, wherever they were around the world.

DePue: I would assume it's a level of security, where your wife's not supposed to know exactly where you're at. Does she mail something to the Navy, and they forward it?

Thunman: She'd mail it to the Fleet Post Office, never to the... She would mail it to the U.S.S. *Shelton* Fleet Post Office. It was in San Francisco, California.

DePue: And then the Navy would get it to wherever you were going to be.

Thunman: Would pick it up, wherever it was going to go.

DePue: So that's got to be one of the toughest parts of doing this.

Thunman: Very, very tough, very tough on the families. It always was, and it was even worse on submarines, because there wasn't any mail, at all. There wasn't any contact for sixty, seventy, eighty days.

The one thing about Japan which was funny, we would walk down what we called the Ginza, which was a street full of little shops, where the people, they made everything.

DePue: This is in Tokyo?

Thunman: Well, it was in Yokosuka. Whatever Japanese city you went into, they had a Ginza.

DePue: Now, excuse me, Admiral, for being a little bit indelicate, but wasn't that the place that you could find any kind of thing you needed?

Thunman: Well, that's true. That's another side of it. But the Ginza, what was interesting to me was they made anything, and they used anything, tin cans. Whatever commodity they could get their hand on, they would use it.

I remember, we'd go along, and we'd argue with the people about what we were going to give them for some nickel, dime thing. In a couple of years, the third time I was there, I remember, I bought one of the little radios, one of the first [phone rings]—gosh, if they want me, they can call me down there—one of the... What's the word I'm—

DePue: Transistor?

Thunman: The transistor radio. I remember, I bought one for \$1.00 or something like that. I was playing with it, and I thought, "Gee, it's pretty good." I looked at

the company that had made it. The company's name was Sony.<sup>32</sup> (DePue laughs) I remember telling somebody, later on, "Well, I got this little radio over there, made by some company called Sony. It was pretty good.

Now, as far as the cathouses [brothels], my gosh, the country was covered with them. We went into Sasebo; that was another place. I was a shore patrol officer. We had to go around and visit all of these places and keep the peace in these places.

DePue: Were you armed when you did that?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, we were armed, and I had some big sailors with me with clubs. There were some fisticuffs involved in some of those, drunken sailors. It was quite an experience. But we had to visit every one of those. They were all over.

You do whatever you want there, in those places. But I'll tell you, the hot baths were the greatest things you've ever seen, especially when I was on a submarine, a diesel submarine. We'd go in to the hot baths, one of the places that had a big hot bath. The Japanese gals, they would put you in big oaken tubs, scrub you and walk on your back. It was great, after thirty, forty days without a shower. They'd say, "*Senshinkan*, [wash basin] sailor; you pay twice." They could smell you, as a submariner, so you had to pay twice as much. That [the bath houses] was prevalent everywhere.

Interestingly, it was pretty much gone by the end of the '60s. It took them about fifteen to twenty years...It was an industry that existed in order to keep them moving along into the industries that they wanted to get into.

DePue: So, when you say, "it took them," you're talking about the Japanese people.

Thunman: The Japanese, yeah.

DePue: I would assume that in those early years, VD [venereal disease] was a bit of a concern as well. Were there efforts to control that on the ship?

Thunman: It was. In those days though, interestingly, they would have a bottle of penicillin at the quarterdeck, when you went on liberty. They would hand out penicillin pills to the sailors, when they went ashore. But it was a problem.

DePue: Do you think the sailors would take it or give it to the...

Thunman: No, the sailors would take it before they left, as they were leaving the ship. Yeah, it was of concern. I never had a problem with it. I don't remember a lot

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<sup>32</sup> In 2018, Sony was a Japanese multinational, conglomerate corporation headquartered in Kōnan, Minato, Tokyo. Its diversified business includes consumer and professional electronics, gaming, entertainment and financial services.

of people having it. Sailors, some of the sailors did, especially when we got down to the Philippines; the Philippines were terrible. Japan was a lot cleaner country than the Philippines by a long shot.

DePue: So you didn't enjoy the times you stopped in the Philippines as much?

Thunman: In the Philippines? No, no, you didn't... Later on, when I became more senior, they would take us up to this rest camp at Baguio, which was a lot of fun. They had a nice golf course. The base there, in the Subic Bay, was great. But they had a city outside of Subic Bay called Olongapo. It was the dirtiest place in the world. I only went out into that city once, turned around, went back in and never... All the times I went to the Philippines, I never went back. Then, of course, it even grew. By the time the Vietnam War came, it was a big—

Now, one of the operations we had, during my time on that destroyer, was we went out to the Bikini bomb tests in 1956, Operation Red Wing, which was an extraordinary experience. Some twenty or thirty nuclear weapons were detonated in the Bikini, Enewetak areas.<sup>33</sup> There were two destroyers and a small jeep carrier and an oiler sent out there to support the operations. Every nuclear weapon that the country [U.S.] had, Army, Navy, Air Force, was tested, actually detonated. [It] didn't get a lot of publicity.

Most of the Bikini bomb tests, people think back to '48, '49, when they detonated a weapon near the ships. They had all those... I think some captured German ships and other things. But this was '56, and the whole spectrum of weapons was tested.

The commodore made me the radiologic controls officer for the taskforce. What we had, to combat the fallout, was we installed plastic pipe systems as wash down systems, all around the ships. So, if you got into fallout, you would spray the ship down.

DePue: Now, you're talking about the entire taskforce? This is what, a dozen or twenty?

Thunman: No, no. Again, we had two destroyers, a jeep carrier and an oiler.

We didn't have much documentation. To sum the whole thing up, we were exposed to a lot of radiation that today would drive people nuts. Later on in my lifetime, I've had neurologists say, "You could have been affected by some of that radiation," because I was always out on deck, sometimes in a swimming suit, running around, trying to unplug nozzles.

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<sup>33</sup> The atolls of Bikini and Enewetak are part of the Marshall Islands and were occupied during WWII, first by Japanese and later by U.S. forces. The islands were chosen by the U.S. for the first nuclear explosion after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on July 1, 1946, after forcibly evacuating all islanders.

Our job there was to track the fallout. Of course, the weather would change, and we'd end up in the middle of the fallout. The fallout was fairly highly radioactive stuff, as you can imagine.

I saw the first H-bomb [hydrogen bomb] detonated. I think it was the first one we ever detonated in this country. I'm pretty certain it was. This was Operation Red Wing. It was about a half a megaton, and it was detonated about 6:00 in the morning, when it was black at night. The sun hadn't come up yet, or even twilight hadn't occurred.

When it detonated, it was like somebody put the sun on the horizon, huge fireball. We were fifty miles away, but you could still feel the heat, not bad, and still feel the shock and this incredible fireball. It had a real effect on me, because I remember standing there on the deck, looking at that fireball, then looking up at a five inch gun on the destroyer, saying to myself, "What the hell is that five inch gun for?" Not realizing, of course, that you're going to have to keep from detonating those weapons; you had to deter that. And that, I learned and dedicated my life to it. One of the reasons that I could do that was because I had seen it. I had seen those things go off. You just can't imagine the destructive power.

DePue: When you say dedicated your life to it, dedicated your life to preventing the use?

Thunman: In the military, yeah, to deter the use of nuclear weapons, to keep an enemy from detonating one of those weapons in the United States of America. It is not something that we could recover from easily. It would drive us to be a third world power. I've seen so many studies and have been involved with many things. You drop one in Norfolk, Virginia, the food supply is shut down on the East Coast. People can't imagine what a catastrophe that is, if you just detonate one or two of them.

DePue: A half megaton bomb pales in comparison to some of the throwaways that we're going to be talking about.

Thunman: Today, of course, of course. We're talking about, typically, our tridents were four or five megatons. Of course, Hiroshima was about 20,000 or so kilotons. The rest of the weapons that were detonated were up around 100,000, maybe 80,000 to 100,000 kilotons. They were not H-bombs. The H-bomb had more... As a matter of fact, I think it probably came out as around 700,000 kilotons.

There's kind of a funny story. This is in their book; this is true. We were worried that people would be looking at the detonation of the weapon. The plan was, have everybody up on deck, have everybody under the control of officers, have them faced away from the area where the detonation was going to occur, the officer being in control. Five, ten, fifteen seconds

beforehand, make sure everybody got their head placed in the crook of their arm. Then, at the last second, the officer would put his own head down. So, when the detonation occurred, nobody was looking in that direction, and their eyes were shielded.

They were using, as I recall, the B-36 Bomber. We didn't make many of them, but the B-36 was the one that was built to drop the A-bomb [atomic bomb]. Now I could be wrong with the number of that. I think people have questioned me before and said, "No, you mean B-39." I don't think so; I think it was a B-36.

Anyway, the story is that they were flying along, and it was an actual operational weapon. It was an airburst. The navigator said to the pilot, "My navigation, I don't think is right. I think we ought to go around again." They had a bunch of other aircraft in the air, measuring points, where they could measure the effects of the weapon. The pilot says, "Ah, no, this is good enough," and he dropped it.

Now, on the ships, we were there. Over the general announcing system, they were counting down, "Five minutes, four minutes, one minute..." Then they started, "Forty-five, forty-four, forty-three, forty-two." We're standing there, kind of getting ready to turn around and get organized. "Forty-one..." Boom! Nobody on our ship was affected, but there were a couple of guys who were blinded.

DePue: Well, if you heard the boom at forty-one, then it was—

Thunman: We heard it.

DePue: ...happening even a lot earlier than that. The flash would have occurred.

Thunman: Well, the flash occurred instantaneously, the speed of light. It didn't occur at zero.

DePue: So some people still weren't covered.

Thunman: Some people were getting ready to do it, and a couple of guys were blinded. I found a book on all of the nuclear detonations, or nuclear tests that have been conducted, and they talked about *Red Wing* in it. They talked about this occurrence. It almost knocked out a couple of planes, as I understand, who took a lot more shock than they expected. They missed the burst point by something like five miles, where the weapon was supposed to burst.

DePue: I would think the pilot of that aircraft, who made the decision, saying it was close enough, might have been in trouble after that.

Thunman: I think he was. I don't know what happened to him, but I would imagine that's the last he was ever involved with any meaningful duty in the Air Force.

DePue: Well, we've talked quite a bit about your first experience, those first three years, which is crucial for a young ensign. That's your formative years in many respects. What were your aspirations at that time, especially as you got towards the end of that tour?

Thunman: At that point, we only had to do four years before we could resign. I liked the Navy, and I was doing well in the Navy. I still had this colorblind problem hanging over my head. I was going to put in for submarines, but I was a little worried about it. But I was going to give it a try, when my captain, Earl Buckwalter, he says, "Hey, you know, I think you can get a command of a ship, a small ship. The Navy is going to turn over a couple of these small, patrol craft escorts to young officers."

In the past, they had warrant officers commanding these ships. Somebody had made the decision in Washington, "Well, why don't we turn over these commands to some young people? It will be a great experience for them." There were only a couple of them.

DePue: What would the complement on that ship be?

Thunman: It was sixty men, fifty-eight men and five officers. Lo and behold, I got orders to command the U.S.S. *Marysville*, E-PCER-857.

DePue: E-P—

Thunman: CER-857, experimental patrol craft escort rescue. It worked for the naval electronics laboratory in San Diego, directly for the laboratory, in sonar development, quite a little ship. We had the most modern surface ship active sonar. The ship had been modified, had a major housing put on the main deck, after part of the main deck. We were used to conduct various experiments at sea. I was a lieutenant junior grade. I was twenty-five years old.

DePue: Which, in Army parlance, would be a first lieutenant?

Thunman: First lieutenant. That ship looked like a battleship to me. It was about 180 feet long, 1,000 tons, twin engines, twin rudders, diesel powered, and operated out of San Diego, an incredible experience. I learned ship handling. I was no longer a boy; I'll tell you that. You go to command of a ship, and the first time you steam out over the horizon and realize that you're all alone with those sixty men, sixty-two or three men, and you're the one that's going to make the decisions about what's next. It's no longer a game.

I had three brand new ensigns who'd just come out of college, never been on a ship; one from Princeton; one from...I forget where the other two... All went to good schools. They'd been in the NROTC [Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps]. I had an executive officer who was a lieutenant junior grade too—He was a year junior to me. He was good, thank God—and me. We steamed up and down the West Coast. We were up in the Gulf of



Alaska. We steamed to Pearl Harbor from San Diego, scared all the way because we didn't know where we were half the time.

DePue: You weren't part of a taskforce most of the time?

Thunman: No, went by ourselves. [We] had latched drums of diesel engine fuel to the decks. I was worried. They hadn't emptied those fuel tanks for years and years and years, and I didn't know what was in the bottom of those fuel tanks.

DePue: Now I'm confused, because this is an experimental—

Thunman: It was a World War II patrol craft escort. We had a number of them, anti-submarine warfare ships, had three-inch guns, neat little ships. As a matter of fact, my brother-in-law was on one. They had taken it and modified it to be experimental, that is, to support the laboratory and had put wonderful sonar on it and the sonar detection equipment. We had telescopic shafts, where we could bring the shaft up, twelve to fourteen inches in diameter, into the ship, change the transducers, bring them out into the water and test whatever we were testing with that operation.

We took scientists to sea with us. One of the sonars we were testing quite a bit was the new submarine sonar. So we operated a lot with submarines as well, up and down the West Coast, in and out of San Francisco, in Monterey, all the small ports up along the way. It was really a great thing.

[We] went into Santa Clara, of course, but Santa... What is the island?—God, I'm getting old—the big island up off California, where they wouldn't let the Navy ships go in, because some ships went in there once and tore the place up. But we were able to get in there.

I would steam up and down the coast. I'd call the captain of the port, the civilian captain of the port, and ask him if I could come in, tell him I didn't have any money, just wanted to come in and anchor. I had two twenty-six foot motor whaleboats. That's why we were rescue, two beautiful motor whaleboats. Normally, they'd say, "Awe come in anyway." It will be for nothing. We'd go in there, and the place would be full of tourists. Sailors loved it. I had the happiest crew in the Pacific fleet.

DePue: Well, Admiral, what do you mean you didn't have any money? You're working as part of the United States Navy. (both laugh)

Thunman: You know, it was really quite an experience. I had so many near misses in that that I really learned to be a seaman. I learned how to be a ship handler, par excellence. I maintain—I'm sure there will be people who argue it—but there wasn't a better ship handler in the submarine force than I was, because of my experience in that little ship.

DePue: I would imagine this ship is much more agile than most of the things you dealt with afterwards.

Thunman: Well, that's true. But you were always battling... One screw was out of commission for this or that. There was always something going on. You had a lot of freeboard.<sup>34</sup> You were always playing the wind, the current. I went under the San Francisco Bay Bridge sideways one night.

The first time we went there, for example—these are the kinds of things that would go on—I remember we were steaming in. It was the first time I was in San Francisco. We went under, of course, the Bay Bridge, and we were heading up toward the island there that is connected to the Oakland Bay Bridge. I said to the XO [executive officer], who was also the navigator, I said, “Which way do you go around that island? Do you go around clockwise; do you go around counterclockwise?” He's reading the sailing instructions, and he says, “Well it doesn't say.” I said, “It's a lot shorter if we go around counterclockwise;” although we noticed that other ships were going clockwise. I said, “Hell, we can go around counterclockwise.”

So we went around, came under the Oakland Bay Bridge. There's tremendous currents in San Francisco. The current caught us, turned us. We were going under that bridge. I thought we were going to hit one of the stanchions, the bridge stanchions. I'm backing on one screw with everything we had and going ahead full on the other, trying to twist the ship. We went by that stanchion maybe fifteen, twenty feet. We didn't hit it. Then we had to get in and moor, where we were in water very close to going aground. It was one of those experiences that you look back at it, this young lieutenant junior grade, fighting your way through that, learning as you went. You learned how to anchor. You learned how to do everything.

I had another experience in San Diego. We were sent down to go alongside a big repair ship for a two-week repair period. It was raining, blowing. We went down there and... As I said, we had so much freeboard, wind was a big deal.

DePue: Freeboard meaning?

Thunman: The amount of structure above the water that the wind could act on. So the higher you are, the more ship you have above the water as compared to your draft, the more effective the wind is on your ship. I remember, I was making my approach on this big ship, and I was going much too fast. I was trying to keep the wind from blowing me over on the ship. As I approached, I was going much too fast, but I got into reasonable position. I was back in emergency with everything we had. The big tender, the ship's tender, which

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<sup>34</sup> The distance from the waterline to the upper deck level, measured at the lowest point of sheer where water can enter the boat or ship. A low-freeboard boat is susceptible to taking in water in rough seas.

had 1,200 men, a giant ship, they sounded the collision alarm.<sup>35</sup> They thought I was going to hit them. This old—in my eyes in those days—this old guy runs out from topside, in a white shirt and tie. It's the captain, a four-striper. He runs out, sees us bearing down on him. I saw him up there, and I'd done everything I could do. The ship shuddered and stopped and swung right over nicely alongside. He looked at all that, and he yelled down to me. He said, "Well," he said, "There are a lot of ways you can do that. That's probably not a way you want to try again." (both laugh)

DePue: That might have put a little damper on your career at that point, huh?

Thunman: I had a ramming bow. It was interesting, they had concrete behind the bow. They were built to ram submarines, a neat little ship. I've got a picture of it.

DePue: So it sounds like it's a step up from a World War II patrol boat.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, quite a bit.

DePue: A PT boat.

Thunman: PTs were no... This thing was 180 feet long. That's a fairly good size. So anyway, I worked for an officer... We were a district ship. In those days, the world was divided into naval districts. The naval district operations officer was a submariner by the name of Moon Mullins, quite a distinguished World War II submariner, tough as nails.

DePue: I take it Moon wasn't his given name.

Thunman: No. But he had been a boxer and a football player at the Naval Academy. There are great stories about him in the Philippines, in his submarine. At point blank range [he] had fired torpedoes at the Japanese transports bringing in the troops in the attack on the Philippines. The torpedoes didn't work. He got pounded all day long. He was in an S-boat, which had no air conditioning, which was very primitive.<sup>36</sup>

DePue: This was early in the war, when they were having all the torpedo problems?

Thunman: Yes. He told me that story. The war had started, and the Japanese were attacking, and he was in position. He said, "Point blank, 500 yards, bounced off the side." He was so mad about that, he turned... Well, he was leaving the Navy. He had cancer, and his career was over.

But he called me up one day, he said, "You ought to go in the submarines." Now I'm coming up at the end of my four years of whether I've

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<sup>35</sup> A ship's tender, usually referred to as a tender, is a boat or a larger ship, used to service or support other boats or ships, generally by transporting people and/or supplies to and from shore or another ship.

<sup>36</sup> S-class submarines, often simply called S-boats, were the first class of submarines with a significant number built to U.S. Navy designs. Others of this class were built to contractor designs.

got to get out of the Navy or move on. Frankly, the surface Navy didn't impress me that much. I just didn't really see the surface Navy coming too far. The cruisers and destroyers and ships like that didn't seem to me to have a place in the future for the Navy.

DePue: Why not?

Thunman: Well, again, an eight-inch gun, a five-inch gun... That's compared to a half a megaton weapon. You couldn't hide them. I knew enough about submarines then and submarine sonar, where the submarines were much better than the surface ships.

DePue: And aviation, Navy aviation was out of the picture for you?

Thunman: Well, again, there was the colorblind thing. But the submarine thing... So I told Chapple I had this problem. It was the first time I had ever told anybody about it.

DePue: A chaplain you say?

Thunman: Chapple, Moon Chapple. What did I say, Moon Mullins?

DePue: Yeah.

Thunman: That was wrong. Moon Chapple. C-h-a-p-p-l-e. Moon Chapple. I told him about it, and he said, "You ought to try it anyway." He said, "You're a natural; be a submariner." I had, at that time, almost four years, and that was the longest... You had to make your application to submarine school within four years of commissioning. I said, "Well, I'll be late by a month or two." He said, "I'll call the detailer, and he'll select you. I can guarantee you."

So I thought, Well, I'm going to try. If I fail the exam, I fail the exam. Then I'm out; I'll be a civilian for the rest of my life. My career will be over. [I] decided to face the facts. I had some difficulty with the physical, with my urinary tract. That was the first time that raised its head a little bit. They couldn't understand why there was some infection there, a little bit. But they finally said "Go ahead, you pass. It's something we think will go away." That's why, later on, some of the doctors said maybe that all started back then, after your experience in the Bikini bomb tests.

So I went to submarine school. I think I told you the story before. [I] flunked the colorblind test cold, couldn't read any of the twenty-one cards, because they put it under daylight light.

DePue: Now is this before you actually went to the submarine school?

Thunman: You went to the school, and the first thing you did was take the physical there. I'd taken preliminary physicals before I got there, but the real physical, which

was a lot more difficult, was at submarine school. In those days, they gave you a very stiff submarine physical.

It was the first time that I'd ever read those colorblind cards under this, what they called daylight, which is the way you're supposed to. They should be presented to you in this environment. I thought, Well, that's it. They said, "Well, you've got to go up to the submarine research center" that they had there. "They'll look at your problem. They'll check on you." I really didn't have much hope of passing the exam.

I got up there, and there was this young woman, late twenties. She was a real expert in color, and she started giving me colorblind tests, one type after another. Line up the yarns; look at these figures; look at this, on and on. We went on for about an hour or two. Finally I said to her, I said, "I have to admit to you that I've had problems before. I know you're trying to be sure that I've got a problem." I said, "I can tell you that I've had problems before, passing the exam, and that I think I have a color problem, and I failed."

She said, "No, no, you passed." I said, "I failed those exams. I thought I was colorblind." She says, "No, you're not colorblind. You are color perception blind. Every color's brightness looks the same to you. Yellow is no more bright to you than blue. People like you were in great demand in World War II. Nobody can camouflage anything from you." (both laugh) The other facilities that gave me this exam didn't have that expertise. All they had were the cards. I stumbled on an expert, and apparently she had studied this. So I passed.

It was like somebody had taken a 1,000 pound weight off my shoulders. It was incredible, all those years, worried about it. By then, that was eight, nine years. They put a letter in my record, and every year from then on, people would look at that. They'd give me this test, and I'd say, "You've got to read this letter." They'd read the letter and, "Oh, isn't that interesting."

DePue: (both laugh) As in boy, I didn't know there was such a thing.

Thunman: That's right. Then I was off into submarine school. I was then so happy and charged up that I worked my tail off at submarine school.

DePue: Now, when we met the first time, you told me about getting close to Admiral Rickover's office. Was this prior to all that?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, way before that. Way before that. I really worked hard at submarine school, and I was a little older. I had some people say, "Well you're too old to go into submarines. You won't make it in submarines. You know you should have gotten in submarines a year out of the academy" and all. But man, I really worked at it and stood first in submarine school, mainly because everybody else, I don't think, had the same fervor that I had to get caught up.

DePue: What was the timeframe you were in submarine school?

Thunman: In 1959, January of 1959 to June 1959. Let me see, just to be sure.

DePue: Where was the submarine school?

Thunman: New London, Connecticut. (pause) Yeah, from January '59 to June of '59, I was in submarine school.

DePue: Was New London then the center of all things submarines in the United States Navy?

Thunman: Oh yes, that's the home of the submarine force.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about New London.

Thunman: Well, that's where the General Dynamics Electric Boat Shipyard is, where most of our submarines were built in World War II, where most of our nuclear powered submarines are built. It's a submarine town, and it has been since the beginning of the submarine force in the early teens, actually in 1900, 1910 or so, a great history of submarines.

One great story. The first submarine the Navy had was the submarine, *Plunger*. That was the Navy's first submarine. Subsequent to that there were two more *Plungers*. Teddy Roosevelt went to sea on the *Plunger*. He was so excited and—

DePue: When he was secretary of the Navy maybe?

Thunman: No, no, he was president, 1902 or 1900, somewhere in there. But he was president when he went to sea on the submarine, *Plunger*. He was so delighted, as I guess Teddy Roosevelt would say, that afterwards he authorized submarine pay. A dollar a dive was the extra pay you got for being on a submarine. So the submarines, they tell the stories, looking out there in the bay—I don't know which one—off the East Coast, off Montauk Point and that area, these submarines diving up and down, bobbing up and down, because every time they dived, they got an extra dollar. (both laugh)

So it's a submarine town, and that's where the submarine force began, and that's where it remains today. I got involved... The Congress was going to shut down the submarine, New London here, in about 1995, '98, '99.

DePue: During the base realignment?

Thunman: Yeah, during the BRAC [Base Realignment Commission].<sup>37</sup> I got involved with defending it, with Senator Warner and Lieberman, Dodd. We were the only time, I think, ever got the BRAC decision turned around. Supposedly it was impossible to do, but we did it.

One of the things... When I testified, they came at me, and they said, "We don't need it. We don't have as many submarines. Why do you want it?" I think a point that I made was pretty darn important. I said, "You know, when I entered the Pentagon in 1981, we were building one submarine a year, maybe. When I left, we were building six submarines a year." I said, "You take away New London, you won't have the space to do that again. In my view, the future of the Navy... It's going to end up as nothing but a Navy of submarines, as you go down the line and different weapons systems are developed." So I think that made a point that at least they listened to, and they turned it around.

DePue: The several months you spent at the submarine school sound like they were the first opportunity, in how many years in the Navy, for you to actually have some kind of a shore assignment, shall we say.

Thunman: Well, it was. It was in four years, almost five years, where I was at submarine school. Submarine school, that was a very difficult school. That wasn't a rest haven. You spent a lot of time going to sea on submarines in those days, at submarine school.

DePue: Were they all diesel submarines you were practicing with?

Thunman: Yes, all diesel. Then I was ordered to a diesel powered submarine in San Diego, the U.S.S. *Volador*, SS-490. I was aboard that ship from July of '59 until January of '61. Half of that time we were deployed to the Western Pacific.

DePue: Where was the Navy at this time, in nuclear subs versus diesel powered subs?

Thunman: Well, the *Nautilus* went to sea and was operating in 1955. They, at that point, had decided... They'd built a few—I don't know—two or three nuclear attack submarines, and they were negotiating as to whether they should build the fleet ballistic missile submarine.

DePue: Okay, they being senior brass?

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<sup>37</sup> Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) is a process by a United States federal government commission to increase U.S. Department of Defense efficiency by planning the end of the Cold War realignment and closure of military installations.

Thunman: The Navy, the secretary of the Navy, the Department of Defense. There was great concern, about 1958, I guess, when Sputnik<sup>38</sup> went up.

DePue: That was '57, October of '57.

Thunman: Fifty-seven. When that happened, then they realized the Soviets had a ballistic missile that could reach the United States. They made a decision, my gosh, we're going to have to build a deterrent force, a strategic deterrent force. An air force... You couldn't rely on an air force as to be your strategic deterrent. You ought to build a strategic deterrent submarine force.

So the design of the fleet ballistic missile submarine came to the fore. The design of the Polaris missile came to fore.<sup>39</sup> Both of these things [were] designed at the same time. They took the attack submarines that they were building at the time—there were a couple of them—cut them in half, put in missile compartments—an amazing engineering feat—promised that by 1960 we'd have our first fleet ballistic missile submarine at sea and did get it to sea, the *George Washington*, with a missile.<sup>40</sup>

DePue: Nineteen sixty?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: With a Polaris missile?

Thunman: With a Polaris missile.

DePue: Let's back up a little bit. You talked about attack submarines. If we watched too many World War II submarine movies, that's what an attack submarine is?

Thunman: That's an attack submarine, and of course, that's what my submarine, the *Plunger*, attack submarines... *Snook* was an attack submarine. I served on one Polaris submarine and two attack submarines, nuclear attacks, and one diesel attack. [I] served on four submarines.

DePue: So even once they got to the nuclear age, not all the nuclear powered submarines are strategic?

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<sup>38</sup> History changed on October 4, 1957, when the Soviet Union successfully launched Sputnik I, the world's first artificial satellite. It was about the size of a beach ball (58 cm. or 22.8 inches in diameter), weighed only 83.6 kg, or 183.9 pounds and took about 98 minutes to orbit the Earth on its elliptical path.

<sup>39</sup> The UGM-27 Polaris missile was a two-stage, solid-fueled nuclear-armed submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) built during the Cold War by Lockheed Corporation for the United States Navy.

<sup>40</sup> An attack submarine or hunter-killer submarine is a submarine specifically designed for the purpose of attacking and sinking other submarines, surface combatants and merchant vessels.



- Thunman: Oh no, no, no. When I was commander of submarine force Pacific, I had fifty nuclear attack submarines. I had about twelve fleet ballistic missile submarines in my command.<sup>41</sup>
- DePue: Could the ballistic missile submarines not sink enemy shipping then?
- Thunman: No, they could. They had four torpedo tubes and carried torpedoes, mainly for defense. But you use those ships for the strategic deterrents. They went out and hid and maintained their readiness and were frequently tested, without any gimmicks, maintained their readiness to launch missiles within fifteen minutes. I've seen it happen many times, that we tested it.
- DePue: Let's go back to your first assignment on a diesel submarine. You say that was the *Volador*.
- Thunman: Yeah, *Volador*, yes.
- DePue: This is probably an appropriate time then to ask you, how do submarines get named?
- Thunman: In those days, they were named after fish.
- DePue: A volador is a fish?
- Thunman: Volador is a fish.
- DePue: Volador.
- Thunman: Yeah. Up to that day there was only one submarine in the United States Navy that was not named after a fish. That submarine, and we're talking about the second one now, was *Plunger*. *Plunger* was not named after a fish. Now, the diesel electric submarine, *Plunger*, plus the first *Plunger* that Teddy Roosevelt went to sea on, was named after the word *plonger*, to dive. That's an interesting fact that I've always said about the *Plunger*.
- DePue: Well I guess that threw me, because I don't know what a volador would look like.
- Thunman: Well, you've got, you know, scamp, sculpin, there's all kinds of fish out there. We had in World War II, I guess there were 100 submarines. We lost fifty submarines in World War II. By service, more submariners were lost per capita than any other branch in the Navy in World War II.
- DePue: What was your assignment on ship? Excuse me, on boat, on the boat.
- Thunman: Well, we called it a boat in those days, yeah.

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<sup>41</sup> A ballistic missile submarine is a submarine deploying submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with nuclear warheads.

DePue: Is it worth mentioning what the difference is between a boat and a ship?

Thunman: No, it's us old guys; we still call them the boat. In those days they were called the boat. Today you call them both. Most of them call them ships. But to those of us who served in the diesel boats... I was one of the few who came up into a senior rank in the Navy that had served on a diesel submarine. It was a great experience for me. The skipper, he bent over backwards to train me, because most of my contemporaries already had three years in submarines, two or three years. During that time I was onboard, which was about a year and a half, I was weapons officer; I was supply officer; I was the navigator, and I ended up as chief engineer.

It was a great training, although it's too bad. I was able to pay him back later on. He wasn't the smartest guy in the world, so I didn't really respect him as a really sharp submarine skipper, never, ever considered for nuclear power. But he took an interest in training me. He really did, because they kept changing the job; they kept getting harder. I'd have the job three or four months. The next thing I'd know, I'd be... For example, maybe the navigator when we were in the Western Pacific.

DePue: Some of these other positions then, were rotating off the boat?

Thunman: No, I didn't rotate, no. He would take that officer... Yeah, rotate off the boat or maybe rotate them to something else on the boat, mostly rotating off the boat. I became chief engineer when the chief engineer had to leave, because his children had asthma. I had a great qualification experience in submarines, and it was when I was onboard—

Well, I've got to go back and tell you about something that I didn't tell you about when I was on the *Marysville*. I told you about it, but I forgot it. After I had been a year aboard the *Marysville*, I got orders back to Washington to be interviewed by Admiral Rickover, bolt out of the blue.

DePue: What was that?

Thunman: To be interviewed by Admiral Rickover, it was a bolt out of the blue.

DePue: Oh, a bolt.

Thunman: That was when Rickover had decided to build a nuclear surface Navy, build nuclear powered surface ships. I went back there. Gosh, I was just amazed. I was worried, who was going to pay for the ticket—I remember that worried me—flying from San Diego to Washington, D.C.

I got there, and his staff interviewed me. They asked me if I wanted to do this, and I said. "No, I wanted to go into submarines." They talked to me and talked to me and talked to me, a couple of days, talked to different people. Finally, I ended up with a senior member on his staff. He was a retired

captain, Captain Dunford. He said, "Are you sure you don't want to go into the Nuclear Power Surface Program?" I said, "Well, I'd like to go into the nuclear power program, but only in submarines. I don't want to go into the surface program. I'd be an engineer, and I've already been an engineer of a surface ship. I don't want to do that. I want to be in the operational side of the Navy." He said, "Well, you're kicking over a great opportunity." And he sent me back.

I didn't see Rickover at that time, and I can say, frankly, I'm the only guy, I think, whoever turned Rickover down or his people down and then turned around and got picked up again. When that happened, later on, one of the things they asked me was, was I going to tell Rickover, when I went in to see him, that I'd been there before. I said, "No, I won't, unless he asks." They said, "Don't." (both laugh)

So anyway, now I'm on the diesel boat. I remember my XO saying, "Boy, you ought to put in for nuclear power." I said, "I don't think so." I said, "I went back there. I told him no," and I said, "I'm probably *persona non grata* in Rickover's eyes." And a bolt out of the blue, I got orders back for another interview. This is about September of '60. We'd just come back from WESTPAC [Western Pacific Fleet], we'd been gone six, seven months.

I went back. They interviewed me, and that's when Dunford again said to me, "Are you going to tell Admiral Rickover you were here before?" I said, "No, not unless he asks." He said, "Well, don't." So, I went in there, said a few words with Admiral Rickover, and he just laid into me. I think he knew that I'd been there before. I don't know. He certainly wasn't very pleasant with me. (laughs)

He said, "Well you're nothing but a dumb football player." These are his words, I remember. "You're nothing but a dumb football player. You're nothing but a punching bag. On top of that, you weren't even a good football player." He said, "You're a playboy, and we're going to examine you, and I don't think you'll make it." He said, "But you've got to go back to your ship; study forty hours a week; keep track of it; come back and take an examination in nuclear physics and in mathematics, mainly calculus, in three months."

I went back to my submarine, and I told the skipper that. He said, "That's hogwash; that's preposterous." I told my squadron commander that, and he said, "That's crazy." He said, "Don't prostitute yourself like that. Either you're good enough, or you're not good enough." He said, "Rickover won't be around very long, and they're not going to build many nuclear submarines."

I went home and thought about it and thought, Well, I'm probably going to be out of the Navy anyway...No, wrong, no. I thought about it, and I thought, Well, now I'm going to make the Navy my career, really going to

make it. I've got a chance to make it my career. I'd better select something that I think's going to be the future. It really made a lot of sense to me, and I think my time in that patrol craft, where I was involved with submarines and my time on the diesel submarine.

It was great, except you had to come and snorkel. You had to charge the batteries. It was my experience, through all of those things that I'd been involved with, that aviation would get you. You came and snorkeled; you put up that snorkel mask, radars were getting to where they could snap you up. Sonars were getting so they could detect you, detect that diesel engine. You couldn't quiet it.

So I chose to do it. [I] worked awful hard studying, wasn't able to make the forty hours, but I kept track, something like twenty-six hours per week. I was chief engineer of the boat too, so I had a tough job. [I] went back, took the exam. Rickover called me in, and he said, "Well, you did okay in the exam." That's all he ever said about it. Then he said, "Did anybody encourage you to come into the Nuclear Submarine Program?" I told you this story before, I think. I said my executive officer had. He said, "What's his name?" So I told him. He said, "What about your captain? Did your captain encourage you to come into the nuclear submarine program?" I kind of stopped and didn't say anything. He said, "Do you think I'd do anything to your captain?" I looked at him, and I said, "I don't know, sir." And he said, "That's all." (DePue laughs)

I came out, and Dunford was there. He said, Okay, this is now December." He said, "You report to nuclear power school on the second of January."

DePue: The decision had been made even before you walked into the office. (both laugh) Well here's the question I've got for you, sir. How much did you know about Admiral Rickover before you walked into this?

Thunman: Nothing.

DePue: He wasn't already a legend at that time?

Thunman: No. Most people hated him, talked about him as a nut.

DePue: So there was some word out there in the community.

Thunman: Yeah, but you know, it was not something that I was into. I was on that diesel submarine, trying to qualify, trying to get to earn my dolphins. So, it was not something that... Yeah, I'd heard about him, but I didn't know all the great stories that were ahead of me with Admiral Rickover, in my lifetime.

DePue: In retrospect, you obviously learned a lot more. What was his place in the U.S. Navy at the time that you were interviewed?

Thunman: Well, he had an incredible place. I'm not sure people acknowledged it. But he had been the one person in the world who had put together all the pieces and built a power producing reactor, Oak Ridge, a commercial power producing reactor.

DePue: Now, what timeframe was that?

Thunman: In the late '40s, early '50s.

DePue: Was he in the Navy at that time?

Thunman: Yes, he was. His story in Oak Ridge is a riot. The Navy didn't know what to do with him. They didn't believe in nuclear power. They sent him to Oak Ridge to get him out of their hair. They had to send somebody to be the representative to this "nuclear power for peace" effort.

DePue: Which at that time, I suspect, was just a notion.

Thunman: Yeah. People were talking about, you know, we know how to make bombs. We ought to do something with nuclear power for peace. Peacetime use of nuclear power, that was the mantra. He was clearly a nut in the Navy, but smart. He had run the electrical division in the Bureau of Ships during World War II, had done a wonderful job. The equipment, the electrical equipment that the Navy had in its World War II ships, was wonderful stuff. It was the most reliable thing, the switchboards and all the various techniques used in the development were just brilliant. But the Navy thought he was a nut, and he just didn't respect anything. He just told the story the way he saw it.

So, they sent him down to Oak Ridge. He gets down there; he grabs a couple of guys he likes down there, civilians, "Come work with me." He got some money and started developing the nuclear reactor. It was his idea. There's a good book on Rickover, a wonderful book on him. The Navy doesn't like this at all. Now, [Chester W.] Nimitz had become the Chief of Naval Operations, a submariner. But the engineering side of the Navy said, "That stuff is crazy." So they take Rickover's money away. Then Rickover goes down to another program that's going and convinces the guy to use his money to develop the nuclear power reactor.

DePue: Somebody else in the Navy?

Thunman: Oak Ridge was huge in those days and all kinds of money. That's where they developed the nuclear weapons, and that's where they were still developing weapons. They had huge amounts of money. So some other guy had a program that Rickover talked him into..."Give me your money. I'll let you play in mine, if you—"

DePue: It sounds like we're outside the Department of Defense even, where he found some pot of money?

Thunman: Yeah. Well, it was defense money, but he talked some guy into giving him the money. So, he developed a power producing reactor. He was the one who had the vision to take all the pieces and do all the things necessary to put it together. It was not inventing it; it was making it a practical operation, a practical engineering system.

Then he started ping-ponging on the Navy. He got to Nimitz and said, "You need to build a nuclear powered submarine. That's what we ought to do with nuclear power in the Navy." By that time, he had muscled his way into... He was back into Washington again, and he was in the Bureau of Ships, as the director of nuclear power. He was in the Atomic Energy Commission [AEC] as the director of the Navy's nuclear power program. He had a billet there. He was on the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. He was really the Navy's representative. He had three jobs. The only three jobs that naval officers had in the world of nuclear power, one in the Navy, one in the AEC, one in the Congress. And that joint committee is a very powerful committee, because it had budgeting authority. It had the authority to spend money by itself, the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. It didn't have to go through the whole process. It could spend it on its own.

DePue: So as far as a lot of people in the Navy are concerned, it sounds like... Tell me if I'm wrong here. They're sticking him over in some corner someplace, just to get rid of him, and he's building an empire.

Thunman: Yeah, that's right, building an empire. So he's writing letters to himself. (both laugh) That's the truth. The first thing he built, before he built the *Nautilus*, he built the hull of the engineering plant of the *Nautilus*, up in Idaho, Idaho Falls. You went up there, and there was a hunk of submarine—it wasn't the whole submarine—but the hunk of submarine that was the engineering plant. Coming out of it was a propeller. Well, it wasn't a propeller; it was a water break. But it was a shaft, and that was built... Everything inside of it was exactly the same as the engineering plant of the submarine. He built that, put the reactor in it, and for the first time, a reactor other than the one that he had put together down in Oak Ridge, took it critical. They didn't quite know what was going to happen when they took it critical.

DePue: That means you start the nuclear reaction.

Thunman: Yeah. You start a controllable nuclear reaction, you hope. You make it power producing, and then you can control it. [They] took it critical and started producing power. That shaft went around.

DePue: Well here's my totally ignorant, novice approach to nuclear energy, at least peaceful nuclear energy. You think about nuclear power plants today, they're mammoth operations. I would think it's much harder to go smaller scale than it is making them big.

Thunman: No. The Army had a power producing reactor, which was not any bigger than the size of this table, maybe going to the overhead. They screwed it up and killed a couple guys, back in the '60s. But no, the size of the reactor is not a big deal. The power plant of any ship is a big deal. You've got turbines and main engines and pumps, like any ship has got. But the reactor is not a big thing. Yeah, there's a compartment that you've got to put it in to keep it separate from other places. But he had the vision to put that together exactly the way it was going to operate at sea.

One of the things he did, after they got it going, he said, "Okay, we're going to steam to England." He brought the reactor to power, an equivalent power level of twenty knots, and ran it as if they were heading for England. People were saying "No, Admiral, we shouldn't do that. We've got to stop periodically and check this and check that, the chemistry and this." "No, no, we'll go right on through." He took that as a means to demonstrate that he had been successful and should build the *Nautilus*, the submarine *Nautilus*.

I asked Admiral Rickover once, "How much had it cost to build that prototype in Idaho?" He looked at me and he says, "I don't know." (both laugh) He was in those three jobs.

DePue: It sounds like he didn't really care much, as long as he was getting to the vision that he had in his head.

Thunman: Yes, that's right. He owned all the strings to pull to get the money, so it was no big deal; although he was a very, very frugal man. You worked as a commercial vendor for Rickover, you had a hunk of your hide taken off of you in order to keep going with it. You didn't get away with anything.

DePue: Another point of clarification for me. The first time you went to interview with him, where you didn't interview with him, it was about the surface nuclear fleet?

Thunman: Yes, yes.

DePue: But you said the first nuclear vessel was the *Nautilus*?

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: So already, right from the beginning, he had in his mind—

Thunman: Yeah, the first time he interviewed me, which was in 1957, I guess, all this *Nautilus* thing had already gone through.

DePue: Right.

Thunman: All that had happened. But anyway, the key in the '40s, he got Nimitz to write a letter to the secretary of the Navy, saying the Navy needs a nuclear powered

submarine. That was the only thing he needed. The engineering part of the Navy was holding him back. I remember he had a little plaque over his desk. It was framed, and it was a statement made by an admiral by the name of [Albert G.] Mumma, M-u-m-m-a. I'll never forget it. It said, "*With the advent of the pancake diesel engine, there is no need to develop a nuclear powered submarine.*"—They had developed a new engine for the diesel boats, the pancake diesel engine—Signed, Mumma, Rear Admiral or Vice Admiral Mumma, who was the chief of the Bureau of Ships.

DePue: But I assume a diesel engine that still required you to snorkel?

Thunman: Yes, which shows how dumb Mumma was.

DePue: I'm no expert on submarine technology or anything, but I know enough about submarines in World War II, that once air cover could be provided for a convey of ships across the Atlantic Ocean, that pretty much spelled the demise of the wolf packs.

Thunman: That's right, because they had to come up and snorkel. That's right; that's what beat them. The Germans lost 900 submarines, and most of them at the end of the war, where we had these aircraft and radar, aircraft and radar. You read some of the books about how they just tried to get out of port, to make it up into the channel, with these aircraft all over the place, looking for them. They were real heroes, those Germans. Nine hundred submarines they lost.

So anyway, the key thing was Nimitz, thank God. He had the vision. Everybody was against it. He wrote that letter. Of course, in those days, I guess you had a lot of power as the chief of naval operations, where the secretary of the Navy felt bound to authorize it then.

DePue: The chief of naval operations is the senior officer in the United States Navy.

Thunman: Yeah, in the Navy.

DePue: He's like the Army chief of staff.

Thunman: Yes. But you see, in those days, a guy like Nimitz or Marshall, if they made a recommendation, I think it happened. So that's how the *Nautilus* started. Of course, what furthered the problem was, as you pointed out, was in '87, I guess, Sputnik—

DePue: Fifty-seven.

Thunman: Fifty-seven, yeah, when Sputnik came. There was no question. Eisenhower was really upset about it. He wanted something to demonstrate that we were countering it. The nuclear submarine was his response.

DePue: Countering the ability of the Soviets now to—



- Thunman: The technical advancement that the Soviets had demonstrated in shooting a ballistic missile.
- DePue: Which means that they can land a nuclear tipped ballistic missile anywhere in the United States they wanted to?
- Thunman: Yeah. That was upsetting, the fact that they could do that. As a matter of fact, reading more about it, he wanted Rickover to send the *Nautilus* to the North Pole immediately, to demonstrate to America that we had this capability coming along that nobody had.
- DePue: Was the *Nautilus* an attack sub?
- Thunman: Yes, an attack submarine. She had torpedo tubes. But, he wanted to demonstrate that we had demonstrated incredible technology, along with the Soviets. And Rickover wouldn't send it.
- DePue: I think it's hard for us today to understand the impact that Sputnik had on the nation at the time.
- Thunman: No, we don't. That had a great impact on Eisenhower. You read about that. Rickover wouldn't send it. Eisenhower was mad, but Rickover said, "They're not ready. They're not ready to do it yet." He let another six months, a year go by, and then said, "They're ready." They went up there, had this successful operation, came back, had the tickertape parade in New York City, the *Nautilus* crew, driving down New York City. The whole city turned out for it. [They] got to Washington, the whole crew, invited by Eisenhower into the White House for a reception to celebrate it, except one guy was not invited, Rickover. (both laugh) Incredible story.
- DePue: Because?
- Thunman: Because he had turned Eisenhower down. When Eisenhower wanted to do it, Rickover said, "No."
- DePue: And yet he managed to survive all of this.
- Thunman: Well, the Congress loved Rickover; they just loved him. There's no military officer—there may be a few, Marshall and some of those guys—but very few ever had the stature that Rickover had in the Congress, none of them. They loved him. They heard that. The next thing you know, Rickover is in front of the Congress, full session, every one of them, every senator, every representative are there, and they pin the Medal of Freedom on him, bang! And they promote him to vice admiral. (both laugh) So, they saw Eisenhower's reception and raised him. (laughs)
- DePue: This all happened before you even had your first interview session with him or actual interview.

- Thunman: Really, no. I'd had my first interview in... What was it I said, in '57?
- DePue: Where you never got to see him though.
- Thunman: No, I didn't get to see him. All that happened. I didn't know any of this stuff was going on.
- DePue: Well, I know enough about human nature to believe that that meant that all his other contemporaries in the Navy probably despised the guy, but he was relatively untouchable.
- Thunman: Well, I know this, when I go back to my story about, "did your captain recommend..." The people did not like the nukes. They called them the nukes at the Officer's Club in San Diego when I was on the diesel boats. The diesel guys would get on one side of the club, and just a few nuclear guys would be on the other side. They all looked at them like... And then when I became, it was over there. They looked like we were nerds. As a matter of fact, I think that's where the term first started, because we had to go to school and study physics.
- DePue: You were the guys with the slide rules in the pencil pocket. (laughs)
- Thunman: The slide rules and the pencils, yeah, the nerds. That's why they said it was ridiculous for me to go back and take this examination and study all that. It was in that timeframe.
- DePue: Admiral, I think I'd like to finish off with a few more questions about your time on the *Volador*. Am I saying that right now?
- Thunman: Yeah, *Volador*, yeah.
- DePue: And just to get a sense of what you saw as different between life on a surface ship versus life on a submarine.
- Thunman: Well, the submarine crew, they were so much better at what they did. They all knew what they were doing. They had great attitudes. They wanted to help you. They would not suffer fools, but if you were honest and trying to do the right thing and had the capability... It wasn't a matter of, "Gee well, he's trying hard; let's help him." It was, "He's trying hard, and he's smart enough. Let's help him." So you were in a much more professional outfit.

It was exciting. Diving a diesel powered submarine was exciting. From the time you were up on the bridge, sounded the diving alarm. The two lookouts went down that hatch. You followed them, shut the hatch in fifty seconds from the time the first blast of the diving alarm. The diving signal is two blasts. The first blast, fifty seconds, green water would be coming over that hatch. So all of that had to happen. That was exciting. You didn't screw

up and trip, catch your pants on the hatch. (both laugh) What you did was exciting.

Of course, that's when I had my first taste—on that diesel powered submarine—of our operations against the Soviets. What I call special operations. We'll talk more about this. But part of our major mission in the Pacific was to go up into international waters, up off of Vladivostok, and conduct—again, you have to make sure you say international waters, or you'll get me in trouble—the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations, ISR, against the Soviets.

DePue: At that time, what was international waters?

Thunman: Twelve miles. Now, did we carry that out? Who knows? (laughs) But as far as I'm concerned, if anybody asks me, it's, "We were in international waters." That was exciting. That was really exciting, and it was all hush-hush, highly classified.

We got underway 5:00 in the morning, no lights on the boat, sneaking out of the harbor in Yokosuka—kind of like World War II—going up, diving and making our way through the straits up there, Tsugaru Straits, into the Sea of Japan. Of course, the Soviets were out there with anti-submarine warfare ships and aircraft. There was no question that, if they detected you, they were going hold you and surface you and do whatever they could to you.

DePue: Hold you?

Thunman: Well, maintain contact.

DePue: Okay, h-o-l-d, hold you.

Thunman: Yes. It would have been a terrible thing. It was pretty hard in those ships. The nuke boats, where we did it, and I did an awful lot of it on the nuclear submarines, special operations. But if things really got real bad, you just put the pedal down, went deep and put the pedal down, and you left everybody behind you. You always had that option. You didn't have that option on a diesel submarine. Once they got you, and the longer they held you, the more battery you were using, and the tougher it was getting.<sup>42</sup> So, it was a real tight-jawed operation. But that was so exciting, and that's the difference. We had a mission there, a real mission.

DePue: Instead of just sailing through the Pacific Ocean flexing your muscles.

Thunman: Yeah.

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<sup>42</sup> Battery is the primary weapon or group of weapons around which a warship is designed.

DePue: I want to finish with this one. This is fairly technical, but you're just the guy to talk to about it. I've read enough to know that there's this tradeoff between speed and silence and depth. Can you walk us through that, so even a novice like me can understand?

Thunman: Well, the most important attribute of a submarine is stealth. So sound quieting is vital. That's how we beat the Soviets. We could detect them and trail them, and they couldn't do it with us.

Now, the name of the game was, maintain your stealth, but increase your speed as much as you could, but again, maintaining stealth as much as you could. Now, you might design the submarine to go a lot faster without proper stealth, and you wanted to have that design. But you had to know that if you were up there operating at thirty knots, they could then detect you and track you, possibly. Early on, that was true. As we improved our capability in the design and construction of submarines, we got quieter and quieter at higher speeds.

DePue: But normally the tradeoff was, the faster you went, the noisier you got?

Thunman: Yes, yes. The depth, initially we wanted to go deep. The deeper you got, the more stealth you had. You could get underneath the thermal layers in the ocean and hide. Initially, we built the 1,300 foot boats. My submarine was a 1,300 foot boat. Well, we lost the *Thresher*. She was a 1,300 foot boat. We finally came up with, "Hey, you know, probably 1,000 feet or so is as much as we need. We don't really need to go any deeper."

Now the Soviets, during this time, were experimenting with the old... Their alpha submarine was able to go down to 5,000 feet. They wanted to go deep. I think [this was] because they thought they could escape our torpedoes. But when I was in the Pentagon, what we practiced was, we would not design our submarines to go deep; we'd design our torpedoes to go deep. So our torpedoes could always go deeper than the Soviet submarines. That's what was important, not how deep the submarine could go. You wanted it to go fairly deep, but 1,000 feet probably was going to be good enough. That's where we ended up.

DePue: What just struck me, being in the Army, ours was generally a two dimensional fight. Yours is a three dimensional fight.

Thunman: Yeah, it is. But sound quieting is, again, that statement, "What is the key attribute of a submarine? Stealth." The great things about it—I think I've said this to you before—if you've got a cruiser or an aircraft carrier or two aircraft carriers, you've got two aircraft carriers; you've got a cruiser. [If] you've got a submarine, you've got a Navy. If you don't know where that submarine is, you know how many submarines there are. That's quite an attribute.

I remember when I was COMSUBPAC [Commander, Submarine Force Pacific], we had a big exercise. This surface taskforce, a fairly good size taskforce, carriers, destroyers, guided missile destroyers, were coming from San Diego to Pearl Harbor. So they developed an exercise that we would oppose them with our nuclear submarines, with two or three nuclear submarines. It was going to be a big deal.

Well, right before the taskforce deployed, the Iranian Hostage Crisis came up, and we had to send a couple of our submarines out west immediately, to get them out there to the Straits of Hormuz.<sup>43</sup> I was talking to my boss—he was a good guy—I said, “We’re not going to be able to oppose that fleet coming over here.” Red Dog Davis, he was an aviator, four-star. I said, “Do you want to tell the fleet that we’re breaking out of it, pulling out of it?” He said, “No, let’s just [let them] think that you’re in it.”

So, all the way across, from San Diego to Pearl Harbor, we’re getting these contact reports [of] attacks on submarines, simulated attacks, forty or fifty of them, all the way across. [There] wasn’t any submarine there. That’s why I say to you, you’ve got a Navy if you’ve got one submarine. You know where the hell that damn thing is.

If you look back at the Falklands, they were lucky in the Falklands.<sup>44</sup> They would have lost the Falklands if the Argentineans had configured the torpedo properly that they shot at the transport. [It] would have hit it, would have sunk that hummer, killed a lot of men.

DePue: Well, this is probably a good place to stop for today. We’ve got lots more to talk about in the future. As before, it’s been a lot of fun and fascinating.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Thank you very much, Admiral.

Thunman: Okay.

(end of interview session #2)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman # VRC-A-L-2012-023.03

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<sup>43</sup> Fifty-two American diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days, from November 4, 1979, to January 20, 1981, after a group of Iranian students, belonging to the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line, who supported the Iranian Revolution, took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

<sup>44</sup> On 2 April 1982, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands, a remote UK colony in the South Atlantic. The move led to a brief, but bitter war. The conflict lasted 74 days and ended with the Argentine surrender on 14 June 1982, returning the islands to British control.

Interview # 3: June 11, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, June 11, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I have my third session with Admiral Ron Thunman. Good morning, Admiral.

Thunman: Good morning, sir. How are you?

DePue: Great. We had two sessions. It's been a lot of fun so far. We're really getting to the meat of your career. So today we're going to pick up where we left off, roughly the early 1960s, when stopped the last time. But I wanted to ask you just a curiosity question on my part to begin with. That's, why are submarines called boomers?

Thunman: Well, not all submarines are called boomers. The fleet ballistic missile firing submarines are called boomers. The word "boom" kind of goes with shooting a ballistic missile, and that's where the nickname boomer came from.

DePue: It doesn't have to be any more sophisticated than that, huh?

Thunman: That's it.

DePue: How about the attack subs? Did they have a nickname for them?

Thunman: No. We always felt that it was a lot more glamorous to go into the attack submarines, because you carried out what we said were ISR missions, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance. You'll hear, in the military, ISR a lot, in discussions. Well, you carried out those missions, and that was kind of

a romantic side of the submarine world. But attack submarines kind of went with what you were involved with, attacking the problem. The boomers, of course, got away from the problem. They never wanted to be detected. They had to be by themselves, ready to fire in fifteen minutes. That was tested over and over again. The Soviets knew that we had that capability, so they were out there always, by themselves, as much as they could possibly be, whereas the attack submarines were inside the area of action.

DePue: You're going to end up serving up information, as we talk through this, on both attack submarines and nuclear ballistic missile submarines.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: So we'll get much more in detail when we get to that part. But in 1961, I know that you attended the Nuclear Power School.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: Was this your first exposure to nuclear training?

Thunman: Yes, as far as training was concerned.

DePue: I know that you'd had that intensive, self-taught course.

Thunman: Well, yeah, that was self-taught in the basics, that Admiral Rickover made me take, in the basic physics and math. But this is the first nuclear training I'd had.

DePue: Where was the training?

Thunman: It was in Vallejo, California. They opened a school there, Admiral Rickover did, in some old barracks. They refurbished the barracks. There were six of us who went to the course and then went on from there. It was a six month course, taught by incredibly bright and capable teachers that Rickover had gotten out of the education world.

DePue: So these weren't uniformed officers?

Thunman: Well, they made them uniformed officers. They were ensigns and lieutenant junior grades, and he commissioned them. All they did was teach at these schools. They didn't have to go through anything special. I don't know if they went through OCS [Officer Candidate School] or not, but they were there, and the only thing they were required to do was teach.

I remember I had one who taught math, who was a PhD in mathematics from University of Chicago. That's the caliber... He was an ensign. He'd just graduated. Rickover somehow got his hands on him to teach for a couple of years. I'm sure the guy was delighted that he had a job and was

involved with the program. Another taught physics. I forget where he went to school. He was the best teacher I'd ever had anywhere, a young guy. We had these incredibly capable instructors in the basics of math, physics. And then we also... We studied chemistry; we studied electrical systems; so it was quite a six months. It's the hardest academic course I'd ever been in, by a factor of four or five.

DePue: So they're teaching you basic nuclear theory.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: But not teaching you any kind of direct application about how to use this in submarines or in nuclear weapons?

Thunman: No or in reactors. There was no reactor operation, other than in the theoretical side. If you stopped the flow, what would happen in a reactor, the cooling flow? If you did things that would affect the physics of operating the reactor, then you would learn what the physics was. You went from that six months course to what was called a prototype, which was an actual reactor plant.

Remember I talked to you about the *Nautilus*, that was the first prototype ever created. Well, he subsequently created two or three others. The one I went to was in Connecticut, Windsor Locks, Connecticut, where you had a small reactor up there. It was small; it was the same size as the reactor plant on a smaller submarine. That's where I learned how to operate the reactor, where you actually became a qualified—what we called engineering officer on the watch, or a watch officer—operating that reactor like an officer at a commercial nuclear power plant.

We'd have to sit there and operate the reactor, day in and day out. You knew how to operate a reactor, not only a reactor, but a reactor plant, power producing reactor plant. You had a week of standing watches there, where you were the reactor technician who operated the whole facility. It was quite good training. When you left there, you were qualified.

Industry, they would be anxious to hire you, because of that training. Nobody else in the industry ever had that training, ever had the money to build these prototypes. So, when you went into the program, you had to sign on for I don't know how much more, two or four years—that wasn't important to me—before you could leave the program, so you wouldn't go off in industry and use it.

I have good friends who did that. As soon as they could, four or five years later, they went off into the industry. Most of them are millionaires today, because they started early in the Commercial Nuclear Power Program, all smart enough, capable enough.

DePue: But then they didn't get to do all that fun stuff that you did in the submarines.



Thunman: That's right; that's right, didn't get to do all that fun stuff. [They] didn't get to hurt their back and all that stuff. (both laugh)

DePue: There's tradeoffs in everything, Admiral. Was yours the first of these classes, or had they been going on?

Thunman: This was about the first or second class conducted there, in Mare Island. I would say, maybe the top three, and the first or second or third classes conducted up in Connecticut.

DePue: You said Mare Island?

Thunman: Yeah, I changed it, Vallejo. It's Mare Island inside of Vallejo, California. Mare Island was the shipyard there. There were only six of us who went into that first nuclear power class. Tragically, I'm the only one alive. The other five died of cancer of some sort, one way or the other. All of them had stayed in and gone into nuclear powered submarines and had good careers.

DePue: It begs the question then, Admiral, if the rest of your classmates all died of cancer, did it have something to do with that assignment or exposure to nuclear—

Thunman: The neurologists always said, "Well, it's remarkable..." The words that they used that really ended up causing the Navy to give me 100 percent disability, was this really distinguished neurologist said, "Well, it's remarkable that you have the problems you have and that you've been exposed to so much radioactivity in different forms, in both the Navy's nuclear power program and also in the nuclear weapons testing."

Now, we were trained very carefully in the protection against nuclear radiation in the Navy's nuclear power program and were very careful in everything we did. Our exposure was recorded. I had some exposures, but not off the board, but some were high, because I was involved with the repair of a reactor underway, where we had to shut down the reactor and go down into the reactor compartment and repair a detector. But we always were very careful with all that. So I never felt that it was the problem.

I remember I had a good lawyer friend of mine who said, "Gosh," he said... This is after I retired, and I was having these problems. He said, "You could say to the Navy... They'd give you \$1 million just to keep your mouth shut. You know, they'll give you a million; they won't even argue with that. If you want ten or twenty, maybe they'll do something."

I said, "I don't want to be the vice admiral who sued the Navy about radiation in the Nuclear Power Program." I said that that will get in every newspaper in the country. [phone rings].

[pause in recording]

- DePue: Well, we took a quick break because of the cell phone. I couldn't help but notice, Admiral, your ring tone.
- Thunman: It's the Navy fight song. The Navy fight song, which was...I guess somebody wrote it about 1909, and it was used at the Army-Navy game in 1909. It's been used by the Navy ever since.
- DePue: It sounded like "*Anchors Aweigh*."
- Thunman: It is. But it was not written to be *Anchors Aweigh*. It was written to be, *Sail Navy, Down the Field*. (both laugh)
- DePue: Ah, the Army-Navy game. We could spend some time talking about that, but we'll move on with nuclear strategy, I guess. I did want to ask you. You're relatively close to the ground floor at the beginning, the creation of this nuclear submarine force and the ballistic submarine force as well.
- Thunman: Yes, yes.
- DePue: Kind of lay out how that fits into the overall national strategic policy.
- Thunman: It really was a major response to the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik. When Sputnik was launched, I think you said '57—
- DePue: October of 1957.
- Thunman: Fifty-seven. This was a major problem to Eisenhower. Of course the newspapers and the politicians across the country said, "My heavens, the Soviets are ahead of us in the development of ballistic capabilities," which means you could develop and create a ballistic missile, which would reach the United States, which was a whole new weapon capability, the ability to shoot a weapon 4,000 miles that can't be detected, because it goes up into outer space and comes down and hits and can be, in those days, accurate to within about a mile, which was quite accurate. A mile from the center of New York City is still a pretty populated place.

So, once Sputnik was launched—you probably can't recall. I recall, there was a big furor in the country about the Soviets having this capability—Eisenhower was looking for something to show that we were ahead of them, technically, in the world of technology. The one thing we had was the *Nautilus*.

The *Nautilus* had been launched in 1955 and was being prepared to make a trip to the Arctic. You may recall, right after Sputnik was launched, Eisenhower wanted *Nautilus* to make that trip to the Arctic. Rickover said, "We're not ready. We haven't trained the crew enough." There was a bad feeling between Rickover and Eisenhower. You remember that chain of

events maybe, where Eisenhower subsequently didn't invite him to the White House celebration and all.

So anyway, the *Nautilus* made the trip, great publicity. In the meantime, the CNO, chief of naval operations, was one of the greatest, Arleigh Burke, who I knew. I didn't know [him] well, but I had met him when I was a lieutenant junior grade. He came aboard my ship, the *Marysville*, interesting story in itself. He moved quickly to try to develop a missile that could be launched from the nuclear submarine, a ballistic missile submarine, boomers, as we've talked about.

At that point, I think a couple of years before, we had started... An admiral, another wonderful admiral, great American, Rayburn, started developing a ballistic missile that could be launched from a submarine that was not a liquid fuel rocket. Its fuel was a solid fuel rocket that you could put inside of a launch tube of a submarine and launch, shoot 4,000 miles.

DePue: Launch vertically or horizontally?

Thunman: Vertically. Your ballistic missiles are launched vertically. And in those days, those first ballistic missiles carried sixteen.

DePue: Was the *Nautilus* a ballistic missile submarine?

Thunman: No, no. But you had the nuclear power plant. If you had the nuclear power plant, and you had the ballistic missile, and you had it in the same submarine, you had a hell of a weapons' system.

DePue: When was the first one of the ballistic missile subs launched?

Thunman: It was launched in '59, went to sea in 1960.

DePue: So again, this is right at the time you're getting in?

Thunman: Right at the beginning. It was an incredible achievement. I'm not sure industry or the system, the government, could do it today. But here you've got Rayburn, back in about 1955, Arleigh Burke having the vision to say, "Hey wait a minute. Let's take these missiles, and put them in submarines," after the *Nautilus* demonstrated that you could have a nuclear power plant at sea.

So the concepts of a ballistic missile in a submarine and a nuclear power plant in a submarine—you'd probably want to check the dating and all, but I would say, sometime in the middle '50s—those concepts came together. Hey, let's do it! I think Arleigh Burke put it together in his mind. An incredible program, expensive program, to develop a ballistic missile, develop a nuclear powered submarine.

So, Rayburn said, "We can have this done by 1960." There was a tremendous press to get it done, because they'd said 1960, and Eisenhower wanted it done. They launched the first ballistic missile submarine, the *George Washington* was the first one. They called them the "*Sixteen for Freedom*." They were all named for heroic political figures; *Abraham Lincoln* was one. You name a historic figure, and that was one of the submarines.

It was launched in '59. The secretary of defense that said, "We'll do it," his wife launched it. Gates was the secretary of defense. It went to sea in 1960, Incredible. It was on the line, sixteen nuclear missiles, capable of going 4,000 miles.

DePue: Are these Polaris missiles?

Thunman: Polaris missiles. The first missiles were Polaris. They carried about... In those days, I guess, maybe 400 or 500 kiloton weapons, which is ten times the destruction capability of Hiroshima.

So the Soviets suddenly had this in their lap. They didn't have any, and here we had ballistic missiles at sea. That was the counter to Sputnik, '87. In three years... '87, they had a missile that they (background noise) could shoot from land, ballistic missile. Then in three years we had a missile you could shoot from sea, which of course was better, because it was undetected, the launch platform was undetected. (speaking to his wife in the background)

[pause in recording]

DePue: I know at this time, and this is early in the nuclear warfare stage of the Cold War, but by this time, you have land-based ballistic missiles.

Thunman: The Air Force, yes.

DePue: And you have bomber delivered ballistics.

Thunman: Bombers, yes, and the submarine launch.

DePue: So, why did you need the submarine?

Thunman: Well, you see, when they put it together, they put it together as a triad.

DePue: Who's they?

Thunman: They, the Defense Department, probably working directly with the president, secretary of defense. They said, "We don't want to just depend on one system; we want a three-legged stool, and we need all three legs," of course. There was a lot of politics. The Air Force said, "Hey, all you need is us dropping nuclear weapons from bombers. There's nothing that can... You know, we can protect them."

DePue: Which means you have to have bombers in the air all the time.

Thunman: Bombers in the air all the time or ready to launch. Of course, you were vulnerable, because they could attack your bombers on the ground. The ballistic missiles that you had on the ground, in launch tubes—which we still have today. Of course, they know where they are—so they can preempt those missiles. They could attack them first, before you could launch. And the same thing, you could preempt the aircraft, attack them while they're on the ground, if they're not in the air, or attack them in the air, with different systems.

But the submarine, you could not preempt. You didn't know where it was. There was no way of knowing where it was, or how many were at sea. I guess you could have figured that out later on from satellites, how many were not detectable and ashore. But we always kept about a third of the force at sea, ready. So, you had the sixteen submarines, and you had five or six of them at sea, ready. In fifteen minutes, you've got eighty missiles or sixty missiles in your lap, eighty missiles in your lap.

Even Khrushchev made the comment. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, he made the comment, he said, as I recall, he said, "I always worried about the submarines" when they were making the decision of whether to start the nuclear war. What he was saying was, no matter what we do, these submarines are going to launch, against us.

I was part of that a little bit, as a young officer on the *Robert E. Lee*, which was the second nuclear powered ballistic missile firing submarine. I ended up in the *Robert E. Lee*. When I graduated from nuclear power school, I was extremely disappointed, because I was sent to be an instructor at the nuclear power school that we were starting in Maryland. It was the beginning of the school in Maryland. I taught enlisted men nuclear power, the theories behind nuclear power, as I had learned.

DePue: And these would end up being the technicians who would actually operate the nuclear power plant.

Thunman: Yes. Rickover wanted them taught math and physics and chemistry. He wanted those people taught, as well as the officers. Now, not as difficult a program, but a pretty, fairly difficult program. I would put it in the college range. We were in kind of the PhD range, I think, the officers. But those sailors, they were...and that was a real challenge. Those kids, they were so anxious to pass. They didn't want to be thrown out of the program. That one year, I had one year experience teaching, was just invaluable to my career, working with those young sailors, and they all volunteered.

DePue: Invaluable in what respect?

Thunman: Well, in dealing with, again, with the sailors, learning how to instruct them. As an officer, you know very well, half the time you're teaching your people

how to do something, how to carry out some operation, complex or not. That's what you're involved with. So I learned how to do that.

DePue: Did it also give you a deeper understanding of the material you were dealing with?

Thunman: I think it did. You've always got to be better than your students. So I became, in my mind, pretty knowledgeable of reactor theory. Now, I'm not talking about the deepest theory but pretty much the theory of how a nuclear detonation or nuclear power producing process works.

But I went there; I was so disappointed, because I wanted to go to the U.S.S. *Thresher*, which of course, was lost a year or so later. That was the first nuclear attack submarine of the new design, which was the best submarine in the world, best nuclear attack submarine in the world, by far.

I was onboard a ballistic missile submarine for only a year, when I got ordered... That was after the nuclear power school. But instead of the *Thresher*, I had been ordered to the ballistic missile submarine. That story, I think is worthwhile. I graduated from submarine school, as we talked. I was a year aboard the U.S.S. *Volador*, the diesel powered submarine that was taken into the nuclear power program. [I] spent a year in training, nuclear power school prototype, then was ordered to the nuclear power school, as an instructor, and was very disappointed, as I say.

But Rickover would come to the school, when we got the school going. Rickover was so involved with education. That was kind of his hobby. He would come up to the school. We wrote our own books, believe that or not. He had assigned a PhD physicist. I think he got him from someplace like Westinghouse or GE, got the guy, Will Underwood, I still remember his name, who came and helped us write the books. But we were the ones who, frankly, who came up with the message to teach the sailors how to apply the theory to the operation of the plant, which was not easy to do, because nobody had ever written it before. There were not any nuclear reactors.

I remember, I said to Will Underwood, I said, "Now, we've got to have some easy formula we can use to demonstrate what happens to the reactor if certain things occur, something in their mind that they can say, well, this temperature goes up, and this goes down, and we're going to have this condition, something simple."

DePue: Was there something going on in the civilian nuclear world, some of the earlier reactors?

Thunman: Not at that time. Later on, it came on.

DePue: So you guys are in front of the development of civilian—

- Thunman: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. It came down a couple of years later.
- DePue: What company designed the nuclear power plant that you were working with?
- Thunman: The integrator of the whole design was Rickover.
- DePue: But there's civilian contractors that were doing it.
- Thunman: Oh yeah, but we're talking about...He integrated all of them, the company that built the reactor vessel, the company that built the reactor structure itself, the fuel rods; the companies that built the coolant pumps; the companies that built the steam generators, all of the major components that go into a power producing reactor plant. They're all civilian companies, no question. But the guy who integrated all of I, selected the companies, selected the designs, came up with the requirements for the designs; the guy who did it all was Rickover.
- DePue: So, he's the father, not of just ballistic nuclear submarines, but of the civilian nuclear power world?
- Thunman: That's right, yeah. And as I told you early on, he developed the first civilian, power producing reactor, down at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, back in about 1948, '49. He had done that. I say there are a lot of people; I don't know who they're going to remember in history. But somebody's going to say, "Hey, this is the guy who did it, started it all." He'll be remembered as the father of...not the Navy's nuclear power program, which most people know, but the father of the world's nuclear power program.
- DePue: As we go through this, I want to sprinkle in some other events that fall under the category of Cold War events, because you are very much a warrior in the Cold War.
- Thunman: Yes, yes.
- DePue: Vietnam is something immaterial to you to a certain extent, I would think. The first one I want to mention here, ask you about, is the Bay of Pigs incident, April, 1961.<sup>45</sup> Anything to do with that?
- Thunman: No, we had nothing to do with the Bay of Pigs.
- DePue: The second one, I would think you had some response to at least. That was October 1962, and the Cuban Missile Crisis.
- Thunman: Oh, yes. That's where Khrushchev said, "I was always worried about the submarines being ready to launch," as we were having that nearly combative developing reaction with the United States, over the Cuban Missile Crisis.

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<sup>45</sup> The Bay of Pigs Invasion was a failed military invasion of Cuba, undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-sponsored paramilitary group Brigade 2506 on April 17, 1961.

They were talking about launching missiles from Cuba, and we were talking about air attacks against Cuba. But his comment to all that was, "I was always worried about the nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines at sea."

DePue: Well, the trigger of the whole thing was the possibility of the Soviets using Cuba to establish their own inter-ballistic nuclear missiles. But what's the difference between that and having a couple of Soviet submarines parked off the shore?

Thunman: The Soviets didn't have submarines at that point. They had not developed the ballistic missile submarine yet. They had nuclear powered submarines that were going to be capable, if not capable at that point, to fire cruise missile submarines. A cruise missile's an airplane. It has the range of an airplane, maybe 400 or 500 miles, if that, in those days, and it can carry a warhead, like an airplane. It's a robot. You shoot it from a submarine, and it travels the path that you set in it and attacks. But you can shoot it down like an airplane. So that's not good enough. It had to be something better than that.

I was involved—and I'll tell you more about that—in detecting the capabilities of their cruise missiles—this is when I was on those special missions—as well as detecting the capability of their ballistic missiles. I was right in the middle of all of that.

But, going back to the beginning of it all, we had the first submarine at sea in 1960. That was there at sea. We had, I don't know how many at sea. We were building one a month, starting in 1960.

DePue: So by the Cuban Missile Crisis, there were already several that were cruising the oceans at the time.

Thunman: Yes, yes. That's what he had to deal with. That's what Khrushchev had to deal with and he made that statement, "I was always worried about the submarines." Interestingly, that was said later, during the Vietnam War. I'll come to that when we get to the Vietnam War. We were involved in the Vietnam War. I'll be able to tell you that story.

DePue: This is probably a good time to get into your experiences on the *Robert E. Lee*.

Thunman: I finished nuclear power school. Now, I was late coming into the submarine program, which made me late getting into the nuclear power program, to a degree and was sent to a ballistic missile submarine, which I was disappointed in. [I] learned how to operate the ship's reactor plant at sea. I was an officer of the deck, conning the submarine at sea, but kind of an average operation, an average situation. I was not in the front line of the guys headed for the attack boats. They were very experienced officers. I had not qualified as an engineer yet, which was very important. You had to take this special examination. It was an eight hour examination. I had not done any of that. All I had done was



spent the year at the nuclear power school, teaching, before I came to the submarine.

We had two very interesting experiences in that submarine though. One of them was what happened when Kennedy was killed. We were at sea when this happened. This is one of my favorite sea stories. We got a message from the commander of Submarine Force Atlantic, saying, "The president's been shot. We don't know all the details. It could very well be a conspiracy, so everybody be alert." The captain passed that word over the general announcing system to the ship, to the crew.

In those days, there was a system. There was a practice, a readiness practice, where, once every couple of weeks, at some time unbeknownst to the crew, we'd get orders to conduct a weapons system readiness test. It came from commander of Submarine Force Atlantic, came in using the same communications, practices that were used in a real wartime alert, to fire. It was very realistic, and everything inside the submarine was done to get ready to launch, all the way up to the point of opening the hatches and shooting. The hatches were never opened, and of course, the missiles were never fired. But all of the things that went into that was timed, recorded, so the system could see if you really did maintain this readiness that they wanted, which was fifteen minutes to be able to fire.

Here they'd passed us the information on the president. About two hours later, they sent one of these weapons system readiness messages, which I assume was, from the initiation side, kind of a routine thing. Somebody said, "Okay, it's time for the *Robert E. Lee's* WSRT. Send the message," not linking that up to the Kennedy situation, typical right hand, left hand problem.

We had a new officer of the deck in the conn at this time, a young officer. He had just qualified, demonstrated his capability to be there, to operate the ship without the captain there. That's called, you're the officer of the deck.

Our captain's practice, which I thought was a good practice, was whenever we had a WSRT, weapons system readiness test, ordered, he would pass the word, "Man battle stations missile." The officer of the deck would actually do it, unless the captain was there. Then, after you pass the word, "Man battle station missile. [phone rings] This is a drill." We all knew it was a drill, whenever that test was conducted.

This new officer of the deck, the word came up, WSRT, "Pass the word. Man battle stations missile," forgot to pass the word, "This is a drill." So all we knew on the submarine was Kennedy has been shot, be alert, might be a conspiracy, an hour or two later, man battle stations missile. We all believed we were going to go shoot. I remember, I was laying in my bunk. I rolled out of that bunk and took off down...I was the reactor control officer on

the submarine—that was my job—heading for the engineering spaces. I can remember seeing the eyes of the people all going to their battle stations. Nobody was panicked. Everybody was going where they were supposed to go, but you could see the terror in their eyes. We all knew, my God, we're going to end the world; we're going to destroy the world.

DePue: That leads to a couple of questions.

Thunman: Well, let me just finish the story. It's kind of a funny ending. We get there, get to the battle stations, in like a minute or two, three minutes maybe. The captain had been in the john. He had one of these Polaris suits, they were jumpsuits. He got up, and he had the pants around his legs. You've got to pull them up. He's trying to make his way out to the conn and pull these things up, as we used to talk about, walking like a penguin, trying to get there, because he knew that it was a drill. When the word went to the officer of the deck and the conn, the word always went to the captain's stateroom. So he knew it was a drill, and he knew the crew didn't know. He's trying to make his way there, and he finally gets there and passes the word, "This is a drill."

So, that's two or three minutes, but for two or three minutes in my lifetime, I thought we were going to blow up the world. I believed it. That's a terrible experience, never forgot it. Okay, go ahead with your question.

DePue: Well, the questions are—and maybe this is some information that you can't get into in much detail—but how did it work, the authority to actually launch nuclear missiles? It isn't one person's decision, is it?

Thunman: It's the president's decision. You've heard people talk about carrying... He's got an officer with him, a military officer, wherever he goes. He's got a briefcase. It's called the football; he carries the football. From that he can order the launch. The order goes through several different ways, one of them to the land-based missiles, of course, and aircraft, through that command and control system, as you can imagine. The order goes to the National Military Command Center in Washington. I guess there's a backup center, in those days, in Colorado. Then there was also one in an airplane, always in the air, where you could launch. You could send the order.

You had three different ways to send the order. There may have been four. In the Navy, we had aircraft streaming a wire a couple of miles long, circling in the Pacific. I was involved with operating those when I was in Guam, which were always ready to send the message. It was the last resort. If the Soviets had the capability to eliminate our communication systems, normal systems, this capability would be there. They could send the order to the submarine, because the submarine always had communications with these aircraft. Their communications capability, what was called ELF, [extremely] low frequency. That signal would go thousands of miles. It was a signal that was always there, no matter where you were.

DePue: And it's something the submarines could pick up, even when submerged?

Thunman: Yeah, even when submerged, because it was a very low frequency. And the submarine had its own wire that it trailed. As long as that wire was within 100 feet of the surface, it would pick up that ELF signal from the aircraft. So, when you were submerged, you had to be fairly shallow, well not that shallow, 400 or 500 feet, maybe 600 feet. Your wire went up and floated within 100 feet of the surface, the floating wire, we called it. Whenever you changed course and did things, you had to be careful that you didn't pull that wire down. It was quite an elaborate facility, to be sure we could get that signal to the submarine.

When I was in the Pentagon, I got a certain amount of publicity, I or the Navy, not me personally, but it was my office, the deputy CNO of submarines. We developed a land-based communication signal, using the rock formations. It's either Minnesota or Wisconsin. I think it's Minnesota. They've got rock formations below the surface of the earth that go a long way and are such that you could transmit what was called an extremely low frequency communication signal that would go all around the world.

Now, a lower signal than ELF could be intercepted by the submarine. You didn't have to have a wire to intercept it. You could just use the regular antenna configuration, at any depth. So you could communicate with that submarine, anywhere in the world, by going through this ELF system. That was quite a story when we developed it, were testing it.

The farmers in Minnesota—I can't remember; it was one of the Midwestern states—were all upset about it. It was in the press. We were sterilizing the cows. It was a big flap, and it worked. By God, it worked. What I liked about it was these submarines, any submarine, all of our submarines had floating wires. So whatever submarine, the attack boats, they could be anywhere, and you could alert them to come up and communicate. It was a very low data rate. You couldn't transmit much information, but you could certainly send them an alert signal.

DePue: And then they'd come up.

Thunman: They'd come up and communicate. I thought it was a great capability. I spent the money, when I was deputy CNO of submarines, to develop it.

DePue: Getting back to the whole process of being alerted and then actually getting to the point where you launch the nuclear missiles and trigger Armageddon, or at least maybe end Armageddon, what happens on the boat itself that has to occur?

Thunman: Well, you have to get the submarine at about 100 feet depth, because the missiles were designed, at that point, to operate... You had to be at 100 feet. The submarine had to be hovering. It couldn't be moving, not very fast,

maybe a knot or so, like that, at 100 feet, so that the ship's attitude had to be adjusted. Normally, you were steaming along at five to ten knots. So you had to get the submarine into a hovering condition.

You had to spin up the missiles. The missiles are sitting there in standby, and you've got to get all of their different gyros and what have you inside, spun up to its normal operating condition and ready to launch. Those are the two things that happened in the main. Missiles were ready; the submarine's ready, and then you would fire. Of course, you would open the hatch, the missile hatch. That would flood the tube, and you'd fire with a flooded tube.

Remember I said there were two things that happened on that submarine? One was the Kennedy thing. The other one, we fired the missiles. The first test firing conducted from a ballistic missile firing submarine was the *George Washington*. It was a failure, all kinds of problems that they hadn't thought about, about flooding the tubes and all. We were on patrol. We, the *Robert E. Lee*, were on patrol. This was in 1963, yeah, '63, January, February of '63. They had an organization called the WSEG, the Weapons System Evaluation Group. It was a DOD [Department of Defense] group that tested the various nuclear weapons systems to see if they were really operable or really work. Well, here, the entire Navy's ballistic missile system had failed in the test.

They immediately ordered another submarine to go out and conduct the test. We were picked. We were on patrol. What that meant was, you came back in to the Holy Loch in Scotland, exchanged out your missiles... Actually, what they did, you didn't exchange the missiles; that's wrong. What they did was, they would come aboard and exchange the warheads for exercise heads, six missiles. Then they sent us into a patrol condition, into another area of the Atlantic, to be in standby, then, when the order came, to actually launch the six missiles into an exercise area and determine the reliability and capability of the system.

So it was a big deal to the submarine force. The first one had failed; now this is the second one. The first one had been a single missile failure. Now they said shoot six. That's quite a number to shoot. Suddenly we were given that order to carry out that mission.

We were out there. I was the electrical officer and reactor control division officer. I wasn't the chief engineer. But the electrical officer... We had some problems in the system. I won't go into them at length, but the 400 cycle motor generators had been poorly designed. The frequencies would change, and when they changed, they could trip off the line. When they tripped off the line, that affected the navigation system, and you wouldn't be able to launch. It was something that was not hard to fix, and it was

subsequently fixed, but it was something... Here we were, you certainly didn't want to have this occur during this vital test in the program.

I had come up with a system. I used to call it "man battle stations 400 cycle." I had people stationed in different points around the submarine to monitor what was going on in the 400 cycle system, to ensure that we didn't have this irregularity. We were on patrol. We were playing bridge in the ward room. We went three or four days without an order. We didn't know when the order would come. That was part of the test.

I was sitting there playing bridge with the captain. I was his partner. The chief electrician came in and he said, "We're having problems with the 400 cycle. We've got to shift 400 cycle motor generator sets," which was a very touchy thing to do. Did it wrong, [we] didn't get the frequencies exactly matched. You trip it off the line, and you lose the system. It would take you a number of hours to bring it back up. So I disappeared with the chief. We got all these people lined up and ready to align the 400 cycle system and shifted. It was okay; it worked out okay.

So I came back. The captain was still sitting there at the bridge table with the other guys. I sat down and said, "Captain, it's okay. We're all right." I remember saying afterwards to one of the guys, I said, "By God, that captain's a cool customer." This impending disaster was ongoing, and he sat there playing bridge. Well, of course, there wasn't anything he could do about it. One of the guys said, "He didn't move until you came back." (both laugh)

Anyway, came the order; we launched all six. I was the diving officer during the launch, and that was kind of funny. Nobody had ever launched six missiles. Nobody had ever launched more than one. We launched all six, and of course, to be the diving officer, you're controlling the depth of the submarine. You had to stay at about ninety, plus or minus five feet. You couldn't lose control of that depth. You couldn't broach up or go deep.

I remember, we launched the first one, and we flooded the tube. Now you're changing the amount of water coming into the submarine, the weight of the submarine. I remember, I was using the automatic depth control system. I realized, early in the game, that that was not going to work too well. I was using it. It had some detectors, which would measure the acceleration of the boat, vertically, up or down. I realized quickly that I should be using that to see if I was accelerating, not if the boat was moving; that's velocity. Acceleration gave you an indicator whether you were going to move, just like anything else, physics.

DePue: I'm trying to figure out the physics of this. First of all, I don't understand how a missile takes off underneath the water for ninety feet. Where's the propellant to begin with?

Thunman: The propellant would ignite. It would come up in a bubble. The important thing was, before you launched it, that bubble will only be operative for about ninety feet. If you were deeper, the missile would go all the way. It wouldn't surface properly. If you were too shallow, it would be too powerful and take it off its line.

DePue: So, obviously, there was some oxygen in the missile itself.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, in the missile propellant. That was a major design feature that Admiral Rayburn had come up with. The Soviets, I think even to this day, they still have liquid firing, liquid fuel missiles in their submarines.

DePue: Which are a little bit more unstable?

Thunman: Yeah, more unstable and less reliable. We've always had solid fuel propellant.

DePue: Then just listening to you describe the physics of this, you've got the missile going off, which is a downward force, I would think, on the submarine, and you've got the water in the tube, which is now emptying.

Thunman: An even more downward force. The captain had made me the diving officer. I was scared; I was really worried about that, and this occurred. So, after two missiles had fired, I could tell from the acceleration... Now, we'd only moved a couple of feet. We're again measuring acceleration. If you remember from physics, you've got velocity. Then you take the derivative of the velocity, and you get acceleration. That tells you which way you're going to go, maybe not this second, but in a few seconds.

At about the third missile, I realized, my God, the acceleration was building up. So I remember, I ordered, "Blow all main ballasts," which was the most you could do to stop. You blow all the ballast tanks, the water out, to stop the downward acceleration. I remember the captain looking over at me. (laughs) As soon as I blew it, I could see the acceleration come off, then I vented the tanks. The ship didn't move any, but it had been a pretty violent order, during the middle of the operation. But the great news was, three of the six missiles were a success, went into the launch area, within a mile... The system was only designed to be 50 percent successful. Now, in those days, that was classified. Today, of course, it isn't.

All we had to do was demonstrate 50 percent. But that's why they fired six, figuring you need more than one missile to really make a determination whether you've got an effective system or not. It was a great success. The demonstration of that system then proved that the program should go on, and missiles and submarines should be built. It was quite a success.

DePue: The next part of the question, for all of us civilians who are paranoid about the fact that there are all of these ballistic nuclear submarines floating around the

ocean and wondering what happens if they have a *Dr. Strangelove* situation, have some rogue commander out there?<sup>46</sup>

Thunman: It's a question that always came up. The system was designed... Everything was two-man. The captain couldn't do anything unless he had the executive officer... In order to get to the keys that would operate the system, you had two men to get inside the safe.

DePue: What system are we talking about now?

Thunman: The launch system, the actual launch order of actually putting the key in the ignition, like a car, and turning it. In order to get those keys... Well, you had two sets of keys. You had the key to launch the thing, but then the key to get to the launch keys, which were in a safe in the captain's stateroom. To get to that, you had two people who had to sign off on that, who had to agree to it.

You had to have two people agree to use the keys in the missile firing area at the missile operations control panel, where you monitored the pressures, the procedures to launch the missile. You had to have two people there. You had to have two senior people on the submarine buy off on it. You had to have two people agree to open the hatches; that was another thing. There were these two people things all around the submarine. I don't know how many, probably half a dozen or so, that if any one guy said, "No," then you wouldn't launch.

I was asked this question many times. I remember, I took a reporter from *TIME* magazine to sea with me, on the U.S.S. *Michigan*, which was now the *Trident* submarine.<sup>47</sup> He wanted to write an article on this—I've got a copy of it up there, if I can find it. I'm pretty sure I've got it up there. That was one of the things I was going to look for—where I demonstrated to him that you had that kind of reliability.

There were two things I demonstrated to him. One was, we had that kind of reliability. Two was, that the crew would shoot. He doubted that the crew would fire, even though they were ordered to. I remember telling him the story about the *Robert E. Lee*, about my experience, which was pretty good to tell him, the fact that we had that as a data point. The crew were all headed to their battle stations. People were doing all the things they were supposed to do to shoot. Nobody was coming apart; nobody was stopping and saying, "I'm not going to be part of this." They were all doing what they were supposed to,

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<sup>46</sup> *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, is a 1964 political satire, black comedy film that satirizes the Cold War fears of a nuclear conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States.

<sup>47</sup> *TIME* is an American weekly news magazine published in New York City. It was founded in 1923 and originally run by Henry Luce. A European edition is published in London and also covers the Middle East, Africa and, since 2003, Latin America.

for at least three minutes [that] we knew of, when they really thought they were going to shoot.

The *TIME* magazine newsman, he interviewed an awful lot of people around the submarine about it. He came back and told me, in my room. He said, "Yeah, you were right, Admiral, they'll shoot. I believe they'll shoot." And he put it in the article. It was interesting.

DePue: As a positive thing or a negative?

Thunman: Yeah, a positive thing.

DePue: So, the system would work as designed?

Thunman: Work as designed, yes. We had proven that both from the technical side, as well as the personnel side.

DePue: You mentioned that you were on the *Robert E. Lee* when a couple of these incidents happened. Where was its base of operation?

Thunman: It was in the North Atlantic, North Sea, which is north of Scotland. It's a terrible place to operate, because you had gales upon gales upon gales.

DePue: What does it matter, if you're underneath the water?

Thunman: Well, you can still be affected by rolling. In the early submarines, we had a gyro stabilizer, which was a gyroscope as big around as this table and room.

DePue: And spherical?

Thunman: No, it was a gyroscope, and what it did was detect any roll. It would precess in the opposite direction, to keep you from rolling.<sup>48</sup> See what I mean? It was like a gyroscope. It would precess. It would detect the roll, as the roll was starting, and then this giant gyro stabilizer, the weight would shift to the opposite direction. So, it would keep the submarine from rolling. If you got into heavy seas...Remember now, you're going to be at 100 feet, so you can't get all the way down deep. At 100 feet, in a gale, you could probably get ten, fifteen...maybe not in a gale, but in a heavier gale, you could get a roll that would be outside the specification required for firing the weapon.

We had this stabilizer. As the electrical officer, I was responsible for that thing too. I remember we were rolling round a lot more than normal; we were down. I'd said to the captain, I said, "Gosh, it must be bad seas up there," because we're rolling around. So he went up, at the periscope depth, to take a look at what was going on. It was reasonably quiet. We had hooked up

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<sup>48</sup> Precess is to change in the orientation of the rotational axis of a rotating body.



the stabilizer backwards. (both laugh) So, every once in a while, things didn't work the way you wanted.

DePue: Is that the kind of thing that gets you some grief from the other officers?

Thunman: Yes, from the captain.

DePue: A little rolling of the eyes maybe or some sharp words. You say you were operating in the North Sea area. My guess is that you're—and maybe this is a question you can't answer—you're operating somewhere off the northern coast of the Soviet Union?

Thunman: Well, you're pretty far west of that. You're kind of up northwest of the coast of Scotland. But you're right, you're operating probably 500, 600 miles away from the Soviet Union. But that's a big ocean out there, and they had no capability. They tried to detect us, and they had no capability.

DePue: But the missiles were long enough range that that was—

Thunman: Well, of course, you had to not only travel to the coast, but you had to travel all the way to Moscow. So you were probably—I don't know what that is—probably fairly close to 4,000 miles from the northwest coast of the Soviet Union to Moscow. In that area, that's how far the missile would have to fire.

DePue: But I thought we were at the northeast corner of the Soviet Union.

Thunman: No, no, northwest. Scotland's over here, and England's here, and then here's the coast of Europe over here, and up here is the Romansk area.

DePue: Right.

Thunman: And we were up in here, northwest area, the northwest and northwest by northwest areas. That's where the North Sea is. It's all that area across the top there. I would describe it that way, across the top, from the English Channel, across the UK, across—

DePue: I just flunked my geography test here, I think.

Thunman: It's not an area you think about very much.

DePue: And was Holy Loch, was that your base of operations?

Thunman: Holy Loch was a base of operations there in Scotland, which was the southern area of Scotland, which is the Loch and the southern area. That's where our ballistic missile submarines were home ported there. We had a submarine tender there, and we had a base there.

DePue: Did you have your families there?

Thunman: No. The crews, you had two crews per submarine. This is how we operate the submarines. You'd be out for sixty to seventy days, submerged continuously, come back. The other crew would fly over from New London, and you'd spend about a week turning over the submarine. Then you'd fly back to New London, and you'd spend sixty, eighty days in New London.

Holy Loch is [consulting the map]... Well there's Dunoon. Yeah, there's the Firth of Clyde.<sup>49</sup>

DePue: Here it is, right here, I think.

Thunman: Yeah, and Dunoon. I remember getting drunk in Dunoon. Boy, I'll tell you, going up the Clyde. I can remember, I was the officer of the deck. It was so cold and rainy, I didn't care whether we ran aground or not. I just wanted to get warm.

DePue: So it sounds like you were surfaced at that time.

Thunman: Yeah. We were getting ready to come back from patrol. We'd surfaced out here. Yeah, that was where we operated.

DePue: And otherwise, you're just kind of floating in the huge sea and trying to stay undetected.

Thunman: Stay undetected, yeah. Plus, running drills, we ran a lot of drills. That's one of the great things that's kept the submarine program alive, where we haven't had, frankly, the loss of a submarine is because we trained and trained and trained. You got so tired of it, it came out of your ears, all the possible casualties that could occur to the reactor plant, to the steam plant. It was all as realistic as we could make it. It's one of the things that upsets me about this recent fire casualty in the shipyard. I don't understand how it could occur, how the fire could get out of control. Training should have preempted that.

DePue: Where was the missile test? Did that occur in the North Sea as well?

Thunman: No. We went south, as I recall. I think we came out probably halfway across the Atlantic. We fired down, south, into the... not the Mediterranean, but...

DePue: Somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean?

Thunman: No, no, down in the—I'm having a senior moment—you know, the Bahamas, that area, the Caribbean, the Caribbean area. So, it was a 4,000 mile test. We were up in here probably.

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<sup>49</sup> The Firth of Clyde is an inlet of the Atlantic Ocean, off the southwest coast of Scotland, named for the River Clyde which empties into it.

DePue: But the landing point, the target, was in the middle of the water then, in the ocean?

Thunman: It was in the water, yes. We had aircraft and ships around it, so they could monitor exactly where the explosion, impact occurred.

DePue: Do you recall any other stories or incidents from that time period?

Thunman: No, those two. Of course, the big thing to me was I was kind of doing all this and working the problem, but I was disappointed. I said, "My God, I'm going to be on this ballistic missile submarine forever, and I haven't qualified as the engineer yet." We were ten days from coming in from patrol. The radioman came in with a message from the Bureau of Navy Personnel, ordering me to be the executive officer of the U.S.S. *Snook*, a nuclear attack submarine, one of the newest, fastest, which was an incredible surprise, because I hadn't qualified as the engineer. And I'd only been a year; I'd never been on a nuclear attack submarine.

DePue: Was this like going at the big leagues?

Thunman: Yeah, from my point of view. This was getting into the majors.

DePue: Well see, that's contrary to what I would think, that you'd want your most stable, your most seasoned officers, sitting on top of Armageddon, basically.

Thunman: Well, no, but I was not anything special. I wasn't the chief engineer. They could lose me without a...train up somebody else. But the executive officer of a nuclear attack submarine, that's a pretty big responsible position, and you're up there in that ISR world, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance. You make a mistake up there, and you've got an international situation.

DePue: Well, before we leave the *Robert E. Lee*, I understood that it went to dry dock. Something confusing for me is that the dry dock was the U.S.S. *Los Alamos*.

Thunman: Yeah, it was in Holy Loch. We had a floating dry dock in the Holy Loch. I didn't know the name of it, but we had floating dry docks around the world, for the submarines. That was a pretty sporty event, to go and take that submarine into a dry dock and to dry dock it.

Those floating dry docks were not the most sophisticated things in the world. You had to be careful that you didn't dump the submarine over on its side. There were all kinds of problems that could have occurred. It's amazing, what we did in those days. You don't do it today. But what we did in those days was, from a technology point of view, it took a lot of...I remember when I was a squadron commander in Guam, dry docking those submarines. I was always uptight about that whole thing.

DePue: Because it was still a relatively new concept, I would assume.

Thunman: Yeah, it was new. Plus, the dry docks that we had were old dry docks that had been refurbished in the Navy and towed out to these positions. They weren't the most modern systems in the world.

DePue: I'd imagine they're not designed to be seaworthy either.

Thunman: No. When they towed the dry docks out, it was like two knots or four knots [about 2.3 to 4.6 miles per hour]. It took them two or three months to get them. I remember though, in Guam, trying to pull a submarine out of the dry dock with a typhoon coming. I had every tug in the whole Guam community, commercial and the Navy, pushing on that submarine, as it came out, as you tried to keep it away from the side of the dock. It was one of those situations where you thought, Well, I'm going to end my career here somehow.

DePue: We'll get to Guam here in a little bit, but let's get back to the U.S.S. *Snook*?

Thunman: *Snook*, yeah.

DePue: Before we get there, I've got some kind of broad, overarching questions for you. This is an appropriate time, I think, now that you're heading towards an attack submarine. What are the various missions that the attack submarine would have or that submarines in general would have?

Thunman: Well, your attack submarine, of course, ruled the sea. If you went to a conventional war, a nuclear war, but let's say conventional, you would sink everything in sight. There wasn't anything that could combat your operation. You carried torpedoes, and there wasn't any way to protect any ships at sea from you.

DePue: Ratio wise, what were the percentage of attack subs versus ballistic missile subs?

Thunman: In those days it was probably equal, but they were growing. When I left the submarine force, we had twice as many nuclear attack submarines as we had ballistic missile submarines. But they were both growing at about the same rate. When I went into the attack submarines, we probably had five or ten of each, somewhere in that.

DePue: When most Americans think about the Navy today, they think of aircraft carriers, and they think of carrier fleets, operating in various parts of the world. Would those fleets also have attack submarines?

Thunman: Not in those days. Today they do, battle groups they call them. I fought the concept, probably erroneously, when I was a senior officer. But I wanted the submarines to do what they do best, which I always believed in; [that] was operate independently. That's what they did in World War II and virtually destroyed the Japanese, commercial ship effort. Really, you could have won

World War II by just blockading Japan. We were blockading Japan that way, with submarines.

DePue: Did the Navy in World War II, or the Navy during the time you were involved, ever adopt the wolf pack concept that the Germans had? [phone rings]

Thunman: We had tried to do it, to a degree. But it's too hard to do, in many ways, keep the submarines from interfering with each other. The difficulty was communicating between the two and coordinating their efforts. You were better off letting each submarine—this is my view, and I had tremendous experience in attack submarines by the time it was over—just let the submarine do its thing. Don't make it hard, because you've got these wonderful weapons. You've got the fastest ship in the world, the deepest diving ship in the world, the quietest ship in the world. You don't need to get fancy. All you need to do is go out and shoot torpedoes.

DePue: You confused me a little bit, because you're calling them ships instead of submarines.

Thunman: Okay, both, yeah.

DePue: Did it have an anti-submarine role, an attack submarine?

Thunman: Yes, and that turned out to be its most important role, according to the rest of the Navy. Of course, that's what ISR developed into. Intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance was trailing the Soviet, nuclear submarines.

DePue: Okay, now this opens up a whole range of discussion.

Thunman: A whole range of things, yes.

DePue: So, I'll kind of turn it over to you. First of all, how the heck do you find them in the first place?

Thunman: Because of the incredible sonars that you have developed on your ships that can reach out. You go out and search for them and detect their noise levels, very low noise levels. Then make your way over, and you've got them, and you're going to trail them. Or you trail them out of port.

DePue: That's what I was going to ask. So you know where the ports are, that's not a secret, and you pick them up as they're coming out of port.

Thunman: Yeah. One of the major successes I had, when I was submarine skipper, was I was leaving a Soviet port, the Vladivostok, where we operated, again, I always emphasize, within international waters, because that's politically sensitive. We had left there and was headed for Guam. We were halfway to

Guam when there had been some suspicion that a Soviet submarine was operating in the Philippine Sea, north of Guam.

They ordered me in route to Guam to search for it. I think kind of tongue in cheek, "Well, let's see if this submarine can find it," because you have that whole giant ocean out there. I remember, I got the orders to do that. I'd just left the Philippines. That was kind of exciting because a typhoon was headed there, and we had some trouble getting out, material problems. I was worried I was going to end up spending the typhoon inside of Subic Bay. That's another story.

So, I said, "Well, how do you search a big ocean like this?" That's not something we'd practiced at. I went back to my old days on the destroyer. I remembered, one of the things we had been taught was the expanding square search. This was to search for a diesel, electric submarine. So I thought, Well, might as well use that as any. I didn't have any other skill and science to do it. So I started an expanding square search, except I made the squares very large, based on what I thought the capability of our sonars [was], how far they could see.

DePue: Is that something you can say, how far they could see, at the time?

Thunman: Well, depending on the noise level of the target. In those days, this target was so noisy, the old Soviet echo submarine, that I figured we could see about ninety miles. I developed the search, based on a ninety mile search capability, using this technique, mathematical technique. Of course, in those days, it was a matter of yards, 1,000 yards. Here it was ninety miles. But [I] used the same thinking, not really believing we were going to do it.

We'd had a very successful mission, and we were on our way home. We'd been gone for six months. I wasn't really all that anxious, because I thought the possibility of detecting it was limited.

I was up in the conn, and I asked the OD, what contacts have you got? He called in the sonar, the sonarmen, all submariners... If you've read the *Hunt for Red October*, all submarine skippers had their favorite sonarmen, if you remember in the book.<sup>50</sup> I forget what the guy's name was. I had my guy, who was really good. In those days it was by ear. You detected it. And it wasn't a signal. Today you look at the scope, and you see signals. It's a different capability. I said in there... Now I've forgotten his name. But anyway, I said, "What contacts do we have?" He said, "Well, we haven't got much." We think there's a merchant to the west or something. Up to the north, there's a trawler.

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<sup>50</sup> The #1 *New York Times* bestseller that launched the literary career of author Tom Clancy is a gripping military thriller that introduced Clancy's hero, Jack Ryan, who went on to be a central character in many of Clancy's later novels.

I'm standing there thinking, A trawler in the Philippine Sea? You get up around Japan, and you get up in the Sea of Japan, you get out in the South China Sea, you've got thousands and thousands of trawlers. "The Philippines?" "Yeah." I said... They recorded this, and later on, they told me I said it. I said, "There aren't any fucking trawlers in the Philippines." (both laugh) I turned the ship, and I took off at flank speed, which was not the right thing to do. But, you know, those signals could vary. You could hear them, and then you wouldn't hear them, depending on the sound conditions.

I took off down that bearing and ran about ten miles and came back up, and we had a good sonar signal from them. [We] closed in, took position on them, about a thousand yards on his quarter, and started trailing them. Then I decided, Well, I've got to prove that I did this. So I went in and did what we call a sound pressure level recording of him, which was a dangerous thing, kind of, to do. You had to get in within about 300 yards and get astern of him, cross the stern, while you were recording his sonar signal. They used that to develop our capabilities against the Soviets, knowing how loud they were. But you had to get close. You had to know what the signal level was at the source. That's why you had to get in so close, 300 yards, not very far away.

DePue: I would think close enough where they could detect you.

Thunman: Well, that's right. So we stay astern in the baffle, so they can't hear within sixty degrees of the propeller, because of the noise of the propeller.<sup>51</sup> You come in astern, and you peel off that way. You make a mistake, you peel a piece of them off. If you don't get close enough, you don't get the source level.

I made one of those, and we were told that if we got contact, not to report it, trail for, I think, two days, and then come home, because we'd been gone so long. So we did that. I remember telling the exec—we were headed now for Guam—I said, "The Navy, the system, is going to be so surprised that we detected this submarine, because it's almost like finding a needle in a haystack. What we're going to be is very calm and officious about it. We're going to write a message that we detected him; here is where we got him; this is what we did; we did the sound pressure level." It was all kind of a standard operating thing, like you'd gone out and conducted an exercise, message. I said, "We'll write the message that way. We don't want to sound exuberant in any way," which I think normally I would have.

So, we came in, I remember, into Guam and we were mooring. The squadron commander was on the pier. Of course, apparently, he's the one who... He's an old friend, good guy. He's the one who had convinced the system to have us search for the submarine, because he's the one who

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<sup>51</sup> The baffles is the area in the water, directly behind a submarine or ship, through which a hull-mounted sonar cannot hear. This blind spot is caused by the need to insulate the sonar array, commonly mounted near the bow, from the noise of the vessel's machinery.

suspected that there was a Soviet submarine out there, in the Philippine Sea, based on some indications they had got from patrol aircraft, using patrol aircraft submarine detection techniques, which were not very good. They weren't able to localize anything. He had heard about it and decided to use a submarine to do it. So it was his project. If he was successful, he would get some atta-boy points, so to speak.

So, he was standing on the pier. We're maneuvering in alongside the pier. He goes, "Ron, did you get it? Did you get him?" I said, "Oh, yeah, Commodore, we got him." He about jumped off the side of the... "You did! I'm still maneuvering alongside, and we're getting the lines over. He's standing there; he just can't wait to get that brow [the temporary bridge connecting the ship's quarterdeck to the pier] aboard, so he can run aboard. He said, "Have you got a report?" I said, "Yes, sir. Here's the message." He said, "Send it; send it!" He said, "Come with me."

We jumped in the car, and we go up to the admiral, who was an aviation admiral, who was commander naval forces Marianas; Guam was in the Marianas. I go up there. This guy's kind of an irascible old guy, and there's the typical rivalry between aviation, patrol aircraft and their ability to detect submarines and the submarine force's ability, which we all believed, in that it was true. We could detect them. Those guys, they would put buoys in the water and work hard at it. It was pretty hard. You had to be pretty close to them to detect anything.

I sat down with him. He said, "You got it?" I said, "Yes, sir, we got it." "How do you know you got it?" He didn't know that much about submarines. "How do you know you got it?" I said, "Well, we did the sound pressure level recording." He said, "What is that?" I remember telling him. He said, "Will that get checked?" I said, "Yeah, we'll send it off now, and the recording will be examined by technical experts." He just kept pushing on it, trying to convince himself that we hadn't done it. Of course, we had, and of course, that landed in Washington. That was a big deal, that one of our submarines, traveling across the Philippine Sea, could go out and find one of theirs in that big ocean out there. So that was that story.

Again, the nuclear attack submarine, what we were using [it] for was off of the Soviet ports. In those days we didn't have satellite systems. We had antennas, which would intercept Soviet communications, and they can't go a lot further than that. But we could record it. We would gain an awful lot of intelligence about what was going on in the Soviet Union, because those communications, as you can imagine, would travel across the Soviet Union.

The way things were being developed in those days, if you were going to send a message from, let's say, the Soviet headquarters in Vladivostok to Moscow, you probably sent the message by ultrahigh frequency to a tower. Then from the tower, it would be sent, maybe high frequency, across the



Soviet Union. But either one of those signals, depending on the location of the transmitting sites, could be detected by a submarine sitting in international waters, again I'll say, and record it. So you brought all those recordings back. Then the intelligence guys could go through them very carefully and gain an awful lot of intelligence information.

DePue: But I'm sure the stuff was encrypted.

Thunman: Yeah, but you see, we had... If you brought it back to the specialists, they could decrypt a lot of it. They had the capabilities to do it. Of course, a lot of it wasn't encrypted, because the Soviets, I don't think, had any idea that we could do it.

DePue: That you were listening that closely.

Thunman: Yeah. Now, they knew we were there. They certainly suspected it. And they did everything they could to find us. They would send out battle groups. So, it was kind of exciting.

DePue: You're playing a cat and mouse game at mammoth scale.

Thunman: Yeah, mammoth scale. The first one I'd ever played, as I go back to my old diesel boat, remember, the first one I ever was on, that's what really excited me about submarines. I was so excited. That was such a spectacular event. Nobody ever did that, ever sat in the middle of the other guy's backyard and stayed away from him, but at the same time, stayed close to him and intercepted his communications. It was an exciting game.

DePue: One more mission—maybe there are more—but there's one more mission I did want to ask you about. I think I picked up in your testimony to the Senate at one time, mining?

Thunman: Oh, yes. This is when I was commander Submarine Force Pacific. We had submarine torpedoes, which we could shoot as mines. We'd shoot them. They'd go rest on the bottom, and they would be mines. You could put them wherever you want to. They were really good weapons, mining weapons.

DePue: Did they have a particular life, or do they sit out there forever?

Thunman: They sit out there, and you can turn them on and turn them off with the sonar signals. Or you could send them out there, and they could wait a month or a week or be active right away, whatever. They were very capable, and of course, they're laying on the bottom; they're not detectable. You could use them [as] ship counters, maybe explode [them] after the third ship goes by. Depending on the sound level that you wanted it to explode... They were very capable mines.

My technique, I told the fleet commander, I said, "I could mine the Soviet ports." He said, "Oh yeah, tell me about that." The major ports they had in those days on Kamchatka was Petropavlovsk, off Kamchatka. That was where they had their entire fleet and, of course, Vladivostok in the Sea of Japan. That's where their major naval ports [were]. I said, "We could mine these." If the situation got bad with the Soviet Union, we could go off and mine them. I forget how long I figured it would take us. Of course, the transit time was a week or ten days to get your submarines there. Then to lay the mines was like a day or two. You would absolutely bottle up their ports within a week or two.

DePue: I would assume these mines are sitting on the floor in fairly shallow water?

Thunman: No. I think those mine capabilities were 1,000 feet or so or maybe more. I can't remember.

DePue: Again, I'm struggling with the physics. If you have an explosion on the floor, 1,000 feet below the surface-ship that you're targeting—

Thunman: I'm trying to remember the capability of the mine. You may be right. Maybe 1,000 was too deep. But if you explode any weapon directly underneath a surface ship, the impulse [force or impact] is incredible. As a matter of fact, the torpedoes we have today are designed to explode under the surface ships.

Let me go back and correct what I said, 1,000 feet. I can't remember now, whether there was a release upwards, if it detected the target, [if] it released the mine upwards, or whether it exploded where it was. I kind of think back now that it was exploded where it was. I think you're right. I think we figured that it had to be within 100 or 200 feet of the bottom.

DePue: Is this something that you could detonate yourself from the submarines?

Thunman: Yes. You could use sonar signals to detonate, yourself. What you would do is you'd go lay it. Rather than detonate it, you would lay it so that it wouldn't detonate. You'd get ahead of the game. Let's say the political situation was getting tense. So you'd go lay it, before the situation got to where you went into a conventional war, which is what I always thought would be the most possible thing. I've never thought a nuclear war would be something that would occur. It would only be a conventional war. But if you laid all the weapons before the war, then you could sit off there with a submarine. Then, if they decided to go to a conventional war, you'd pull the trigger, so to speak. Now, all the mines are capable, and you've isolated the—

DePue: But the mines are there for months or years perhaps?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Well, there's something else I wasn't aware of. I'm learning all kinds of stuff this morning, Admiral.

Thunman: I've always felt here, recently, that we ought to mine Syria, then tell them.

DePue: What other missions did the attack submarines have that we don't know about?

Thunman: Well, of course, the detection, the trailing, was vital, the recording of signals, communications, not only of communications, but radar signals. When I was executive officer of the nuclear attack submarine, *Snook*, they sent us on a special mission, very interesting mission. Gene Fluckey, Admiral Gene Fluckey, was then commander of Submarine Force Pacific, diesel submariner, Medal of Honor winner, very imaginative guy, great stories about him.

The one where he won the Medal of Honor was when he sank a train, when he blew up a train from a submarine. In Japan, he launched his people in rubber rafts to the coast of Japan. They went in and set the explosives around a railroad track. Then when a Japanese train came along, they blew it up.  
(laughs)

DePue: It sounds like the guys who went onshore were the ones that should have gotten the Medal of Honor.

Thunman: No, you're right. He didn't get it for that. He got it for an incredible operation against the Japanese navy, where they sank umpteen ships. No, he didn't get it for that. I should have said, he was known for that operation, where he blew up a train. (DePue laughs) He was a very imaginative guy.

My skipper, when I was exec of that submarine, Jim Watkins, in later years, became the chief of naval operations. When he was chief of naval operations, I was the deputy chief of operations for submarine warfare. We were kind of a pair in those senior jobs. As being the same pair, we were CO/XO of a submarine. Jim Watkins had been Fluckey's assistant, when Fluckey was what they called a division commander. They had one assistant. After you completed command of a submarine, you had a division of submarines, which were two to four submarines, which you helped train. He [Watkins] had been his [Fluckey's] assistant, so they worked fairly close.

Fluckey called us up one day, and he said, "I have something I've always wanted to do. I wanted to go up and examine what the Soviets have in the Sea of Okhotsk, spelled O-k-h-o-t-s-k, pronounced Okhotsk, which is a giant, pretty large sea, west of Kamchatka and east of Siberia and south of Siberia. He said, "I always wanted to know what was up there. I want you guys to make a patrol of it, to determine all of its radar and command-controlled capabilities." At that point, we had the first system, water buoy system, which was designed to intercept and record Soviet communications and electronic signals. We were the first ones to have one, the *Snook*.

I got a lot of experience on the *Snook*. I came to the *Snook*...Remember, I got ordered from the *Robert E. Lee*, came to the *Snook*—

DePue: Is this in '64?

Thunman: This was in '63, December of '63. We left, December of '64, for a patrol in the western Pacific. During that patrol, we had two sixty, seventy day operations off Vladivostok. I had this wonderful skipper, who'd been a World War II submariner, as an enlisted man, smart as a whip.

DePue: Do you remember his name?

Thunman: Yeah, Bill Yates, wonderful guy. He had worked directly for Admiral Rickover. People didn't like him, because they thought he was...Nobody liked Rickover in those days. So they thought he was Rickover's boy, and he was. But he was a wonderful captain of a submarine, taught me everything I knew. I came there, one year in a fleet, ballistic missile submarine, then, before that, way back, one year on a diesel electric submarine. That was my entire submarine experience.

DePue: And now you're executive officer.

Thunman: I'm executive officer, going to conduct what was at that point, one of the most important operations the Navy conducted.

DePue: What was your rank at that time, sir?

Thunman: I was lieutenant commander. I had just made lieutenant commander.

DePue: Is that an O-5?<sup>52</sup>

Thunman: That's an O-4.

DePue: The equivalent of a major in the Army.

Thunman: Yeah. The O-5s were the skippers of submarines.

DePue: What was the compliment for the *Snook*?

Thunman: About 100 men and twelve officers, twelve or fourteen officers...But really a valuable submarine. It was the fastest submarines we had in the Navy, the Skipjack class, the newest, other than the *Thresher*. They were just starting to build those. They were spectacular submarines. They were little sports cars. They were something.

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<sup>52</sup> U.S. Navy pay grade for warrant officers. O-5 and O-6 are senior officers. O-1 through O-4 are junior officers.

DePue: How fast could it go?

Thunman: Well, in excess of thirty knots, which is about thirty-five miles an hour.

DePue: What would be the speed of some of the Navy's better surface-ships at the time?

Thunman: The best speed would be about thirty-three knots, thirty-four knots.

DePue: So you guys, submerged, could keep up with the surface-ships?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, we could, forever. We didn't have to fuel. We'd just keep going. But, anyway, Bill Yates, he was...Not many captains would have been as supportive of an executive officer coming onboard with hardly no experience. The other officers onboard kind of resented me, because they'd all been on spec ops [special operations] and been on the ships. I'd done none of that.

DePue: Well, before we get too much into your experiences on the U.S.S. *Snook*?

Thunman: The *Snook*, U.S.S. *Snook*, SSN-592.

DePue: I wanted to ask you the impact that the sinking of the U.S.S. *Thresher* had on the submarine fleet.

Thunman: Well, it had an incredible impact.

DePue: And that was April of '63?

Thunman: April of '63. This is when I was still on the *Robert E. Lee*. We just left the Holy Loch to conduct a deep dive. As a matter of fact, I remember when they came back with the word the *Thresher* had been lost during their deep dive off Portsmouth. All of us, we were in the engineering spaces, searching for leaks. We were so thorough, because we didn't know what had leaked on the *Thresher*. All we knew, it had gone down. That was April of '63. I left *Robert E. Lee* in December '63.

DePue: So, basically, it increased the pucker factor for everybody in the submarine fleet?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. Well, it did that. But what it did was...Rickover did the right thing. He didn't become defensive about it, although people said, "Oh, Rickover's submarines. Well, it wasn't his system that failed. I could go into long explanations of that. It had been, probably, a seawater system, associated with the forward end of the submarine, that had ruptured, four inch diameter piping, exposed to full submergence pressure. [It] ruptured at 1,300 feet. This was the *Thresher*. She could go all the way down to 1,300 feet.

DePue: So they were doing deep diving tests?

Thunman: Yeah, it was a deep diving test. The ship had just been built. They conducted sea trials. They'd come back in from sea trials. They had some things they had to do, to correct. They knew that some of the bonding of the welded joints... This was silver brazed bonding, which is different than welded bonding. You put silver brazed metal between the two pipes you're trying to join. It solidifies, so you've bonded the two. It's certainly nowhere as strong as if you welded the two. They, in the building of the *Thresher*, had several silver brazed joints. But you were supposed to have 60 percent bonding, at least. They knew several joints did not have the 60 percent bonding. They sent her on sea trials anyway.

DePue: Why would the Navy have done the silver brazed bonding?

Thunman: Well, I think it was because they didn't have the capability to do the welding bonding at that time. They subsequently got it, probably because Rickover demanded it from then on. He had it in all of his piping. It was the forward area piping.

DePue: I would think, trying to do an accident investigation when the ship's at the bottom of the sea is a little bit difficult anyway.

Thunman: Well, they knew. They were able to go back and say, "My God, they didn't have the bonding." They also knew that there were some communications with the *Thresher* when she went down. They knew they'd had a rupture of some sort, because the communication was, "We're having difficulty and we're blowing up." That means blowing main ballast. We knew... From these worldwide detection systems of the low frequency noises, we knew when she had imploded. We knew when she tried the blower, because that's a very noisy operation, and she couldn't. She blew, and then it stopped.

[They] subsequently investigated that and found that the main ballast system of this new submarine froze. If you blew the main ballast system, with the filters that it had in, the piping, that these filters would freeze, because of the change in pressure. The air in the piping itself, now under different pressure, and the cold temperature, which was produced by the different pressure, would freeze. The moisture would freeze and block the filter, and they weren't able to get the air into the ballast tank. That was something they had not designed properly.

DePue: Just listening to you and thinking about this, the metallurgy involved with building a submarine that can stand those kinds of pressure has got to be astounding.

Thunman: Astounding, yeah. Well, those systems, that air piping system for ballast, was designed to withstand 3,000 pounds per square inch pressure. That was the air pressure in those systems. So, the design of those things were—

Anyway, we pretty much knew what had sunk the *Thresher*. Later on, when we get to the story that, I guess, I did—Although Ballard did it, found the *Titanic*—it goes back to this.

DePue: I didn't know there was a story about the *Titanic*.

Thunman: Yeah, we found the *Titanic*, when I was in the Pentagon.

DePue: Did you know about, did the Navy know about the Soviet's version of a catastrophe, the K-19<sup>53</sup>, which I think happened in 1961?

Thunman: This is the one that we went out and tried to get, I think. You're talking off Pearl Harbor, in the Pacific?

DePue: No. I thought this was—

Thunman: Well, there was one in the Atlantic. We knew about those things. We knew about all of them, pretty much. They lost...The '61 submarine, I'm pretty sure, was the one that Howard Hughes got involved with. Do you know about that one?

DePue: No, I don't. This one, I don't think it was lost, but they had an exposed reactor core for a while, and it caused some major concerns.

Thunman: There was one off in the east, where they killed the...Where a couple of guys died, heroically, went down in the reactor compartment in order to correct the problem, whatever it was. I don't know what it was, but they were exposed and subsequently died.

DePue: Going back to the *Thresher*, how much concern was there about the *Thresher's* nuclear reactor being at the bottom of the ocean?

Thunman: A lot of concern over that. I became the deputy chief of naval operations I sent Bob Ballard out. That's what set off the whole *Titanic* thing, was I sent Bob Ballard out to take samples of the bottom and also to take photographs of the bottom.

DePue: Where the *Thresher* was?

Thunman: Yeah, and also the *Scorpion*, which was lost in '68, another U.S. submarine.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> One of the Soviet's first generation nuclear submarines, equipped with nuclear ballistic missiles. Hurriedly built by the Soviets to catch up with the United States' lead in nuclear submarines, the boat was plagued with accidents, fires and breakdowns. On its initial voyage on July 4, 1961, the K-19 lost all coolant to its reactor. To avoid a nuclear meltdown, the crew sacrificed their lives to rig a secondary coolant system. Twenty-two of them died from radiation sickness during the following two years.

DePue: So it's a dangerous business.

Thunman: It was in those days, because a lot of that stuff was new. I know in my own ship, we were headed west, and I had to pull into Guam because of a problem that I had. The guys were down. We had a leaking valve in one of the forward systems, seawater system valve, exposed to full submergence pressure. They pulled the valve out to repair the seal, which you could do. They looked in to the piping, and they realized that when the ship had been built, they had put the wrong size piping.

DePue: Are you talking about like an eight or ten inch pipe?

Thunman: We're talking about six inches in diameter of piping. The thickness is what we're talking about. Rather than being as thick as the cup, it turned out to be as thick as this cup or maybe twice this cup. It wasn't the right thickness. The thickness of the piping that they'd put in the ship was designed to withstand, I think, 600 feet. It was supposed to be designed to withstand 1,300 feet, big difference. So, the guys came up and told me, "My God, we've got the wrong pipe. The ship was built with the wrong pipe."

I went up and told the squadron commander in Guam. He sent a message into the commander of submarine force Pacific. There was a big turmoil about it, because they needed to get us up there. There was some special missions, special operations, they thought were going occur off Vladivostok that they wanted us to be present for.

There was a lot of turmoil at the top. I don't know. But I went in to see the squadron commander. I remember, he was an elegant guy. He didn't swear. He was a wonderful guy, a great example for all of us. When I came in there, he said, "Well, commander," he said, "we've resolved what we're going to do, and we're going to send you anyway. The word has come down from COMSUBPAC, to limit your depth to 400 feet, unless you've got to go deeper." (both laugh)

DePue: That's a big unless.

Thunman: I remember listening to that. Then I said, "Yes, sir." And I said, "Thank you." I turned around. I was walking to the door and I hear, "Hey, Ron..." Now this is unusual for this guy to call you by your first name. I turn around and look at him, and he says, "Watch your ass, boy." (both laugh) I'll never forget that.

So I went. We limited our depth to 400 feet. I guess a couple times we had to go deeper. But you're right, we walked on eggshells, because my ship

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<sup>54</sup> On May 27, 1968, USS *Scorpion* (SSN 598) failed to return as scheduled to its home port at the destroyer-submarine pier complex at the southern end of the waterfront in Norfolk, VA. Within hours the sub's failure to arrive escalated into a major military crisis that spread to the Pentagon E-Ring and the White House.



was the sister ship of the *Thresher*. We were the number two ship. The *Thresher* was number one that was built.

DePue: But I'm thinking that something as fundamental as the wrong thickness of the diameter of that tubing, that's... You look for the scalps that you want to get for that one.

Thunman: Yeah. Well, the SUBSAFE Program was developed, where every ship was examined, everything.<sup>55</sup> The seals were replaced with welded seals. A new emergency blow system was put into every submarine to eliminate this problem with the freezing up of the filters. A lot of changes were made.

But more significant than that, they came up with anything that went into a submarine had to be stamped, SUBSAFE. That meant you had to know its pedigree. For example, the piping that was the wrong piping. That piping couldn't have been installed in new construction ships, because its pedigree would have been examined. When you bought the pipe, it had to be stamped SUBSAFE, which meant it had certain characteristics. They didn't buy any piping that didn't have the full thickness characteristics. It went down that deep. It was stored in different places, in the construction process. It was an incredible system the Navy installed, called SUBSAFE, because of *Thresher*.

So, we learned an awful lot from *Thresher*. Rickover changed the operating procedures of the nuclear submarines. One of the problems on *Thresher* was, when the valve ruptured, obviously water, incredible pressure, entered the ship, flooded the electrical panel areas, which would have shorted out the electrical system, which would have stopped the electric pumps from sending cooling water into the reactor. That meant the ship's procedure was, if you lost the pumps, you shut down the reactor. You shut the main steam stops. You stopped producing steam, because it would possibly damage the reactor, if you didn't keep the cooling water going through it, and you were withdrawing heat from the reactor.

Well, that was the procedure that Rickover stopped. He said you keep the main steam stops open until... If you've got an emergency, you make steam as long as you can. There is a good five or ten minutes worth of energy left in the system [that] they could have used to drive themselves to the surface, which they didn't.

DePue: What did they use for cooling water, ocean water?

Thunman: Well, it's very highly purified water that you make in your distilling plants.

DePue: Onboard?

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<sup>55</sup> The Submarine Safety Program (SUBSAFE), is a quality assurance program of the U.S. Navy designed to maintain the safety of the submarine fleet; specifically, to provide maximum reasonable assurance that submarine hulls will stay watertight, and that they can recover from unanticipated flooding.

Thunman: Onboard the submarine, yeah. But it was an incredible thing. He came out immediately. We had just come off patrol, the *Robert E. Lee*. I had been made the chief engineer. This is now in like June of '63. Rickover ordered not all the captains, but all the chief engineers of the submarines, back to Washington to tell them about these new procedures and to tell them why, and to make sure we understood them. Of course, we were all just wide-eyed, go back and see Admiral Rickover?

We were all sitting in there. There was, at that point, we had maybe, I guess, fifteen of us—that's how many nuclear submarines we had—sitting in there, all of us scared to death he was going to ask us a question. (both laugh) He got up, and he went through this as carefully and as calmly and in as detailed a fashion... He kept saying, "Now if you've got any questions, ask me." All of us sat there like, "I ain't going to ask any questions."

At the end of it, we were sitting there, and he said, "Anybody got any more questions?" One guy got up, who was the chief engineer of a new construction submarine; they were building the submarine. In those days, whenever there was a change to anything in the technical manuals or procedures, they came out with—I'm having another senior moment—something like a field change, something by that name. This guy raised his hand and said... The procedure was, when you got one you had to change everything immediately. That was one of the things that come out as part of SUBSAFE. You changed everything, because as they learned things, they didn't want to wait a couple of months or anything.

So this one guy got up, and he said, "Yes, Admiral, you know these field changes we've been getting, when do they become effective?" And all of us... This guy obviously hadn't prepared very well to come back there. All of us, we all went, "Oh, this is going to be terrible. This is going to be a massacre." (laughs) Rickover is calm and as cool... He lived up to his statement "Ask me anything." He very calmly, "Well, you know, lieutenant, these things are effective immediately, and it's very important that you change them immediately." Didn't chew on him. The rest of us were just waiting for him to just lash out at him. But he did that. That was always impressive to me, that he did that with us.

DePue: That it was something out of character?

Thunman: Yeah, out of character.

DePue: Well, I'm wondering though, when the *Thresher* happens, from what you've told me and what I understand, he didn't lack for high ranking enemies within the Navy and within the administration.

Thunman: Oh, God, absolutely.

DePue: Were there people going after him?

Thunman: Well, this is a new administration now. I don't know what people were after him. I'm sure there was an awful lot of those things, and we never thought those things would work in the Navy. There was a lot of diesel, electric... The same guys who told me not to go into nuclear power were still in the Navy.

DePue: And some of them technically outranked Rickover, I would think.

Thunman: Oh yeah, but he had that congressional power.

DePue: Which doesn't ingratiate you with all your peers. (laughs)

Thunman: No, no, that made it worse, made it ten times as worse, in fact. I'm sure. I wasn't in a position to know what pressures he was under—it never filtered down to us—but I'm sure he was. I knew that in '64, when I became the exec, that nobody liked us.

I remember, before I went to the exec of the submarine, this captain of the submarine—

DePue: This is the *Snook* now.

Thunman: The *Snook*. This squadron commander of diesel submarines, who was a famous football player at Navy. I had met him when I was in diesel submarines. I didn't know him well, but I'd become acquainted with him. He knew my division commander. But before I got to the boat, on the *Snook*, he knew I was in the area. I just arrived. So, I got a message that he'd like to see me, big old Ben Jarvis, All-American tackle, Navy. He called me up there. I went in, and I sat down. This is even before I'd even met the captain, been onboard the submarine. I think the submarine was at sea when I arrived in the area.

He said, "Now be careful." He said, "Nobody likes your captain. They think he's unreasonable. So, be careful of what you do there on that submarine. You know, you're going to a submarine where the skipper's disliked." That was very true. I was very clear. I could tell you some stories about that, where he was tremendously disliked and was not given credit for some great things he did, operationally, because he was disliked.

DePue: Disliked within the submarine community, or as a submarine commander, the crew didn't like him?

Thunman: No, no, the crew loved him. Well...No, I take that back. The crew had tremendous respect for him. But he'd gone through this terrible experience, where his wife had been burned up, literally burned up, because she was sitting on a electric heater in the shipyard up in Mare Island, before he was skipper of the *Snook*. Her bathrobe caught on fire. She had one of these nylon bathrobes. [She] was essentially—what's the word—immolated, something like that. He became a very religious man as a result of it. I came aboard, right

before we left. We immediately steamed out to the western Pacific, right before we left on this six-month operation.

[We] went into Subic Bay, which was the garbage dump of Asia, as far as I was concerned. They had this city outside of the Subic Bay shipyard there. It was terrible. It had everything bad in the world was there, girls, boys, whatever. The crews of the ships... Of course, a lot of other ships were in there. Carriers and destroyers went in and out. We came in there, which I think [was] unusual for a submarine to come in at the time.

The captain gave the word, the crew had to be back to the ship by 11:00 at night. Now everybody else, the carriers and destroyers, they could stay out all night, as long as they were back on the ship in time in the morning. The crew was really upset about it. I was watching this, and I'd been out there on a diesel submarine. I'd been out there on a destroyer. I knew what that place was. I went in to see Bill Yates. I kind of got my nerve up, and I went in. I had great respect for him. I said, "Captain," I said, "you know the crew, the morale is really down about this." I said, "It's not so much that they can't do this; it's because everybody else can, and they can't. They just feel like they're children, rather than grown men." I said, "After all, if they're going to go out and get laid or whatever..." Olongapo is the name of the city, Olongapo. They're going to go out and do this. They're going to do it at 11:00 in the morning, if necessary. They're not going to wait until 11:00 at night. He looked at me, and he said, "I think you're right." So he said, "Okay, you can change the rule."

So the next morning at quarters... The executive officer always meets with the crew every morning. I pass the word. Well, I became a hero. I didn't mean to be. That wasn't something that I was... Boy I get to go out there and tell the guys what a great thing... I didn't say I'd done it. I just said the captain had announced... But they knew that there had been a change, and they figured that I'd done it. I think the word got out somehow. But anyway, I was always a hero on that submarine, (both laugh) because I could get them into Olongapo after 11:00 at night.

DePue: Well, there are priorities in a sailor's mind, I guess.

Thunman: But boy, we conducted one operation, very successful operation, our first one. And we came back. The commander of the Seventh Fleet was an officer by the name of Tom Moorer, who later became the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; quite a guy in the military during the Vietnam War, M-o-o-r-e-r, quite a successful naval officer. He was then a vice admiral, and he was on a cruiser. He'd heard about our success in our operation. So he sent a helicopter in from his cruiser while we were passing by Okinawa. We were in Okinawa to pick up the captain to come in and have him brief him, which was quite an honor. Typical Bill Yates, he says, "You know, Ron, you've got to come with me." I was surprised. I didn't expect to go.

So we both went in there and went up, I remember. Before the briefing, we had breakfast in the admiral's cabin, which was a typical big cruiser cabin, beautiful cabin, with stewards and white table cloth. I'm sitting there at the end of the table, and there's Moorer and his staff, and there's Bill Yates. I don't say anything, and nobody says anything to me. I'm just down there eating, trying to look like I knew what was going on. Finally, Admiral Moorer—I'll never forget it—he turned and looked at me, and he says, "Well, young fella, what do you think of the admiral's cabin and the cruiser?" (both laugh) I don't know why it came out, but it did. I said, "Well, you know, I'm really impressed, Admiral, because every place setting gets its own pepper and salt shaker." (both laugh) He roared with that. He said, "That's a pretty good observation." But he loved Bill Yates. He had the briefing. He just thought Bill Yates was something. We had been detected during the operation.

DePue: Can you start us at the beginning of that operation?

Thunman: Well, we went up off Vladivostok. We were there fifty, sixty days in international waters, of course.

DePue: Which is twelve or twenty at that time?

Thunman: Twelve.

DePue: Twelve miles.

Thunman: There had been indications that we'd been detected. I don't want to go any further than that. It wasn't a big deal. We handled it properly. Afterwards, we briefed Admiral Moorer on it. He didn't think it was a big deal. He's commander of Seventh Fleet. We were operating under his auspices, at the time. He was very impressed of the other things we had done, (beeping sound) the collections, the detections. [referring to beeping] I don't know what that... It must be—

[pause in recording]

Thunman: When we came off that operation, we came back through Pearl Harbor. You always brief COMSUBPAC after you came back from an operation. I was there, handling the slides in the brief, and Bill Yates was up giving it. This admiral... Well, it wasn't the admiral; it was his chief of staff. The admiral sat there and let him do it though. Walt Small—I'll never forget him—was then chief of staff and just all over Bill Yates. It was pretty violent, because it had to do with the detection. I remember him saying, "How fast were you going when you were detected?" Yates said, "Well, we were making probably around four or five knots. This boat's small," a diesel submariner. He said, "That's too fast; that's too god-damned fast! You guys don't know how to operate these submarines, periscope depth!"

[I] remember another submariner who was highly thought of, nuclear submariner—one of the few that they had in Pearl Harbor—jumped up. He says...”Admiral...” I forget what he said, words to the effect. He said, “That’s how fast you’ve got to go to operate these submarines in heavy seas.” He started lecturing the admiral. He jumped up and yelled at him. I’m standing there watching all this going on, and I’m thinking, Whoa, this is something.

So Bill Yates never got recommended for an award. [He] should have been recommended for the Legion of Merit, in my view. The boat never got any sort of recognition. Poor Bill Yates, I remember on the way in, he thought we were going to be recommended for a Navy Unit Commendation [NUC]. I remember him saying, “Well, XO, now I want you to start figuring out the guys who should get lesser awards.” Normally what happened, the skipper got the Legion of Merit or the boat got the Navy Unit Commendation. Then you would pick out certain people underneath him that would get lesser awards, the Navy Commendation Medal, those kinds of things. So, you kind of put it together. Maybe ten or so people would get special awards from it. He asked me to start preparing that, so we could get it off right away. That’s the type of guy Yates was. He was interested in his people. Well, we left there with nothing. His dauber was down. I never saw a more discouraged guy. When we left Pearl Harbor, I felt so bad for him.

We got to Pearl Harbor, and he had his orders to be relieved. That was time; it wasn’t early, I don’t think. Somebody may have said, “Let’s get him off now, because COMSUBPAC is mad at him.” So, that was the story of Bill Yates.

To kind of close out this special *Snook* situation, we were in Pearl Harbor. Our sister ship—there were two of us there—had a problem with its piping in the reactor compartment and was taken off the line. We were designated to go get this new system. It’s called the water buoy system, to monitor electronics from a submarine.

DePue: B-o-u-y?

Thunman: Water buoy, yeah. That was its code name, quite a system, spectacular. We went up to Mare Island to have it put on. Nobody knew anything about it, all highly classified. Got up to Mare Island, I'll never forget, we went alongside and were moored. By that time, Yates was due to leave in a few weeks. He'd kind of turned things over to me. He was really disappointed in where he was. So I remember I went out on the pier. I said, "Well, now, where are the shipyard people?" "Well we don't know. What are you here for again?" I said, "We're supposed to be here to get this incredible system." "Well, we know anything about it." I had to go up in the offices. I'm looking around for somebody who knew something about the water buoy. Finally they said, "Oh, yeah, you go down to this office."

I go in there, a big set of offices, a bunch of people in there. I said, "Well, we're here." "Oh, God, we didn't know you were getting here." So I went down to the ship with them, and I said, "Now, where are you going to put this box? How big is the box?" They said, "Well, we're going to take everything out of the attack center and relocate it and put in these huge electronic boxes, panels, for the system."



U.S.S. *Plunger* (SSN-595) entering the water in the Mare Island Naval Shipyard on December 9, 1961.

DePue: Doesn't everything have to go down a pretty small hatch?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. You've got to move a bunch of stuff in there. I said, "What?" I said, "My God, that's going to take weeks! We were told we'd be down here a week or two." We just got back from West PAC, been gone for six and a half months, families are all in San Diego. We were now up in San Francisco. Imagine, I had to go out and tell the crew we were going to be there six or eight weeks, after they'd been gone so long.

We were there, and I remember I was... The company, Sylvania, had built the system. They were in Mountain View, California, just south of San Francisco. We were up in Mare Island, which is north of San Francisco. We'd work all day long. I really had fun at this. I redesigned the attack center, where we put the radar over here; let's put the tracking table over here and these detectors over here. I redesigned it. I based it on having that six months experience there in the western Pacific. So, I pretty much knew that attack center.

DePue: The attack center would be what we would visualize today as the control center for the submarine?

Thunman: Yeah, where the planes, controls, where everything is, the electric panels. I had a lot of fun doing that, and I spent a lot of time figuring it out. I'd bring Bill Yates in there. I'd tell him, and he'd say, "Oh, that's great idea, XO. Go ahead with that." What I would do is I'd work on the boat. I'd get up at 6:00 in the morning, get to the boat at least by 7:00. I'd work until 1:00 or 2:00 in the afternoon. Then I'd get in my car, and I'd drive to Mountain View, [California].

[I] never knew at the time, I probably could have gone to somebody and gotten money to do that, for my car. I never thought of that. [I] drove to Mountain View and spent until 8:00 or 9:00 at night, working on the system that was going to be installed, trying to design the system so it would go in the hatches, so that it would fit in the places we were going to put it, that the wiring could be installed the way they saw it. I kind of put it together myself, and it was fun.

We left, and we had this incredible system. No other submarine in the world had it. I go back to my story about Gene Fluckey. [He] wanted to take that system first all through the sea of Okhotsk and then over into the Sea of Japan and all the way around Vladivostok. It was quite a beginning of sophisticated ISR operations.

Subsequently—and this is a great story—when we finished our first operation, this operation I was telling you about, Sea of Okhotsk and Sea of Japan, our captain, Jim Watkins, was ordered back to Washington to brief McNamara on this system.

DePue: Was Watkins there before Yates?

Thunman: No, after Yates.

DePue: So he replaced Yates, and you were still—

Thunman: Still the exec. I was the exec for one year with Yates and one year with Watkins. He was ordered back to brief McNamara, Secretary McNamara. I remember the night before he left. It was on the floor of the attack center, where we had this big briefing chart. I had all these special little symbols and colors of pens, working on the briefing paper, which was kind of like a big chart that you rolled out, to show what we had found in these different areas.

Watkins went back. Watkins, he was the world's best politician. Man, there was no better politician than he was, as far as being able to get along with senior people and brief people. He was an expert at that. He went on and became, later on, the chief of naval operations. That was demonstrated throughout his career.

Anyway, when he got back there—so the story goes; I'm pretty sure it's true—he and McNamara had this chart out. I wasn't there. They had this



chart out on the floor of the secretary of defense's office, on their hands and knees, going around saying, "See, up here, we found these radars and these communication systems. Over here we found this and this." It was quite a detailed briefing of, "Well, how do you know that?" "Well, because we've got these frequencies." Watkins was really good at that stuff. At the end of it, McNamara authorized the 637 class submarine, which was the follow-on to the *Thresher* class. That was all because of that operation and also because of Jim Watkins's brief, but really because of that wonderful water buoy system.

What they did was, the submarines they built subsequent to that were pretty much the same, except they had this water buoy system, improved as they could make it improved, based on what we had learned on it.

DePue: Is the water buoy system an upscale sonar system?

Thunman: No, no, no, this is electronic. You put the antenna up, and now it sits in an electronic environment. All the high frequency, low frequency, ultrahigh frequency signals in the area is being seen by this antenna. You can pick them out. You can pick out the frequency. Dial the frequency that you're receiving now on the antenna. Bring it down into the submarine, and it's there, and you can record it. So, now you know where you're recording radar stations, communications stations, ships, UHF transmitters. All of that's being recorded, if you pick out the right signals, and you carry experts with you who know what the right signals are.

Well, we're looking for 97.75 on the UHF scale. That's what the admirals used to talk with. So they go and they—as long as you've got the antenna up—they go, and they detect that. Then they start recording it, and they start listening to it. That's what water buoy was.

DePue: This mission that you're talking about, where the water buoy system was being tested, and you've got all this great intelligence, was that the one that the boat did win the Navy Unit Commendation?

Thunman: Yeah, we won the NUC on the *Snook*. We also won one in *Plunger* too. But the first one was on *Snook*, and that was an unusual award. **Very** few submarines got those.

DePue: One more question, and it's probably about time for us to stop today. You've been talking about the friction that still exists between the diesel submarine fleet and the nuclear submarine fleet. Why both systems? Why did they have—

Thunman: Well, because they had the diesel boats. They still had capabilities. We weren't building them anymore, weren't building the diesel submarines, but they still had good capability, if a war occurred.

DePue: These were all attack submarines?

Thunman: Yeah. We did build a couple of cruise missile firing submarines in the '50s that would shoot cruise missiles and not ballistic missiles but cruise missiles, which were nuclear tipped.

DePue: When you're saying cruise missiles, would it be a good analogy to think the difference between what the Germans had for the V1 versus the V2?

Thunman: Absolutely, absolutely. Perfect.

DePue: The V1 would have been a cruise missile.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Well, with that, if you don't mind, Admiral, I think this is decent place to stop for today.

Thunman: It's enough. (laughs)

DePue: It's been fascinating, and it gets more technical as we get farther along.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, it does. Well, it was an incredible time. As I put it all together, I think back on all of it, it was a time of real growth in capability in the Navy, not just the submarine force but in the Navy's capability to do its job. I just knew some wonderful people. I was always so fortunate to deal with great men, people who were really, truly great men.

DePue: And the other thing that's obvious is you were right at the heart of the Cold War.

Thunman: Yeah. Right at the heart of it. That mission that we made in *Snook* couldn't have been any... That 637 class was built—and they built twenty or thirty of those ships—was built as a Cold War ISR vehicle. That's quite an investment on the part of the U.S.

DePue: Thank you, Admiral.

Thunman: Okay, good.

(end of interview #3)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.04

Interview # 4: June 22, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Friday, June 22, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I have another session this morning with Admiral Ron Thunman. Good morning, Admiral.

Thunman: Good morning.

DePue: We thank you again for allowing us to meet in your home. It always works better for us, I think, in many respects.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: We've had quite an interesting conversation. But I want to kind of a broad picture here for you. We're about halfway through the 1960s, so you're certainly not in the stage of your career at this point where you're forming military strategy or even perhaps, to a lesser extent, Navy or submarine strategy or making those decisions. I wanted your personal thoughts about mutually assured destruction, as an approach, because that triad that includes nuclear submarines is so important, perhaps the most important leg of that.

Thunman: Well, of course, that was my whole life, MAD, as it is called, mutually assured destruction. I had my first taste of the need for it as that young officer on the destroyer in the Bikini bomb tests, in 1956, where I actually saw these weapons detonate, including, I believe, the first H-bomb that we ever detonated, half a million tons, a couple of hundred times more powerful than Hiroshima's. So, even at that young age it was clear to me that, if you're going to stay in the military, you were going to have to do all you could to prevent the detonation of that weapon in a war, because war would not be... You couldn't run a conventional war. Even though we thought, back in the '50s, I think, that maybe you could, but certainly not as the years went on, with everybody's, mainly the Soviet Union's large arsenal of nuclear weapons, along with ours.

As I had that experience, seeing the weapons, then I had the experience aboard the fleet ballistic missile submarine. As you heard my previous stories about, we thought we were going to launch when Kennedy died. For a couple of minutes there, because of miscommunications on the ship, we believed that we were going to launch. [With] the development of that missile, the test firings we did, it was clear that this was really an important weapons system for the United States.

Those tests, the tests that we conducted when I was on the *Robert E. Lee*, were the most important tests conducted, I think, in the military in that time, to see if that weapons system would function as designed. When they found that it did, we actually had a weapons system that was 100 percent sure, as a mutually assured destruction system, in operation.

In other words, whatever you did to another country, however you were able to prevent the bombers from flying or the missiles from the land-based systems, however you might try to preempt them, you could not do that against the submarines. Submarines that were at sea, a system that, within fifteen minutes of the order...and it was tested, thoroughly tested...The Soviets knew it. We had a system that prevented the nuclear war, operable.

DePue: Well, the acronym, you mentioned it, the acronym is MAD. There certainly was no shortage of voices out there, suggesting, yeah, this is a very ironic and peculiar form of madness.

Thunman: Yes, yes.

DePue: But did you believe that it was an effective strategy; it **is** an effective strategy?

Thunman: Well it was. You can prove it. Of course, it carried forward the policy of containment. That policy was set by—

DePue: I know it dates from the Truman years.

Thunman: Yeah, it was in the early '50s, and it was set by a wonderful staffer in the early '50s. I had the name close, and I've lost it. He's written a couple of books. But he was the one who said, "Look, the only one way we're going to be able to deal with this problem is contain them, and they contain us, that there isn't any other solution, which was his way...He started off using the words containment, which turned into mutually assured destruction.

You carry that forward and that incredible force we built...And they were doing the same. I was in the business of monitoring that. We were monitoring each other's missile shots on these special missions. Both of us were watching each other as closely as we could. That was our relationship with the Soviet Union.

As I said, you could prove that it worked. The first one was in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Remember I said to you, Khrushchev said, when they were thinking about a nuclear war, as things got tighter and tighter, and before they turned their ships around, he made the comment—I don't know where, but I know he made this comment. You'll probably have to dig it out somewhere—he said, What I worried about the most—not those words, but pretty much the same words—were the submarines. “What scared me the most were the U.S. submarines.” He said that there, and he turned his ships around.

Later, in the Gulf of Tonkin, when the Soviets sent three or four of their echo class nuclear submarines—these were cruise, missile firing submarines—sent them down from Vladivostok into the gulf, where we were operating our carriers, of course. There were some thoughts, I think, that the Soviets would try to deter us or intimidate us, because those cruise missile firing submarines were designed to sink aircraft carriers; that's what they were designed for.

Kissinger was at a meeting with the Soviets. A typical foreign relations statement was made by the Russian representatives, “Well, we're watching what's going on there in the gulf, very closely,” which is what they were doing, using their submarines, assuming that we didn't know.

DePue: Well, the Gulf of Tonkin was '64. That was the Johnson Administration. I don't know that Kissinger would have been the person there.

Thunman: No, we operated in the Gulf of Tonkin until we left. At this point, Kissinger was the secretary of state.

DePue: So a little bit later.

Thunman: It's got to be '68. He said, “We're watching you closely,” assuming that we didn't know their submarines were there. Kissinger's response was, “Well, yes. We know what each of your submarines is doing daily.” That was a great shock to the Soviets. The next day all of their submarines left.

DePue: Was that the truth?

Thunman: That's the truth, yeah. Well, was it the truth? Yes. We had trailed their submarines. When they came down out of Vladivostok, into the Sea of Japan, we were peeling them off.

DePue: So you were picking them up as they were coming out of port.

Thunman: Or in route. That really impressed the Soviets. That was really like getting hit in the face with a fish, to stand there and say, “We're watching you closely,” and then the guy turns around and says, “Well, let me tell you, we know

where each of your submarines are.” That’s when they realized, my God, these guys have got a capability better than ours.

DePue: Which is going to play into the story, once you get into the 1980s and watching the Soviet sub development very close.

Thunman: Anyway, from a young guy, I saw the weapons detonate. I participated in the very early patrols and the testing [of] our fleet ballistic missiles. Then, of course, my career was involved, my operational career was involved, watching the Soviets in these special missions and watching them develop their systems, as we developed ours.

DePue: We left off last time, you were on the U.S.S. *Snook*. Just a couple more questions here before we move to your next assignment. This one is kind of a broad question, as well. Did you have an opportunity to work under the ice cap on the U.S.S. *Snook*?

Thunman: No, we did not. We were up in the arctic water area. We were up in the Sea of Japan. Remember, I told you we made that incredible survey of the Sea of Okhotsk, at the request of Admiral Fluckey, which was all around submarines. We did that in the springtime, early summer. It was all around the coast of Siberia, the Sea of Okhotsk. Siberia goes around the top of it. So we could see incredible scenes of ice and snow in the mountains of Siberia, but there was never [work] under the ice there at all.

DePue: Was there any strategic reason for American submarines to be working under the ice, or was it strictly for scientific reasons that we might do that?

Thunman: Well, it was preparing for the day when everybody would go up there and use it as an operational area, to hide. That happened; the Soviets did that. They designed a submarine to do that, the typhoon class, huge, biggest submarine ever built [to] operate under the ice. We had been working—

Dr. Waldo Lyon, who was a good friend of mine over the years, he started it. He was there at the beginning, when *Nautilus* went under the ice. We sent submarines up under the ice about every two years or so, then just about yearly, in the ‘70s, to learn how to operate there, to be ready to counter another force there, to take over, whenever you figured out how you could maybe get commercially active systems that could operate there for different ore, oil or whatever, as the Soviets did. The Soviets now are pushing hard, operating under the pole. As a matter of fact, I think they’ve declared the North Pole—this is within the last year or two—as Soviet claimed waters. The argument’s ongoing now, about the Law of the Sea.<sup>56</sup> I don’t know if you’ve been reading about it, but that affects... This is where you set 200-mile

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<sup>56</sup> The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), also called the Law of the Sea Convention or the Law of the Sea treaty, is the international agreement that resulted from the third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III), which took place between 1973 and 1982.

economic zones, and the Soviets are claiming an awful lot of the Arctic for themselves.

DePue: Well, since they have that huge northern coastline.

Thunman: Yes. I was always against it. I got involved with the Law of the Sea discussions, back in the '80s, when we opposed it. I got involved, briefing the staff at the Department of Defense about why we in the Navy didn't want any restrictions as regards to our operating at sea. It was really kind of funny, about how people really didn't know how things were. (laughs)

You know, as I grew up, I started off in submarines, on that diesel boat and then on up and all those missions and everything. If I was going to go from points A to B, I figured out how I wanted to go. Then I would pass the track to my superiors. So, the commander of the submarine force always knew which direction we were headed. But I'd kind of make my own decisions, whether I'd want to go pass this island or maybe back over here. It depends on the weather or the navigation. I kind of wandered around the southeast Pacific.

I was thinking about it the other day. I put a map in front of me there, and they were discussing the Chinese trying to take over the South China Sea and the East China Sea and those waters around them, the Philippines. I was looking at all that, and I said, "God, nobody has run around those waters as much as I. I never asked anybody anything." I'd just say. "Well, I'm in Manila, and I'm going to be up in the international waters off Vladivostok. These are the dates that I'll get there." But I never said that I'm going to go this way or that way. I just did it. Well, of course, the Law of the Sea discussions today want to restrict submarines from doing that.

DePue: For most of your career, it was a twelve mile limit, and the international waters is beyond twelve miles?

Thunman: Twelve miles. Well, most of my career, it was a three mile limit. But the Soviets had changed, and there had been discussions about a twelve mile limit. So we adhered to a twelve mile limit, but always had authority to go into the three mile limit, under certain approved circumstances.

DePue: What was the internationally recognized limit at the time, twelve miles?

Thunman: Twelve, yeah.

DePue: So, you just said that you had the authority to go closer to that. You, as the skipper, could make that decision?

Thunman: Well, depending on your orders. If you had orders, your orders said you could do that. I don't want to get any further into that.

DePue: But 200 miles, trying to pick up where the Soviets might be coming out of Vladivostok, is a much tougher—

Thunman: Pretty hard. I don't know what the intricacies of the law is right now. Supposedly—I haven't read it, but reading some of the newspapers articles about it—they say the Navy is happy the way it's written this time, which did not have the restrictions of having to notify a country. If you went inside their limit, you had to notify them first. Apparently, they've come up with rules. I worry about it, because when they say, "The Navy is happy," I've wondered, Well, is the submarine force happy?

DePue: When you say **they** came up with rules, who's the they we're talking about?

Thunman: Well, this is the Law of the Sea negotiations that are ongoing right now, which is now going in front of our Senate to approve.

DePue: Was this something that was discussed, developed at the United Nations level?

Thunman: Yeah, I think so. We had not agreed to it in the '80s. The last time we took it on was in the '80s, when I was in the Pentagon. Going back to the funny part of the story, I'd go down and talk to some of the senior people in the Pentagon. They'd say, "Well, how do you do it now?" And I'd say, "Well, you just kind of go where you've got to go." and they, "What?" (both laugh) "How do you pick the straits you're going to go through?" "Well, you pick the one that looks okay. (both laugh) [phone rings] They were all shocked to find out we've had these submarines wandering around, going wherever they wanted to.

DePue: What fun would it be to be a skipper of a submarine, if you had to ask permission all the time? (both laugh)

Thunman: Or if you **ever** had to ask permission. That was really... You ask, "Well, why did you go into submarines?" That was always the attraction of the submarine. Everybody else was in some sort of a formation, with some sort of a plan, and you just went. You figured out your own plan. (both laugh)

DePue: Broad mission orders and how you flushed it out from there was up to you, huh?

Thunman: That was up to you. (laughs)

DePue: Any other comments you want to make about your years on the U.S.S. *Snook*?

Thunman: The worst casualty that I encountered was on the *Snook*. It's amazing we didn't kill half or all the people on the submarine. You have an air system in the submarine, where you keep hydrogen, carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide at certain levels within the atmosphere. Of course, you're bleeding



oxygen, because you're a contained system. You're not replenishing your air. They had what was called the CO...carbon dioxide, hydrogen burner, which was a device that you put a catalyst in, and if you heated that catalyst to around 400 degrees, then it would absorb carbon dioxide. Then you took your air system, the circulated air through the submarine, the air would go into this piece of equipment, go across the catalyst bed, and the CO2 would be removed. Well, you had to replace the catalyst periodically. You could always tell when you replaced the catalyst, when the CO2 levels will be going up. As I recall, we kept them less than 3 percent, somewhere around that.

We were getting up at about that level, and I came down to my room one day. I lived with the chief engineer. I said, "Engineer, it's time to replace the Hopkalite. The CO2 levels are getting too high." "All right, XO." The next day he comes into the room, about 8:00 at night, slams down his... "All right, we did it; we replaced the Hopkalite. Are you finally satisfied? We got that done." We were kind of joking.

DePue: What was the name of it again, the Hopkalite?

Thunman: Hopkalite was the catalyst. That was the commercial name of the catalyst. It came in drums, and it looked like charcoal, little pieces of charcoal. So he came in, kind of joking. He said, "Well, okay, XO, you've been bitching about this. We've done it." So I'm sitting there, and I hear, "Fire in the AMS!" which is auxiliary machinery space, called up. So, in a submarine, when you have a casualty like that, the executive officer goes to the scene. The captain goes to the conn. The engineer goes back into the engineering spaces, into maneuvering, to take control of the engineering plant.

So, I'm out of my chair and down into the auxiliary machinery space. It's just forward of the engine room. I get into the space. I'm looking for smoke, and I couldn't see any smoke. I thought, Well that's good. If you can't see any smoke, then whatever it is isn't too bad. We trained our people carefully, just the slightest bit [of smoke], call it away. Nobody will ever be upset with you, night or day. Call it away.

I got there, and a young guy was coming from the lower level of the auxiliary machinery space, up the ladder. His head was through the hatchway area. He looked at me, and his eyes kind of rolled around. He slid back down to the bottom of the ladder, and I looked at that. Another young guy was coming around the switchboard, and he looked at me and stumbled down. I realized that we had toxic gas of some sort. So, I just kept right on going into the engine room and grabbed the communications microphone that we have there in the control area, which is called maneuvering. I pass the word, "Toxic gas. All hands don airline breathing masks." Now these are masks... They're rubber masks; they've got an air hose that connects into an air header, about a fifteen pound air pressure header that's all through the submarine. So

everybody can wear a mask, plugged in, and breathe and also operate the ship. It's kind of difficult.

DePue: But it restricts your movement.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, to a degree. You plugged in to these plug-in stations, four or five plug-in per station. [I] didn't know anything, other than toxic gas. Well, we were up in the Sea of Japan. We weren't in an area where we could surface. My skipper was Bill Yates. He was my first skipper, the one I loved so much. I passed the word up to him. I'm trying to figure out what's wrong. I can't see what's wrong back here, except that we've got toxic gas. We're searching to see what's causing the problem. People were dropping down, so we had to really kind of direct our attention.

The ones who hadn't got their masks on, who'd been operating the plant, probably several minutes while the problem was going on, and had taken in the high levels of CO<sub>2</sub> and carbon monoxide, we had to get them out of there and get control of them and get masks on them. It was difficult, dragging them out of there. We had to bring people from up forward to get them out and tend to them.

The crew figured out on their own, nobody had ever trained us, how you could take a breathing mask, put it over a guy's face, use a pen—they had a little pinhole next to the regulator—and operate the regulator. You'd pump air into the guy, using the mask. You actually pumped it in. Normally it's a demand system, where you suck in, and when you sucked in, that opened the passageway to the air. But if the guy is laying there not sucking in, then how do you do it? Well, they figured that out; all through the submarine they figured this out. It was amazing, on the spot, smart submariners.

Anyway, it was difficult. To get a guy through a submarine, who's nothing but a sack of potatoes, is dead weight, is hard work. You're bouncing his head, and you've got a mask on, and he's got a mask on. It affected some people in a bad way. The engineer kind of went out of his head. I won't tell you his name, but he went up the ladder, which was just outside maneuvering. He said, "We've got to get out of here." We were submerged. I had to drag him down physically, not that he could have opened that hatch, because the sea pressure would have kept him from opening the hatch. But he was a little bit crazy. I had to drag him physically down, just kind of threw him in the corner.

I went down into the AMS, not that I was a big hero; I was scared to death, I'll tell you. At the lower level, I was walking around, looking, trying to figure out what was wrong. I had not linked up the CoH<sub>2</sub> burner and the Hopkalite. That had not linked up in my mind. I went by the burner. I looked over at the temperature indicator, and it was pegged. Oh, my God! So I got somebody, and we pulled aside the access plate there. We had a red hot

charcoal fire going inside the burner, where the Hopkalite had been; remember, it was a bed. It was charcoal.

The manufacturer had mislabeled the drums of Hopkalite. They were actually drums of charcoal, but he had labeled them Hopkalite. So we'd put Hopkalite in them, which is the worst thing in the world. So what are we doing? We are circulating, through the submarine, carbon dioxide, just like you're sitting in your car, huge amounts of it, all through the submarine. I spotted that. We were lucky. I had a young guy with me. I remember we used a screwdriver; we pulled that plate aside.

I got back, and I got on the horn with the captain. I said, "We found the problem. The whole boat's full of CO<sub>2</sub>. I don't know how many people are down, wherever they are." He [the young submariner] was running groups of men, taking care of others who were being dragged out. So he was handling all that. I wasn't handling that, did a good job. The torpedo room was pretty clean, so he had all the real bad cases up there. We had to push the engineer up there too. There were a couple of funny incidents later, when you thought about it.

I said, "Captain, we've got to get up the snorkel." By that, you've got to get up to periscope depth, bring snorkel mast up, and ventilate the submarine, bring in the air from the outside." He knew that. He ordered that and brought the ship up. We couldn't drain the snorkel mast. Normally the mast is flooded, and you drain it before you use it. We knew it leaked, but we hadn't had an opportunity to fix it. So, I said, "We've got to drain that mast; we've got to drain it." I had a couple of really good chiefs in there, but one of them went down; he was sick. I had one guy show up in his oxygen breathing apparatus, which is different than the... We call them OBAs. You put them on. You had a canister. You weren't connected up; you were self-contained.

I remember this wonderful chief, Chief Nardowitz, best chief on the submarine. I said, "Nardowitz, you've got to get in there and drain that mast." "Oh, yes, sir, okay." He had a beard, but he had his OBA on. He opened that door, went in there. They were looking at him. They had what they called deadlights on each door of the submarine. They're looking, and they say, "Nardowitz is going out there, where I can see him... Whoops, Nardowitz is down." (laughs) He didn't have a good enough seal with his oxygen breathing apparatus.

DePue: Because of the beard?

Thunman: Because of the beard. This will lead to a story, later in my career, that ended up affecting the whole Navy, the whole United States Navy.

It was funny. You get all that CO<sub>2</sub>, your tongue swells, *so you're talking like this*. It's really just a messy environment. You can't understand

anybody. I had this other young guy there with me. I said, "Let's you and I go back in with our breathing apparatus on," not an OBA. I kind of helped him, showed him exactly what he had to do. He had to get up in the overhead and drain it. We drained the mast. But by then we'd been down about an hour and a half or so. We got up to periscope depth and ventilated. We didn't lose anybody; I don't know, everybody was just sick. There were headaches; everybody's headaches were incredible. Today, I'm sure they'd do something for you. I don't know. It may have affected all of us.

It was funny, while I was back there with my oxygen breathing apparatus on, connected. People would come running into maneuvering. When you ran up and down the boat, you had to unplug, run to where you're going to go, and then find another plug and plug it in. I'd be in there, and somebody would come running into maneuvering and unplug me. (both laugh) I was standing there, all of the sudden... (laughs)

DePue: Not funny at the time, I'm sure.

Thunman: I remember the wonderful skipper though. He was cool as a cucumber during the thing. I'm not sure I was so cool. But he came up, and everybody was attended; nobody was dying. But everybody was sick and felt bad. I came up to him, and I said, "Captain, I'll take the..." We were the only two officers standing. Everybody else had gone down, one way or another. We were the only two. Many of the chiefs... He [the captain] said, "No, you go down, and get a little sleep, XO, and then I'll wake you up." I said, "Well, I should stand actually." He said, "Go down there, and get an hour's sleep. I'll be up there. Everything's okay."

So I went down, got in my bunk, and I just went *clunk*. About eight hours later, I came to. I went, "My God." I went running up, and the captain was standing there by himself the whole time. He let everybody that could sleep and letting the right people into the right places. I was out cold.

DePue: Why was he less affected by it? Was he at a location that was less affected?

Thunman: Well, remember I talked about Bill Yates. He had been a World War II submariner, diesel, enlisted man, very young enlisted man, very smart, picked to go to the Naval Academy, went to the Naval Academy. He had that terrible... When you say, "Why wasn't he affected by it?" He was. I'm sure he felt just as bad as everybody else. Those of us who had been all the way aft, we had to connect and disconnect. We were taking in a certain amount of the CO2 as we were moving around. It affected us more than the people who stayed forward. So, he wasn't affected by it, but he was also cool. His wife was the one who had burned up, who was sitting on a heater in Mare Island, in the shipyard and caught her nightgown on fire, terrible story.

But anyway, that came as close... We probably should have lost half the people. If they hadn't figured out that way of how you could take your buddy and take a mask, put it over him, and then operate it, pump air into him using that mask... It was a procedure never used. Again, some of the things that came about as a result of that... They had more connectors to each mask, so that rather than having to unplug somebody, you could plug into somebody else's mask, to the air hose that was going to him. There were a number of those things that came out of that. We did an investigation. It was handled well. But again, remember, I told you they didn't like my first skipper. He really should have been commended in some way for it, the way that was taken care of.

DePue: But did he catch some flack because of the incident?

Thunman: No, but they didn't like him. Remember, I told you the story?

DePue: Right.

Thunman: They didn't like him, so they just kind of thought, well... No investigation that I know of was ever done on that company. That company should have gone out of business.

DePue: Your story leads to some questions about what kind of medical staff you would have had onboard.

Thunman: I had a corpsman; we had a corpsman.

DePue: Which was an enlisted man.

Thunman: Enlisted man, but very, very capable. We fairly quickly ran out of the medical oxygen we were using. He was wheeling big oxygen bottles around, to try to bring people back. He himself was having a hell of a time. I remember him; he could hardly walk. He was dragging himself back between the main engines. I remember, I said, "Get forward and get some real oxygen in your system, and then come back here."

DePue: Separate from this disaster that you had, was he authorized to perform even various surgical procedures?

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: If somebody had to have an appendectomy—

Thunman: Well, I went through an emergency appendectomy at sea, when I was on the destroyer. I don't know if we covered that or not. There was a man who had, they thought, appendicitis. Our doctor, a young lieutenant, operated on him to remove an [appendix]. I was part of that. I was chief engineer, wheeling in the

big commercial oxygen bottles and had people standing around with battle lanterns, to give him better light.

That was a funny story too. It turns out the guy didn't have appendicitis, but he had something that gave you all the indications of appendicitis. But they had a hell of a time. They cut him open. Everything came out, like a bunch of balloons. I remember standing there with the captain, looking at that. Boy, the poor skipper's eyes got big. That young doctor, he finally went around to the head of the table, where the corpsman of the ship at that time was. [He] took a patch, gauze, put it over the guy's face, poured, I guess, chloroform, and the guy went down. They had given him a local, spinal. As soon as he did that, everything went back in, and everything was okay.

So yes, we had the authority to do whatever was necessary. On my own submarine, we did a fairly extensive tooth repair, which I'll tell you about. Well, I might as well tell you now. We'd gone up, deployed. Before you deployed, everybody in the crew was supposed to have their teeth checked, everybody that went with you, so you wouldn't have a problem while you were gone. We took some CIA people with us. They had not had their teeth checked, although they'd been told to. We get all the way up in the Sea of Japan and everything, and this guy comes down with an abscessed tooth. I am madder than hell. I said, "Well, we've got to go back. We'll have to come down and get him off the ship in Japan." The guy knew I was mad at him. I had a wonderful corpsman. These corpsmen were very good, really wonderful, submarine corpsmen. He said, "Well, I think we can fix it, captain." He said, "I think I can drill a hole in the side of the tooth, drain it. I'll put some antibiotics on cotton, and I'll pack it. I think it will be okay for a couple of months." The guy, he knew I was going probably write up the worst report he ever got, because he hadn't done what he was supposed to do before he left. He said, "Oh, yeah, I want to do it; I want to do it."

So I got in there, I remember, with the XO and I and the corpsman. The corpsman was trained to give a block, one block, like a dentist would give, which would collapse half of your face. He knew how to do that. They were taught how to do that.

DePue: This is an anesthetic?

Thunman: Yeah, anesthetic. It was Novocain, a Novocain shot, they'd learned. The corpsman said, "I know how to do that." So everything will go dead on that side. We're in the ship's office, and we got a little drill from the engineering spaces, the highest speed drill we could get. (DePue laughs)

DePue: This isn't a dental instrument.

Thunman: No.

DePue: Oh, my God.

Thunman: So we get in there, and I'm looking. I said, "There's no way I can do this, with my big hands, plus I'm just too spastic anyway, to do that." The corpsman says, "I can't do it too well." My XO, a smaller, very precise guy says, "I think I can do it." So he drills that hole, but it takes forever with what we think is a high speed drill. It's nowhere near the speed of a dental drill. He drills a hole in it. They drain it out, and they pack cotton in it, with antibiotics. The guy was fine for the rest of the patrol.

But going back to the catalyst and that whole thing, there were some lessons learned in how to operate that oxygen breathing apparatus. It was the only time that I know of, where the ship had to operate for a couple of hours with everybody in these masks.

DePue: Not just yours, but any of the other submarines in the fleet, as well?

Thunman: Yeah. I did the investigation for the ship and submitted it. We have to do a formal investigation. They accepted that. It was routed around, I think, to a lot of people. I was always a little upset. I was always hoping to hear about some company being brought on the line for making the mistake. The end of that story, though, is a pretty good one that maybe I've told you about.

One of the things after that, when I went to command, I said, "No beards on my submarine." I called the enlisted distribution system, "Anybody you send me, don't send anybody to this submarine with a beard. You can't have a beard on my submarine." I'd been in the personnel business before I went to command. We'll talk about that. So, I knew how to put that word out. I put the word out, and it was okay.

Zumwalt [Elmo Russell "Bud" Zumwalt Jr.] took over the Navy. Remember, Admiral Zumwalt was very loose in changing the length of the hair and all the things that were going on in that timeframe, about 1969, '70. None of us liked him, because we wanted the same discipline to obtain, and he wanted to loosen everything up. His thought was, "Well, I'm not going to get people to volunteer for the military if I don't make it looser and let them wear civilian clothes." I don't know if... You probably don't remember those days.

DePue: You're talking about the Vietnam era, where the enlistment rates were plummeting, and the draft was in full force.

Thunman: Yeah. Well, but of course, they had a lot of things that... You're right. It was a bad time. Anyway, the word went out, and Zumwalt, he started these first sessions where he would go all around the Navy, around the world, and talk to the sailors. He'd bring them all in big theaters and give them a pitch and motivate them, then let them ask questions and talk about policies that they didn't like.

Well, he came to Pearl Harbor, and he did that at the submarine base, had all the submariners down there. I wasn't there. A submariner got up, as part of the Q&A part of it, and he said, "Admiral Zumwalt, isn't it okay for people to wear beards on submarines?" And Zumwalt said, "Why of course." The guy—and he was not in my crew. He was in a different submarine crew—said, "Well there's a submarine here in Pearl Harbor that won't let you wear beards." So Zumwalt turned to his EA, executive assistant, and he said, "Okay, we'll look into that."

So I'm down on the boat, just trying to do my day's work and flapping around. They come in, and they say, "Commander Submarine Force Pacific, Admiral Lacey"—so this would have been 1970—"wants to see you." Well, you know, I'm the commander, captain of the submarine, but you don't go see COMSUBPAC for anything minor. Oops, something's happened. So I go up to his office...He wants to see you right away, it was.

So I went roaring up there. I was in dirty khakis, I guess. I stood there, at his desk. Admiral Lacey, a wonderful guy...And there sat next to him, next to the desk, was Admiral Zumwalt. He said, "Have you met Admiral Zumwalt?" I said, "No, sir." [He] shook my hand, and Admiral Lacey said, "Ron, I just had a question for you. I understand you don't let your people wear beards on your submarine." Zumwalt didn't say anything about it. I said, "Yes, sir; that's true." He said, "Why is that?"

I told him the story. He listened; he'd apparently never heard the story before. His eyes got bigger and bigger as I described the problems, the difficulties we had in getting that submarine through that problem. I finally finished. Lacey looked at me, and he looked over at Zumwalt. Zumwalt didn't say anything. He looked back at me, and he said, "Thank you very much, Ron." (both laugh) Nothing happened, and the word went out across Pearl Harbor immediately. Lacey didn't put it out, but you know how those things happen. Hey, they called Thunman in to talk about the beard business, and nobody changed anything. If you skippers want to change it, you can go ahead and change it. Pretty soon all the skippers had told their crews they couldn't [wear beards].

I led the charge when I was a three-star in the Pentagon. We used to have these CNO executive panels, where we'd sit around at a roundtable, the three-stars and the CNO, and discuss different major personnel policies. I led the charge to eliminate beards in the Navy. I remember there was a lot of grumbling in the discussion. That's why you don't see beards on sailors.

DePue: Well, having myself been in the Army at the time, where having a beard would have been, what? In the Navy, they allow beards in the Navy? That was our attitude.

Thunman: Yeah, that's a good point.



DePue: Well, we've been at this for quite a while already. We were talking about the *Snook*, but we got into some other great stories in the process. Do we have a few minutes to spend today? I know you've got a tight schedule, but to get to your next assignment, which is—

Thunman: Well, the next assignment is—

DePue: First of all, when you were on the *Snook*, what kind of assignment would you have wanted next? It wouldn't have been another ship assignment?

Thunman: Well, I hadn't really thought about it. I was finishing my second year. It had been a very tough tour, two deployments, one six and a half months, the other seven, four of these special operations. We put that special equipment on the ship. [It was] quite a challenge to bring it aboard and make it operate. We really had conducted some spectacular operations at the Sea of Okhotsk, surveillance, where we found things that nobody even knew were there. For example, we found the big oilfields of Sakhalin Islands. Nobody even knew they were there. Of course in those days, we didn't have satellites. Huge oilfields that the Soviets had developed there.

I really hadn't... You know, it had been really a tough two years. But it had been great. I really learned how to submarine. Bill Yates taught me the basics, and Jim Watkins, who was the second skipper, taught me the politics of how to get along with your superiors and system. We were well-known. We won the Navy Unit Commendation in the *Snook*. Won is not the right word. We were awarded, because of that operation we did in surveilling the Soviet Union with the water buoy system.

I was given my first decoration, which was the Navy Commendation Medal, which is no big deal today. But back then, that was a big deal. If you got a Navy Commendation Medal, you were something. The captain, Jim Watkins, was given the Legion of Merit. That was a big deal, very rare. As a result of that, his being awarded the Legion of Merit, I was given the Navy Commendation. Then we gave out a couple of other Navy achievement medals, but medals were hard to come by in those days.

DePue: Was there something between the Legion of Merit and the Navy Commendation Medal?

Thunman: No.

DePue: There wasn't any kind of meritorious service medal?

Thunman: No, it came out later. So, we were coming back. I hadn't thought about it, and they wake me up in the middle of the night and say, "Got a message from Washington. You've been ordered to the Bureau of Naval Personnel, and you've got to be there in two weeks." What? What the hell does the Bureau of

Naval...I didn't know anything about the Bureau of Naval Personnel. The captain, Captain Watkins, he said, "You can't go. That's nuts. It's crazy."

We got into Pearl Harbor, and he called the bureau and said "Hey, you know, I've got to keep him here for a while, some more. We'll be changing out other officers, and I need him." They said, "No, got to go." It's a new billet in the submarine officer assignment office. The submarine detailer, it's called, the office that assigns all the submariners, where they go in the Navy, all the officers of the Navy.

DePue: So in essence, you were told you have to be reassigned, and you're going to the place that's going to reassign your colleagues.

Thunman: That's right, just a bolt out of the blue. I got back, and we got the family together, and we took off for Washington. We just got in the car and went. [I] remember arriving in Washington, looking around the Northern Virginia area. [We] found a little hotel where we could go in and start figuring out where we might live. But I was shocked. I thought, Oh man, this has nothing to do with anything that I know about, the Bureau of Naval Personnel? That's people, that's—

DePue: Well, that was my question. In the military circles, there's a certain type of person who wants an operational assignment or working in research and development. Then there's another kind of animal that wants personnel or supply or logistical issues.

Thunman: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: At that point in time, what kind of animal did you think you were?

Thunman: Well, I thought I was fairly technically, operationally suited guy; although this was a...If you went to the detailers' office—they call them the detailers—they were the gods of the officer corps, because they are the ones that decided where you went. They pulled the strings. You're going to go to postgraduate school...All the big decisions and the whole Navy worked through them. They wanted a certain kind of officer, or they wanted their buddy to do this.

DePue: So the officers in the field would pick up the phone and call the detailers and say, "I want...How can I get this?"

Thunman: That's right, write letters, Congress...It was really quite a thing. Well, I get there and—

DePue: Was this at the Pentagon?

Thunman: No, that's in the Bureau of Naval Personnel, which is just up the hill from the Pentagon. You see about six or seven annexes up there. I go in and report. My boss is the greatest naval officer I ever worked for, an officer by the name of

Lando Zech. [He] later became a vice admiral. He was a captain. He had been my company officer at the Naval Academy. I was so pleased. My gosh, I'm going to go work for Lando Zech. He was a submariner, of course. He was head of the Submarine Detail Offices, but he also had just been designated a new assignment that went along with his regular assignment, which was the program manager for nuclear power.

The program manager for nuclear power, a big instruction had come out in the Navy—this is now 1966—about the program manager would be in control of all of the policies associated with management of personnel in the nuclear power program. He had an assistant designated. That was me. I was the assistant program manager for nuclear power.

DePue: Is Rickover still in the picture at this time?

Thunman: Rickover's over in the Naval Sea...He's still in his three jobs.

DePue: I suspect he's casting quite a shadow over your department though.

Thunman: Oh. Shadow? (both laugh) How about an elephant foot? I went in to see Captain Zech. I was all shined up. Zech, who was always squared away, was a wonderful guy, tough guy. He'd been on a destroyer in World War II, had the destroyer shot out from under him. He was in the water for six or eight hours. He told me; he said, "Well, we established this program, program manager for nuclear power, and you're going to be my assistant. We're going to put together the policies and procedures for personnel selection and qualification of personnel," kind of a broad discussion. I'm thinking, Is this is for the whole nuclear power program in the Navy?

DePue: Which would apply to the surface fleet as well, correct?

Thunman: Yeah, for any nuclear power surface ships as well. He said, "Do you have any questions?" He said, "You'll be okay. We'll go along." He was a busy man. He had all kinds of things. I said, "All right, Captain, what do I do, really? What does my mission completely?" He looked me—and this is a true statement—he says, "Your job is to keep Admiral Rickover and Admiral Semmes from killing each other." (both laugh) I got up and went, "What?" We'll go on from there, because the stories, those two years... There I was, for the first time in my life, involved in the development of policy for the United States Navy. I was in position. It turned out to be a very powerful position, as a lieutenant commander. But there were very few captains in Washington that had more power than I had, not because of me, but because of Rickover.

DePue: Admiral Semmes, what was his position?

Thunman: He was the chief of naval personnel.

DePue: That was who Zech was reporting to?

Thunman: Yeah, he reported to Admiral Semmes. I think I was the right guy to go in the job, because if I had been arrogant or the sort of guy who looked down on others, I wouldn't have been able to survive. But I always tried to get things done in a common sense way, a logical way. I never tried to use the Rickover connection. But, I had that blackjack in my back pocket. After a few months, people came to know that I'd had it there.

DePue: By saying you had the blackjack in your pocket, do you mean that you were in pretty tight with Rickover?

Thunman: Pretty tight, yeah. We weren't buddies, but he wanted things done, and he wanted them done now. There weren't any excuses, [like] the Navy doesn't like this, Admiral. You never went back to that. It was, this is what we're going to do, bing, bing, bing, bing, bing!

DePue: Were you selected for this position, in part, because somebody knew you had that connection with Rickover?

Thunman: Well, I think I was selected for the position because I had a good reputation in the submarines. Certainly, Rickover must have examined my record. He had his own records for his people. He knew who I was, how smart I was or dumb I was. I had good records on the submarines. And my old boss at the Naval Academy, my company officer, he knew me, and had made me a striper. So I think he had a lot of confidence that I could go and do that job, without making a complete ass of myself. But every once in a while—

One of the first things that happened... We'll finish with this story. I was there about a couple of months. The Navy was all upset about the amount of money which was being spent on training. It's too much, in the Navy. So, the Navy gave Admiral Rickover \$1,050,000 a year for training. Rickover must have spent a couple of billion. He built the *Nautilus* up there. I mean, we talked about all the things he did.

DePue: And this is during the days of the wrap-up in the Vietnam War, when the military spending—

Thunman: Well, no, it wasn't so much. This is 1966. The war was still going pretty good.

DePue: But, at least as far as the presence in Vietnam, it's building steadily at that time, correct?

Thunman: That's right, yes. You're right. The one thing about being this program manager for nuclear power, the instruction was written so that we could go anywhere. We didn't have to follow any hierarchy. If I wanted to go into the training organization in the Navy, I went over there. If I wanted to go to the Naval Sea Systems Command, wherever. Wherever Rickover wanted policies established for training qualification, selection of nuclear power personnel, we

go. That was the first program manager the Navy had, as a matter of fact, program manager of nuclear power.

I would normally start off dealing with a commander, maybe a captain, mostly a commander in these offices. I got a call by this commander who said, "Well, the edict has come down about the cutback in training. We've gone through all the training funds. We're going to have to cut nuclear power [by] \$50,000, from \$1,050,000 to \$1,000,000." That's because my boss said you've got to take some of the cut. Everybody's got to take a cut. Others are going to take a big cuts, so we're just going to take \$50,000. I said, "I don't think that's going to go over too well." I said, "You know, after all, he spends a hell of a lot of money on training, a lot more than this." Well, "That's it." So then I said, "Well, I want to see your boss."

I went over to see his boss, the captain. Not many people liked me to begin with. I said, "I recommend you don't do this. It's not very much money. I don't think you want to make Admiral Rickover mad about something like this, because he spends so much money on it now. I think you would be better off to just let it go." He kind of threw me out on my ear. I went back to see Zech about it. Zech says, "Well do what you've got to do." He never liked to get involved with those things.

I called the commander back, and I said, "You know, you guys got to stand by for some heavy seas, because I'm going to take this over to Rickover's office, if you want me to. I know he's not going to like it, and I know that something's going to happen." He said, "Well, okay. I'll go talk to my boss again." He came back, and he said, "No. Do whatever you've got to do. We're not going to take that kind of crap."

So I called. I wouldn't call Rickover directly. He had a Navy assistant over there, a commander. I said "Well, here's the problem..." A fellow by the name of Don Hall, who refurbished the nuclear power plant in Clinton here, a brilliant guy, he said, "Okay." I said, "Do whatever you've got to do, Don. I can't make it work." About an hour later, there's this call from Admiral Semmes. I could hear on the telephone what the captain said. He says, "What the hell's going on? What's happening? Send Thunman up here."

I go up there. I see Semmes is there. The admiral in charge of the training organization in the Bureau of Naval Personnel is up there, not the captain, but the admiral PersC [Personnel Section 3]. I'm in there, and he said, "What happened?" I explained. The poor admiral in PersC said, "Oh my God, give him the money." I said, "All right, sir. I've got to get it to him right away." "Well, you give it to him. Give him the money." Apparently, Rickover [had] called the secretary of the Navy. The secretary of the Navy called the chief of naval personnel and chewed him up and down, one side and the other. The chief of naval personnel called this poor rear admiral in PersC.

I went back to my office. I hadn't the slightest idea how to give anybody any money, anywhere. I went back to my days when we would order things, when I was on a ship. I got one of those forms.

DePue: What, a requisition form or something?

Thunman: Yeah, it was a invoice kind of a form. (DePue laughs) I typed up an invoice, (laughs) \$50,000, pay to the director, Division of Naval Reactors, so and so on such a date, signed it, N.R. Thunman, Assistant Program Manager for Nuclear Power. I called Don Hall over at the bureau and said, "I've got the money for you." He said, "Okay, we'll get it; we'll pick it up right away." I went down at the entranceway of the building, big black car pulls up—this is true—the window comes down. I stick the form in, and off it goes. (both laugh) They had to get that money into Rickover's hands immediately. I don't know what they ever did with it. (laughs)

DePue: Were you somewhat of a marked man, because you were connected with Rickover?

Thunman: Yeah, oh yeah, for the rest of my life. When I came walking into an office after that, boy everybody got real quiet. I tried, as I said, not to lord it over people. But I had some real essential people just tear me up one side and down the other, for what Rickover wanted to be done. [I] got into it with the secretary of the Navy and the secretary of the Navy's executive assistant, the editor of the Naval Institute Proceedings. I was in all kinds of people's hair, because Rickover would say, "I want this done." If it had to do with personnel policies, I was the guy who had to do it. He was mad at Zech, it turns out.

DePue: Rickover was?

Thunman: Yeah. It turns out Rickover didn't like Zech, and when Zech left the job, did not go to a nuclear job. He went to be commanding officer of a cruiser, conventional cruiser, which was... I felt sorry for him; although it didn't really hurt him, because he went on to become a three-star [senior commander].

I ended up as the guy, and it was... They never said, "Bring Zech up here." It was, "Thunman, get up here," because I was the one who would... Sometimes I'd have to go over and tell him myself, face-to-face, here's the problem.

DePue: Here's the timeframe now. Suddenly all that training you got on the *Snook*, about how to work the politics, comes in handy, huh?

Thunman: See, Watkins had worked for Rickover, before he came to the *Snook*. And Bill Yates had worked for Rickover, before he came to the *Snook*. Bill Yates, they hated, because he had worked for Rickover. Watkins was able though—because he was such a slick politician—to put that behind him. But he was helped, because COMSUBPAC was Fluckey, and he had been

Fluckey's division engineer when Fluckey was the division commander. So, the *Snook* went from the dark-haired boy to the fair-haired boy.

But I was in the Rickover...the small organization that he had sprinkled around the Navy that he never did away with. You never, ever stopped. From then on, I never stopped working for Rickover. It didn't make any difference what job I had.

DePue: So people would whisper behind your back, "Watch out for Thunman, because he's a Rickover guy."

Thunman: Yeah, look out for him. And they'd blame a lot of the things on me, that they were my ideas. I would never...I was very loyal to the old man. It was the only way you could deal with him. I always gave him my honest impression, even back then, as a young lieutenant commander. He'd say, "What do you think of that?" And I'd say, "Admiral, I don't think that's a good idea." "Why is that?" he'd yell at me. I'd say, "Well sir," and I'd give him my reasons. He'd say, "That's the dumbest, god-damned reason. You're not thinking very clearly." "All right." But he'd go along, and he'd say, "Tell me some about that, what you were talking about." (both laugh) It was quite an unusual position. You'd think it would have made it easier for me. It didn't. It made it tougher for me.

DePue: And in this job—correct me if I'm wrong—but he was not in your rating chain, was he?

Thunman: No. Zech wrote my fitness reports.

DePue: Is this a good place for us to finish today?

Thunman: Yeah, I think so.

DePue: Well, we're hearing about all kinds of operational things, but also the politics of the Navy.

Thunman: The politics is starting to come in. That was when my real political training came, because I was trained by the experts. I was trained by **the** expert.

DePue: Well, thank you very much, Admiral. We'll pick it up again.

Thunman: Okay, Mark.

(end of interview #4)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.05

Interview # 5: June 25, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, June 25, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. This morning I'm in the home of Admiral Ron Thunman. Good morning, Admiral.

Thunman: Good morning, Mark.

DePue: This is our fifth session, and we're up to the 1966, '68 timeframe.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: So we've got a little bit more of your career to go. But I wanted to start today...I remember my curiosity when we finished off last time, because you were talking about this PerC. Also, there was some other jargon, like commander acronyms that the Navy has. I thought, maybe, if you could explain that, that would be helpful.

Thunman: Of course, we'd be here the next six months, if I were to describe to you the Navy acronyms or the military acronyms. I'm sorry. I get carried away and forget that others have no idea what those are. The PersC was really...The Bureau of Naval Personnel, Section C, at that time was the section in the bureau that handled all Navy training. PersA handled Navy policy; PersB, assignment of people, and PersC, training. So that's where all of that came



from. I probably used, unwittingly, BUPERS. That's the Bureau of Naval Personnel. (DePue laughs)

DePue: When you're talking about commands, like we're going to be talking about in the future, when you're the commander of the Pacific Submarine Fleet.

Thunman: Commander Submarine Force U.S. Pacific Fleet, COMSUBPAC, a very romantic position, because he led the war against the Japanese in World War II, COMSUBPAC, Lockwood. It was Admiral Lockwood. Whenever you read stories about World War II submarines, they were always talking about COMSUBPAC.

DePue: But some of the aviation guys might have thought that they were the ones who actually won the war in the Pacific.

Thunman: (laughs) That's right! You could get a story from each side. I'm sure the Army can give you some good ideas too.

DePue: At least if you talk to Douglas MacArthur, his accolades. When we do COMSUBPAC, would we capitalize, C, capitalize S, capitalize P?

Thunman: Well, when you do COMSUBPAC, it's all capitals.

DePue: It's all capitals. Again, every organization has its own dialogue, and it doesn't take long for most people to stand around saying, "What in the world are they talking about?"

Thunman: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Let's go back to your timeframe, then...

Thunman: I'll make a comment though, that I think you'll find interesting, about Admiral Rickover and acronyms. Unless you really were around Rickover a lot, generally, you never used an acronym with Admiral Rickover. And you never wrote one. You could write one if you first started off with what the full title was, and then in parentheses put the acronym after it, Commander Submarine Force U.S. Pacific Fleet, parenthetically, COMSUBPAC, close paren. From then on, in your paper, you could write COMSUBPAC. But if you didn't have that first one in there, he just threw the paper out.

DePue: Is that because he was working so much with politicians and the public?

Thunman: Well, he just wanted people to be clear in what they said and not be sloppy. He thought the Navy had gone too far into that, so you didn't really understand what the guy was talking about; who was he talking about? That was just Rickover. You just couldn't... You could say COMSUBPAC to him—I could, and others—but you'd never say PersC to him, god. (laughs)

DePue: Let's go back to your days in '66 to '68 and the Bureau of Naval Personnel. We talked quite a bit about that job the last time. Your boss initially was...?

Thunman: Captain Lando Zech.

DePue: And then above him was Semmes?

Thunman: Vice Admiral B.J. Semmes, S-e-m-m-e-s, an old, distinguished, battle ship Navy family.

DePue: S-e-m-m-e-s?

Thunman: Uh huh.

DePue: Well that certainly wouldn't have been the way would have thought it was spelled. What else can you then tell us...Let's ask this one. This is quite different from being assigned to a submarine and going out on tours and being out in the ocean for months on end. Tell me a little bit about what it was like, first of all, to live in the Washington, D.C. area.

Thunman: We enjoyed it, good schools. I made a mistake, didn't buy a house I should have. I didn't think I'd be there too long and really couldn't afford to buy a house. Although it was a mistake. I rented a nice house, and the guy that rented it to me wanted me to buy it. He wasn't just trying to make money. He said, "Hey, this is a good chance for you, young fella, to get started and get going." But on those days, I would had to have had \$1,000 to put down. I didn't have \$1,000 to put down. None of us in the military, as you well know...I was a lieutenant commander.

But I love Washington. I've lived there now several times, and the kids loved Washington. My sons are there now, in the Herndon, Virginia area, and my grandchildren are there. Washington was an exciting place then, not as exciting as it is now.

DePue: Would it have been your expectation at that time, you have a sea duty and then a shore assignment in Washington, D.C., and then a sea duty and another assignment in Washington, D.C.?

Thunman: You would have a sea duty and then another assignment, not necessarily in Washington. I was lucky. I didn't realize it at the time, the way politics go. The sooner you get to Washington, the better chance you have to go to the top. I didn't know that. I thought I was doing something wrong, because I was being ordered to the Bureau of Naval Personnel. My gosh, I mean, what is that, for a submariner?

DePue: Now, why is it that if you spend time in Washington? Does that mean you've got a quicker ticket to the top?

Thunman: Well, you learn. You learn what the military is all about. You learn the politics. You learn the ins and outs. One of the things you learn is what's going to get you in trouble and what's not going to get you in trouble. But what is going to get you in trouble is very important to learn early in your career, and how to respond. Everybody's going to have difficulties, especially personnel difficulties. That's ninety percent of the difficulties you have.

DePue: You mean what assignments you're going to get and how you can get the good assignments?

Thunman: Well, and how you interact with seniors, how you respond to orders from the civilian military. You learn the military is run by the civilian political corps of the United States. It's not run by the military. The secretary of the Navy is the number one man in the Navy, like the secretary of the Army is, as far as establishing policies, establishing practices. Granted, he's not making decisions on whether we send the men over the top or not. Those kinds of decisions, that's a separate thing. But that's not what most of your military career is.

Most of your military career is putting together programs, which will support the country and support the military. That's where you can get into trouble, when you have not given enough thought to that program, and that bubble breaks in some way, and people are hurt. Newspaper articles are written by the thousands, and the next thing you know, you're a dead man. (laughs)

So, the sooner you get there, the better off you are, the sooner you begin to learn that. Of course, I had the world's greatest political expert to model myself on, which was Rickover. Now, I didn't model myself on Admiral Rickover; although I guess maybe some might have thought, because I could be very harsh, never as harsh as Rickover. I would get upset, probably unduly, some would say, when I found out that people were not telling me the straight story; they were devious. If I found people were dishonest, I just couldn't stand that. I got rid of them. Maybe I was a little too tough in that area, but...And Rickover was that way, but I didn't learn that from Rickover, I learned that from my father. (laughs)

DePue: How much of the advantage of being in Washington, D.C. could be tied to having some of the senior people in the military, in the Navy, as mentors for you, but also having their names on your fitness reports, after the end of the tours.

Thunman: Yes, yes, yes. Very important. What was most important, I think, from the promotion side, is you started to develop a service reputation among senior officers. So it wasn't so much that they were signing the fitness reports, although they're important, but the fact that you got out in front of them. You were making presentations to these people. They saw you and saw your name.

Either you did okay, or maybe you didn't do okay. But that reputation stayed with you the rest of your career.

So at the time, what's interesting was that I thought it was a terrible thing that I'd been ordered back there, to that kind of a crazy job. I thought it would be poor for my career, where it turned out it was the best thing that could have ever happened to me.

DePue: What kind of hours did you work?

Thunman: Long hours. I'd leave at 6:00 in the morning, and I'd get home at 7:00, 8:00, work on Saturdays, maybe not quite those hours on Saturdays.

DePue: But that was what was expected of officers who were posted there?

Thunman: The hours, working hours, I think were 8:00 to 4:00, but we had so much to do. Nobody ever said, "Hey, you've got to be in at 6:00." In order to just get your hands in all the things that were going on, you had to get in there early. When you were in a high powered job back there... Now, everybody didn't work those hours. In our office we did, simply because that's what it took to get the job done.

DePue: From the kind of hours you worked in Washington, D.C., and the kind of tour you just came from, where you're months at sea oftentimes, that's got to put a serious strain on relationships, on marriages.

Thunman: Yes, yes, yes.

DePue: How about the social life there? Was that good for you?

Thunman: No, that was not much, at that time. Later on, when I served in Washington as an admiral, the social life was a strain. I wouldn't call it "social" so much as having to attend the receptions and different official functions. That's just a pain in the neck, getting dressed and going and standing around, talking to people you didn't know, and they didn't know you, and neither one of you cared about each other. (laughs) It's a huge Washington bureaucracy.

DePue: From what you explained though, that kind of assignment doesn't give you much opportunity to form relationships outside of the Navy.

Thunman: Well, there is some, though. You get to know the secretary of the Navy's office. But you're talking about relationships outside the Navy, neighbors and things like that, you're right. I didn't get to know my neighbors were.

DePue: Were you able to go to church at the time?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. We would get the kids to church. But that was, it was... What you were doing was so important. Probably, in my case, it was too serious to me. I think I dwelled on it too much. I wasn't able to break away from it.

DePue: How many children did you have by that time?

Thunman: I had my two boys, two sons.

DePue: Let's turn our attention to what was going on in the world at that time, especially in the United States Military. In 1966 to '68, there's a serious buildup going on in Vietnam. I'm going to be asking more about Vietnam later, but I want to ask just your impressions. During that timeframe, did that have any impact on what you were doing in your job?

Thunman: Just some minor impacts. One story I didn't tell you about [was] when I was an exec, about Vietnam, which I think I should put in here. I was there in the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Did I talk to you about that? I don't think I did.

DePue: We talked about the Gulf of Tonkin, but that was during what Kissinger was doing, so no.

Thunman: We had been on a special operation and came into Okinawa. We were reading the traffic about the Gulf of Tonkin incident, about the destroyers being attacked by the patrol boats, the North Korean patrol boats, and how, based on those attacks, Johnson made the decision to put in 200,000 troops. We were just laughing our heads off about whether there were patrol boats there or whether they weren't there, and whether they shot torpedoes or didn't shoot torpedoes. If you go back and look into it, you find it was a rainy, kind of a rough night in the gulf. You can get a lot of different radar returns. The poor surface guys were saying, "Well, we think they shot torpedoes, because we heard torpedoes." Well, how could you hear a torpedo running in the water, when there are torpedo boats running in the water? It's all just one big sea of noise. It was so indefinite.

Later on, my very good friend, Medal of Honor winner, now dead, prisoner of war... Gosh, I'm having a senior moment; it will come back.

DePue: That's all right, sir. That can be added later.

Thunman: Anyway, he was in the Gulf of Tonkin at that time. He jumped into an airplane, went out and looked for the torpedo boats. He couldn't find them. At that time, he was a squadron commander.

It was so weak, the reasoning behind putting those 200,000 troops into Vietnam. The reasoning was so weak it was hard to believe. Even we assessed it then, sitting in that officer's club in Okinawa saying, "What the hell?" They don't know what they had out there that night. Based on that—if you read a

lot, and I'm sure you have—Johnson decided to use that reason to put 200,000 American troops into Vietnam.

DePue: Well, to be able to get congressional approval to do that.

Thunman: I don't know that he even had to get congressional approval to do that. I think he just ordered it. I don't think he did.

DePue: Well, there was the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave him to cover to do that, at least.

Thunman: Okay, I'd forgotten that. But I thought that order went out the next day or immediately. But in any case, he made... And even the commanders, the local commanders, say, "We're not sure about this." I'm not criticizing the surface guys. You get into those kinds of things and bad weather—I've been there—and you can imagine all kinds of things going on. You don't know, and you're trying to understand the tactical situation. But we were laughing then about it. I remember sitting in that club laughing, saying, "God."

DePue: Well, here's the question for you, sir. Why would the reaction among you and your colleagues be both laugh?

Thunman: Well, because it was so unprofessional, unprofessional that nobody was taking the time to find out what really happened and to analyze it. We were the nuclear guys again, and nobody was taking the time to say, "We don't really know," because of the sea conditions and the weather and the reports. It was funny. I don't say we were laughing in a comical way. We were looking down on the whole thing as being ridiculous, that you would make a decision based on what they did.

DePue: Shaking your head over the whole affair?

Thunman: Yeah. Later on—and I'll think of his name. I had him here—we went to lunch with him, a great American hero. He told me the story about what the reports were. He was on the carrier with his squadron, and when the reports were coming in that there were these torpedo boats, he was trying to understand what was happening. He was the squadron commander, and he decided to go and look for himself. He took the ready aircraft that they always had on deck and he took off. He said he flew all night long, and he couldn't find anything in the gulf. That's in his book too. I'll think of his name in a minute.

DePue: That would have been 1964. [August 2. 1964]

- Thunman: That would have been in '65. Wasn't it? I can't recall, '64 or '65.<sup>57</sup>
- DePue: I can't recall the specifics either. You're in this assignment though, from '66 to—
- Thunman: Well, now I'm in the bureau. I'm deep into recruiting, getting people... We're building this huge... We're launching a nuclear submarine a month.
- DePue: Is that a *Thresher* class submarine?
- Thunman: No, ballistic missile. We built forty-one of them. We started building them in '60, and we're now [at this time in the Vietnam War] building them big time.
- DePue: Would it be fair to say this is the tip of the spear in the Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union?
- Thunman: That's right. We're not only building the fleet ballistic missile submarines, we're building the attack submarines too, *Thresher* class. It is a huge effort required, because Rickover would only take about one or two percent of the people, from a capability point of view, those who stood at the very top in what they called the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Test. I was in the middle of that. People were saying, "Well you've got to lower your standard." Of course, Rickover would never lower anything. I was into difficulties with people on that, setting up, expanding the schools, getting the curriculum set. Of course, I'd been involved with that earlier, when I taught at the nuclear power school, just a couple years before.

Setting the policy, there is an instruction that exists today. It is BUPERS Instruction 1540.40. I'll never forget it as long as I live. What it does, it sets forth the policy for selection, for training and qualification of nuclear powered personnel in the Navy. It's about ten pages long, and I wrote it. I say I wrote it; Rickover wrote half of it, because he used to bounce back and forth between our office and the Rickover offices.

It was quite a demand on the Navy to do things in this very professional way. It applied to the Navy. Anybody involved with nuclear power personnel had to comply with the tenets of this instruction. But that was quite an effort. We were building a mountain there, in a very short period of time. A lot of that went on in '66 to '68. The basic instruction, which set forth the program, was this instruction.

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<sup>57</sup> The Gulf of Tonkin incident, also known as the U.S.S. *Maddox* incident, was an international confrontation that led to the United States engaging more directly in the Vietnam War. It involved either one or two separate confrontations States in the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. The outcome of incidents was the passage by Congress of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

We promulgated that about six months after I got there. That's what I did for the first six months. Nobody would agree with it, in the Navy, because it had so many things in there that it was contrary to the Navy system.

DePue: I'm not sure I follow you. What would have been contrary to the system?

Thunman: Well, the fact that we got just this top percentage of people, the fact that they had to qualify at certain stages, that they virtually didn't get a second chance, that the qualification program went on for your entire lifetime. Once a year you were going to be examined, academically examined. Who'd ever heard of that? And if you didn't pass, you were thrown out of the program. You didn't get, "Oh, okay, go back and study some more." [Those were] pretty harsh requirements, requirements regarding the record of your radiation and your records and how they were maintained, on the radiation you'd been exposed to; the number of years you were signing up for, once you completed the training; the fact that you could be disqualified really on... You had no argument if your superior said, "Well, you're not qualified. We've lost confidence in your ability to operate a nuclear reactor." There were pretty tough standards set.

DePue: When you first got into the submarine force, you'd already been in the Navy, in the surface fleet for a couple of years?

Thunman: Four years.

DePue: Was the Navy now taking people straight out of the Naval Academy and the NROTC?

Thunman: Yes, yes. We'll talk about those interviews, which were so funny. In my day, as you recall, I'd been four years in the Navy, and I was interviewed by Rickover. But then, because of our expansion, Rickover had to start taking people right out of school, to get the quality he wanted. Plus, he didn't want any more of diesel submariners. He didn't like diesel submariners. He said they had formed bad habits in the diesel submarine force. I remember talking to him about, "Well, gee, maybe we've got to go get some more guys out of the diesel submarine force." "No. We'll get them straight out of college." That was one of the reasons why we were short of people.

When I would go back to my time when I was executive officer of the U.S.S. *Snook*, I was the executive officer; I was the navigator, and I stood watch, one in three watches, when we were up on patrol. There were only eight officers onboard.

DePue: Out of a complement of how many?

Thunman: Well, we were supposed to have, I think, about twelve.

DePue: No, I mean the crew, sir.



Thunman: A hundred or so, 100 enlisted. So, that was the major buildup. That was when the buildup acceleration of the buildup occurred, '66 to '68. All of these new policies, the program manager for nuclear power, with the authority to travel anywhere into the Navy, cross any lines, nobody ever heard of that before. Normally, you went up the line, PersA, PersB, PersC. You went up one path and came down another, like the military was willing to do. But not this one. You just went directly wherever you went, or I did. So, it was really quite an extraordinary experience, those two years.

DePue: You mentioned the interviews. You had people come in and actually had to go through the interview process, similar to what you did?

Thunman: Ah-huh. Rickover interviewed every officer who went into the nuclear power program. Every person who was going to be an officer in the nuclear power program, Rickover interviewed, personally interviewed.

DePue: You've mentioned a couple of times, you had these three positions. But what gave him the power and the opportunity to actually be able to do that?

Thunman: He did it, and he was questioned. There were terrible allegations made that he was intimidating the people. As a matter of fact, as a result of that, he was required to have a naval officer present during the interviews, so that they could witness what he was doing. As you can imagine, I did that on the one occasion.

After I finished my tour in '68, I had to go over to Rickover's offices for three months. Everybody who went to command, before you went to your command, you went and studied your submarine in Admiral Rickover's office, with his people, for about three or four months, took examinations, the worst exams I've ever... toughest academic environment I've ever been in. I don't know how I survived that.

But anyway, it was a funny time. Of course, the riots were going on in Washington at that time. At that point, they were bringing midshipmen in, senior midshipmen from the NROTC and the Naval Academy, in for interviews. There'd be a day of interviews. He'd interview thirty, forty, fifty of them. Maybe not that high, but thirty anyway, I'd say. They were funny; they were really funny.

My job, I found, was to try to prepare this young guy for this interview. In the beginning I would say, "Now A-T-Q, answer the question. Whatever he asks you, answer that. Whatever you do, do not try to snow Admiral Rickover. Do not try to impress Admiral Rickover, just answer the question to the best of your ability. If you don't know the answer, tell him you don't know, that you'll find out, but you don't know." Invariably, they'd screw it up. (laughs)

One of the things Rickover did, along with the interview, the guy's academic record came. Rickover would go through the academic record, look at it. If the grades were going down, or they weren't good, he'd just chew you up about your academic record. Rickover, education was his hobby, I think.

I remember the one guy came in. He was a smart kid. He was from Yale, had good grades. His grades, they'd kind of gone down. In engineering, he'd gone from As to A-minuses, maybe to Bs his last year, but still a very fine academic record. Rickover immediately picked up on that. He said, "Why are your grades going down? What happened to your grades?" The guy said, "Well, Admiral, I've had a lot to do in the past year." "Oh, what? What have you had to do?" "Well, I'm involved with a lot of different things." "What things are you involved with that make your grades go down?" You could see the kid then he realized he was in trouble. All his cockiness was out of him. He said, "Well, I'm in this club, and I'm in the choir," Rickover said, "Well why would the choir cause your grades to go down?" "Well, you know, we have to practice and learn a lot of different songs." "Learn a lot of different songs? That caused your grades to go down? Sing me one of the songs." (DePue laughs) This is true. I'm sitting there thinking, Oh.

This guy, by now is panicked. And this is the truth. He probably couldn't think of anything else to say. He sang, "*Jesus loves me, yes...*" (DePue laughs) I went over. I was sitting in the chair like this, in the back of the room. I just, whooped and went over backwards. (both laugh) It was the funniest thing. I just whooped and backwards. Rickover yelled, he said, "Thunman, you're dumber than he is. Get out of here." And he said, "Take him with you."

So I had to take him. The ones that had a problem with him, we would have them sit somewhere in an office by himself. Rickover would say, "Tell that guy to think about what he said, what he did. Then I'll see him later." Then the old man would forget about him, and I'd have to go in there and say, "Well, Admiral, we've got two hidden in these offices out here. You haven't..." "Oh, okay, well bring them back in." Those interviews were really funny. They were something.

DePue: Did you feel any sympathy for the guys who were interviewed?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, I tried very hard to calm [them] back down, tell them, "Let's go over again." Answer the question. I would help them. The kid who went in there when Rickover said, "How old are you?" He said, "I was born February 26, 1956," or something like that. As soon as he answered the question that way I thought, Oh, here it comes. "I didn't ask you when you were born! Out!" (both laugh) So I'd sit down with the guy and say, "Calm down. Think about..."

He'd [Rickover] let some of the guys get in trouble themselves. The story, the one that he got in trouble in, was when the allegations were made that he was requiring these people to give up their leaves, to go and study for the program and things like that. What happened, what Rickover would do, he'd say, "Do you want to be in the nuclear power program?" "Yes, sir, I do; I really do." "What would you give up to get in the nuclear power program?" Some of the kids would come out with incredible things. "Would you give up your Easter leave?" Of course, the guy could have answered, "No." It wouldn't have bothered the old man. The old man was always just trying to figure out how you thought. But the kids would [think], Well maybe that's what I'm supposed to say. "Yes, I'll give up my leave." "Oh."

DePue: Well, this is the same guy that told you, "I want you to go." And you're on a boat, studying forty hours a week.

Thunman: (laughs) Well, that was a different thing. I think it was a different time. I look back on it, and I think probably I could have studied ten hours a week; who knows? The exam was that easy. I'll never forget the exam was so easy, that I took. I couldn't believe it. You would have not been very smart to have failed it. They needed you, I think, in those days.

But he would lead them into their own traps, and then he would say, "Okay, well, if you're going to do that, you write me and tell me whether you did it or not." He was always doing that, telling people to write him. They promised something, then you had to write him and tell him.

DePue: Again, this is the timeframe that the ramp-up for the Vietnam War is going strong. Did you ever think that there were some officers who were choosing this path because they were looking to stay out of a shooting war?

Thunman: No, no. The path was too hard. If you had that kind of a personality, there was other paths they could have chose, and I'm sure they did choose, to stay out of the shooting war. There were some in submarines who wanted to get involved in Vietnam, but of course, we wouldn't go to duty in MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam), something like that.

I'll tell you where I saw the war and kind of a personal contact with the war was, I would stand duty. The Bureau of Naval Personnel has a duty officer, lieutenant commander grade, major grade, who's there always, twenty-four, seven. In those days, it was mainly casualties that you were dealing with. We had big rows, records of casualties, in the duty office. Reports came in, and you wrote the president's messages.

DePue: Did this include the Marines as well?

Thunman: Yes, Marines and the corpsmen. That's where... The corpsmen were really was...

DePue: Navy corpsmen who spent their time working with the Marines as medics.

Thunman: With the Marines. We had a lot of casualties there. When you say Marines, as well... No, I take that back. It was all Navy corpsmen. There were some sailors, but Navy corpsmen, they really, really took a lot of casualties. Dealing with the families, writing the messages and then getting... What we would do was, we had chaplains all over the country, designated, and calling them and getting them headed for the—with a military representative in that area—headed for the family's home when the announcement was made, then writing the letter, the message from the president. You just didn't want to make a mistake in that.

I remember one thing. I got a call, and it was a man from Oregon. He said, "I'm just calling to see how my son is doing. I didn't know who to call." He gave me his name and serial number. Sure enough, he was in the casualty stack of records. He was in the hospital, somewhere, I forget. He'd been badly wounded, and he'd dropped through the system somehow. The guy had been notified that he'd been wounded, but he never heard anything more since. This is like a month or so later. The guy was the nicest man. He said, "I hate to bother you." He said, "I know you guys are busy there. Can you give me any more information about how my boy is doing?"

Oh, gosh, you know, those kinds of things... You were on the phone [with] mothers. Everybody called you and said, "Are you sure you had the right person? Can you check again?" It was a night of just kind of hell, of dealing with grief. So, that's one of the things I got out of that, that had to do with Vietnam.

The rest of what we did was not Vietnam. The rest of the Navy was not very happy with us, because here we're raising all this hell about qualification in training, standards, and they're out fighting a war.

DePue: I suspect they would say things like, "We need these good people working for us."

Thunman: That's right. And, why should you guys have special dispensations? At the same time, I was putting together the legislation to pay bonuses for people coming into the nuclear power program. We needed to incentivize it, and that was a big deal. We did a lot of work with the Congress on that. That's the first time that we'd ever paid bonuses for people who had special skills, to stay in the Navy and to pursue our program. On top of that, I was out lecturing in the various colleges around the country, to try to induce the young midshipmen to volunteer, because all of it was on a volunteer program.

When I first got there, for example, Rickover was upset that the Navy had not done more to get volunteers from the college, from NROTC units. In those days, we had sixty-five Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps units at

universities around the country. Now this was about, I don't know June, maybe a little earlier than that, May. Rickover wanted to be ready to interview people by the first of October, I think. Rickover called Semmes. These things, he'd call... He never went through the system. He'd call Semmes, and he'd say, "I want every one of those schools visited between now and the first of October. I want those people talked to, and I want a program presented where they understand the nuclear power program." Well, that was me. I went all over this country.

I remember, I went down in the travel section of the Bureau of Naval Personnel. I said, "Well, I'm supposed to go to..." My orders were written as broadly as any set of orders ever could have been written, "four corners of the country, travel any means, any time." Nobody in their right mind could get orders like that from the supply organization. They looked at it, and they finally said, "We don't know how to do this." I said, "How am I supposed to fill out the things?" So they just gave me a booklet. I had a booklet of... They were really vouchers. Wherever I went, I'd just write the voucher and kept a copy of it. I flew helicopters; I flew... Every way you could travel, I traveled to get to these places, in order to meet the schedule. I visited all of them. And it was a bad time. Some of the universities, there were riots going on.

I went to Columbia, and the professor of naval science, who's the guy who runs the NROTC unit, was a captain. The professors of naval science were full Navy captains. I always wore my uniform, of course. He wasn't wearing a uniform. He said, "I don't wear my uniform." We were walking across campus. He says, "Do you mind?" He says, "I don't want to walk with you across campus. I'll meet you on the other side." And I went by, people jeering, insulting me, yelling at me. There I was, in the midst of these kind of new students, who were certainly disrespectful of anything that had to do with the military.

I remember, up at Harvard... I went there. All the midshipmen had to be there. That was a requirement. That was one of the questions I'd asked the professor of naval science, because I had to answer that question to Rickover. Was everybody there? Yes, unless they were in the hospital or something. But I would have to say, "Two were not there; one guy had a broken leg or something." I knew the old man would ask me, from time to time, "Are they really all coming to these things?" "Oh, yes, sir."

But they came in their uniforms. They didn't have any socks on. That was kind of going through the, I guess, colleges, where you didn't wear socks with your shoes. I remember afterwards, getting together with that Navy captain and saying, in a nice way, but I said, "It seems to me, captain, you could get these guys in uniform, and uniforms includes socks, the way I learned it." But it was not a good time to travel around college campuses in the United States of America in 1966.

So I had all these things on my plate. The two years went fast, and an awful lot got done. One of the key points that I would make here, the qualifications' side; these qualifications were really like licenses. You went through the nuclear power training, and you passed and made it through, you received what was called a Navy enlisted classification code, certain numbers that indicated that you were qualified as a nuclear power operator, in whatever area you were qualified, machinist, electricians, officers; there's an engineering officer to watch.

It was a formal thing, and there was a lot of legal background associated with that, where Rickover had, through one means or another, said that I will never put anybody operating a nuclear power plant, who is not qualified, today, who is not qualified. [That] doesn't mean that he was qualified two years ago, no, no, today. He's qualified today. I will certify today, that the man operating that reactor is qualified. That's why the yearly exams and all of those things went on your records reviewed, your reliability reviewed." That number was an important number, if it was in your service record.

It was my responsibility to keep those records up-to-date. All hell would break loose...As you can imagine, and at that point, we were getting up to 4,000 or 5,000 operators, and we were qualifying them in the schools. Guys would fail, or somebody'd get in trouble; somebody'd get a felony, all of these things happening. It was my job—I was the only guy—my responsibility was to keep those records up-to-date. I got a billet from Captain Zech. I said, "I've got to have somebody to help me with this." So he got me...I ordered back an enlisted man, first class, a petty officer, smart, young guy, off a submarine, really smart young man. He's the one that kept that going.

That's when I first kind of got involved with computers. I'd made friends with an officer there in the bureau, who was involved with keeping records. I was up talking about them. He was talking about this new process they had, where they had punch cards...I don't know if you go all the way back. He said, "You've got this card on the guy, and you punch whatever it is you want to punch into it, and then you put it in, and you've got a listing of them. If you want to change the guy, of course, you just pull the card out and change it. I thought, Wow, that's something.

So I immediately got that with my young assistant. We put all the qualified people in the nuclear power program into punch cards. I think it was probably the first community that they'd ever done that in. The old man liked that. He really liked the fact that...He'd say, a couple of times he'd say, "How do you know that list is up-to-date?" I said, "It's brought up-to-date every day, Admiral." "How do you do that?" "Change cards. If something happens last night with a guy, pull his card, put another card in there, run the list." He liked that. He thought that was slick. But he had a legal requirement. That was more than just his own something he wanted. He had a legal requirement that he

said nobody would ever operate one of these reactors who wasn't qualified today.

DePue: Now, you're talking about Rickover having a legal requirement. Wouldn't that have been a law, written by Congress, under the influence of Rickover in the first place, that that was the standard the Navy would achieve?

Thunman: Yeah, I think so. I'm sure, as a triumvirate, yes, yes.

DePue: So he would have that to go back to and say, "No, this is what validates what I'm doing in the first place."

Thunman: Yes, yes. So those two years... And there were times I went to the highest levels of the Navy. I had to go to the secretary of the Navy once.

DePue: Who was that at the time?

Thunman: Say it again?

DePue: Who was the secretary of the Navy at the time? Do you recall? [secretary of the Navy, from November, 1963 through June, 1967 was Paul H. Nitze]

Thunman: I don't.

DePue: That's okay.

Thunman: We had this officer who had a masters [degree]. The guy ended up as an admiral. I hated him for the rest of my life and most people did. He was never a favorite in the submarine force, and he never had a big time submarine job, smarter than hell. He'd gone on and gotten a masters from... He'd been picked by the Navy. He was nuclear trained, a submariner, been picked because he was so bright and sent on to get a masters at Harvard or Yale. He gets out of college or his masters program and then goes back aboard a submarine, on one of the ballistic missile submarines, which again is just filled with qualifications, standards and requirements, well above anybody else had ever experienced in the Navy, because you've got nuclear reactors and nuclear missiles all mixed up together.

He writes a letter to the *Naval Institute Proceedings*, which is a monthly magazine, a very professional magazine about naval subjects, issues. It's always been very good. He writes an article, "*Polaris*." I remember the name. "... *Pinnacle or Predicament?*" was the name of it. He had been serving on a ballistic missile submarine. He said, "We really don't need all of these things. These people could be doing some other things, and more people could go to postgraduate school and learn things outside of the nuclear power program." This gets published, well written, but it just essentially said we could drop these standards; we don't need all these high standards.

Rickover read it, was just furious. I got called, "Rickover wants a rebuttal written immediately and wants it to appear in the next *Naval Institute Proceedings*." I had to write the rebuttal. I carved one out with my elbow. I could certainly never write like the other guy. I sent it over to Rickover's offices. It came back approved, with some changes, of course. I called the *Naval Institute Proceedings* and said, "Admiral Rickover's got this article he wants into next month's magazine." This guy was very aloof. He said, "This is a private organization;" although it lives at the Naval Academy. That's where they had their offices. They said, "Well normally it takes six to eight months to get an article into the queue, maybe four months. We can't get one in for next month."

So I went down to see the editor. I remember his name was Bowler. He treated me like a plebe. "Are you kidding me? I'm not going to put that article in there." I said, "You've got to understand, Admiral Rickover wants this." I said, "What would it take? Who would have to tell you to get that in there?" He and I kind of got nose to nose a little bit. He was a retired Navy captain. I said "Well, what if the secretary of the Navy told you to put it in there? Would you tell him no too?" He said, "That will never happen." I said, "Don't be surprised," He sloughed it off.

So, off I went to the secretary of the Navy. As I said, I'd go anywhere. I went in to the secretary's executive assistant, Harry Train, who later became a four-star, was a captain. I went over to the office, and I said, "Captain, I need to get this article approved. I need to get the secretary to direct the editor of the *Naval Institute Proceedings*, to get this article in for the next month's *Proceedings*." He said, "Well, I don't know if I can get in and see the secretary about that." I said, "Rickover wants this, Captain. I'm telling you; he really wants this. This is not going to stop until somebody high up tells him to stop. It ain't going to be me, and it's not going to be you." (laughs) He said, "Well, okay, have a seat."

I'm sitting there, and it was clear, because I had been in Rickover's office when Rickover would pick up the phone and call the secretary of the Navy, get mad and just chew him a new one. "You dumb son of a bitch, you..." (DePue laughs) I've been there a couple of times when that happened. So, boy, almost immediately, he went in to see the secretary. Out came the secretary. I'm trying to think who it was. He came out of the door. He looked. He said, "Is this the officer from Rickover's offices?" "Yes, sir." "What does the Admiral want to do? What does he want to do? It was just a few words. I said, "Well, he's got this article that he wants in." I tried to explain, and he said, "Okay, okay." (both laugh) He told Train, "Train, get a hold of the institute and tell them to get that article in there," turned around and walked back in his office. It got published. (both laugh) That's why it was an extraordinary job.



DePue: Was this during the time, the three months transition while you're getting ready for the next assignment?

Thunman: No, no, no, it was during my regular job.

DePue: I guess what's curious to me is the secretary of the Navy's not even in your chain of command, technically.

Thunman: No. But remember, the job is, "Keep them from killing each other." Every time I was unsuccessful, that's when Rickover would pick up that phone and either call Semmes or the secretary of the Navy. It only had to happen a couple of times. Rickover would get on that phone and say, "I'm going to go to the Congress! You people are supposed to be supporting. You're not supporting this! Here we are, we're talking of safety of personnel reactors. Cities in this country could be damaged." He'd go on, you know. I'm sure the secretary would hold that [phone out here]. (DePue laughs) They didn't want that, and I didn't use it. I tried to be respectful as I could. I always started off with, "Hey, you know, this can get bad."

I had a couple of times, say, "No." I'd go back; I'd call over to Rickover's offices and say, "I can't get it done." That's all I had to say, "I can't get it done."

DePue: We mentioned this in our last session too, but I'm sure these kinds of incidents didn't ingratiate you with the rest of the community.

Thunman: No, no, no. I was Darth Vader.<sup>58</sup> When I walked into an office, people would say, "Where's he going?" I really tried not to, but it was after about a year there, I'd walk into an office, and the place would quiet down. They'd watch. What's he after? What's he doing? I'm a lieutenant commander. (both laugh)

DePue: In most circles, that would be pretty far down the food chain.

Thunman: It was like a major, walking around the Pentagon.

DePue: There's 1,000 of you guys.

Thunman: Yeah. (laughs) It's amazing, the things I found that have been attributed to me in my lifetime, which I had nothing to do with, that the system somehow decided well that was something Thunman did. Thunman is the one who put that together. It just happened that way.

DePue: Putting all of that aside, did you feel like you were making a big contribution? Were you proud about what you were doing during that time?

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<sup>58</sup> A fictional character in the Star Wars movie franchise. Vader appears in the original film trilogy as a pivotal antagonist whose actions drive the plot, while his past as Anakin Skywalker and the story of his corruption are central to the narrative of the prequel trilogy.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, I was very proud, because we were launching ships, putting crews together. It was really difficult. We were manning ships. I had to find the people, the sailors, the officers, but the officers were not as hard. There was another officer there who handled officers mainly, although I did some. But I had to put together a crew of forty some-odd men, who could operate a nuclear power plant, with the right seniorities and the right training and background, package that group and mail them off to where the submarine's being built. That was not an easy thing to do.

DePue: A mixture of experience and new people?

Thunman: Yes and different qualifications.

DePue: Were you just looking at those who would work with the nuclear power plant?

Thunman: They all had to be qualified.

DePue: So this wasn't the entire ship complement?

Thunman: No, no. All the officers, of course, had to be qualified and all the nuclear power people.

DePue: Where were the enlisted coming from?

Thunman: I was drawing them down from other submarines and from the training program.

DePue: Were you involved with the enlistment of the right kind of people to begin with?

Thunman: Yes, setting the standards. The BUPERS instruction 1540.40 set the standards for enlistment, for the whole thing. When we manned a crew, our office manned the engineering department and the officers. The rest of the Navy picked the rest of the crew. But the engineering department, which was... The allowance at that time was thirty-three enlisted, and I think, twelve officers. But I had to go find them, put them together in the right proportion, experience, rank, rate, and get them there.

DePue: This is the time during the draft. I'm wondering what the minimum standards would have been for the enlisted personnel, high school graduate? Were a lot of them college experience?

Thunman: We had some college. The standards that were set, that Rickover had come across and then set, were these ASVAB, as I talked about, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. They were the ones that were a little bit different, I think, than the ones you're thinking about. I'm not sure I've got the right acronym now, but in World War II they did a lot of study of testing

of people, in intelligence and also skill, especially at Great Lakes [Naval Station].

As a matter of fact, I had to write a paper for the old man one day about, where these tests come from? It was very interesting. I got deep into the bureau someplace and found out about them. They had proven to be very good in predicting the performance of people. There were different categories. I forget the categories that you could end up with, depending on your performance in the testing. I don't know what they were, one, two, three or four, something like that.

Rickover set the top category, set the...I know what they were called. They were called, when we came down to it, GCT/ARI, General Classification Test and ARI, which was arithmetic. Those were the tests. He set a minimum of some number, 250 or 450 or something. You could not come in the nuclear power program unless you had that number in your testing. There was no requirement about having to be a—this is for the enlisted—about being a high school graduate. Officers, of course, had to have a degree in engineering, but the enlisted had to have this minimum requirement, GCT/ARI. That was put in our instruction. [There was a] big battle in the Navy about that, a big battle. I had to take on several people in the Navy to get them to agree that we would only take that caliber of person into our nuclear power program. That standard was set, and it's still there today, I'm sure.

DePue: If the enlisted went into this, would they have a three-year commitment?

Thunman: It was six years.

DePue: Six years, because of how much was invested in that area?

Thunman: The training they would be involved in. If you enlisted for going into the nuclear submarine program, you had about two years of training and four years of operations, but it's six years. You got proficiency pay—we got this authorized—if you signed up for seven, then you got proficiency pay.

DePue: I suspect that, after that enlistment was over, which is a long enlistment, they could probably write their own ticket in the civilian world?

Thunman: Yes, they could. They all did well. I've always marveled. Across my lifetime, I've had young people come in to fix the air conditioner or something in my house. I'll ask them their background. One of the guys would say he's nuclear trained. I just watched how they operated, how much better they were than the rest of them, how he had the instruction book there and how he had the tools. He could tell you exactly what was wrong with your air conditioning plan. I'd sit there and think, Yeah, that's it. (laughs) I know where he came from.

DePue: I wanted to ask you a couple of general questions that didn't apply to this specific assignment. These aren't things that would be direct to your experiences, but I'd like to hear your thoughts on a couple of events in the world, or if there's any impact. The first one was June of '67, the Six-Day War, over in the Middle East.

Thunman: It had no impact on us whatsoever. Of course, our ballistic missile submarine force was at sea and ready, [phone rings] but I don't recall anything...At that level, I was not involved with anything tactical. I can recall, though, laughing about how well the Israelis—

DePue: Six days, that's a pretty short war.

Thunman: But the way they took them apart was...I'm afraid the Arab community has still not forgotten that. They'll never forget it.

DePue: Well, the second event, and perhaps a little bit more painful, that was late January, primarily February of 1968 and the Tet Offensive.

Thunman: Other than the information...Here again, I was a low level, not really in any sort of a chain where I got meaningful reports. But we would sit at lunch and talk about those things. The way I got it, right off the bat, was we were winning. We were just chopping them up left and right. The discussions with some of my friends, Marines and others...It was a victory. It's just amazing to me that it came out the other way. I think Walter Cronkite, among others, had the most to do with that.<sup>59</sup> I forget the numbers, but we killed an awful lot of North Vietnamese in the Tet Offensive.

DePue: Well, even more so, the Viet Cong.

Thunman: The VC, you're right, VC. At the time, I remember talking about it. I was interested in those things, we all were. I thought, Gee, this is great. We're winning. It turns out we were losing, in the minds of America.

DePue: At that time, did you think we were there for the right reasons?

Thunman: No, I never did believe we were there for the right reasons. I never believed he should have put the 200,000 men in. He had no reason to put 200,000 soldiers in there. I didn't argue with it, but I knew that there was fallacious reasoning used to make that decision.

DePue: Did you and your fellow submariners—

Thunman: Wait just a minute. I'm getting close to the name of my friend, Stockwell.

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<sup>59</sup> Walter Leland Cronkite Jr. (November 4, 1916 – July 17, 2009) was an American broadcast journalist who served as anchorman for the CBS Evening News for 19 years (1962–1981). During the heyday of CBS News in the 1960s and 1970s, he was often cited as "the most trusted man in America."

DePue: Stockman?

Thunman: No, no, Stockwell. Jim...Stockwell was not the name. It's Jim. I guess it will come, but he was the one in the Gulf of Tonkin that went out and looked for the torpedo boats.

DePue: Stockdale.

Thunman: Stockdale, God almighty. Yeah, very good friend of mine, prisoner of war, won or awarded the Medal of Honor for trying to commit suicide by drowning himself in a bucket of water, to keep from having to go through the interrogation by the North Vietnamese.

DePue: He was eventually a vice presidential candidate with Ross Perot?

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: What I wanted to ask you about was whether you and your fellow submariners saw what was going on in Vietnam as part of this greater Cold War, which you guys were so much at the heart of.

Thunman: I did believe in the domino effect. I believed you had to...Going back, let me kind of modify where I said I didn't believe. I knew that we didn't have correct reasoning for making a 200,000 troop decision, in my mind. But that doesn't mean that I didn't believe that we [should] stand and fight. I think that was good, and I thought that at the time too. You had to stand and fight somewhere. I think that was useful. I think the Soviets learned that they weren't going to run over us. So, I modify my statement about, did I think it was a good thing for us to be doing. Yeah, we all believed it did.

I go back now and I think back in the bureau, there wasn't anybody there in the military group, people that I dealt with, that felt that we shouldn't be there. We all felt we should be fighting the Russians somewhere. Maybe not the Russians, but fighting to impress the Russians that we would fight, because that was the only way you were going to deter them. There was no other way you were going to deter them. They had to know that you would stand and fight, even from a conventional point of view or from a strategic point of view.

DePue: One of the other phrases that's oftentimes used when talking about our national policy at that time and the concepts that we had about the Cold War, was this notion of monolithic communism, that the Soviets were pulling the strings and dictating what was going on in places like Vietnam and later on Nicaragua, but wherever the war happened to be fought.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: Did you adhere to that?

Thunman: I did. In the initial stages of the Cold War, Jim Stockdale used to say that those were Soviet pilots in those North Korean aircraft. Of course, the Chinese were providing a lot of supplies to North Korea, I'm sure, at the direction of the Soviets. The Soviets were too. It was an effort of communism. I think, in those days and across the entire time of the life of the Soviet Union, I think they called the tune. They set the... There wasn't any communist state that was going to step out of the line and do other than what the Soviet Union wanted to do.

So I go back, and I'd say I think it was a good thing we did there. We handled it so poorly. When the war ended, I was then a captain on the fleet commander's staff in Pearl Harbor and saw the terrible way that we ended the war and how Congress abandoned Vietnam, abandoned everything that was ever done on the good side. It was too bad.

DePue: Well, I'm definitely going to come back to the issue of Vietnam later on in your career. But I want to ask this one more question. Then we probably need to close up for today. Was political training part of what you got as a cadet at the Naval Academy or a part of what these very select people you're choosing to be part of this nuclear force? Did they get political training and instruction of what communism was, instruction of what capitalism was?

Thunman: No, we did not. We didn't. I think they do a lot better at that today than in my day. One of the things that Rickover, I thought, did wrong—and I could never convince him otherwise—he would not let any of our nuclear trained officers go to war college. He said it was a waste of time. He said people could learn all that on their own. He said they need to be out doing other things, important things. They were valuable people, and there was need for them at sea and in other important jobs. That was too bad, because I think the war colleges do a good job at that. Now, I never argued vociferously with him about it. I just commented; I said... My point was, Admiral, this does impact on the promotability of our people, when they're compared with others. They haven't had any war college. He would say, "They're better off because of it, those—I don't know what words he used—pinkos they're teaching. (both laugh) He had no regard for the war colleges. That's too bad, because I would have liked to have gone.

DePue: Well, I'm not sure you understood my questions though. Our opponents would have called it political indoctrination, that even as young recruits or young officers—

Thunman: No. None of that was done at the Naval Academy in my timeframe or in my career. All of my training was functional training and education. Political indoctrination—and I understand what you're saying—is something that comes as part of a broader effort. It's not training in how to turn the bolts one way or the other. We didn't get that. At the Naval Academy, the course I enjoyed the most, I remember, was we had a political science course. I really

enjoyed that course at the Naval Academy. I remember at the time I thought, Gee, I'd sure like to do more study in this.

Many of those things... Today, for example, we picked some officers in the Navy—this occurred when I was in the bureau—to send to what we called a strategic studies group, which is up at the war college. These are really our top officers. They go into that group, and they consider all kinds of things involved with the future of the military and of the country. But as far as going back with any sort of a basic education or effort to set people's minds properly, that was not done any time in my career.

DePue: We've spent much more time in this particular tour than I would have ever anticipated. And it's been, I think, very important to get that insight into how Rickover, in particular, but the Navy in general, was very careful in crafting who was going to be commanding and manning these submarines.

Thunman: The thing that I'm most proud of in my Navy career... When I came to the Pentagon, and we'll get to that, I was not qualified for the job to be the deputy chief of naval operations for submarine warfare. Nobody wanted me in the job anyway. I was Rickover's boy, and that's a whole other story. I ended up there five years in the job. Nobody thought, I think, I would last very long. I got to that job, and I thought, I don't know all of this budgeting, contracting, congressional interplay process, but I do know about selecting people, evaluating people.

So I decided that I would personally review the records of every officer going to submarine command, submarine squadron command, every flag officer going to submarine flag command. They couldn't go to those jobs until I approved them and that I would also approve the training and qualification process for our officers. The chief of naval personnel, I told him that's what I wanted to do. He said, "Fine." It didn't bother him at all. And that's what I did.

The force operated well, I thought, during those five years. We didn't have many problems. I see some of the problems they have today, about having to fire skippers—you read about it—in the Navy. I was able to do that and that was a good thing to dwell on. I look back on it, and that was a good decision. The rest of that crap gets done somehow. The guy that you put in there to run those ships, you and I have laughed about it before. You give him all this training and qualification and advice, and you say, "Okay, off you go," and that's the last... (laughs) He comes back. "Well, what did you do?" "Well, I had a good time. I went here, and I was there." (both laugh)

DePue: As a matter of fact, the next time we get together then, we're going to be talking about what many people would see as the pinnacle of a career, what they've been aiming for, command of your own...

Thunman: Command at sea, yes, commander of your own nuclear powered submarine. You know, I used to feel...It's one of the ways you can measure a man, was if he really wanted to do that. There are some who will say they want to do it, and they don't want to do it. They're scared to death of it. They don't have the confidence in their ability to do it. I don't mean to say that I was really confident, going into submarine command. Nobody is, but you're not afraid of it. That's something you've got to find out early and not send him. I'm sure that's true of the Army.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Well, that's a good teaser for the next session, when we talk about the U.S.S. *Plunger*. Thank you, Admiral.

Thunman: Okay.

(end of interview #5)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.06

Interview # 6: August 3, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Friday, August 3, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm in the home of Admiral Ron Thunman. Good morning, Admiral.

Thunman: Good morning, Mark, how are you today?



DePue: Good. I think this is our sixth session, but there's been quite a hiatus between session five and session six. I wonder if you'd be willing to explain a little bit of why that happened.

Thunman: The bad news was I had an operation, a spinal fusion, addressing a problem I've had. Ever since I was in the military, I've had problems with my back. [This was] my fourth operation associated with my back. That was two weeks ago yesterday, when I had the operation. It was successful. I feel much, much better. I'm still having a few after effects of the operation, but I'm very pleased that it's gone the way it has. I'll put in an advertising plug here for my doctor, who I think is just superb, Dr. Van Fleet, who's done the last two operations on my back, an extraordinary surgeon, I think.

DePue: Well, that's an appropriate name for somebody who has a Navy career.

Thunman: (laughs) Yeah, that's right. Well, as a matter of fact, I think he is in the Navy Reserve. I think he has a Navy background, from that point of view.

DePue: How much do your back difficulties have to do with being a really tall guy, who spent his career on a submarine?

Thunman: Well, I think just about everything. As I went on and on in submarines, my back would bother me and bother me. Of course, you wouldn't do anything. And, of course, I had the bad knee. That contributed to the back, because you were always favoring the knee. Finally, whatever the problem was, the neuropathy that showed up in the late '80s, toward the end of my career, I think probably had something to do with the back. I was, frankly, too tall for submarines.

DePue: Did you end up stooping a lot when you were onboard?

Thunman: Yeah, stooping a lot, squatting a lot. You were hanging on a periscope a lot, up and down with the scope, in what we used to call the duck waddle position, up and down. I spent so much time at sea and in submarines and in reconnaissance missions, where the scope was up and down and up down, daily, nightly, with me on it, during the tense operations. I think that's really the background of it.

Maybe I mentioned before, I am 100 percent disabled in the eyes of the VA, as a result of the injuries I sustained during my career. Of course, they investigated all of that carefully, before they will give you that designation. For anybody's information, it has nothing to do with what your rank is. They've got some people who, that's what they do, regardless of what you look like or where you came from. They look at you like you've never been looked at before. Then they decide what percentage of disability you're at, and they came up with 100 percent.

DePue: Well, we get to talk about a period of your own personal history that I think you feel very strongly and probably very warmly about. We're going to be talking about the tour of command with the U.S.S. *Plunger*, which I understand was 1968 to '71.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: You came off this fascinating tour, working in the Pentagon and very closely with Admiral Rickover and helping basically form who those commanders and who the officer corps would be on all these submarines. I wanted to start with just a couple questions about the *Plunger* and how you were selected for that position.



*Official Command photo of Captain Ron Thunman, while he commanded Submarine Squadron 15 in Guam, 1974*

Thunman: That's an amazing story. It turned out to be lucky for me; although at the time I didn't think it was. I was in this position where I could pretty much call where I would go. I was in the officer assignment section of the bureau, and my boss said, "Pick out what submarine you want to go to." The newest submarine, in the newest class, the *Queenfish*, the "Queen of the Sea." The captain was coming up for rotation, so I picked that, of course.

DePue: What was your rank at the time?

Thunman: I was a lieutenant commander, making commander. I made commander just a couple of months before I came aboard.

DePue: Is that an 05 position?

Thunman: Commander is 05. The commanding officers of submarines is an 05 position. So, naturally, I picked the best. One of the things you have to do before you go to command of your submarine, in those days—I'm sure it's the same now—you had to go to Admiral Rickover's offices for three or four months and study that submarine itself and its equipment and its history. So that when you came aboard the submarine, you knew everything about that propulsion plant, engineering plant, problems that that submarine had. It was a good thing and very difficult process, because at the end of it, you took an eight-hour examination. It was probably the most difficult exam I've ever taken. The instruction was really, you going over there and reading all of the information they had on that submarine, and then going to the division heads and sit and talk with them a little bit about questions you had.

DePue: Division heads being whom?

Thunman: Division heads being people who reported directly to Admiral Rickover. I bring that up because he wanted senior people in his organization to talk to you. He didn't want junior people.

DePue: So, these aren't people that were attached directly to the ship you were going to?

Thunman: No, no. These were people attached to Admiral Rickover, worked for Admiral Rickover there in Washington.

One funny thing that happened during that time was—this is in a time when they built Resurrection City, right behind the old main Navy buildings, there at the mall in Washington, the mall [National Mall] in front of the Lincoln Memorial. All of the hippies—there was a couple thousand of them—went out and put together this terrible mess.

DePue: This is 1968, isn't it? (laughs)

Thunman: Yes. I'm there one Saturday morning. We were studying all the time. The people ran in, and they said, "My God, the Admiral is loose in Resurrection City."<sup>60</sup> Admiral Rickover, on his own, had got up, gone out, marched into Resurrection City, where all these hippies [were], and there's Rickover, as you can imagine, with all these hippies. They [Rickover's people] said, "We've got to find him. We've got to find him." Of course, all of us spread out, hunting for him.

We found him there in kind of a makeshift tent with some long-haired hippie. He was lecturing this guy about how he ought to get to work and stop this foolishness. So we got our hands on him before they devoured him. He was just so tiny, as compared to all of them.

DePue: Was he in uniform, and were you folks in uniform?

Thunman: We were not. When we were in his offices, we were in civilian clothes. He never wore a uniform, except on very special occasions. He hated to wear a uniform.

DePue: I suspect, though, that it wasn't difficult to tell you guys apart from the rest of the group? (both laugh)

Thunman: No. We formed kind of a phalanx around him and marched him out of there. But that was funny, finding him there lecturing, looking up at this guy, just giving him, what for, for being such a bum and not contributing to his country.

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<sup>60</sup> Resurrection City was a 3,000 person protest camp, set up on Washington DC's National Mall, as part of the Poor People's Campaign for six weeks in the spring of 1968.

Anyway, at that time in the fleet, Rickover had established what they called the Nuclear Propulsion Examining Boards. They were called ORSE boards, O-R-S-E. Operational Reactor Safety Examining teams. The first examinations were being conducted. [There was] a lot of concern in the fleet, because the senior member of the board—there were generally six very highly experienced nuclear submariners, who were part of the board—but the senior member reported directly to Rickover and also directly to the fleet commander. There'd be nothing in between.

If the senior member found the ship to be unsatisfactory, then the ship was shut down, returned to port, shut down, and Rickover would then direct the corrective actions necessary to bring it back into the fleet for operational use. Fleet commanders didn't like it. Nobody liked it, but Rickover set it up.

They started these examinations, and one of the first examinations they conducted in the Pacific Fleet was in the submarine, *Plunger*. And *Plunger* failed miserably. So I'm about two or three weeks away from graduating from Rickover's school—as long as I could pass the examination—when I got called. [They] said, "Hey, the captain of the *Plunger* has been relieved for cause, and you are going to relieve him. You've been designated to take his place." They told me, they said, "Now, of course, you have to pass the exam first." I always thought, I wonder if I'd flunked the exam, what would have happened. I took the exam in a couple of days, and a couple of days later, I was headed in an airplane to Pearl Harbor to take command of *Plunger*. The ship was in port, shut down.

Before I—and this is something that a lot of people don't know; many probably won't believe; I don't know; but it happened. Before I left there, Rickover called me in. He said, "You know about the *Plunger*?" And I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "You're going to go there, and you're going to screw up as badly as the guy that's coming out of there. You guys aren't going to do what's necessary to make those ships top of the line." And he said, "You're going to be just like the skipper of the *Thresher*."

Now this is an interesting point here. The *Thresher*, of course, was lost in '63. He said, "Do you know about that?" I had just heard about it that morning. I think the people there in his office said, "Hey, we'd better make sure he knows about this," the fact that the skipper of the *Thresher*, when he went out on his test dive, did not do the dive in accordance with procedure, which is to go down every 100 feet and tick. He went straight down to test depth, without checking at the interim depths.

He [Rickover] said, "That dumb skipper." I won't mention his name, "You're going to be just like him. You're the same kind of guy. You haven't got any sense. I don't know whether you can do this or not, but this is all we've got. This is all we can do, and you've got to go." I'm sitting there listening to this. That was it, not good luck, congratulations. That's it, and off

I went. I thought, Oh, well, my God. So I was going to go from the top ship in the Navy to the bottom ship.

I was on a plane, and I got there. Everybody was upset with the *Plunger* but also upset with Rickover, because he now had control of that ship. It was a fleet ship, but he had control. Nobody could operate it or do anything without his permission. I get aboard, and I'm thinking, Well what the heck am I going to do? So I thought, Well, the one thing I know is people. I know about people.

So I'm going to interview everybody on the crew. The first thing I said to the executive officer, the number two guy, I said, "Okay, we're going to shut the hatches, cut all the phone lines to shore, no more telephone calls." "To family and all?" I said, "No telephone calls. Put the telephone in my room. That's it." I've got to find out what we've got here. What's the problem?

I started this process of interviewing every officer and sailor onboard, about 100, 110 people, for about a half an hour with each. It was an interesting thing, and of course, the sailors, their morale was on the bottom. They were bottom ship now in the Navy, and the *Plunger* was the first ship ever to fail the Operational Reactor Safeguards Exam. The commander, submarine force was appalled and embarrassed that one of his ships had failed, had been taken off the line. Of course, it had been reported up the line to Washington. [The] fleet commander was upset about it. It was a big deal, the first time a ship was taken off the line by a technical bureau in Washington, because of improper operation, safety, all the considerations that went into that examination. The ability of the crew to operate properly. It wasn't a written examination; these were operational examinations. You went to sea to conduct it.

Actually, in the interviews, I found, these guys are pretty good guys I was talking to. They were not bad at all. I expected to have some real problems. One sailor, who was the best on the ship, had the best reputation on the ship, he was a first class petty officer. That's an E6 from your point of view. He was responsible for maintaining the chemistry of the reactor. The records of the reactor chemistry showed that it had not been maintained properly. It had not showed what it should have been showing, if it had been maintained properly. So I sat down with this guy. Here he was, a wonderful guy, a wonderful family, had orders to go to shore duty there in Pearl Harbor, to be part of the shore-based, chemistry maintenance system. I'm talking to this guy, and I'm looking at the records. I'm saying, "I don't understand how these records could come about." I was talking to him. I said, "Did you really add this amount at this time, and did you actually do this, all of the things you're supposed to do?" He said, "Oh, yes, yes." I said, "I don't understand why it didn't react properly."

It's about 11:00 or 12:00 at night, and I was going through it. Finally I just stopped. I looked at him. He's the number one; everybody in the crew just loved this guy. I said, "You're lying to me. You can't add those chemicals at that point and not get this reaction. That is physically impossible. That doesn't comply with the laws of chemistry. So, you're lying." And I said, "I'll prosecute you for this, if you don't tell me the truth." That scared him. He said, "Yeah, you're right. I am lying. A lot of those things I didn't do. All I did was gundecked the record."<sup>61</sup> I said, "Well go down; pack your sea bag; get off the ship; go up to the squadron offices in the morning. You're no longer on this ship."

The next morning...Now I've only been here now two or three days. The crew has been watching all this go on. Here this captain comes aboard, this commander comes aboard, interviews everybody, and who does he fire but the best sailor on the ship? (laughs) This really hit them in the face. I didn't advertise why or anything about it. I just...That was it. Of course, the exec and the engineer all knew who he was. That was step one.

But let me say this for the poor guy who was there before me, who was a good man, smart guy, not a real strong individual, like you had to be in those days. He was letting the force commander tell him what to do, as far as maintaining the ship, and what he could do and what he couldn't do. The ship had been in a minor overhaul, and there were a lot of things that should have been done that were not done.

The force commander was saying, "You don't need to do that. You don't need to overhaul the gyro. You don't need to do this." Rather than stand up and say, "Either we fix this, or I go," which I later did on the *Plunger*, on one occasion, they beat him down to nothing. The guy was a beaten man when I got there. He wasn't a bad man, and he was a smart guy, a smarter guy than me, I think. So, it did not have that really strong leader. It had not had it. He hadn't been tough enough to go find out what these problems were. The ship itself was dirty, and the bilges had oil. He had no standard.

I addressed that with the crew. I said, "We don't do business this way. This is the way we do business." [We] took all the pinups down. The people had pinups, and I said, "Wait, we don't have pinups on the submarine. We have instructions, and that's it. Take it all down." Then we started the process of retraining, so Rickover could make an evaluation of when we were ready to go back in the fleet. [We were] going in and out to sea, spending a lot of time doing different operational evolutions, observed by different people. We finally reached the point where we were ready. Wrong, I said that wrong. We spent a lot of time getting ready to go out to sea, a lot of operational evolutions, but they were conducted in port.

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<sup>61</sup>To gundeck is to falsify official documents, reports, logs, etc. especially in cases where work was not actually performed.

This was a funny story. It came the time when I turned to the squadron commander; I said, "We're ready to go to sea. We've had enough." He said, "Okay." So the commander, submarine force, sent a message to Rickover and said that he was going to send the submarine to sea, you know, the fleet commander and Rickover. Rickover came back; he said, "Only if you have a message from the commanding officer that the ship is ready." That's a real kick in the pants. It was a Sunday night. I'm up in the BOQ [base officers' quarters], and I get called, "Hey, you've got to go see commander, submarine force Pacific, COMSUBPAC."

He was having dinner in his house when I arrived. There was his family at the table and this wonderful flag quarters. He had a message sitting next to his plate. I came in and stood there at attention. He handed this, and he says, "I want you to initial this." (laughs) Now, he didn't like that at all, to have this commander have to initial his message that the ship was ready to go to sea. I gulped, and initialed it. That was it. He didn't say another word.

Now, going back, this commander of the submarine force, Admiral Walt Small, Walter Small, if you go back to my days on the *Snook*, when I was the executive officer for Bill Yates, and we came back from that patrol, and he got beat up so bad in the presentation of our patrol by the people who were briefing commander, submarine force Pacific and his staff. In his staff, his chief of staff was Walt Small. I'd seen Small just beat the hell out of Yates, and I was there in the presentation, just flipping the slides. I wasn't making the presentation. But there I stood, and then the guy... I had to initial what he wanted. He didn't like that. He was a diesel guy; he wasn't a nuke submariner. He did not like it.

So off we went. One of the problems they had was that they had a special operation that they had to conduct, that had been delayed. They were trying to recover. You know, we'll get the submarine there; give us some time. So, our training at sea was pretty extensive. We were there, trying to cover every area that was a problem and to make sure the crew was ready. Finally, the COMSUBPAC himself, Walt Small, went to sea with me one day. We went out and made some approaches on different ships, and he watched me.

I'm not sure many of the people were happy that I was the guy. I had though, gone to the Submarine Prospective Commanding Officer School before I went back to Rickover's office. All of us did that, PCO [Prospective Commanding Officer] school, they called it. Apparently, they gave me really a high checkmark. I was later told that he asked the PCO instructor, "Who would be best to go in there to *Plunger*?" They said Thunman would be the best guy. I think mainly because I'd had all that experience in *Snook*. I had done all of those operations in *Snook*. It was unusual for anybody to have that much experience.

Anyway, they said they're ready. At that time, Rickover said okay. Then they immediately deployed me, within a couple of weeks. We really weren't ready from a lot of points of view. Things I didn't know, but also I hadn't spent much time in submarines. You remember, the year in the diesel boat, a year on the *Robert E. Lee* and two years in the *Snook*, four years. I'd never been the chief engineer for any length of time and those kinds of things, which most of the skippers had. But away we went.

It was quite a patrol, quite an operation. We had problems with the shaft, alignment of the shaft. Finally, I had to send a message—I didn't like to—to tell them I've got to have this checked in Guam, where we had a submarine tender. I felt bad about that. But we went into Guam and got that addressed. At the same time, we found that the piping in the seawater system, associated with air conditioning plants, piping that was exposed to full submergence pressure, was the wrong size, when the ship was built. It was half the size required, as far as strength and capability.

DePue: How in the world does something like that happen?

Thunman: Well, you can go back and say, "How did *Thresher* happen?" We were the sister ship of *Thresher*. That message went back, and there was a big rumble back at Pearl Harbor. Of course, none of them wanted to go back and tell Rickover that we had this problem that they didn't know about.

DePue: It's not reflecting badly on you, but it certainly would on them?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, of course. The fact that they said the ship was ready and sent it off, and here we are. I'm this young, wide-eyed commander, actually kind of anxious to go. I get called up by the squadron commander, there in Guam. He said, "We looked at the problem; COMSUBPAC has looked at the problem. You're to go anyway, but you limit your depth to 400 feet." There was nothing written down here. You can go deeper if you have to, but limit your depth to 400 feet. All that had been done by a telephone conversation, without any reference to Washington. Well, I don't know whether... But certainly not anybody associated with Rickover in Washington. Rickover would have shut the ship down again.

The commodore, he's a wonderful guy, Pat Hannifin, a very eloquent guy, who always addressed people formally. He said, "You've got to go. You limit your depth to 400 feet. Go deeper if you've got to." He kind of said that with kind of an embarrassing shrug. I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "That's it." So I turned around and got to the door out of his office, up on the submarine tender, where he had his office. And he says "Hey, Ron." He never called me Ron before. "Hey, Ron." I turned around; he says, "Watch your ass, boy." (both laugh) I'll never forget that. So, off we went.



- DePue: Well, let me back up on that. That sounds like you'd ruffled some feathers, and the people are going to be looking for your scalp. If they could find the excuse, they were going to go after you. Is that about the right assessment?
- Thunman: Well, it was not so much... They were going to go after Rickover. They were afraid to tell Rickover that the ship had a problem, and they weren't going to address the problem, which was part of the way they got to where they were. They had problems in that ship that they did not deal with. The former skipper was not tough enough to stand up to them.
- DePue: But again, it sounds some people would have been fine if you ended up being the fall guy.
- Thunman: Oh, yeah, they had no problem with that.
- DePue: I have one other question here. This goes back to that—
- Thunman: No, but you're right with that. Certainly, Walt Small didn't have any love for me, at that point.
- DePue: One other question. This deals with the conversation Rickover had with you. He tells you basically that he didn't think you were the right guy for this job.
- Thunman: Yeah.
- DePue: Did he say that to motivate you or because that was what he really thought?
- Thunman: I think it was to motivate me. I think, knowing Admiral Rickover the way I did, he told me that story, because he wanted me to know that the *Thresher* skipper was a hotshot. You're a hotshot. Don't make dumb decisions, just because you're a hotshot. Make the right decisions. That was his way of saying that. No, I wouldn't have gone there if he didn't think I could do it, from knowing him later on. There was no way that I would have been the guy.
- DePue: I'll let you go back to your narrative, but typically, a lot of officers would see finally getting a command of your own boat, that's the pinnacle of your career.
- Thunman: That's the pinnacle of your career, yeah. And this is how I started off with it. So, away we went, up into what we called Indian country.
- DePue: Which is where?
- Thunman: Well, up in the Sea of Japan, international waters, very close to the Soviet Union ports and ships and operations, [to] carry out our mission. It was wintertime, so it's generally not really a productive time to see new things. There's a lot of ice and snow and storms. But I'm up there, just chomping at

the bit, trying to find something new and find something special to report. We found a couple of things, not major, but a couple of things.

One of the things was, I would say, “You’ve got to stay on the twelve-mile limit.” Now, you know, we’re supposed to stay at sea, in international waters, but I don’t want to give up anything. I don’t want to stay in the fourteen mile limit. I want to stay in the twelve mile limit, at the most productive spot, which of course, would be near their major port, which of course, in the Sea of Japan would have been Vladivostok.

So, one Sunday morning we’re up there. I’m in the ward room, and I hear this big, “Whump!” noise. I get a call immediately, “Captain, the rudder ram seal has blown.” The rudder is connected to a ram, and the ram causes the rudder to move. If the seal blows, you don’t have any hydraulic pressure to move the rudder.

DePue: In other words, you can’t steer as well.

Thunman: We can’t steer at all. (laughs)

DePue: And when you’re working twelve miles from the Soviet Union, it’s a bit of a problem? (laughs)

Thunman: Bit of a problem. The cause of the problem was they had installed new types of valves in the hydraulic piping, and they hadn’t been properly tested. One of them literally blew up into pieces. The seal didn’t blow. The valve, porting the oil to the seals, had blown, blown up into 100 pieces, just boom! The wrong valve. I got back there, and there’s a fog of oil. Fortunately, one of the things I had directed before we went was to put in some blocks, so you could always block over your rudder. I’d learned that when I was skipper of a PCE. I said, you know, you’ve got to have some means to control yourself if your rudder’s back there, flopping back and forth.

I remember, when we were preparing for the deployment, I said, “Make sure we’ve got blocks, where you can block it to the actual ram and hold the rudder at a certain position.” We blocked the rudder over, so that we were steaming in this little circle, at a very, very touchy point, with the ships going in and out. Sonars were pinging. We’re there, and I talked to the engineer and the chiefs. They said, “We’ve got a guy who’s pretty good on the lathe.” We had just a little lathe. It almost looked like a little sewing machine. We can make a jumper to go in the space where the valve was. So we decided on that. We decided, okay let’s go. We were putting together the plan to cut it. This little guy’s in there, some guy from Indiana or Ohio, who somehow had learned how to operate a lathe well. He was cutting this jumper.

I’m circling around here. This is six months after the *Pueblo*, where the *Pueblo* was taken. One of the problems they had with *Pueblo* was *Pueblo* couldn’t reach anybody to tell them that they had problems. *Pueblo* made a lot

of dumb decisions, but they were having communications problems. As a result of that, they'd put in a special notification system.

DePue: Well, we should mention here that the U.S.S. *Pueblo* was captured by the North Koreans, because theoretically, they had crossed into North Korean waters.

Thunman: Yes. Of course, we didn't know whether we were going to cross or not. With the currents being what they were, you could imagine. Certainly, the limit was threatened.

DePue: It's one thing to capture the U.S.S. *Pueblo*, it's another thing to capture a modern fleet attack submarine, isn't it?

Thunman: Yes. You don't think that went through my mind, like gee, should I get ready to burn the stuff we've got onboard? What's going to happen if they detect me, and they start depth charging me? Which they would do. I'm convinced of it. It happened on the *Snook*. And how would I handle it? It was quite a pressure. Then in my mind was, should I tell them? Should I tell COMSUBPAC, I've got a problem? Once I communicate, the Soviets will know they have a ship there. They'll be able to triangulate on it. They have these radio beacons ashore and will know exactly where we are. So, I thought, Well, let's just see how we're doing here, with this lathe.

I'm walking around the boat, kind of whistling and saying everything's fine, looking okay. Everybody, they would look at me and follow me with their eyes. Okay, we're getting along. Everything's going to be all right. I'm up in the attack center, watching these ships go by. Fortunately, we weren't close enough, they didn't expect to find anybody. (laughs)

Finally the guy gets it done, the best he can do it. This has been about a day, and we get it in place. I said, "Now, when we pressurize this thing, we need to do it very carefully. We want to put just a little bit of pressure on her. If we can just get a little bit of pressure on it, then we can move the rudder slowly, then we can head south and get the hell out of here." So we did that. But there was some leakage, seepage. We had the pressure down. This is normally a 3,000 pounds per square inch system. We had the pressure down to around 400 pounds or so. We got the rudder mid-ships, where we could hold it mid-ships and got the ship pointed. I thought, Well, I don't know how long this thing is going to last, but at least I've got a chance to get some way away from here.

DePue: One quick question. Had you actually violated Soviet waters?

Thunman: Well, I would not tell you one way or the other. That's not part of the interview.

DePue: Well let's move on then. (both laugh)

Thunman: We started south. Then I thought, Well, I'd better tell them now, now that I'm heading out of here. I used this new system. I still remember the code name. I'm sure it's cleared now; it's called Zokphone. What you did was you came up on your high frequency communications, and all you did was type in Zokphone, or transmit Zokphone. Because of the *Pueblo* problems with the communications, every communication station in the world—we had seven or eight major Navy communication sites for high frequency in those days—was required to stop everything they were doing and to take that traffic.

I had very carefully made the message as short as I could. I didn't want to transmit, because I knew then, the Soviets would be able to DF it, direction find it. I was in radio there with the radioman. In those days we used the key, none of this fancy stuff. He hits Zokphone, "Bang!" Every communication station in the world came on the line and said, Send your traffic," which was heartwarming. (both laugh) So we sent it. Then I watched the messages going around, SUBPAC Fleet, COM Seventh Fleet, bouncing around the world, submarine. We got a little further south, and they came back. Then we were out maybe forty, fifty miles. They asked for more information, and I gave them all the information.

DePue: I'm assuming all of this is encoded.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, everything is encrypted. But there's no question, they knew. Of course, later on we found that they used the encryption system of the *Pueblo* to intercept our traffic, all the way up into the '80s. So *Pueblo* was a major find for them. The *Pueblo*, they went and took that ship, not because the Koreans wanted it, because the Russians wanted it. It was an opportunity for them to get their hands on our crypto systems.

So, I figured, well they'll come back and say, you've got to go to port here or there, wherever. COMSUBPAC, I'm sure...I've always thought, they didn't want to admit that this ship still had big problems. They didn't want to admit that to the world. They send me a message, go to this point, across the Sea of Japan, just northwest of the small Japanese islands that are there. They'd send another valve out by helicopter. At the time I thought, Jesus, you know? Okay. It was okay with me. I had no problem with it.

So we get there, and it was like a bad movie. We surfaced at 5:00 and came to the point. Then out of the dusk came this helicopter, with a wire hanging down, with a valve on it, the valve that had blown up. I'm standing on top of the sail. I'm so anxious to get my hands on that valve. When it's hanging down there, I grab it, like I shouldn't have. Anyway, I ground myself to the submarine. A helicopter, whenever you touch a helicopter, you've got to be careful that you're not grounded, so that you didn't take the full charge. Well, I took it all. But by God, I got my hands on that valve. Down it came, and away went the helicopter. Down we went and put in the new valve. Back we went.

DePue: I would have wanted two valves.

Thunman: Well, there's a lot of stuff like that that could fail, that would really... But that was probably one of the worst things that could fail, to lose steering.

DePue: Do you think by that time Rickover knew that had been done?

Thunman: I don't think they told him. I don't think they told anybody in Washington. I think this is ole Walt Small covering his six, he and the fleet commander.<sup>62</sup>

DePue: Well, you're about this close from another international incident, I would think. I'm sure that's what's going through his mind.

Thunman: It could have been. You know, if we hadn't been able to make that jumper, I don't know what I'd have done. I don't know. I was going over and over it in my mind. I mean, what the hell are you going to do? Well, I knew what I'd do. I would, of course, send a message and tell them to send a carrier battle group up here, to help me out of here, take me in tow. That would have been wonderful news for everybody to glom onto.

Anyway, back we went, finished the op, did pretty good, not spectacular, but pretty good, took some great pictures, came out of there heading south. I thought, Wow, we made it. By God, we did it. I'm sure SUBPAC felt the same way. The next thing I know is I get a message from COMSUBPAC, "Proceed to Sasebo, Japan. Make the first port entry of a nuclear submarine into Sasebo, Japan." (laughs) I had a number of material problems that they didn't know about. One of the periscopes didn't work, and the gyro was a mess. I've got to tell you that story too, because it's a great story.

I can't remember if it was before or after the rudder thing, but our primary gyro should have been overhauled. [It] wasn't and was having a problem. We were there at the limit, a foggy, rainy day. The gyro failed. We had no backup gyro that was working. So, I said, "Okay, we'll get out of here. Start heading south. We'll use the magnetic compass," which was a tank compass, up on the control stand.

DePue: A tank compass?

Thunman: Yeah, that's the same magnetic compass that they used in tanks in those days. They had that as the backup, third backup on the submarine.

DePue: I'm trying to come up with an image here. A tank is nothing but steel, and a submarine is nothing but steel, so how do you get a compass to work in there?

Thunman: Well, you know, supposedly it works.

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<sup>62</sup> Covering your six is a military term for watching/covering your back/rear side.

DePue: Go ahead.

Thunman: This is a true story. The night before, I had been reading the publications associated with the port of Vladivostok, classified publications, because I didn't have anything else to do. I was just reading about it. They talked about having a ship on station at the port entry, where all the commercial ships went in.

So anyway, we're heading south. I'm sitting in the attack center, and we're at periscope depth. I'm just kind of sitting there wondering, Is anything going to happen here? We've got to get these gyros fixed. The guys are scrambling, trying to figure out how to fix it. About that time, the officer of the deck says, "I've spotted a ship." I took a look at it. It was a patrol craft, the same type that they normally use at the entrance to the port. (laughs) What the hell? I'm heading south, not north. The tank compass was just on the control stand, and I go, (bangs the table). That heading goes, "Zwang!" (DePue laughs) It's God's truth, 180 degrees. So we got out of that. That was the other big story of that operation.

Going back now, we're heading into Sasebo, a big deal in Japan, nuclear powered submarine, in those days, you know?

DePue: Had there been a press release about this?

Thunman: Oh, gosh, it went all over the world. Here we are, going to Japan, with the problems we had, okay. They had riots in Japan, twenty, thirty, forty thousand rioters. Of course, Japanese riots are so well organized that they're really not a riot. They're just kind of like a unionized riot. The information had been released two or three days early.

Another part of the story was, as we came around and headed north, up into the Sasebo area, we had a ship try to run us down. That was placed there to run us down. I don't know if anybody believes it. I believe it and my young guys on the ship, because we were up on the surface, in shallow water, heading toward the port, going by an island. We had, of course, a warning light. There's an amber warning light that flashes, that says, "I am a submarine." The officer of the deck said, on the radar, "There's this ship up by this island, just laying there."

I came up the bridge, and it got underway and established a course that would have been a collision course with us. So, I got up on the bridge, at night, black. He was not lighted. Who? He, she, that ship was not lighted.

DePue: Did you know at the time who was controlling the ship?

Thunman: No, no. Just that it was a radar...and I could see the black blob. I adjusted course. He was coming this way, and I adjusted course. He gave me room to get by, and he adjusted course. So it was a purposeful thing, no question in my

mind. Of course, it had been announced a couple days later. It's something that the Soviets, and I think the Chinese... Certainly the Soviets, they would have loved to have had a collision and embarrass us, going into Japan like that.

DePue: Were you in international waters at the time?

Thunman: Yeah, um-hmm.

DePue: Do you think it was a communist controlled ship?

Thunman: Yeah, I think so. I maneuvered enough, and he maneuvered enough. Fortunately, I'd had that experience on that patrol craft. I knew about how to maneuver when you get into a collision situation. I hung on to the very last with this guy, this big black hulk. We were coming together like this, and then I got the rudder over full and went down his starboard side. He couldn't react fast enough, and I went under him and headed north. But his movements were such that he was trying to collide with us. Why? I don't know, but it had been announced in the international press that the United States was going to have a nuclear submarine visit Japan. That was international news in those days.

DePue: I think I know the answer, but I want to hear your perception of this. Why was that such a controversial thing to do?

Thunman: Well, if they'd had the collision, it would have embarrassed us quite a bit. It would probably have stopped the visit or the visit would have been—

DePue: But why was the visit so controversial?

Thunman: Oh well, because in those days, Japan had no nuclear power plants. They were still much against anything that was nuclear powered.

DePue: It was just too soon after Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Thunman: That's right. That was a big deal in Japan, not to have a nuclear ship visit. So we got in there and moored. I had to argue with the local admiral there, who was a good guy. I had to say, "How do you know the water is deep enough?" He said, "I know." And I said, "How do you know?" I'm talking to an admiral, and we kind of... But I get in there, and I get alongside the big tender. The riots out in the streets and—

The other part of it, going in there was something, because once we got in range at Subic, there were more, I don't know, there were a couple of thousand small boats, a good fifty helicopters, all around us. I used to say that I know what happened to the Japanese kamikazes. They all became helicopter pilots during... I was up on the bridge. They couldn't hear me. I couldn't hear anybody. I had people on deck with fire hoses. People were trying to get onboard from these small boats. I said to myself, We're going to wash

somebody back into the propeller. You know, this big propeller is not shielded in any way. Today is bound to be the end of my Navy career. I said to myself, We're going to screw something up here today. It was a two or three hour thing, the entrance into Sasebo, with all this going on, all of it on television, as best they could in those days. They had a pretty good article in the Springfield paper. I don't recall if I've got that or not.

But anyway, we got in. Then we started the international part of it, the political part of it. I had dinner with the COMNAV [Communications-Navigation] of forces, Japan and his local dignitaries, which included Mrs. Yamamoto. I had an opportunity to converse with her, wonderful lady, spoke great English. [She] told me stories of how she and her husband approved all of the marriages of Japanese officers in the Imperial Japanese Navy, before World War II.

DePue: Really? (laughs)

Thunman: Yeah, very interesting.

DePue: Now he died towards the end of World War II.

Thunman: Yeah, he was killed. We attacked him by aircraft when he was on a plane, headed somewhere around Indonesia. But what a lovely lady she was.

DePue: And she spoke English.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: She had been with him all those years he was in the United States.

Thunman: Yeah, he went to Harvard. She was a very elegant lady. The quarters that I had there, assigned to me for my personal use, if I wanted, was where they planned the Pearl Harbor raid, in Sasebo, interesting.

I got to know the mayor. They were still having riots in Japan, so the decision was made—this is interesting—the decision was made to have a member of the Japanese Diet come down and visit the submarine, so that they could put that on the television and calm everybody about the nuclear powered ship there.<sup>63</sup> I'm sure they had to go to Rickover with that too. I'm sure everybody in the United States had to agree to that.

The offer was made, and the Japanese said, "Fine. We're going to have Minister Genda, G-e-n-d-a, visit the submarine." Minister Genda was Commander Genda in World War II, who planned the Pearl Harbor raid. If

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<sup>63</sup> The National Diet is Japan's bicameral legislature. It is composed of a lower house, called the House of Representatives, and an upper house, called the House of Councillors. Both houses of the Diet are directly elected under parallel voting systems.



you watched the movie, you'll see the commander there on the bridge, Genda. That was the same Genda.

DePue: Did you know that at the time?

Thunman: No, I didn't. He was highly respected in Japan, spoke beautiful English and I think is a friend to America. I don't think he was... Well, I don't know. Anyway, it was touchy that he was going to come aboard. He came with his entourage, came down the hatch and into the control room, where you've got the controls for the planes and all. I said, "Your welcome," of course, and "Mr. Genda, this is where we control the submarine." This is where the stern planes, we call them, are operated, and this is where the sail planes are operated."<sup>64</sup>

He stopped right there. He very sternly looked at me, and he said, "Are you going to discharge radioactive liquid into this harbor?" Nobody had prepared me for that question, nobody. The admiral was there, Admiral Bob Long was his name, a good guy. His mouth dropped open. It was an incredible, international question, because on a nuclear submarine, you've always got to be ready to discharge, if you have to. There are different emergencies where you would have to discharge. I don't know where it came from, and it's probably the thing that made my career more than anything else I'd ever done. Getting away from the rudder and all of that, probably the most important thing I did for the United States in that whole operation, I said to him, "Mr. Genda, we are going to comply with the agreement that the United States has made with the government of Japan." (laughs) And he goes, "Hmm." That was it. (both laugh) I don't know. I'd never thought of it. I don't even remember why it came out. It just came out.

I did get an atta-boy from Rickover later, on that. That was one of the few atta-boys I ever got. But from then on, everything went well. They had a couple of false alarms, where they had detectors all over the place. The detectors detected what they thought was radioactivity. It turned out there was... Somebody's local radar was operating, and it had set the detectors off.

I had one unusual experience. Admiral Long's chief of staff, who was kind of a dunderhead captain... They had one of these alarms, and he came rushing down to the ship with a couple of his people. They had a Japanese radiation detector with them. They said, "Look, we'll take this aboard, and we'll prove to them that you're not discharging or you're not causing something to be radioactive in the vicinity." I said, "No, you're not bringing that aboard ship." They said, "Why not?" I said, "I don't know what's in that detector." I said, "I don't know whether it will indicate something or not."

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<sup>64</sup>Stern planes are used to control the angle of the boat in ascent and descent. This can be thought of as gross depth control. Sail planes were used for fine depth control. They are useful in maintaining periscope depth, maintaining depth at a specific number of feet.

“Well, we should...” I said, “You’re not bringing it aboard this ship.” The guy said, “Yeah, we’re going to bring it aboard, commander.” I said, “God damn it, you come and step on the brow, and I’m going to knock your ass from here to Tokyo.” (laughs) It was nose to nose, and I would have.

DePue: Who was your chain of command at that time?

Thunman: At that time, I was working for COMNAV for Japan. This was his chief of staff.

DePue: Okay, yeah. That’s why I asked. (both laugh)

Thunman: He wasn’t as big as I was, so I was pretty safe saying it. He realized I meant it, and everybody straightened up and stiffed up. He left. Admiral Long never said anything about it. I never heard anything back from Long on it. I’m sure he went back and told him. And Long says, “God, that’s what I would have told you too.”

We left that. Then we proceeded with a normal operation in the Pacific. We went to Pusan, Korea.<sup>65</sup> [We] took the joint chiefs of staff of Korea to sea with us, to demonstrate to Korea that we had submarines in the area that could protect them if we had to, to demonstrate to the South Koreans. That was interesting. They were all named Kim. I took them out.

The Russians had run an escort down to Busan, because this had been announced in the press again, to try to embarrass us in some way. But I thought it was a great opportunity. I went in, picked them up, dove in shallow water, went out past the escort, came up on the other side, and let each of them look at the escort through the periscope. They all liked that. They thought that was neat. So we did that, and that went very well.

DePue: Did you make landing at Pusan?

Thunman: Yeah. They brought in what they call a submarine rescue vessel, which is a small ship about 200 and something feet long. They anchored it. We couldn’t go all the way into the port, because there wasn’t enough water. We had to make a tough landing alongside.

DePue: Did you get a similar reception from the people of South Korea?

Thunman: No, no, they were very happy to have us there. They were very happy to have us there.

DePue: At that point in their history, they still had some pretty strong feelings against Japan themselves.

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<sup>65</sup> Pusan, Korea’s name was changed to Busan in the year 2000.

Thunman: Yeah, well, but they also had that DMZ [demilitarized zone] being protected by the Americans. They were delighted. And the reason we did that was because they were worried about the submarines that the North Koreans had. The Soviets had given the North Koreans some diesel submarines. So they wanted submarines. This was to demonstrate to them that we had submarines there that would protect them if necessary, not to worry. That was the purpose of the whole thing.



*USS Plunger, with crew topside, returning to Pearl Harbor after seven month tour 1970*

So, we finished that, a normal WESTPAC operation, and went to Hong Kong and then home.

DePue: Home is Pearl Harbor.

Thunman: Pearl Harbor. This is about seven months later. It's always been the practice in those days, for the commander submarine force to meet the ship at the entry of Pearl Harbor, to walk through the ship, whenever they're coming home from a long operation.

So we get there, and Walt Small comes aboard. I'm up on the bridge. My exec takes him through the ship. He comes up to the bridge finally. He watches a little bit, doesn't say anything. I'm thinking, Well, God, I don't know what he thinks about this. Finally he looks at me. He says, "Well, Ron, it looks pretty good down there." That was it. We didn't get any spectacular award. They awarded me a Navy Commendation Medal, which was not usual in those days. Certainly, operationally, I hadn't done anything spectacular. But I think Walt Small felt like, Well gee, we ought to recognize something. I think probably he recognized the way we handled that rudder was spectacular.

Anyway, at the same point, they did recommend us for the Arleigh Burke Fleet Trophy, which denotes the most improved ship in the Pacific Fleet, of all the ships in the Pacific Fleet. [We] kind of told our story, from when I came aboard to that point. And as you can see, we won the Arleigh Burke Fleet Trophy. I've got it downstairs.

DePue: It's a sizeable plaque.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, a big thing. So, we were recognized. I made my way around Pearl Harbor then. I really raised a lot of hell with the maintenance facilities there about periscopes. I went in there and personally chewed out the senior guy of the periscope shop for the condition of our periscope, how the ship had been deployed with that.



*Commander Ron Thunman, receiving the Arleigh Burke Trophy in Pearl Harbor for the most improved submarine. 1969*

Where I almost got across the breakers was with my squadron commander, who had qualified me in submarine years earlier, been the guy that pinned my dolphins on, a diesel guy, World War II submariner. He called me up, and he said, "You're going to have to go again, because a ship that was scheduled to go had a problem." We were going to have to go, and this time we'd be in the Kamchatka area. It would be in a couple of months. I said, "Well, we've got some problems we've got to fix." I said, "One of them is, I want the gyro overhauled," after my experience with the gyro. He said, "Well, we really don't have time for that." He said, "We'll have some people look at it." I said, "No, Commodore, I want a class A overhaul of that gyro." That's a specific... I mean, you really go down and rebuild it, electronic. He said, "We don't have time for that." I looked at him and says, "Commodore, if you don't overhaul that gyro, I don't go." I said, "I'm not going to go through that experience again," almost mooring in Vladivostok. He looked at me. I thought, Well, maybe I've gone too far. He said, "Well, okay, we'll do it, but you'll have to operate without it." I said, "That's okay with me." I said, "I can see in the Pearl Harbor area, and I'm okay here. I'll depend on the other gyro," which was also a little faulty. "But I want that master gyro overhauled." So they did. It was one of those... I go back to the earlier guy where you—

In those days, when you were dealing with the diesel guys who didn't understand the complexity of the nuclear submarines, you had to stand up to them, because they thought, "Oh these nukes, they want too much. They don't understand that that's not the way you operate submarines. You fix them yourself and all."

DePue: I wonder if that's not just diesel, but that's World War II, when you had to fly by the seat of the pants, because you were in a wartime situation.

Thunman: Yeah, I'm sure. This guy had been in diesel boats on war patrols, a wonderful guy, qualified me in submarines. He's a lieutenant on the *Volador*. He was my division commander. That operation was quite a thing. We went again, now—

DePue: Before you go into the second cruise, I've got a couple questions about the first one. Did you get a sense—and this is part of the lure of the Navy and being on the open seas, et cetera, in the first place—but did you ever get a sense that hit you, of how lonely command was out there?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. I'll say. I can recall, when I was headed for Guam, I had the problem with the shaft banging. Trying to communicate with someone in those days... Communications was so difficult, you couldn't contact anybody. I can remember sitting there thinking, God, just all alone out here. A couple of times, when we were going through the rudder incident, it was, What's the right decision? What's the right thing to do? Looking ahead to what could happen, it could have been the greatest international... You could be really writing a spectacular oral history, if you'd had the skipper who ran aground in Vladivostok (laughs), who were captured.

DePue: It's pretty darn good anyway, Admiral. The next question—

Thunman: But no, to answer that question, boy, I'll say.

DePue: You'd started off the *Plunger*, having to fire who you've described as probably the most popular enlisted man on the boat.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Was there a point in time when you felt that you really had the loyalty and support of that crew.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, I did. Oh, they loved it. They loved the *Plunger*. I hear from them today.

DePue: But were you personally able to feel that sense?

Thunman: I did. I would develop that. I did some things, which the crew thought was just great. I established "*Plunger* Hero Night," where we would pull out and go down 400 feet, three or four knots. I let the crew wear whatever they want, put together whatever skits they wanted, broke out brandy—which today would be terrible—gave everybody a little bottle of brandy—you know these little—did it legally, prescribed it. The captain of the ship can prescribe it. I prescribed it, 100 and some odd bottles of brandy.

DePue: This goes right back to the old British Navy days.

Thunman: Yeah. The crew, thought that was... They really... Then *Plunger* Hero Night, we made up awards, made our own medals out of tin cans. It was amazing,

some of the things they prepared to recognize screw-ups in the crew. [They] wrote out a distinguished citation, signed and everything, as if they were getting the Legion of Merit. They were getting a *Plunger* Hero Award. I heard from a guy the other day, [who] said he'd been one of the winners of the *Plunger* Hero Award. You know, when you are skipper of a submarine, you are on. You are on stage, always. They're always looking at you. They don't look at anybody else. They look at you. It's like you're a dog, wondering what they can read into those eyes of yours. And you cultivate that.

For example, you'd be working with a ship at periscope depth. He would be close aboard, and you'd be up and down with the scope. You'd raise the scope, and you'd drop it. You'd say, "Angle on the bow, zero." That means he's coming right at you. Then you wait a minute or so, the ship, not too far away. Then you raise it up. You could see him starting to turn. You drop the scope, and you wouldn't say anything. You can see them all. You knew he was turning, but nobody else knew. He'd say something like, "Well, you know, I think he's going to turn pretty soon. We'll take another look." (laughs) I knew he'd already turned. I'd come up, "Oh yeah, he's turning." You did those kinds of things, and then you picked out incidents that the crew would find funny.

I don't know if I told you this one. This is the one I got the email from. I was in one of my later operations. It was at night. I'd been up for a day or two. I was up on the scope and down. The chief said, "Go get the captain a cup of coffee," to this young kid who was fairly new onboard. He'd only been aboard a couple of months. This kid went down, came back with this cup of coffee in the black of the control room. We always had the lights out, so it didn't affect your eyes when you were looking outside. I'm down, like this, on the scope, where the crack of your pants are. This young guy comes up there, trips, pours the damn coffee down the crack of my rear end. (DePue laughs) It didn't hurt me any. It really went down the pants. You could literally hear it in the control room this, (sighs) sigh.

So, it was an opportunity to be on stage. I turned around and looked at this guy. The kid was absolutely petrified. I said to him, very calmly, I said, "Young man, you haven't been in the Navy very long. How do you expect to get ahead if you start out by pouring hot coffee down the crack of your captain's ass?" (both laugh) Everybody looked up. That story....The young guy I did that to, I got an email from him not too long ago. He got a *Plunger* Hero Award for that too. So, we did that.

The crew, I know, when we got into port, always wanted me to come...In those days, we had a slush fund. The chief of the boat had a slush fund, which was a roll of money like this. He would lend it out at usury rates. But he would also use it to send kids home. If they had to fly home to see their parents or something like that, he would give them the money, without any interest or anything. But whenever we got into port, they would take over a

bar. Nobody else could come in. It would be *Plunger* bar, you know. They'd always invite me there. I'd always go, and they'd say, "Captain, we've got "Weemy Martin" [Remy Martin Cognac]. You ought to come out here." That's what they called that brandy, Weemy Martin. The same thing always happened. I'd get there, and I'd sit down. We'd be having a drink, and then out from the curtains would come a naked Japanese girl. [She'd] jump on my lap, and about eight or ten of them would jump up with their cameras and take pictures. You knew it was going to happen.

So, I'll say this...It's immodest, but I don't think any skipper had a closer relationship with his crew. The rules I set...I think I told you the story about the beards, no beards on the *Plunger*. In fact, when we came into port, it was, the crew who wants to come in whites, like [when] we came home from that one operation, and they said, "Don't waste your time getting into whites. You've got to do these things before we came in." No, the crew wanted to come home in whites. We won the Navy Unit Commendation, which was quite a thing in those days. We won the Battle Efficiency E three years in a row, the only one in Pearl Harbor who did.

*Plunger* was a special ship. From that day on, they had this... They had it all the way up into the '90s, "*Plunger* Pride, Catch It." That was something established in the boat, not when I was there. It came after I left, with the Arleigh Burke Fleet Trophy. I always had it at the entrance of the attack center. When we went to battle stations, the crew would go by and rub its nose. If you look at it, it's got a big, shiny nose. It was a special group of men. My chief torpedo man came down to see me last year. I just heard from him the other day. He was concerned. He'd heard about my operation. [I had] a lot of very, very good professionals. These were good guys. That was the thing that I saw. That was the thing that helped me more than anything else with the ship, was sitting down and talking with each guy and realizing that I had a hell of a good crew. Nobody knew that, but I knew it, and I could succeed on this ship.

DePue: I wonder if you wouldn't mind if we read a citation that you got, a Legion of Merit that you received for summer and fall of 1969. Was that this first one?

Thunman: That was the second one.

DePue: That was the second one.

Thunman: I came home in the spring, then we went back out again that fall.

DePue: Well, maybe we should hear about the second cruise before we do that.

Thunman: Well, the second cruise, I can't tell you a lot about it, because a lot of it was classified, the things that caused us to win that Legion of Merit. Also, we won the Navy Unit Commendation as part of that. We went up in the international waters off Kamchatka, observed the operations, some spectacular operations,

conducted by the Soviets. We learned things that were very valuable to our Navy and to the country that I really can't tell you much about, or how we got the info, but they were pretty exciting. It was a very successful operation, nothing major to talk about from material problems.

One problem we had, we were halfway there when they came in, and they said one of our main lube oil pumps had failed. The idler gears had wiped it. We only had two, so that means we were down to one. You say to yourself, Jesus, if you lose that one, you can't operate anything. You can't make that propeller go around, without lubricating oil. I said to myself, Now do I turn around and go get this fixed? No, I'm just going to pretend that one is enough. I'm not going to think about it anymore. And nothing happened.

But you were talking about, gee, you lose something and... There were some things that there was no redundancy for. I really can't say much more than that; although it was very spectacular, got a lot of publicity in the intelligence community in Washington. I wish I'd kept some of the photographs we took. I would have loved to have them. They were good enough to put on the cover of *TIME* magazine.

DePue: But wouldn't those photographs be classified as well?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah. That's why I didn't keep any of them.

DePue: When will that stuff not be classified?

Thunman: I don't know. There's been discussions with the Navy for a long time about that. I think that's an international... It's a problem. We have declassified a few of the things that went on in the Atlantic. One declassification was our trailing a Soviet fleet ballistic missile submarine for sixty days or so, thirty days or so. That was declassified, in order to tell the public what submarines do. But none of the rest of it, all those wonderful—

I found out in Washington, when I went back to Washington later, when I was introduced to one of the people in the Navy Secretariat, "This is Rear Admiral Thunman."<sup>66</sup> I was a brand new rear admiral. He said, "Oh, the photographer." (both laugh) He remembers.

DePue: You're taking pictures through the periscope?

Thunman: Yeah. We became experts at it. When I was an exec, we learned to do that. At the XO *Snook*, we took a special camera. Then when I was CO *Plunger*, I got a really good Hasselblad camera, and we practiced that. It was always funny, because I couldn't stand to take a picture of myself. I just couldn't stand to

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<sup>66</sup> The Office of the Secretary of the Navy, also known within DOD as the Navy Secretariat or simply just as the Secretariat, in a DoN setting, is the immediate headquarters staff that supports the Secretary in discharging his duties.



have the periscope sticking out there, when you were close aboard one of their ships.

So, I had a young officer, [with whom] I still stay in very close contact, a smart young guy. He was my photographic officer. I'd get the ship in position to take the photo. Harlan would stand there—Harlan Sager was his name—with the camera at the ready. I'd drop the scope to the picture, drop the scope to the dip. I'd say, "Okay, Harlan, take the picture." And he'd clamp it on, very quickly clamp it on; raise the scope; take the picture. Well, Harlan was always interested in the quality of the picture. So he'd get it up there, and he'd start adjusting it a little bit. (laughs) I'd say, "That's enough Harlan. Take the picture. Harlan, take the picture." He'd very coolly adjust it, adjust it, then get it down, but took some great pictures. (laughs)

I really can't say much about that. But we really did some exciting things in that operation. We came back, and one thing happened in my debriefing. By that point, we were kind of a hero now. *Plunger* was a hero in Pearl Harbor. We were no longer the bottom. We were the top. In the debriefing, where they had all the skippers and XO's and everybody in the area, a classified briefing, it was a sellout. There were people filling the auditorium.

Walt Small was still COMSUBPAC at that point. It was right before he left. We had incidentally become his favorite ship. He had to go to sea every so often, in order to keep his submarine pay active. That son of a gun would always pick us to go to sea on, which bugged me, because he liked to come aboard my ship. We didn't talk very much. He liked to play cribbage. I remember one day I was busy. We were doing a major test in the plant, back aft. He made me come forward and play cribbage with him. I thought, son of a gun, here I'm back here—

But, Uncle Walt, as I used to say just to myself, was sitting there in the briefing, and I'm going through the brief. Everybody knew how well we'd done. The briefing was going well. I showed one picture. Walt Small looked. In the picture, you could see a lighthouse. He said, "How far away were you from that lighthouse?" I looked at him, and I said, "Twelve miles." (DePue laughs) And the whole auditorium erupted. He didn't say anything further. That was the only question he asked. (both laugh) So that went well.

Before we went on that operation, we did fix the ship. We did an awful lot of things to fix the ship.

DePue: You already talked about the gyro. There was a lot more that needed fixing?

Thunman: We got in, and were able to get in the shipyard and got that shaft addressed and fixed. That was a big deal to me, because we never understood why we

had the problem. Then we found it. I was confident of that ship afterwards, even though I lost a lube oil pump.

I remember, after we worked on the shaft, I said, "I want to test the shaft alongside." I put big cables over the pier, operate the shaft. The shipyard commander said, "You can't do that, Admiral Rickover will not let you do that, will not let you test a propulsion



USS *Plunger*, somewhere in the Pacific. Ron Thunman was the commander from 1968 to 1971.

plan alongside." I said, "I'm not taking it out there after we completely disassembled this thing and all. I want to test it." "Well, you have to go to COMSUBPAC." Well, I went to COMSUBPAC. Material officer said, "No, you can't do that. Rickover won't let you." I said, "Well, I'm going to call him." "No, don't do that." "I will." I said, "God damn it. He isn't that dumb, to think that with all the work we've done on that shaft, we're not going to test it first." Then they said, "Now wait a minute. We'll check with our staff." They came back the next day, "They said okay." People were afraid of Rickover. He was a very logical man. I knew damn well, he would chew me out if I hadn't tested the shaft. But I had confidence in the ship then.

We came back from that operation, and we were really kind of the fair-haired boys in the Pearl Harbor area. Everybody wanted to get on the *Snook*. We had people—

DePue: On the *Plunger*.

Thunman: On the *Plunger*. Then we went again and had another spectacular operation. This one was back into the Vlad [Vladivostok] area, and also out in the deep ocean area, where we did some work, which got a lot of publicity in Washington, where we detected some things they were interested in. So, we won the Navy Unit Commendation, should have won two. But they were always kind of slow writing the first one up, so they didn't get to the second one, and I was gone. I was awarded the Legion of Merit twice during my command tour, along with the Navy Commendation Medal, which was probably the most important thing I did. (laughs) I kept the submarine in the United States Fleet. You know that story. But that was unusual. I don't think there was anybody in command at that time, and I'm not sure even since then, whoever was awarded the Legion of Merit twice during his command tour.

DePue: We'll get to reading the citation in a little bit. But what we haven't done is discuss, in some detail, what the *Plunger* was, the description of the boat.

Thunman: She's a nuclear attack submarine. A *Thresher* class, 593 class, was the most modern submarine developed in the world in 1962. [It was] deep diving, 1,300 feet; fast, greater than thirty knots; wonderful sonar system. The whole bow was a very exotic sonar with a cap on it. You had to be very careful when you landed that ship, or you'd damage that sonar.

DePue: What's the difference between passive and active sonar?

Thunman: Well, passive sonar receives... We had both, active and passive. Passive sonar, you receive the sound from wherever, say from another ship; you get its bearing; you know exactly its direction from you, and you track it, based on its sound, the frequency of its sound, and the unusualness of its sound signature, based on a sound signature. Today they do it by acoustic signature, electronically. Sound is gone from submarines today. But in my day, sound was very important. When you read *Hunt for Red October*, you recall how the skipper had his sonar guy—I forget what his nickname was—but he had his guy always there when he was in close proximity.

DePue: That was a real art, to be able to read that correctly?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. By sound, it was an art. Yeah, that was a real art. I had my guy, who was wonderful at it. But passive, that's what you used, because active sonar, you transmit a pulse in the water. It goes out, bounces off a contact and comes back. It tells you where it is; you know its bearing. It tells you what its range is, because the pulse came back. But it also tells the guy that you're there. [We] very seldom used, active sonar. Our sonar was good for both active and passive. The active was used... In those days we had what was called SUBROC, a submarine rocket, which you could launch at a target. It had a nuclear warhead on it. What you normally did was take an active range, right before you launched it, then launched it. But passive was what you lived by, was the passive.

I can recall my sonar man, one day, up in one of our operations, I was playing around. This was later operations. I figured I knew more than everybody else, so I was playing around a little bit. I thought I was behind a guy. I was going in the same direction he was; I was behind him. I'm up there in the attack center, and this very calm, cool and collected sonar man that I had, he said, "Captain, you're going to \_\_\_ when you see how close this guy is." (both laugh) I realized that I didn't need to communicate any more with him. Down I went, put the rudder over. I guess I scared the living hell out of that guy. I know that. We went down like this freight train, all of a sudden went by him or under him. Afterwards, he told me about why he thought it was close. I didn't ask him, "Why do you think it was close?" It was just, that very calm—

But you lived by it. It's like boxing with blindfolds, when you're operating with another... All you're dealing with is sound. You're using geometric configurations. Using that sound and the bearings and the rate of change of bearing, you're able to compute range. But it takes time. If the other guy changes course while you're trying to do it, then you may miss it. And, of course, the Soviets had the "Crazy Ivan." When you read the *Hunt for Red October*, you heard about the Crazy Ivan. That was a real thing

DePue: Crazy Ivan being—

Thunman: Their tactic. If they detected you—this is in the book—if they detected you, they would turn and try to ram you. They were apparently ordered to do that, because they were so frustrated with the fact that our submarines were so close to them. What you had to do, if you were trailing them... You assume they're going this way, and you're over here, and all of a sudden they make the turn to come at you—they've heard you drop a wrench or something—you've got to detect they've made that turn, the bearing rate is changing, and you had to make a move. Some of those [were] pretty close.

DePue: From what you're describing here though, it sounds like our submarines were a lot more quiet than theirs.

Thunman: Much quieter. The sonars were more capable, much quieter. We didn't dive as deep as some of their submarines. Some of their submarines went down to 5,000 feet. One of the things that I saw in my time in the '60s, was we were developing our ballistic missile fleet. They were developing theirs. And we were watching them develop that. That was part of our operations.

DePue: Were you generally ghosting along their ballistic missile subs or attack subs?

Thunman: I would say that you had priorities. One of the high priorities was anything that had to do with their missile capability, especially if they did test firings of missiles.

DePue: By missiles, you're talking about strategic nuclear missiles?

Thunman: Yeah, fleet ballistic missiles, missiles you fired from their fleet ballistic missile submarines. [We were] to be there, close proximity, whenever they fired one of those, again in international waters.

The nuclear attack submarines they had was the second priority. If they deployed out of area against us, that we would have our submarines in trail, like the Soviets would send some of their submarines into the Gulf of Tonkin, their cruise missile firing submarines, to counter our carriers. Kissinger commented on that at a meeting with the Soviets, where the Soviets, I think, may have said some words like, "We're watching you," or "Be careful of what you do." Kissinger's response was, "Well we're watching you. We know exactly what you're doing. You be careful."

DePue: We're watching you watch us.

Thunman: (laughs) So those were the two [priorities]. The important things, though, were to gather intelligence on electronics that might be involved with either ballistic missiles or cruise missiles. The Soviets—they still do—but in those days they had quite a cruise missile system they called the echo class submarines fired cruise missiles. They were anti-carrier missiles, anti-carrier. It was their force, their echo class submarines, to counter our carriers. The weapon they used was the cruise missile. Well, you can imagine that that cruise missile had certain electronics associated with it. If you could intercept the electronics close aboard, when it was launched, then you could develop countermeasures. That's why that information was so important.

DePue: What was the complement for your crew?

Thunman: I'd say there was about ninety men and fourteen officers, about that.

DePue: And the power plant that you had?

Thunman: We had a nuclear propulsion plant. It was...I know, 50,000, 60,000 shaft horsepower and one single screw, with a propeller nineteen feet in diameter, very carefully manufactured to be quiet, so that there was no cavitation, if you were operating it properly.<sup>67</sup> It was the same propulsion plant that really went in our first classes of submarines and our second classes, ballistic missile submarines. It was called the S5W plant. Again, it was a very maneuverable ship. If you were running along at flank speed, that's top speed, and you put the rudder over, say left full or right full, you would heel into the turn like an airplane, about thirty-five degrees. You could change depth almost immediately. You had to be careful. If you lost control.

When I was XO *Snook*, we had our fair water planes fail on full dive. We exceeded the allowable depth before we started back up again. [phone rings] You have an allowable depth called test depth. We had four torpedo tubes. We carried the most modern torpedoes.

DePue: Were they all front tubes?

Thunman: Yeah, all in the front, the Mark 48, which was the most modern. We carried the Subroc [SUBmarine ROcket] cruise missile, which had nuclear warheads. We carried the Mark 37, which was an electric homing torpedo, as well. We had about twenty-five torpedoes aboard, twenty-five weapons aboard. A very quiet submarine, everything in it is sound isolated. Nothing is attached directly to the hull. It's attached to a raft, the raft being attached to the hull, through very sophisticated sound isolation mounts. That's why they were so quiet.

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<sup>67</sup> Cavitation is the formation of bubbles in a liquid, typically by the movement of a propeller through it.

- DePue: The torpedoes you had, were those designed for surface ships or for submarines also?
- Thunman: Both. You could use the Mark 48 torpedo. It was the best torpedo in the world and you [could] use it against a surface ship or submarine. You could make it active homing, passive homing. Its ranges are out to twenty miles, incredible weapon.
- DePue: What happens when it exceeds its range?
- Thunman: Well, then down it goes.
- DePue: It sinks to the bottom of the ocean, or it implodes?
- Thunman: It sinks down until it implodes.
- DePue: Did you have any missiles onboard ship?
- Thunman: The Subroc missile. The submarine rocket was a cruise missile. You fired it submerged. It went out of the water, assumed a ballistic path, came back in the water and exploded.
- DePue: Did it go through the torpedo tubes or a different launch system?
- Thunman: Yeah, it launched from the torpedo tubes, launched in a bubble of air.
- DePue: How about any kind of a backup for your power plants? Did you have diesel or battery power?
- Thunman: We had a battery, which was important, in case you lost your nuclear power plant. You had fifteen minutes to get your—if you only had your battery—to get the nuclear power plant aboard, or you were done. You needed that power for the instrumentation to restore the power plant. You had a diesel engine, which you could use to charge the battery, but a very small engine. If you got into a problem—and we used to practice at this, shut down the propulsion plant—you could make about two knots, operating off the battery, with the diesel engine running. Of course, you would be at periscope depth, drawing air from the outside to run the diesel. Those were your emergency power sources.

You had a secondary propulsion motor, not very big, outboard motor that came down from the hull. You could train it one way or the other. A hundred horse, just enough to move you along at about a knot, knot and a half, if you had to. The propulsion plant was your nuclear power plant, driving main propulsion turbines, which were geared to a single shaft, to run that giant propeller.

DePue: This is probably a question only a land lover would ask, but was there a reverse gear?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. You just reversed the propeller in the other direction, through the gearing, through the main propulsion gear. So yeah, of course. We would test that, of course, emergency back.

DePue: How quickly could it change direction for you?

Thunman: Well, it depended on how fast you were going. If you were making fifteen knots though, you probably could get the ship stopped, to start going astern, in like maybe 200 yards. It would take a while. I mean it takes some distance. That's not very far but—

DePue: Everything you've described about the actual operations that you were in, it sounds like you guys were out there on your own.

Thunman: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Were any of these attack submarines deployed in different kind of scenarios?

Thunman: Well, the Navy has developed this more and more now, where they are supporting the battle groups. Every one of our battle groups today are supported by a nuclear attack submarine. Submarines are there to support the battle group in whatever the battle group needs, for search, detection, for attack.

I kind of got in trouble on this, because I was raised—as you can tell from my discussion—in the world of independent operations. I had read everything there was to read about World War II, and those were independent operations. They were not conducted with anybody else. They were conducted on your own. Every time you tried to get somebody else involved, it got too complex.

When I became COMSUBPAC, it was the same time that the newest class of submarine came out, the Los Angeles class and the *Los Angeles* herself. She was sent to the Pacific. My fleet commander, a great guy, Red Dog Davis, he said, “Oh.” The submarine force had kind of given lip service, well more than lip service. [It] had been designed to support carrier operations, carrier battle groups, high speed, that in mind. The first one came out to Pearl Harbor, and Red Dog Davis said, “Well, now we can test this concept and get the *Los Angeles* attached to a battle group.” I said, “Admiral, we can't do that now. We've got all these special operations we've got to run.” (laughs) He kind of cocked his head at me. I said, “Admiral, we are your submarine force.” That was the greatest sales pitch I ever made. I said, “We will do whatever you want. You think of something to do, we'll go do it, but I recommend you keep control of that. You don't turn that over to the commander, Seventh Fleet, who runs these battle groups. You maintain

control of that. If you need one assigned to a battle group for support, by God we'll do it."

But, you know, this intelligence collection operation is vital to the country. In my view, we always must be in position—I've always believed this strongly, still do today—we must have submarines in position that, if the war starts with the Soviet Union and China, that we immediately destroy their fleets.

Talking about nuclear war, the war that is possible to occur, is a conventional war, without using nuclear weapons. But if a war starts, that we just destroy the fleet. We can do that. These submarines can just destroy the other guy's fleet, within a couple of days and be gone, can't operate anything at sea.

DePue: Couldn't they do the same thing?

Thunman: No. They couldn't deal with our submarines to begin with. They might be able to do something with our carriers, but they certainly couldn't deal with our submarines. We could destroy their fleet. That includes their submarines.

DePue: I suspect I'd get a different answer if I had a naval aviator sitting here.

Thunman: Sure, a more senior guy and everything else. But you remember that that's the way I was raised. That's the way I operated, independent. That's why I stayed in the Navy, why I was...A submarine skipper to me, he was a knight that was someone to emulate. You were on your own, and you made your own decisions. You carried out your orders, but you made your own decisions. When you knew you had that power, that you could destroy their fleet. You knew you had the power, not only from the equipment that you had, but because you'd been practicing it all your life, even up with them. It was no different if the war was going on today or it wasn't. Okay, back to work as usual; go find them, and do whatever you're going to do, take a picture or kill them.

DePue: My question, Admiral, is, did you see yourself in this Cold War battle, as the tip of the spear?

Thunman: Yeah. Not only the tip of the spear, but I think I really believed, and I know the Soviets felt strongly about it, we were pretty much of the spear. They could have things they could deal with, with battle groups and aircraft, but battle groups. The Soviets designed their... You've got to look at what the Soviets did. They were not dumb. They designed their whole navy around their submarine force. The Soviets didn't design their navy like we designed our Navy. They built surface ships, of course, and thought about building carriers, but they built submarines.

DePue: You'd say that we built ours around the aircraft carriers?



Thunman: Yeah, except also, sitting alongside, was the submarine force, which got its support from the Congress.

DePue: (laughs) We go back to Rickover again.

Thunman: Yeah, that's right. The Congress understood. When I was back in the Pentagon, and I would brief the Congress, I brought some of these pictures I've been telling you about, television pictures, by those days.

I don't know if I told you that story, but one of my assistants said, "Gee, during your congressional hearings, you ought to show some of these pictures." I said, "Well, I don't know; we've never done that before." So we geared up to do that. That meant that I was going to stand up in front of this semicircular hearing and show these videos that we had.

DePue: This is a classified hearing?

Thunman: Yeah, they're all classified. [We] had to clear the space, had to have special equipment in the space, make sure that it was clean. I told my guys, I said, "I'm not sure I want to do that." One of my guys, who'd been with me on this patrol craft—he was a reservist—said, "Admiral, you were great. You get up and start talking to people and walking around," he said, "You'll do great with that." I said, "But nobody else does that when they testify." "Oh, you'll do fine."

Well, the first time I did it, I have never seen such a reaction. This is from the House Armed Services Sea Power Subcommittee. When I started showing those videos, just short clips of what had been taken through the periscope, these guys were climbing over their desks. "Show that again. Do that again!" The funny thing about it was, of course, I was in the business at that time, selling the SSN-21, the newest nuclear attack submarine, which we'll get to, I think. I headed the conceptual design team for that. I sold it to the Congress, which was quite an experience.

Once we had that first session, of showing these TV clips, then it became an important element in any of those Congressmen's political standing, to have had a chance to see it. You weren't anybody unless you saw Thunman's pitch on nuclear submarines, which was these television clips. Then, all of a sudden, I had requests from all over, in the Congress. I'm pretty sure I got through at least half of the Senate, maybe more, three quarters, maybe half the Congress, every one of them. It was quite an experience. Because of that, they just loved to look at that thing. It was something they could feel and see. You didn't have to believe you; look at that Soviet missile. (laughs)

The one story, the good one, was old Senator Stennis, so powerful. He had diabetes and had lost, I guess, one or both of his feet by then. I got a call from one of his staffers one day, who said, "Senator Stennis wants to see your

pitch.” I said, “Sure, we’ll have to take it to his office I guess,” and he said, “Yeah.” I said, “We’ll have to clear the office and check it out.” He said, “You’ve only got five minutes though, to talk to him. But he wants to see it,” I said, “Well, I’ll show you what I can in five minutes.” They said, “Now be sure, only five minutes.” I said, “Okay.” So they got the office all set up, the equipment all set up. The Senator was there on a Saturday morning, and over I went. [I] turned it on right away and started to talk. I left there about three hours later. The staff kept coming in and saying, “Senator, we’ve got to...” “No, no, no.” (laughs) Then he started talking to me about, not only the Submarine Force but about the U.S. Navy. I was really getting scared. You know, typical southern, “*What do you think about aircraft carriers? Are they any good?*” [spoken with a southern accent] (laughs)

DePue: (laughs) Well, we’re a bit ahead of the time schedule, in terms of your career. I do want to go back and ask you some other questions.

Thunman: Sure.

DePue: You didn’t spend all your time in on cruises. What would you call it, a cruise?

Thunman: Well, we called them deployments.

DePue: Deployments. Tell me a little bit about what was going on when you actually spent time in Pearl Harbor.

Thunman: A lot of maintenance of the ships, a lot of time training. In the year 1970, I think I spent...I used to know. Oh, yeah, 300 days at sea.

DePue: I thought there was another crew for the *Plunger*.

Thunman: No, no, no.

DePue: Wasn’t that the case in earlier ships?

Thunman: No, no. Fleet ballistic missile submarines have two crews, blue and gold. They have only one crew on the nuclear attacks. We used to call it the black and blue crew.

DePue: (laughs) Why the difference?

Thunman: Well, the FBM [Fleet Ballistic Missiles] submarines, they wanted to have maximum utilization of the ship. That way, if you had two crews you could keep the ship at sea, whereas the attack submarines, they could have it in port. There was a lot more ability to do other things, rather than keep it at sea. But in the days that I had command, we were at sea.

I remember when I came back to Pearl Harbor, I remember now, I deployed three times; that was unusual. The third time, I came back, and I

suddenly realized that I didn't know what was going on in the world. My wonderful crew started to leave, and I was getting ready to. My orders were on the board. The *Plunger* was being broken up. The Yankees—from our point of view anyways—the Yankees were being broken up. These new kids came aboard, and I didn't quite understand them.

I remember, when out at sea, right before I left, there was this quartermaster, second class petty officer, up in the conn at night. I was standing there, and I watching him. He looked kind of funny. He didn't look like he was really all there. I got the exec, and I said, "Relieve that man. I don't think he's well or something." Well, it turned out a few days later that we found he was on drugs, these new kids coming aboard, the drug culture. We didn't have that in the boat. And again, we stayed together.

Right now, up in the Pacific Northwest, in the Washington area, they've got a yard of sail planes that somebody's put together, where they've gotten a plane from every submarine. They've got it sunk in the ground, nicely done.

DePue: Explain what a plane is.

Thunman: Well, the fairwater planes on the side of the submarine? They've taken one of them off the ships, after they've been commissioned. So they have a plane from each one of the attack submarines, sitting out there. It's kind of a field, a forest, of these planes. I got a email the other day with a picture of the *Plunger* plane. Now they have a community up there, of the *ex-Plunger* crewmen, who stayed together as part of *Plunger* pride, and all their kids and their grandkids and this whole group, sitting there in front of the plane. It was interesting to see. But I suddenly realized that I didn't understand what was going on.

DePue: Well, I would think not just separated from what was going on in the world but separated from your families as well. Can you talk about the stress it put on families?

Thunman: Well, no. You know, it's on all the families, and that's not really the purpose...Of course, it was. We did our very best to support them. I think we did a good job, watching out for them and using the Navy's facilities. There was no way to say, other than it was stressful, and your kids didn't know who you were. The year 1970, [we were] gone at sea for 300 days. The days you were back, you were down trying to fix the ship. So, it was a sacrifice you made.

DePue: I want to read the citation, unless you'd like to read the citation yourself?

Thunman: No, no, you go ahead.

DePue: "The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Legion of Merit to Commander Nils Ronald Thunman, United States Navy, for services

set forth in the following citation for exceptional meritorious conduct and the performance of outstanding service as commanding officer, U.S.S. *Plunger*, SSN-595, during the summer and fall of 1969.

Through the application of resourceful and inspirational leadership, extraordinary professional competence and sound judgment, Commander Thunman directed *Plunger* to the highly successful completion of a complex submarine operation of great value to the government of the United States. The success of this operation was a direct result of his sound operational appraisals, intense personal effort and adroit application of submarine tactics. Commander Thunman's superb professional skill, inspiring leadership and unflinching devotion to duty upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service. For the president, John J. Highland, Admiral, U.S. Navy, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet."

Thunman: Yep. You have to say that that was one of your goals, to get this ship recognized like that, because you're not only recognized. With that recognition of you, then you can turn around and pick so many of your subordinates to give awards to. And, of course, you did, like your executive officer, your engineer and others. Plus, even a more important award than that was the Navy Unit Commendation, which the secretary of the Navy gives. Every member of the crew got a ribbon for that. That was an important achievement to me, so that the crew got recognized too.

DePue: You mentioned how isolated you felt from real world events. But I did want to go through and ask what your reaction was at that time, if you even heard or knew about some of these events. This first one, I think, happened before you actually deployed for that first time. I think we might have mentioned it very quickly in a previous interview session, but the Tet Offensive in Vietnam starts January 30, 1968.

Thunman: During Tet, I was... You say January of '68?

DePue: January 30 of '68.

Thunman: I was in the Bureau of Navy Personnel. I really wasn't linked to it, other than, remember I told you I would stand those watches and report casualties, the Marine casualties and Navy corpsmen casualties.

DePue: The next one—again, I wouldn't think that there was a direct impact on what you personally were doing, but just your reaction—hearing about Martin Luther King being assassinated, which happened April 4. Do you remember anything about that one?

Thunman: I remember it happened. At that point, I was just starting my training to be a commanding officer. I was at Prospective Commanding Officer School. All of my time was dedicated to that training. As I say, you're separated from what's going on in the world. You were intensely dedicated and involved with

preparing yourself to command that submarine. Really you didn't have much time to think about anything else. The only thing I remember is Rickover going out into Resurrection City.

DePue: Well, let me put three of them together and ask it in a different way. Martin Luther King assassination in April. June, Robert Kennedy is assassinated. August, you've got the Democratic Convention in Chicago. A lot of people are looking at that and saying what in the world is going on in our country? Were you just too consumed in what you were doing?

Thunman: Again, think of where I was. I was in this Prospective Commanding Officer School, intense training, operational training, and then in Admiral Rickover's office, preparing for the most difficult examination that I'll ever take in my life, knowing that if I fail, my career ends. I just didn't... I can recall seeing it a little bit on the television, but I wasn't able to say, "Hey what's happening in the country? What does it mean?" That happened to be in 1970 though, when I was leaving, when I started seeing what was happening in the country, with the way people had changed. It happened to me later on, in 1969, when we came back, and Zumwalt took over.

DePue: Took over as commander of the Pacific Fleet?

Thunman: No, he took over as the chief of naval operation. He started permitting long hair and the beards and the civilian clothes, weird civilian clothes. We all kind of went, what? What are you doing? That was a big deal to me, that Zumwalt was changing the Navy, to slacken it. His reasoning, of course, was, "Hey I need to do this in order to get volunteers." I don't think that was true, but that's why he said he made things so much easier.

DePue: Well, just to kind of put a marker here, this was the '69, '70 timeframe?

Thunman: Yeah. When I got back in '68, that's when I really—

DePue: That's probably right before—

Thunman: When I got back in '69, excuse me.

DePue: They still had the old fashioned draft in place. That was before the lottery system. By that time, in the Vietnam War, the war was very unpopular. The Army was really struggling to fill the ranks. The draft was the way they did it, and I assume a lot of people said, "Well, I don't want to go into the Army, I'll go into the Navy or Air Force." Still, you're probably not getting the cream of the crop, like you were a few years before? Would that be a fair assessment?

Thunman: I think that's it. I think, of course, none of them wanted to go into submarines, unless they really wanted to... That was always a volunteer service. That was never a—

DePue: But isn't that a good way to avoid being on a riverboat, going up and down the Saigon River?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah. Of course, remember in those days, it was a little bit different. We lost the *Thresher* in '63. We lost the *Scorpion* in '68. There was a lot of people who thought, Wait a minute, I'm not sure I want to go on one of those things. We didn't have that many submarines at that point; although, today you can say, look at how safe it is, and it is. But back then, they weren't so sure it was so safe.

DePue: I didn't ask you about the *Scorpion*. What was the impact of hearing that news?

Thunman: That had a major impact on me. The skipper was a classmate of mine who just got to command. I was just leaving. Naval reactors would report to my command, when the word came back the *Scorpion* had gone down. I remember—

DePue: Did you know how or why, at that time?

Thunman: We didn't know. Kind of a funny story was, I was in naval reactors with Admiral Rickover. It was a month or so before I left. The ship was lost, didn't come back. Nobody knew why. But they did have the indications of where she was the implosions that occurred when something goes deep and crushes. The noise had been picked up by these long range sonar systems. There were three of us going through what we called the Prospective Commanding Officer School, maybe there were more than that. There were four of us, maybe, maybe five, I forget, but about that, three to five.

Rickover called us into his office and said, could it have been one of our torpedoes that had exploded internally in the submarine, because of the different detections of sound. He said, "What do you do to prepare your torpedo, when you go on your long deployments? Then how do you reverse that, as you're going home?" He was asking very specific questions, "How do you change the exploder, such that it's safe from an armed condition? And what do you do, and how do you do it?"

Well, we all knew that we did it, and we'd all, at some time in our career, had gone through it. But we hadn't looked at it for a couple of years. (laughs) All of us were stumbling along, trying to explain to him how those exploders work, and not doing a very good job. He finally said, "God damn it, you guys don't know what the hell you're doing. I do you expect you to be able to run a submarine. You don't know anything. Get out!" (laughs)

But we all wondered. We all immediately got back to those torpedoes. Of course, in command—I did it when I was an exec, but I was in command—I always made that a big deal, preparing those torpedoes. I would make them break out the instructions and practice it, go through a drill with

the chief and everybody there and the weapons officer there, before we touched anything. When we decided we were ready, then we'd arm or disarm those torpedoes. We didn't just say, "Hey, disarm those torpedoes" and the kid goes down there and starts monkeying around with the arming circuitry.

DePue: But it sounds like, at that time, that was mere speculation that it would have been caused by the torpedoes.

Thunman: That's right, because the torpedoes... The initial thought was, if a torpedo started, for some reason, we called it a hot run in the torpedo room or in the tube, for some reason, what you would do is launch the torpedo; get it out of there. The torpedo was set such that it would go straight, and that if it turned on its own for some reason, within—I forget what it is—500 or 1,000 yards, it would immediately shut down. That was to prevent the torpedo from coming back and hitting you.

There was a lot of thought that they'd had a hot run in a tube. The torpedo had gone out, and it had done a 180, and it shut down. Or it'd done a 180, but hadn't shut down, and it hit the submarine. This thought was there, in and out of the system. It's still there; guys have written books on it. I got involved with it very closely when I was deputy chief of naval operations for submarines. I sent Ballard out to examine the *Thresher* site and also out to examine the *Scorpion* site. This was in '80—

DePue: Ballard being?

Thunman: Bob Ballard of the *Titanic* fame.<sup>68</sup> As a matter of fact, this is how we found the *Titanic*. I think I've told you that story.

I was interested in finding out what could we determine from a very close mapping of that site? Well, by '83, '84, we had some pretty exotic equipment, cameras on these remotely operated unmanned vehicles that could go down to 13,000 feet and all. So we did a very careful examination of the site. We were not able to show, and I'm convinced, that there was not a torpedo that hit that submarine. It was not a weapon, either internal or external, because the forward end of the submarine is on the bottom, fairly intact. The torpedo room in the bow is fairly intact. The after end imploded, which means it got sealed, until it reached a depth that it couldn't withstand, and then it implodes, and then of course everything just blows apart. It's like a cylinder in a car. You've got all that oxygen, oil, huge pressure, boom!

So I was convinced, after I made very careful examination of what Ballard brought back, that *Scorpion* had had a catastrophic failure forward.

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<sup>68</sup> Robert Duane Ballard (born June 30, 1942) is a retired United States Navy officer and a professor of oceanography at the University of Rhode Island who is most noted for his work in underwater archaeology: maritime archaeology and archaeology of shipwrecks. He is most known for the discoveries of the wrecks of the RMS *Titanic* in 1985, the battleship *Bismark* in 1989, and the aircraft carrier USS *Yorktown* in 1998.

Something had gone wrong in the forward end of the ship that caused it to flood. They sealed the after end, but they lost control of the submarine, and it went down.

What could have gone wrong on the forward end? I think probably the battery exploded. The battery compartment was below the crew's mess. But other things could have happened. The garbage disposal unit, which was kind of a torpedo tube in itself, had been improperly operated, or the ship may have lost control while operating and maneuvering.

I was exec of a sister ship of *Scorpion*, so I knew that ship. That was a little sports car, I think I've told you in the past. She was fast, and she could maneuver, but you could lose control of that thing. So, one of those three things went through my mind. But there wasn't an outside influence that caused the loss of that ship.

DePue: It wasn't anything to do with Soviet action against it.

Thunman: No, no. There's a book out today, *Silent Steel*, I think is the name of it. [It] says that the Soviets, using the codes that they got from the *Pueblo*, were able to crack the code that the *Scorpion* used to report her track back to the U.S. They put an ASW group in the pathway, and they attacked and sunk the *Scorpion*. There was a Soviet naval group about 120 miles from the *Scorpion*, southeast of *Scorpion*, but they didn't have anything to do with it.

DePue: What happens to the nuclear power plant when something like that occurs?

Thunman: Well, the reactor scrams, you know it shuts down automatically. The rods drop into the reactor, and there it is. It sits there and perks along on the bottom. Any problems are carried away by the...There's always heat generated. It goes down slowly, over the years. There's always radiation, but it's very, very slight. It doesn't affect anything. The other things we were able to find was that the sites were not radioactive. We tested both *Thresher* and *Scorpion*.

DePue: Would there be any fear that there would be some kind of a reaction, where the nuclear reactor would overheat and explode?

Thunman: No, because you couldn't overheat in that environment. You'd have to heat the ocean, the whole ocean. Plus, it's shut down, so it's not that much energy being produced. A nuclear reactor cannot be a nuclear bomb. There's not enough uranium, together with the geometry, that there could ever be a nuclear weapon explosion.

DePue: We've been at this for quite some time.

Thunman: Yeah, I think that's it.



DePue: We can pick up your next assignment, '72 to '74, as senior member of Pacific Fleet Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board. Wow, that's a mouthful.

Thunman: Well there again, remember I started this off by saying it was the ORSE board, the Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board, that flunked the *Plunger*.

DePue: So here's your reward, after you get done with that. You get sent there.

Thunman: Here's your reward. (laughs)

DePue: Thank you very much, Admiral, it's been fun.

(end of interview #6)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.07

Interview # 7: August 10, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Friday, August 10, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm in the home of Admiral Ron Thunman. Good morning, sir.

Thunman: Good morning, sir, to you. Welcome again.

DePue: This is our seventh session. Or if you want to look at it this way, chapter seven of your life and career.

Thunman: Okay. (laughs)

DePue: We finished off last time with a fascinating discussion about your command of the U.S.S. *Plunger*. We mentioned before how getting command of your own boat would have been the pinnacle of a lot of guy's careers and what they had been aiming for from day one, even if they got to the Naval Academy or something like that. It was a great discussion.

I've got one other thing to ask you about, in terms of the *Plunger*. This one is a little bit on the fun side. Somewhere here, I've got a little sketch. I don't know if it was your experience, but I wanted to ask you about the food onboard and show you this schematic of what the enlisted kitchen area would have been like for—

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: I don't know if this was your ship or a similar design.

Thunman: That's very, very close, yeah.

DePue: This is from Tom Clancy's book, *Submarine: A Guided Tour of Inside a Nuclear Warship*. I don't know if just looking at that kind of triggers some memories or not. Talk about the quality of the food and the importance of the food.

Thunman: Well, what you're looking at here is the crew's mess, which is really... It's called, here in the book, the dining area. This is where the crew can come to study, to come and watch movies, to come and chat, hold bull sessions. [It's] not very big, people kind of shoulder to shoulder. This isn't exactly right, but the freezers were nearby, and pretty much most of the time they could go in the freezer themselves and get a bowl of ice cream and get other things that were available.

Submarines, we took great pride in our cooking, great pride. We got more money than the rest of the Navy for food. I don't know if it's done the same way [now], but early on, you got so much money each day to spend on food. The submariners got darn near twice as much as anybody else. This was allocated by the government.

DePue: What's the logic behind that?

Thunman: Well, it's a volunteer service; it's a very tough living, tight living, and they tried to do as much as they could for the submariner. The submariner, of course, zeroed in on food, and we did. This came well before me, that food was important, and it was going to be good food, and it was. The cooks that we got... I remember sending, when I was skipper of the *Plunger*—and a lot of the submarines did this. It just wasn't my idea—sending my cooks back to this wonderful hotel in New York City, the—

DePue: The Waldorf Astoria?

Thunman: Yes, Waldorf Astoria. The deal was they could have them, do whatever they want to. It didn't cost them [the hotel] anything. I'd pay the travel, if they'd teach them to cook. These cooks were really superb. You had six or seven meals a day. In the morning you had what you call sticky buns. Every day they would make cinnamon rolls, sticky rolls, like you get. So when you were going on watch in the morning at 4:00, you had a hot sticky bun. Then there was breakfast at about 6:00 or 6:30, and then there was lunch, which was about 11:00, so they could go on watch at noon. Then, about 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon there was soup down, which was sandwiches and soup. Then the evening meal, which was around 7:00 at night. Then at about 11:00, mid rats [midnight rations]. So those were all of the meals that went on during the day, all linked to the four hour watch schedule. Those cooks were working at that all day long.

When we were in Japan, in the *Plunger*, we were tasked to entertain the minister of defense of Japan, Nakasone, who later became, I guess, prime minister. He came down on the ship, and we had lunch with him. We had this very, very fancy dessert that the crew had made. This is the dessert that you have, the internal is ice cream and external is a puffery type of thing.

DePue: A baked Alaska?

Thunman: Baked Alaska, yes. I'm having trouble remembering things today. But those cooks were good enough to make it. It was something, I'm sure, you could eat at the Waldorf Astoria and think it was just as good as anybody else's. The cooks, they took a lot of ribbing. I required every man in the crew, when they first came aboard, to work as assistants in the crew's mess, no matter what their rate. Everybody had to work. I forget what we set, six weeks or something, [to be] the ones who washed the dishes, who washed the decks and did all the stuff, took out the trash, operated the garbage disposal unit. I wanted every man to do that, so they knew what that was, and so they would be respectful of those people, because they'd be easy people to run. So they all did that. Mess cooks, we called them. Everybody had to mess cook. It was a big deal, the food on the submarine.

Now, when we went off on these ninety-day operations, we had to carry ninety days... We went off on our sixty, seventy day operations, we still had to carry ninety days' worth of food. In order to do that, we had food in cans on the decks of the crew's mess, so that the whole deck area would be covered with tomato cans or cans of beans. We had food stuck everywhere. We had to be very careful that it did not... that the cans didn't touch the hull and cause transmission and vibration and the detectability would be affected. The crews had to figure out how to do that so that they could... You kind of eat your way out of that area, into the regular storage areas.

When I was on a diesel submarine, the skipper of that diesel submarine, my first submarine—and he was good to do this. I'm glad he did this. At the time, I didn't like it too much—he made me the supply officer for three months. God, what do I know? But I did as good a job as I could. We were loading the boat out for deployment. I learned this from the chief of the boat—It wasn't my own idea. It was a great idea, though—put all the cans of nuts and cans of cookies, candies and everything, put them out on the pier first. Then there was a full day's operation to load all of the food and position it properly. The last thing you would order, that you would stow, would be those cookies, et cetera. By the end of the day, they were almost all gone. What the crew would do, would take them, and go put them in their lockers. Now if you'd asked them, would you put a can of nuts in your locker to help us? They'd go, "No, absolutely not. It's my locker." But if they could steal it, and put it in there... There's no way on a submarine, you could open up a big, half a gallon can of nuts, without four or five guys diving into it.

The other thing, I decided that... You made up the menus, and you kept track of how much you spent. That was a big deal. If you overspent, as a supply officer, that got you in trouble with your division commander, squadron commander. So I was very careful with it. It built up a little money. The crew liked lamb chops, and I like lamb chops. I thought, Well, I'm going to get some really good lamb chops. I went over to the commissary—this is for the people who lived in the Coronado area, Navy wives, Navy families—I went in, and I bought all the lamb chops they had and had them brought back to the ship. We had these wonderful lamb chops. Of course, all the Navy wives complained that we wiped out the lamb chops for the area. Let me just sum that up by saying, that was a very important day.

One other great story, though, ice cream. Submarines love ice cream, just can't get enough of it. In the early days, we had to make our own ice cream. We couldn't carry it if we were going on any long patrols. They gave us powder, ice cream powder. You tried to mix that with this skim milk and do some magic things with it and come up with ice cream. But it was not very good. I was on the *Robert E. Lee*, the fleet ballistic missile submarine, when somebody came aboard with a commercial ice cream powder that could be mixed and make ice cream out of it. We tried it, and boy, it was wonderful, really good. It wasn't perfect, but it was so much better than whatever else we could get.

Our captain, who was a great guy, later became a vice admiral, Chuck Griffiths was his name. He wrote a letter. Well, he tried to order some of this. Of course, you couldn't order it through the Navy system. This was a commercial system. So we made a requisition to the commercial system. It came back from the Navy, "No you can't do that. We don't buy things outside our standard lines, and we've got ice cream powder in the standard lines." That really made him mad. So he wrote a letter to commander submarine force Atlantic and said, "Here's this wonderful ice cream powder." He said,

“They won’t let us have it. Can you help me, Admiral?” (DePue laughs) You know, this is a big deal.

Of course, he knew what the answer was going to be, because he knew COMSUB Atlantic liked ice cream as much as he did. He’d been down there in his days. So he picks it up and picks up the phone and calls the chief of the supply admiral for the Navy—I forget what he was called in those days, but the chief flag officer in supply—and said, “You know, this is nuts. We ought to have this ice cream. I want this ice cream. If you don’t get me this ice cream powder by such and such, I’m going to the chief of naval operations. We’re going to discuss it.”

He immediately got it. We had ice cream powder coming out of Washington in trucks. (both laugh) That’s how strong we all feel. Today there’s a softie ice cream dispenser in every crew’s mess. You walk by, pull out a cup and get some of softie ice cream. It’s perking all along. After all, that was the only real pleasure that you had on the submarine, was that; it was food. We took care of the crew.

I can remember going up alongside, up in Alaska, in Adak, on the diesel boat—we had to go up for a couple of days—and standing on the pier with these big fifty-five gallon drums, full of the huge Alaska king crab legs in the drum, full of hot water. Everybody’s standing around, ripping those things out of there and big buckets full of butter. It was important.

DePue: You mentioned milk, and you mentioned skim milk, and I would think eggs. Eggs and milk and fresh vegetables, those are very perishable. They don’t last but a few days. What did you guys do?

Thunman: After a week, we’d be out of all of it.

DePue: And go with dried eggs and dried—

Thunman: Yeah, everything was packaged and canned. It was the best you could get, but it was...I can remember when I was COMSUBPAC, we had a boat up by the Straits of Hormuz. He’d been up there seventy, eighty days. We were trying to get him some more chow. He was getting down on chow and having a hard time, because the seas were rough. We just couldn’t make a normal transfer. They would tell me stories about throwing oranges from the supply ship to the people on the bridge, like baseball. (laughs)

DePue: Yeah, it gets to be a sport pretty soon, I would think. I can imagine the crew up there whooping and hollering.

Thunman: Whenever we came into port, after those long runs, they’d have big boxes full of fruit up on the pier. The crew would come off and dig into those things. Everybody would have something, an apple or an orange or something.

DePue: I wonder if, with all this great food onboard, if controlling the crewmen's weight was a bit of a problem.

Thunman: It really wasn't. I know on the *Robert E. Lee* everybody decided to go on a diet when we went. I forget what the hundreds of pounds that was lost, because of the diet. Because everybody had gotten fat onshore and off the ship, a decision was made. Nobody was required to do it, but people just did it.

We had a few athletic facilities where we'd put up a chinning bar and that kind of thing, very little. Initially, the first ballistic missile submarines—this was funny—they decided they would put in a gym. They would make a gym out of rubber that you blew up, put it up on the torpedo room, where the men could go and work in it. Well, that was a dumb idea, because after five or ten guys had worked out in this thing, the place smelled like a barnyard.

I used to, about every day, I would go into the reactor compartment right above that. It had a passageway. I'd do sit-ups and pushups as a means to try and stay in some kind of shape. We didn't have... I don't recall having any fat guys. The guys who you might think were fat were big, big strong men. (laughs) You wouldn't go up to them and call them fat.

DePue: Maybe you could correct me here, because you were supposed to be playing football at the Naval Academy, but a lineman on the Navy football team, maybe isn't the ideal candidate to serve on a submarine. But neither was a guy who was six-foot-four, huh?

Thunman: No. (laughs) A lot of the World War II submariners were Navy football players, the very famous ones.

DePue: One other question. Listening to you made me think about it. They're serving how many meals, six meals a day?

Thunman: Well, if we could count them again, sticky buns, breakfast, lunch, soup down, dinner, mid rats. That's six meals.

DePue: What was the day like? The reason I'm asking this, you're underwater so much of the time; you're not seeing daylight; you're floating around in the ocean and going from one time zone to another constantly. How did you manage that? How did your crew manage that?

Thunman: That was always a problem. We tried several ways. Of course, one way was—and we were always submerged, and we'd transit across during the transits. [That's] when it would be the worst problem. One way, of course, was to change clocks every time you went fifteen degrees in longitude. Then we thought, Well, let's not change them at all. Nobody liked that. Of course, you had a few of us who looked through the periscope, who saw night and day, but

not many. They still had a sense of when it was night and day. Then we tried, Well, let's change about every... Rather than fifteen degrees longitude, let's do it [at] thirty or forty. There were lots of different ideas about it, but the best idea was to just change it wherever you were, so everybody knew. Some people said we'd keep it as Pearl Harbor time. No, they didn't like that either. Let's keep it to wherever we were. So that's what we did.

DePue: But I would also think that there were some people who were always working the nightshift and some who always worked the dayshift.

Thunman: We would dog the watch. What you mean by dog the watch is, we had people standing four-hour watches. Then a watch would come up that would only be two hours long. That would cause the time that you were on watch to change. Time in a submarine is such an important thing. To know what time it is was vital in years past, because that's the only way you could navigate. I don't know if you've read that book about the British king offering the reward for an invention of a watch that could keep good time. It's a great book, interesting book. If you go to Greenwich... Of course, you know Greenwich Mean Time.<sup>69</sup> Go to Greenwich; they have those clocks that were developed in that program there. It was a big deal. Finally, somebody came up and won the prize. But they had all kinds of crazy things.

One of them was the dogwatch. They'd put two dogs together, and they may be friendly. Then they would take one on the ship, on the sailing ship, and off it would go. The other dog would stay there in Greenwich. This is a true story, amazing. Then at noon every day, they'd kick the dog in Greenwich, until it cried. For some reason, they believed the dog at sea would somehow sense that and bark or make some sort of noise. That's where the name dogwatch came [from], because apparently you had to assign a sailor to watch that dog at sea, to see if it barked. (both laugh)

DePue: Well, this also suggests that, after you've been in the submarine service for a while, you guys had your own language, your own culture.

Thunman: Oh, absolutely. They'd go ashore, they would hardly talk to the... surface skimmers is what they called them.

DePue: A derogatory term, I am sure.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, very derogatory. They would arrogantly parade into the bars, the crews or the enlisted clubs. They all would wear... They had shirts like... And would say to anybody, if they'd listen, "There are only two types of ships. There are targets and submarines." (both laugh)

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<sup>69</sup> Greenwich Mean Time or GMT is the clock time at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London. It is the same all year round and is not affected by Summer Time or Daylight Saving Time.

The rest of the Navy never did—either in the enlisted area or the officer area—really like submariners. [This was] because there are not very many. At one time, you might have 20,000 or 30,000 involved, plus everything, submarine tenders and everything. There just wasn't that many people. You're talking about a Navy of millions in those days or a half a million, three quarters of a million and this little group of submariners. And everything they got was better. We had better barracks, we had better...I'll say this; the system was good to us.

But we were a lot more aggressive in going out and getting things for the troops. That was a big deal. It was like the ice cream. It was not, "Oh well, let's do it." It was, "Let's make it perfect."

DePue: Aggressive as in bending the rules?

Thunman: Bent them incredibly. Out in Japan, we had a...After World War II, [on the] top of a big supply building, they had kind of a penthouse up there. It was taken over by the submariners, the submarine officers who were there. They built the submarine sanctuary, called it the SANX. All the boats, you'd go in there. It was for the officers, typical, but you'd go up to the SANX. It was the most resort-like club that it could possibly be. It was a big shower room—of course, we all [were] pleading to have a shower—a giant shower room, with incredible water pressures available and had about a half a dozen stewards assigned—all they did was cook for you and bring you drinks—and a bunkroom, a wonderful bunkroom.

You'd go up there. It was a way to get off the boat. It was there on the base, so you weren't far from the submarine. It was a special place, the SANX. The stewards they had up there were all expert cooks. You could go up there and get eggs benedict. They had all of these specialties that they would serve you in the morning. They'd treat you just like a king, like any millionaire in a resort. So that sanctuary continued.

It was illegal. There was no appropriation, anything that supported that, except it just kept going. The boats would come in and send the food up. The booze would...I don't know how they got the booze, but there was always plenty there. I'm sure it came from the Japanese some way, some sort of bartering, trading cigarettes. Those six stewards were probably the most effective con men in the world, in going out. [It had] a big movie room there. We'd go up there. Then they had a little, special room, which was for the skippers.

That went on for years and years and years. The rest of the Navy would complain about it. It would come up every year or two, saying, "The submarine sanctuary has got to go. Nobody's got it; none of the other organizations have it, and it's wrong. There'd be a flurry, and then it would die down, and it would still be there. When I was COMSUBPAC, I think



every admiral there in Pearl got the call up and talked to the fleet sync, "You've got to get rid of that sanctuary. People are complaining." "Well, yes sir. We'll get at it when we can." (both laugh)

But we had things like that around, that you did things for your crew. You were a lot more aware of the crew, I think, than in most ships. You did special things for them. You watched out for them. That's the first thing you did when you came into port.

One of the things I did, which I was always very proud of. We were up on a special operation, and we got extended. After the operation, we were supposed to go to Hong Kong. We were supposed to stop off in Okinawa, and then go into Hong Kong. We were extended, the operational requirement. So we came out of it. The Hong Kong visits were carefully scheduled. We could only go in there certain times. It all had to be cleared diplomatically, for the submarine to go in there. You couldn't change the timing.

We came out of the Sea of Japan, and they said, "Well, look, you're going to go straight into Hong Kong. Skip the Okinawa visit," which was an unusual thing to do. We would get into Hong Kong and offload all the classified stuff and the CIA guys and everything else that we had, but we'd go right into Hong Kong.

So we got there. Nobody had any money. We were prepared to get paid in Okinawa, while we were there. So nobody had any real money, and of course, they wanted money for Hong Kong. I was there, paying my respects. We got there, and I went in to see the commodore Hong Kong.

I met there, the commander of Seventh Fleet's chaplain, captain. I was telling him, I said, "I've got problems. The troops don't have any money." Then I looked at him, and I said, "Don't you have money? Doesn't the fleet have money in some sort of a religious account?" He said, "Oh yeah." He had so much money, quite a bit of money, as a matter of fact. I said, "Will you lend me..." I forget [if] what I got was \$25,000. I said "Lend me \$25,000, and I'll pay you back." I said, "Let's not go through a big flap of writing messages and getting permission. Let's just do it. I want these kids to go ashore tonight with some money." He was a good guy, and he said, "Okay, let's go do it."

So we went to Bank of Hong Kong. He wrote a check for \$25,000 on his account. They gave me \$25,000, and off I went, back to the boat and held payday. Every man got so much. The chief of the boat, of course, did it. So we had the money for liberty. Then, when we left there, and we got to Ukuska, we got the money back to him. It was not a big problem. But it was something... That kind of stuff went on. We always made very sure that the crew was taken care of.

DePue: I want to change directions here a little bit. Last time we did talk about what was going on in the world, specifically, what was going on in Vietnam. You expressed very clearly that, when you're out doing your missions, you were kind of separated from the larger world overall. But I did want to get your impressions, your views personally—and maybe this is in retrospect for the most part—about whether or not you saw Vietnam in the larger context of the Cold War that you were fighting and your personal opinions about how we fought that war.

Thunman: Well, certainly in your first question, I think it was, in a larger context, a piece of the Cold War. In my view—I believed it then, and I believe it now, even more firmly—you had to stand up and fight somewhere. You had to tell them we're not going to just back down, that we'll fight. I don't know where you were going to pick to fight, because they were pushing us pretty hard. That included the Chinese. The Chinese were supporting Vietnam, as you well know too, and the Soviets were supporting Vietnam. So you had to stand and fight. I've always believed we won the war.

I don't know if I told you my story about when we had to pull out of the Gulf of Tonkin. I was in the fleet commander's office when he got that word. I saw him put his head in his arms. He said, "We've lost," because once we backed out of our agreement that we would supply the south with equipment—once our armies were gone—and then didn't—

Well, the story was this was at the point where Congress had decided not to provide any support. The North, although they had agreed that no support would be provided to the VC [Viet Cong] by North Korea, in excess of what they had done in the past, immediately, once that decision was made, started coming south with huge anti-aircraft equipment and guns and supplies and tanks and troops. You know, they started coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It was clear it was over, because at the same time, we were told we could not put battle groups back into the Gulf of Tonkin. That's when the fleet commander put his head in his hands, when he got the word. When Congress took over and failed to provide the support and would not let us stop that flow of support coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail—of course, we'd been controlling that trail for five or ten years, keeping them out—it was over.

So, to kind of sum all that up, I think we were right to fight. We were wrong to leave like we did. We'd won the war. We killed 50,000 American boys. If we'd made the North comply with the agreement that we had, South Vietnam would have stayed a democracy.

When we got tough with them, it's like McCain has said, "When we started the carpet bombing and all of that, that's when they started being nice to the prisoners of war." So, we had the means. We didn't have to keep the boys on the ground, but we had the means to keep them in place, but we didn't. So we gave up the South.

DePue: This is a little bit ahead of our schedule, but it's on this subject. Nineteen seventy-five is when the whole thing came crashing down. By that time, for about two years, it had been a war that the South Vietnamese Army was—

Thunman: And the deal was that we wouldn't provide them any more... The deal that was made, it would be okay for us to supply them support, no more than we had before, and the North Koreans could not provide any more support than what they had before. They immediately violated that. On our side, our Congress said, "We're not going to vote any funding for it." And the thing collapsed.

DePue: That was post-Watergate, as well, so the political support for Nixon was gone, had evaporated. My question then is, seeing those images of pushing helicopters off of aircraft carriers and the images of those helicopters loading up to the gills on the top of the U.S. Embassy in then Saigon, what's going on in your mind? What's going on in your gut at the time?

Thunman: I was part of this, interestingly. I was commander of Submarine Squadron Fifteen in Guam when Vietnam fell. The first word we got in Guam was you've got to be prepared to take about 30,000 or 40,000 refugees from South Vietnam.

DePue: On submarines?

Thunman: No, on the island of Guam.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Thunman: See, I was a commander of a submarine squadron. We had ten fleet ballistic missile submarines, half of them were at sea. I had a submarine tender, 1,500 men that were there to support the submarines, repair and maintenance. And I had a big site. Guam had Andersen Air Force, but they didn't have as many people as we did. They had maintenance people there, but they didn't have... I had more than 1,000 men.

Anyway, the word came. They said the planes would start arriving immediately, because many came out of the South, the Philippines. Then our 747s, the commercial airlines, were taken over, I guess. They started flying these people to Guam. We had an admiral there, a wonderful guy, two-star fighter pilot. He was a commander of—I'm trying to think of his name—commander naval forces Marianas, the whole string of



*Official command photo for Captain Ron Thunman in 1974, while he was commander Submarine Squadron 15, based in Guam.*

Marianas Islands here. But he only had a staff of about twenty or thirty. It was mainly a political job, where he would provide oversight and support to the islands, up along there. It was kind of an out of the way job, and it was his last job. He was a wonderful guy though. But he didn't have any support capability. He called me up, and he says, "You've got to help me." I said, "Well, I'll do all I can." I had been told, "You've got to keep those Polaris submarines on patrol." So, you do what you can, but make sure those submarines stay on patrol.

So, we geared up. These people were coming. I made fifty-man tiger teams. I put electricians in them; I put carpenter capable people and others. I had these groups put together. The Army flew in some of these thirty-man tents that they had locally somewhere. I guess they had them in Okinawa. They came flying in, so we started making these... We took the old landing field at the naval air station, which had not been used in years, made that the area where we would put the refugees and started erecting these tents. In came the refugees. I mean, plane after plane after plane. We had people sitting in buses, waiting for the tents to go up. We broke all the sledgehammer handles, because of trying to pound the pegs into the concrete. We had to build our own sledgehammers. We had big steel pipes, with a head on them and welded.

The young American sailors who went through that, they just did a magnificent job. They worked themselves to the bone to support these people. The kids I had on the boats were out working too, those who were in port. I had to call the skipper in and say, "Look, you've got submarines down here, and you've got to be ready to fight fires and do all these things. You can't have every man down there dead tired, so you've got to regulate that."

It was quite an experience. I was the mayor. I'd walk around, you know. One funny thing, remember the Vietnamese who shot the VC? There was a picture appeared, I guess, on the front of *TIME*.

DePue: I think it was the Saigon police chief, perhaps, very famous photo.

Thunman: Yeah, very famous photo. Initially, we were very concerned about security, of course. I remember, in the airport, this little old lady pulling this bag behind her, full of the golden baht [Thai currency] leaves. I remember Americans coming out there with suitcases full of \$100 bills. There was a lot going on. One lady came up to me in the camp one day, and she said, "Will you take care of these?" She had a bag full of jewels. I told her, "No, I can't do that," but we'll protect her.

We had some dissidents who came later, because after the planes came, came ships. The ships, I can't believe how bad they were. They had thousands in these small merchant ships. It just stunk to high heaven. You could smell them ten miles at sea, these people coming in. I was worried about security, especially with some of the dissidents that had gotten mixed in

somehow. This guy showed up early on, as one of the refugees. I said, “We make him the police chief, and that will solve a lot,” and it did. (laughs) He was a pretty good guy. There wasn’t anything wrong with him, but everybody knew who he was.

DePue: Tell me more about the cross section of the kind of Vietnamese you had there. Were these military people, families?

Thunman: No, no. They were mostly civilians. Well, they were all civilians. Many had worked for the government.

DePue: These aren’t South Vietnamese peasants, by a large part, are they?

Thunman: No. The ones who came in the ships later on were a lower class. The ones who came in the aircraft were, I would say, middle upper class. An awful lot of children came, without any parents. As I understand, what would happen, the parents would pay some of these guys I talked about—who had suitcases full of \$100 bills—and they’d give them the child. The guy would get the child on the plane. They’d arrive in Guam, and all of a sudden we had little kids wandering around, with no parents. We had to start our own little orphanage.

I had one other good experience. We didn’t have any food. I had the food on the tender, but 35,000 people come pouring in there. I went up to see my boss. I said, “Surely, can’t we get some food a little faster than this?” Somehow the flight situation with Pearl Harbor... Well, that was going to be tough.

Then I heard that there was a Greek freighter coming in that was full of rice. It had an engine problem. It had to come to Guam. A bearing burned out or something. So I said to him, “Couldn’t I have the rice? Can’t we take that rice? Isn’t there something that says it’s okay for us to take it? We’ll pay it for him?” He said, “Well, I’ll check that with CINCPAC.” Of course, getting through anything with CINCPAC in Pearl Harbor... I said “Well, Admiral, would it be okay if I just went down and took it?” He said, “You do what you want. We’ll support you.” He didn’t say he would take care of me if I got in trouble.

So off I went, down to the Greek freighter. I went up the brow. There was this Greek captain. Nobody could look more like a greasy, Greek captain, there, kind of bowing in an oily fashion. (DePue laughs) We go up into his room. He opens a little cabin. He pulls out some Ouzo.<sup>70</sup> He pours some Ouzo; we toast each other. He said, “What can I do for you?” [speaking with a Greek accent] I said, “I’ve got a great deal for you. I’ve come here for your rice. I’m going to pay you twice as much as what you’re being paid.” The rice was in route to Taiwan. I said, “That’s a great deal for you.” I just came up with that. I hadn’t cleared that with the admiral. I just figured that we ought to

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<sup>70</sup> Ouzo is a dry anise-flavored aperitif that is widely consumed in Greece, Cyprus and Lebanon.

be able to sell that. He looked at me, and he said, "Well, we may have to talk about the price a little bit." I said, "Well, it won't make any difference, because we're offloading it now." (both laugh)

What I had brought with me, I had a company of Marines there. You know, you always have Marines assigned to you if you've got nuclear weapons you're guarding. Of course, we had all those missiles that were inside the tender, and there were all these Marines that were all around that hold. Stuff was starting to move. (laughs) We went out. He looked, and his eyes were that big. He said, "Okay." That was it. (laughs)

DePue: I'm thinking that this isn't the kind of thing where there's a Navy manual to tell you how to do it?

Thunman: No.

DePue: Or all that training you received in preparation for command?

Thunman: The one thing you learned in command was, if you came across a situation, you deal with it the best you know. In my mind, I thought I was being more than fair; although, he probably wanted to negotiate for five times as much or ten times as much.

DePue: My guess is he pocketed a little bit of the profit himself.

Thunman: I'm sure he did. (laughs)

DePue: Tell me more about the dissidents. When you say dissidents that slipped in, what do you mean?

Thunman: They were people somehow, who had come and decided they didn't want to be here, didn't want to be part of America, and wanted to go back. As a matter of fact, we sent them back. The ships that came with all of these refugees, we sent those ships back with the dissidents onboard.

DePue: Were these people that you suspected were communists, that had somehow slipped in?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah. The FBI interviewed, checked out everybody who came.

DePue: My guess also is that the South Vietnamese who wanted to be there were more than happy to point out the other ones.

Thunman: Oh, yes, yes. There was never any problem. There was never anything, because the South Vietnamese who were there were so supportive of us. Over the years, I've run across people who were part of that. They hear that I was involved there, and they've always been supportive. It was quite an experience; it really was. You're right, a submarine an ex-submarine

commander was a good person run something like that, because you're used to that. You're used to changing situations that you've got to figure out how to deal with. There's nobody there to help you. The admiral was a good guy. Finally, after about two weeks, the Army arrived. They got together some Army forces to bring in, to take over the administration of this whole thing.

I have to tell you, the first things that arrived were aircraft after aircraft full of jeeps. Pretty soon the whole island was covered with and locked together with jeeps. In the Army, if you didn't have a jeep, I guess you don't have anything. You didn't need them, but they all came, and they were all used. It was just one big traffic jam, full of jeeps. I'm struggling here, trying to remember the name of the admiral. You'll know...His son, very, very famous singer, rock singer in the '60s and early '70s, of the Doors. Have you ever heard of the Doors?

DePue: Morrison?

Thunman: Yeah, Morrison.<sup>71</sup> It was Admiral Morrison, who was just this wonderful man. He had a beautiful voice. In church every Sunday, we'd listen to his voice. [He] and his wife, were nice people. They were so sad. By that time, Jim Morrison had died, killed himself. I don't know what happened. And this was his last tour. Then he was going to leave the Navy. He was a wonderful guy to deal with, and we handled that. We got it done. We put those dissidents back on those ships.

The other funny part of the story was, when we got the dissidents, we had them separated in camps. I was worried about them. Of course, you know, we had the, what is it, Posse...?

DePue: Posse Comitatus.<sup>72</sup>

Thunman: Posse Comitatus. We were worried about trying to use our own military people to handle them. I sent some messages, "Don't you have somebody you can send us?" Well, the first thing they sent us was about four or five of these U.S. marshals showed up. I remember somebody coming to me and saying, "The marshals are here." "How many?" "Five." "Five?" I said, "Five. What are we going to do with five?" I went out to meet these guys. Man, I never met men like that before. They all looked like John Wayne, all with these big guns hanging down. (laughs) We went up to where we had a camp for these people. They opened the gate, and they walked in there. That place quieted

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<sup>71</sup> James Douglas Morrison, born on December 8, 1943, in Melbourne, Florida, was the charismatic rock singer and songwriter for the 1960s rock group the Doors, until his death in Paris at age 27. In the official account of his death, he was found in a Paris apartment bathtub. Pursuant to French law, no autopsy was performed because the medical examiner stated that there was no evidence of foul play. The absence of an autopsy left many questions regarding the cause of death.

<sup>72</sup> The Posse Comitatus Act restricts the participation of the military in domestic law enforcement activities.

down pretty fast. (laughs) I watched all that, and I said, “My God, there was a John Wayne movie.” (both laugh)

DePue: Happy to see that group arrive, huh?

Thunman: Yeah, I was happy. I didn't think five was enough. Five was probably too many.

DePue: Well, I didn't expect to get into this story. But this is why we do these interviews, because it's an important piece of history, as well. I did want to talk today a little bit—I don't know that we will be able to finish your tour—but as a member of the Pacific Fleet Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board. There's a mouthful.

Thunman: Well, that was a great surprise. I had finished my command tour.

DePue: This was 1972, '71?

Thunman: Yeah, '71, finished in the summer of '71. [I] had a very successful command tour. I figured I'd be in for a pretty good job somewhere, maybe back in Washington. I was up on the COMSUBPAC staff. They brought me up there as an assistant chief of staff. I was a commander, early selected for promotion to captain by two years, which was quite an achievement for me, anyway, I think for anybody. I get orders, I'm going to be the Pacific Fleet senior member of the Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board, responsible for examining all of the nuclear powered ships in the Pacific. That includes the carriers, the cruisers, all the submarines. Every ship had to be examined once a year, a very intense operational examination.

DePue: In other words, you're in charge of writing the report card for all of these boats.

Thunman: Yes. And the hierarchy, which was established, was I reported directly to Admiral Rickover and directly to the fleet commander. I had nobody in between me. That had been agreed to by Rickover and the chief of naval operations.

DePue: Point of clarification, before you go on in with this. Did this include surface ships that were nuclear powered?

Thunman: Yes. Carriers.

DePue: Is that it, the carriers?

Thunman: No, we had the *Nimitz*. But in those days we had four cruisers in the Pacific.

DePue: That were nuclear powered.



Thunman: Nuclear powered. They don't have them now. Everybody was afraid of that examining board, because you recall, that's how I got command. The examining board had found the *Plunger* unsatisfactory, and the force commander had fired the skipper. You were Darth Vader, wherever you went. You had the power.

The way it was set up was interesting. You went to sea with them; you had the exam; you made the decision of what you were going to do at sea, and you sent that message from at sea, if you failed them. You didn't come in and talk to anybody about it, talk to the fleet commander or somebody, and let him lobby you one way or the other.

That ship, then, if you found it unsatisfactory, went into port, tied up and couldn't operate its nuclear power plant again, until Admiral Rickover himself gave permission. The ship really was turned back over to Rickover for the retraining of the crew and for conducting the maintenance necessary to fix whatever material problems were developed.

DePue: This would include aircraft carriers?

Thunman: Yes, *Nimitz*.

DePue: Well, if you take one of the aircraft carriers offline, don't you have a serious hole in the defense?

Thunman: Well, the Vietnam War was going on. You're absolutely right, but that's the way it was. Rickover would not budge on that and also, the requirement that every ship had to be examined once a year, would not budge on it, a bit.

I'll tell you the story of the aircraft carrier. *Nimitz* was out, up in the South China Sea. I went in to see my boss. It was old Admiral Mickey Weisner, a wonderful aviator, a four-star commander in chief of Pacific Fleet.

DePue: His last name again?

Thunman: Weisner, W-e-i-s-n-e-r, a little guy, tough as nails, big cigar. I said, "Admiral, *Nimitz* has got to be examined. I realize she's out in the gulf now, but she's got to be examined. The year is up. I've talked to Admiral Rickover's office about delaying the exam two months; they won't do it." And he said, "Okay, does that mean you're going to go out and examine them?" I said, "Yes, sir." I said, "We'll give them a good exam, and we'll be mindful of where we are and what's going on. But we've got to do it, either that or you're going to have to talk to Rickover. There's no way I'm going to change it."

DePue: Was Weisner on the *Nimitz*?

Thunman: No. He was Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, a four-star admiral. Weisner of course, like...None of them wanted to talk to Rickover. (laughs) Well, they

knew that there'd be no budge. He said, "Okay, go ahead." Then he looked at me, and he said, "Just don't fuck it up." (both laugh)

So, I went out there, and we conducted the exam. It was eight days onboard. It was interesting, because they were conducting their alpha strikes on the North [Vietnam]. I'd go watch them go and come back and go listen to their briefings in the ready room. It was very interesting, very. It was good for me. I really got a good picture of how the carrier operated.

But going back to being assigned to the job, I was just astounded that I got this job, because normally the senior member was a good operational submariner—there's no question about that—one of the top guys in the line, but one who'd had a lot of engineering, nuclear engineering, one who had also in his career, been the chief engineer of a nuclear powered ship. I'd never done that. I was the one guy who had been ordered there, remember? Go back when I was ordered to be an exec. I'd never took the engineer's exam when they ordered me in and those kind of things. I was the **least** qualified, from an engineering point of view.

DePue: Well, in Army jargon, people in the officer corps who are all ambitious, driven people, always angling for their next promotion, they would be looking at you and saying, "Hey, this Thunman guy is being fast-tracked."

Thunman: Yeah. That's right.

DePue: So how did this happen?

Thunman: Yeah, but the point is, I was not really, from an engineering... Those exams were very... You went out and you ran drills. When you called them a drill, you said, you simulate a steam leak. Well, what do you do when you have a steam leak in a nuclear propulsion plant? You shut the main steam stops. Now, it is no longer a drill. The turbine generators go down; the shaft stops. You're in the business of trying to recover from a real casualty, even though it was caused by a drill situation. That was a tough time. I don't know how I thought I could do... I did it. I go out on that carrier, and I knew nothing about that propulsion plant, that carrier propulsion plant. I did had five experts who were top notch nuclear submariners, who'd all had very successful chief engineer tours. So I had all these people helping me, but I was the guy who made the final decision, whether we were going to fail them or not, what the final grade would be.

DePue: Was the power plant on a nuclear aircraft carrier significantly different than a submarine?

Thunman: Oh, sure. They had eight reactors. They had different arrangements of their... Of course, the basics are the same. You've got steam; you've got generators; you've got main engines; you've got a reactor. The way that it all interacts may be different, but—

I remember, we went to the carrier. We got there, and they had eight engine rooms. So we started off with one of the engine rooms. We came down. I looked around in the engine room, and none of the ship's people were there, like the ship's reactor officer or chief engineer, normally would be in the vicinity when we ran the drills. [It] didn't require them, but normally they were there to see what was going on. So, one of my guys came up to me, and he said, "Captain," he said, "I screwed up." We were in engine room number four. He said, "We're supposed to be in engine room number two." [He] had all the people in the engine room, all big eyed and waiting for something to happen, for us to start some sort of a simulated drill. So, hell, we didn't even know where we were. (laughs) We were about to run this drill. So I said to him, I said, "Look, just everybody walk around, like they are inspecting, for about fifteen minutes. Then we'll gather and leave and go to engine room number two, (both laugh) like we know what we're doing."

In those situations, you didn't let them put their best people in. If a young guy was the engineering officer of the watch and he'd only been qualified for two months, that's who did it. The chief engineer could not step in, unless he was doing something that was wrong. So, those young kids, these are the guys just out of training. They were just scared to death of you. They were just almost frozen with fear.

DePue: Weren't these, though, some of the people who had gone through the drill with Admiral Rickover in the first place?

Thunman: Yes, yes. Over the years I met them, and they'd say, "Oh, I remember you, oh." I see them even now today. They kind of, "Oh yeah, I remember you." In some of the cases, I almost felt like taking the kid and putting his head on my shoulder and saying, "It's going to be okay." (both laugh)

DePue: What was Rickover's rank at this time?

Thunman: At this time, he was admiral. He was a full admiral. He became vice admiral, Rickover, I think, in the '60s and admiral when I was in my command situation.

DePue: So he was wearing four stars?

Thunman: Yeah. Of course, he never wore a uniform. They had a hell of a time getting him into a uniform in order to get him promoted. They had to go out and buy it and all that. That was a big story of how they got him in a uniform.

DePue: The only reason I ask that is that he and Weisner would have been peers, in terms of rank structure.

Thunman: Oh, yeah.

DePue: But again, your stories emphasize that he was a force unto himself.

Thunman: Yes. He had that direct pipe to the Congress, and he only dealt through the secretary of the Navy. He never went down and talked to guys like Weisner.

DePue: Well, he didn't even have to go through the chief of naval operations?

Thunman: No, no. If he had a problem, he went to the secretary of the Navy. Rickover came out—it was funny—came out to Pearl Harbor when I was commander, Submarine Force Pacific. [He] came out to see me, I guess, and to see how things were going out there. It was unusual. So, one of the things you learned whenever Rickover came was, you never had anything that was ostentatious for him. So I trained a seaman—the smartest kid I could find, and we actually trained him—to be the driver for Admiral Rickover, pick him up at the airport and bring him to the headquarters, my headquarters. He'd raise hell with you if you met him, because you'd be wasting your time. That's not what you're getting paid for, is to go meet people at the airplane.

Then, of course, I spent time with him in the office and all. So it came time to see the fleet commander, Admiral Weisner. I was in the car with him, he and I and this driver. This kid did a wonderful job. Rickover never said anything, but I knew he liked the fact it was a seaman. So we get to Weisner's headquarters, and there's the master chief petty officer of the Pacific Fleet, a wonderful guy, a big guy, a chief petty officer with all kinds of stripes down his side. He's standing out there. I'd told Admiral Weisner, I said, "For God's sake, do not meet the admiral. We will come back to your office. Just let us come, and we'll just walk right into your office. We won't stop and ask for any..." Rickover just didn't like anything that was not worthwhile doing, that wasn't productive. Everything had to be productive.

This chief petty officer, he hadn't been told to do it, but somehow he was coming by—or maybe he had been, I don't know—but the car stops, and he opens the door... The chief reaches in, opens the door, "Welcome, Admiral." Rickover got up and just chewed him up and down. "What the hell are you doing out here? This is what you do? You open doors? Don't you have something... Why are we paying you all that money, to stand out here..." God, this poor chief was just purple. (DePue laughs)

The other part of the story was funny. Then we went up to see the commander in chief, Pacific, CINCPAC, who was the big combatant commander for the whole Pacific. I'd been up there a few times, but I hadn't been up there recently. We got up there. He's smart and he's listened to me. I talked to him about it. He knew; he didn't have anybody, nobody in sight. We pulled up in front of the headquarters. There wasn't anybody. We get out, and we go inside the first floor. This is a four-story building, CINCPAC, maybe five. I knew where the elevator was. I'd remembered that. There wasn't anybody on that ground floor.

We went over to the elevator. I hit the button, and the doors opened. I got in, and I thought, Oh shit, what floor is he on? I forgot. I thought, Well, I've got one chance. I think it's either two or three. I'm not going to say anything; I'm just going to pick one of them. I picked three. We stop at the third floor. The doors open. There stands the commander in chief, Pacific. I'd picked the right one. I don't know what the hell would have happened if I'd picked the wrong one.

DePue: I know the protocol is, if you've got a general or an admiral rank, you've got aides.

Thunman: Oh, he didn't have any aides.

DePue: He didn't have any aides? A four-star admiral would normally be allowed to have what?

Thunman: Oh, he probably... The average four-star has got one or two, as many aides as he wants really, frankly. Two or three, plus he's got a writer; he's got a secretary; he's got a chief of staff. In the Pentagon, I had a chief of staff; I had a writer; I had an aide and just about anything else I wanted, but I had those three all the time.

DePue: And Rickover had nobody?

Thunman: He had people in his office. He had one guy, Bill Wegner was his name, who was his assistant for all those years. He always used to say that he did things on his own. Of course, we were all backing him up. I don't know if I told you the story about when he flew out to Mare Island in San Francisco. They put him on the plane in Washington by himself, and then they had prepared a guy to meet him in the San Francisco Airport, a young guy, again no big deal. The plane came, and Rickover wasn't on it. All hell broke loose, phone calls saying, "Well, where the hell is Rickover? He's not there." I remember Bill Wegner saying, "Well, we put him on the plane. He left here." What he'd done is he'd gotten off at Los Angeles, when the plane landed in Los Angeles. He didn't bother to say, is this San Francisco? (laughs) It was a one-stopper, going to... So, they found him in the airport in Los Angeles, raising hell with the people there about why aren't we in San Francisco? (both laugh)

But that ORSE [Operational Reactor Safeguard Examination Board] board job was a tough job. As I look back on it, I think I was very lucky that I did it. We had some close calls. The cruiser, *Long Beach*, we were at sea, and we lost all power. They were conducting the drills, and some things happened. Here, I'm in a cruiser. We're down to one diesel generator. We were almost adrift, with nothing, and we got it back onto line.

It was a tough job, flying. I flew everywhere, back and forth, across to Guam. We used to examine the ships in Guam. We examined them in Japan,

the Gulf of Tonkin. I was in and out of Vietnam a couple times. It was quite an experience.

DePue: You said you were the senior member, but it sounds like you were going out and doing inspections, along with everybody else.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. The senior member always went. The senior member was the one who made the decision. It was your decision, anything that came out of what was called the ORSE board.

DePue: ORSE board?

Thunman: Operational Reactor Safeguards Examining Team. It was quite a job, quite a unique...I'll say this. Most of the officers... Well, I'd say, when I think about it, all that I know of who've had the job were promoted subsequently to rear admiral.

DePue: Well, that gets back to a question. You mentioned, at the beginning of this part of the discussion, that you got to the O6 rank, the captain's rank, basically two years ahead?

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: What was the normal procedure for—again, here's some terminology—for punching your ticket and moving up? What did that normally take?



*Rear Admiral Ron Thunman with his parents 1976.*

Thunman: Well, probably more than anything else, it required... In the submarine business now, nuclear submarine business, that you have a solid, excellent command tour. That not only included operational command, it also included your performance in operating and maintaining the nuclear propulsion plant of your submarine. You had to get Rickover's support. The only way you'd get him... I don't care how many Medals of Honor they had hung around your neck, if your propulsion plant wasn't well above the average in maintenance and training, he wouldn't support you.

DePue: But was he officially, formally, part of the promotion process? There would typically be a promotion board to make these decisions. I'm sure, once it gets up to captain and higher level, these are flag officers who are sitting on these boards. But I would imagine that Rickover wasn't formally part of that process.

Thunman: Not formally, but clearly part of it. I served on two flag boards, promotion boards.

DePue: So, was it to your advantage—for this position, getting up to captain quicker than most people—would it have been to your advantage to be one of Rickover's guys?

Thunman: Well, I was, certainly was. There's no question about it. But I wouldn't have been one of his guys if I hadn't had the successful command tour. It would have made no difference to him. Going back to what you say about the promotion boards, I would go over to Rickover's offices and sit and talk with mainly Bill Wegner. I never talked to Rickover about these, but figured out who we wanted to promote to admiral. Then we'd have a little list. We knew how many we could get, five out of maybe twenty, fifteen or seventeen flags that could be promoted that year.

When I was in the Pentagon as DCNO [Deputy Chief of Operations] in submarines, I knew who those five were before I went over there, as the member of the promotion board. I'd already cleared those names with Rickover's offices. I wasn't about to take anybody over there who wasn't on... And I had some powerful people say, "Hey, you ought to put so and so on there."

I remember once, CINCPAC, who was a submariner, a wonderful guy, Bob Long, he said to me, "You know, I've got this one guy that..." who was a good guy. Rickover didn't like him too much, because he'd been kind of wild and wooly in his operation of his plant, but a good guy, a smart guy. He [Long] said, "You ought to put him on there. This guy is really good, and I'd like to see him on there." I said, "I don't think that will happen, Admiral," knowing he wasn't going to like that too much.

The first time I was on the board, I was COMSUBPAC, so I was only a two-star. The second time, I was in the Pentagon as a three-star. But then you got into the board and everybody kind of knew. The senior member of the admiral flag board knew, as far as the submariners were concerned. He had no power with anybody else. But if you didn't give him the sign that that guy was not acceptable—I don't care how everybody voted—it would turn out wrong.

DePue: We talked a little bit about this before, but would it be fair to say that there was plenty of politics being played when you got to that level?

Thunman: Oh, God, yeah, yeah. But they all knew... The first time I went on the propulsion board, I was astounded when the first job I got, when I came out to the Pacific as commander, Submarine Force, they said, "You've got to go back to the promotion board You're on the board." What? I was this young rear admiral, and I go back there with all these grizzly, three-stars. But they all

knew. By that time, the Navy knew that you were going to take the signal, as far as what goes on in submarines, from the submariner.

DePue: You would have been the sole submariner on that board?

Thunman: Yeah, um-hmm, the sole submariner on both of the boards I served on. You only got one, and I think there were seven members of a board. I would support... I was smart enough to get involved with their politics and help them out. The senior member of the promotion board is the one I would help out. I'd figure out what he wanted. That was pretty interesting stuff, being on those admiral selection boards.

DePue: Well, let's finish off. I know you said you wanted to get done about 11:00 today, and we're a little bit past that. I'll ask you then, if there are any other stories or incidents that you want to talk about, while you were doing this examination board.

Thunman: No. It was tough. A lot of time away from home, flying all over the country. I certainly learned what made a submarine tick, from an engineering point of view, having seen all of these drills in our submarines and surface ships. I went there; I was very inexperienced in the nuclear propulsion plant. When I left, after two years, I had pretty good knowledge of a nuclear propulsion plant and what it could do. So it was quite an education.

But at the same time, it also gave me a real good look at the people we had operating those ships. I saw them all. The crews, [I] watched them operate, watched them perform. I saw what it took to run a good ship, as compared to what would happen when they were running a bad ship. It got to the point, interestingly, I used to come aboard... We'd be aboard about an hour. I would take a piece of paper, and I'd write down the grade for the ship. I'd put it in my pocket. And we'd go through this, all of the stuff and everything.

Then afterwards, the board would meet. We wrote up the report together. We'd stay up until it was done, in the middle of the night. I would listen to them, and I'd get their recommendation, "What are you thinking?" A guy would say, "I thought he was above average." Each board member got his input. Then we'd discuss, "Well, why would you say that? Look, how he did this over here, and they did that over there." It was kind of a... I could drive it to a degree, but it was pretty much a board decision. Then I'd say, "Okay, let's see." I'd reach in there; open it up. Nine times out of ten I had the right grade. (laughs) That was after an hour of watching them. And three days later—

DePue: I'm guessing, at the end of this, there would be a little exercise where your board would gather together, and the crew would gather together, and you'd have a—



Thunman: Then we'd have a critique.

DePue: An oral critique?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: I'm sure there was plenty of tension in the air, sometime.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. Well, that carrier critique was something. That was unusual. The captain of that carrier, who was quite a guy—I forgot his name now—quite a guy...But they all...They took it. And we gave them the report when we left. I mean, they had it. It wasn't cleaned up typing, but it was pretty much what it was. We would go through and talk. At the end of it, then I would give them the grade. It was a unusual experience to do that. I don't think there's anything else like it in life, where you've got so many people hanging on. When you fail them, then of course...Boy, you could just see the people slump down. Of course, I had been there. I had been onboard a ship that had failed. I knew what that was. That may have been why I got the job. They said, "Well this guy knows what happens when you fail. So he's just not going to throw that around, willy-nilly."

DePue: How hard was it for you personally, because I would think that you would at least have gotten to know the captain of the ship?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. Some of them were my classmates at the Naval Academy.

DePue: And then you have to fail them and know that, in your heart, you're ending their career, to a certain extent.

Thunman: Yeah. A couple of them were my classmates from the Naval Academy. That was kind of hard to do. [phone rings] I had one squadron commander who was really trying to make admiral, and I flunked his ship. He was really upset, and he got me aside and really reamed into me about how I was Rickover's puppet and that Rickover had told me to fail that ship, that they really shouldn't have failed, which wasn't true. I never talked to Rickover, until **after** I had assigned the grade.

As a matter of fact, one of the first exams I conducted, I didn't fail the ship. I said, "We'll come back and look at you again in six months," because the ship had just come back from a long patrol, and I thought there were a lot of extenuating circumstances. Rickover called me. He said, "You should have failed that ship." The way he said it...I remember now, he said, "Don't you think you should have failed that ship? Weren't they really unsatisfactory?" I said, "No, sir. They were satisfactory, at that point." I didn't want to look at him. I didn't change a thing. He didn't say anything. I think if I'd have said, "Yeah, you're right Admiral. I should have," I don't know what would have happened to me. Everything I did, I believed in. Afterwards, I would talk to the old man.

It was funny, a senior member of the Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board of the Pacific, and there's one in the Atlantic. The Atlantic board guy was a couple of years senior to me, highly thought of submariner, later an admiral, highly experienced in nuclear power. He knew. He was the kind of guy they should have put in where I went. (laughs) Rickover would have us come back there every couple of months and just tell him what we thought of how things were going and what the trends were.

Every time, I would go... I hated those things. I'd go back there. I'd sit there. I figured he would call on Ken Carr, Kenny Carr, was the Lant [Atlantic] board. But he'd always start with me, "Well, okay. Now, tell what's going on." I always had to report first. But it was a great experience, regardless of where I would end up in the world. Those two years were unique.

DePue: Was there any difference, in terms of how the submarine people would view service in the Atlantic versus the Pacific? Was one more prestigious than the other?

Thunman: Well, there's always a rivalry, so of course. One would say, "Well our operations are tougher, or we do better." That's the kind of rivalry you'd expect to have. It has always been that way. Of course, the Pacific has always been the romantic submarine force, because that's where World War II was fought. It had always had the flavor of a more Hollywood-like atmosphere. The Atlantic was a little different, from that point of view.

But anyway, to end our discussion, I finished that board job, and I thought, Boy, I've gotten through a really tough job. I'm probably going to go back to Washington now and do something a little bit more exotic and political. And I got orders to be the squadron commander in Guam. (laughs)

DePue: Well, let's pick that up next time.

Thunman: That was a great shock. (laughs)

DePue: A good shock or a bad shock?

Thunman: Well, a bad shock, because that job, as you'll see when we talk about it, was about as tough a job as there was, from a lots of points of view. It had the oldest squadron of submarines that we had. They were all fleet ballistic missile submarines, and they had to be on the line. The president would get a report if it wasn't. This is our strategic deterrent. Of course, that's where the Guam thing occurred.

DePue: Well, that's something to look forward to next time. Thank you very much, Admiral.

Thunman: Okay.

(end of interview #7)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.08

Interview # 08: August 17, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Friday, August 17, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Again today... This is our tradition, Admiral. Every Friday we seem to be able to meet and learn a little bit more about being a submariner. I even learned how to say the word.

Thunman: Submariner, yeah. That's very good. All your Army buddies will be upset with you when you say it that way. They'll say, "No, you've got it wrong."

DePue: But they're still stuck in the British way of saying things. Last time, we finished off with you being in charge of the—

Thunman: Of Submarine Squadron 15.

DePue: Well, that's what we want to talk about today. Let's start that discussion, because that was a ballistic missile squadron, as I understand.

Thunman: It had the oldest, fleet ballistic missile submarines. [It] had ten of them.

DePue: Before we get there, though, I wanted to ask you about the signing of the SALT I Treaty. Of course, this was Richard Nixon, with the Soviets at the time. I believe it was Brezhnev who he signed that with.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: That was July, 1972. Let me just read what I found here, in terms of the decision, its impact on the submarine fleet. "SALT I froze the number of strategic ballistic missile launchers at existing levels and provided for the addition of new submarine launch ballistic missile launchers, only after the same number of older, intercontinental ballistic missiles and SLBM launchers had been dismantled." Submarine launch is SLBM.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: Any reflections on that, because this has a direct impact on you.

Thunman: It was really, frankly, not much of an impact on us. What it did was it limited the number of tubes that we could put to sea. But those submarines that we had at sea at that time included these ten of the George Washington-class, which was the first class. As you recall, I said that George Washington went to sea in 1960. They had been designed for only twenty years of use, so you could take those ships out of commission. We were going to [do that] anyway in eight years, start taking them out, and not impact the force, because we were building ships, as well. The Poseidon missile launchers—it was called the Ethan Allen-class—could shoot the Poseidon missiles. Then finally, we went on to the Ohio-class, which would shoot the Triton missiles.

DePue: Before we get too far into that, there's one other thing to put this into the larger international Cold War context, if you will. This is 1973, October sixth through the twenty-fifth, the Yom Kippur War, where, in this case, Egypt and Syria made a surprise attack against Israel, and it was very touch and go for several days in Israel. Now, this might seem a little bit out of place, but I bet that was something that did catch your attention.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. At that time, I was still the senior member of the Operation Reactor Safeguards Examining Team, on the fleet commander's staff. One of the things the fleet commander did for me, which was really good for me, was I could go to the morning briefings every morning, even though I was not operationally involved [and] although the fleet commander used to call me in and talk about using submarines for different things, because he himself was a submariner, a very famous submariner. Clarey was his name, C-l-a-r-e-y. I heard all the briefings, the classified briefings, of everything that was going on at that time, which was very nice. Every morning, I would go into that briefing. They didn't have many people that they permitted to [come to these briefings]. They only had a small audience, but he said, "I want you to go there every morning, when you can."

So, I watched all of that, or listened to all of that, go on. I wasn't involved, of course. We didn't go on any special alert, but that was the great thing about our fleet ballistic missile submarine force; it still is. It's there; about half of them are at sea and ready to fire within fifteen minutes. That's tested over and over and over again, in a really honest way too. The testing is... Nobody's fudging the numbers or anything that would show that you had readiness that you really didn't have.

DePue: I know this is something that the Israelis have never officially, publicly admitted, that they have nuclear weapons. Did the Americans, at the time, think that the Israelis did have nuclear weapons?

Thunman: There's never been any question in my mind that they had them. I believe strongly that they got them as soon as they could. I don't know that I could tell you when they got them.

DePue: It sounds like this would have been just of great interest to you but not of a direct impact.

Thunman: No. There was the Israeli spy, which we still have in jail here, which I think the other day came up again, where they wanted us to let him go. [He] was the spy who uncovered a lot of information, including submarine information, although it was for them. It was not for the Russians; it was information they [the Israelis] wanted. A lot of the information that he uncovered was our special operations information. So, it wasn't the kind of spy that went to the Soviets. But even so, he got a pretty big hit, I think, with fifty years or something like that. We still won't let him out, although the Israelis are willing to trade all kinds of things for him.

DePue: One other question before we actually get into a more naval discussion. Nineteen seventy-three and '74—and it really peaked in 1974—is the timeframe the Watergate investigation was going on, which obviously led to the resignation of Richard Nixon. Now, as an American citizen, you have an opinion about that I'm sure, but also, as a person who has been deeply involved for your entire life with the nation's nuclear force, and that's the command authority.

Thunman: Yes, yes. Well, I have to tell you that I stayed on Richard Nixon's bandwagon, probably as long as anybody did in the country. (laughs) I supported him, because he'd done some great things. He brought about the all-volunteer force. There are a number of things that he will not be remembered for that he should be.

DePue: Well, of course, détente with both Russia and China.

Thunman: Yes, détente. There's no question about that, which was effectively in place, not that he brought it out. Our missile system automatically put it in place, détente.

There wasn't another option for them. (both laugh) I finally fell off his bandwagon when I read a book. I don't think the name of the book was *Abuse of Power*, but it talked about that whole affair. He had plenty of opportunity to stop that. When he found that the Ellsberg papers had been burgled and his people were involved, at that point, he should have known that he had a strange organization established within his White House staff, and he ought to do something about it. It was not an honest group; it was a dishonest group, willing to do just about anything for themselves. These were these typical CIA spooks, intelligence spooks, who loved to do anything for just for the hell of it.

There was no need for him to invade the Democratic National Committee offices. He was a shoe-in for reelection. Yet this group went on and did this. He should have known that they were doing these kinds of things, based on what he'd already learned about them. When he first got that information about them, he should have said, "Hey wait. What's going on?" He should have put a stop to it right away. Well, he didn't. He just let this group do its thing.

One thing I've learned, if you let intelligence organizations or special operations organizations, like our special operations soldiers today, if you let them do what they want, they'll go do all kinds of things that you don't want them to do. As I've said, jokingly, many times, but I mean it, they require adult supervision. You have to sit down with them and say, "Now what is it you're going to do, and how are you going to do it?" and make it very clear to them that, "No, we're not going to do that. You can't go any further than that. You've got to obey the rules." That doesn't mean that I haven't broken the rules; I have. But I've done so when I thought it really made a lot of sense.

DePue: I wonder, during that time, do you recall any comments or directives that were coming out senior naval levels, directed at the people who were in control of the nuclear force in the submarine force, reminders about the command authority to give the decision to actually launch missiles?

Thunman: Yes. Nothing came out. The system was the same. Of course, Haig, you know, was the one that—

DePue: Alexander Haig.

Thunman: ... who had been the chief of staff in the White House and who made the statement, "Nobody worry; I'm in control." Remember when he said that?

DePue: But he doesn't have the authority to launch missiles.

Thunman: Well, the way he talked, it sounded like he'd taken over the football from Nixon.

DePue: The football being?

- Thunman: The football being what they called the bag that contained the codes and the electronic devices, which would have permitted the president to give the authority to launch. One of the options is—and there are several options—shoot this many, or shoot only at these cities. There are several options the president has.
- DePue: And, of course, that's a concern, because here you have a president facing a very critical personal crisis. How stable and how rational is he going to be? Yes, he's the guy who has the authority to start a thermonuclear war perhaps.
- Thunman: I would imagine there were things going on that none of us will know, that only Haig knows, that he had put in place to be sure that he somehow would be able to be part of that decision, if it was made. I don't know. I've never heard it; I've never read it, but knowing how sensitive that is, I would imagine that they had something going.
- DePue: It's not just sensitive in the United States, but I imagine there were people in the Soviet Union who were losing lots of sleep over that.
- Thunman: Some of the stories I heard about Clinton, about how he would lose the darn football and stuff like that...I don't know whether they were true or not, but they've been written in some of the books that he was pretty sloppy about handling of information, of that stuff.
- DePue: Well, let's turn to your own personal experiences again. I know it was 1974 to '76, you're commander of a squadron of fleet, ballistic missile submarines.
- Thunman: In Guam.
- DePue: In Guam. You mentioned last time, you were rather surprised. How did you end up with that job?
- Thunman: I thought I'd done a pretty good job in the Operation Reactor Safeguard Examining Team. I thought, Well, I've been at sea and doing all this; maybe it's time for me to go back to Washington. It was important to my career that I get into that environment. I was a captain. I was early selected for captain and got ordered to that job, which was really...It was kind of disappointing, because it was a very difficult job, the toughest job I ever had.
- DePue: But it's a command, I would think.
- Thunman: Oh, yeah. It was great, a squadron command. You're right; it was important that I got a squadron command. You couldn't make admiral without it. But I didn't expect I was very close to being an admiral. I had been out there on the line for a long time now, with the ships, in command and on the ORSE board, and it was a tough job. It was tough because you didn't get much guidance. You had a lot of critiques, because everything you did were...Because of the time difference between Pearl Harbor and Guam, you weren't talking in a real

time situation with your boss. Those ten ships were old, older. They hadn't been as well constructed as we would have liked, because we were pushing so hard to get them to sea.

DePue: When were they manufactured?

Thunman: They started in 1960. So you're talking about fourteen years old, twelve to fourteen years old. You had a submarine tender, which was the oldest submarine tender in the Navy, had some 1,500 men in that tender.

DePue: This was a surface ship?

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: Can you explain what that was a little more?

Thunman: Well, a submarine force in those days, we had submarine tenders, which were ships designed to maintain submarines when they came into port. They would overhaul pumps and rebuild motors, really quite a ship. Of course, it had the missiles, all of the nuclear missiles. We would change out the missiles periodically. There was always an age limitation. So it was quite a little city.

DePue: But this is in the port. It's not on the—

Thunman: Yes, in Guam.

DePue: Why wouldn't you use—

Thunman: Well, they just didn't have the facilities there, and to build this facility there would have taken forever. Here you had the people. Also, we would move the tender. The great thing about submarine tenders were you could put them wherever you wanted them. For example, when we started operating in the Indian Ocean, we moved a tender out there to Diego Garcia, for a period. So, it gave you great versatility, plus it gave you an expert force that you controlled completely, the Navy, U.S. Navy. They were very good.

We took our best submarine captains, some of them, and made them the commanding officers of these ships. They ran real professional organizations. We did some incredible things, from a maintenance point of view. I remember we cut a hole, about the size of this table, inside of a submarine, took a turbine generator out of the ship and put a new one into the ship. We welded, of course, all of the things would have to go with that. That's a major shipyard operation. We did that, using the tender people.

DePue: Well, there's a weld you want to make sure that's done right.

Thunman: Done right. Right in the middle of that, a typhoon went roaring by Guam, fairly close. It was kind of a tight time. You were responsible, to some degree



as squadron commander. You didn't have staff like, say in Guam. The squadron commander is there [and], of course, could use the shipyard, which was expert. Then they had the SUBPAC staff there to advise him.

You didn't have any of that. You were it. You made the decisions. "Gee, should we overhaul that or shouldn't..." The big decision was, should we send them or not? Is that problem bad enough where we should delay them, fix it, or send them with some sort of an alternate way to meet the requirement?

DePue: Doesn't that suggest that, if you decide not to send them, there's a hole in the American strategic plan?

Thunman: Yes. Well, that's what I was going to say. That gets reported to the president. I was told that very clearly, when I went out there by COMSUBPAC. If one of our ships—you're supposed to have so many on station—if one of them doesn't go, that gets reported that the strategic deterrence force has been degraded by sixteen missiles, at sea.

DePue: So that puts you under incredible pressure to maybe push the limit and push something out that you shouldn't?

Thunman: That's what I was getting to, was that's why it was such a tough job. You really had to think hard about whether you send them or not. And you did a lot of things personally. I had a staff of about eight, ten officers, and I was in operational control of the submarines too; it was just not maintenance. I was the one who set up their patrols with them and where they were going to go. Of course, that information, I got from SUBPAC. But how they came and went, and all the training... We did a lot of training. Of course, the crews were turned over. You had a new crew and an old crew. You turned them over there, and put them through a training period. That was all mine to establish and conduct. I had that responsibility.

We also, interestingly, had Soviet trawlers, which were trying to trail our submarines as they went in and out of port, embarrass us, as well. We periodically had... We knew that some Soviet submarines would come and visit. So it was an interesting job, because you had a lot of everything. You had maintenance; you had operational considerations; at sea training considerations; some intelligence work about following what the Soviets may or may not be doing in the area.

Of course, we got added another big effort to be the mayor of the 35,000 Vietnamese refugees in that city. It was the hardest job I ever had. I don't know that I slept hardly at all.

Typhoons would come, typhoons around Guam, scary. [We'd] have to get the ships put together, get them out to sea, get the submarines submerged, get that tender out of there, before the port closed up.

Another thing that happened...It's right on the edge of a typhoon. The typhoon had just gone by and the tender skipper, who was a captain—I was a captain—he came to see me and says, “My God,” he said, “there is a 25,000 ton or so passenger liner heading for the rocks on Orote Point.” The entrance of Guam had Orote Point and another over here and not a very wide channel in there. We ran up on the bridge. We looked through the binoculars. We could see out there. He said, “My goodness, it's going to go aground.” It was clearly a passenger liner, had the lines of it. That's 2,000 or 3,000 people. I said—Nubs was the tender skipper—I said, “Nubs,” I said, “stand by for the greatest at sea rescue this country's ever seen. Get every boat you've got into the water.” So he disappeared down below, scrambling to take every one of the boats that might be available.

Well, it turned out that it was under tow, then the tow had broken, as it was going by Guam. It only had three people onboard. It was being towed to Taiwan for scrap, steel scrap. It hit the rocks; we watched it hit the rocks. It broke the forward end of the ship; the forward one-third broke off and sank in the channel. Then the rest of the ship settled right adjacent to the channel, sunk. I thought, My God, I can't get ships in or out of here.

DePue: The Soviets couldn't have done a better job.

Thunman: They couldn't have done a better job. So, I remember going out there in my boat right away. I had to get Coast Guard people out right away to survey the channel and to remark the channel and give us room to get in and out. There wasn't much room, but we did it. We did not close down. Everybody was really concerned we were going to have to close down that channel.

I started dealing with the various agencies. It turns out, that the U.S. Army controls all the decisions with regards to waters inside the twelve mile limit, what you're going to do. Not the Navy or the Coast Guard, but it's the Army.

One of the things I wanted done was...We had divers; we were mapping the whole situation. I said, “Let's put some explosives down there and just flatten the goddamned thing, and blow it up, because if it flattens, we're okay. There's enough water.” It's just the fact that it's so big, it was sticking up in the channel.

DePue: What was the name of this ship again?

Thunman: I don't know the name.

DePue: Okay, go ahead.

Thunman: Well, the Army said, “No, you can't do that. We don't know what that would bring about.” There was environmental concerns. I was going nuts. So, the contract was let to a Japanese firm. This was another thing that teed me off.

The Army did it. They competed, I guess, with three or four organizations to come in and cut that piece, such that they could lift it out. A Japanese firm won it. I said, "Wait a minute, come on. This is classified port entrances, controlling our ballistic missile force in the Pacific." We were the only ballistic missile ships we had in the Pacific.

DePue: There were none others at even Pearl?

Thunman: No, none others but ours, no. All ten of them were out, operated out of Guam. They said, "Well no. It's okay; they've been cleared." I said, "Well, they're going to have to get out of the water, their divers, every time we go by." They said, "That's okay." Well, that's pretty exciting. I said, "I'm not going to tell you when a submarine's going to go in and out. I'm not going to tell you. That's highly classified information." They said, "Well, that will be okay."

Well, those four divers were down there, and these submarines had to keep their speed up around fifteen knots to go through that narrow channel way, so they didn't get set one way or the other. The poor divers down there were swirling around. But it worked, and they subsequently got the piece out of there. But it was an exciting event.

When that thing hit the rocks, I really thought, My God, this is going to be incredible, trying to get a couple thousand people off those rocks. Of course, I'd called the naval air station there. We had every helicopter in the area spun up. You had these things going on, that, the Vietnamese situation. Also, we did more testing of the missiles during that time [than] we'd ever done before.

DePue: We as in your—

Thunman: No. Well, we as the U.S., and we as in me. I became the commander of the task force. We had two different task forces that went out and actually test-fired the missiles. What you would do... The first one, I had two submarines. I had a destroyer that I was onboard, and I had an oiler. We went into the Southwest Pacific. These submarines would assume a patrol status, just like they were on a patrol. Well, first of course, we would bring them in. They would be on patrol. This was all done perfectly, so that nothing false was entered into the conclusions.

You'd bring them in, and you'd change out the missiles, the missile heads, of course. You'd put exercise heads on them, take the nuclear weapons off. Take them to sea, this task force. They would go on patrol, like they were just on patrol, normal speed, normal things, and I would maintain contact. I'd be in the destroyer, 2,000 yards away, maintaining contact on them, during that period.

Then, sometime in the next three to five days or two or three days, the missile order would come. It would come in the normal fashion, the official

fashion, wiring. The submarine would get it and immediately go to battle stations, spin up the missiles, get ready, get to the right depth, and within fifteen minutes, launch. That was spectacular; it really was. Both times, they did it at night.

The first one was kind of funny. Well, it wasn't funny at the time. We had underwater communications with the submarine. He was firing two missiles. This is the first one, I didn't have two submarines. I had one submarine, yeah, one submarine. He fired, and he announced, "Number one away." We were listening to that. Then shortly thereafter, "Number two away." And we heard this big crunch, a big, loud... It sounded like a muffled explosion two. They said, "We'd better call." I said, "I'll wait a minute." He didn't say anything, and I thought for a minute. Finally I said, "Did you really fire number two?" Then, in kind of an exasperated voice, the skipper came back, "Yeah, I fired it. I launched it." I said, "We didn't see it come out." We're 1,000 yards away.

DePue: You were on the surface ship?

Thunman: Yeah, I was on the destroyer. I would try and stay about 1,000 yards of the firing. I'd try to stay close. That was a spectacular thing to see. What had happened, the second one had come out and exploded beneath the water and came back down on top of the submarine, on the deck of the submarine. He then realized that there could be a problem. He checked everything out. Everything worked okay, and we went back in. But only one of the two was successful.

DePue: Would that reflect at all on the captain of the sub?

Thunman: No, not unless, when they got into it, they found that he had done something wrong. It had to be the missile.

The second one that I did, I took two submarines with me. They launched six missiles. One submarine launched two and the other one four. This was in 1976, right before I was scheduled to leave. All six were successful, perfect. All hit the targets. The guys gave me—I've got it down below—a piece of what they used to call the toilet seat for the missile, which blew open when the missile tube was pressurized. It's engraved. I had hurt my big toe on the destroyer. I was walking around with a slipper on. Engraved on it is, "Six for six in '76. Two stars and one broken toe." (DePue laughs)

DePue: Rubbing it in just a little bit, huh?

Thunman: (laughs) What had happened was I had tried to get aboard after the firing, but it was too rough. A good decision I made, I decided not to try it. So, I came back in. When they were lifting the boat out of the water, they screwed up, and I got my foot between the boat and the rail on the destroyer. But that was really something, the second operation, six of those old missiles. It was only

designed, I think by that time, for reliability. Initially, the reliability was 50 percent.

DePue: Are these Polaris missiles?

Thunman: Yes, Polaris missiles.

DePue: Were they MIRV'd at the time?

Thunman: Well, yeah.

DePue: And was that part of the test?

Thunman: The MIRV [[Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle](#)] was not part of the test. It was just an exercise warhead. The ones we normally carried to sea were MIRV'd.

DePue: Can I get you to explain what MIRV means?

Thunman: I'm trying to think of what the acronym is.

DePue: Multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles.

Thunman: You can put up to about a dozen small warheads, each of them being a nuclear weapon. When you launch, they're ejected from the missile cone, and each of them head to their own target. As long as the target...I don't know; I'm sure it's different today. But in those days, if the target was within about 500 miles, along the line of sight, each one could peel off and go to a separate target. As reentry occurred, it follows a ballistic flight path. As entry occurs, it can adjust itself, so it can go to a separate target. Of course, all of our missiles today are MIRV'd. The numbers of MIRV'd is classified—I don't know what they are today—and quite accurate. So, when you launch a ballistic missile from a submarine, you may be launching ten weapons from that one missile.

DePue: Can you tell us, can you recall, even in the MIRV system, what those warheads would be like?

Thunman: Well, then let's see. Today's are about a half a megaton. The Tridents are half a megaton. Those MIRVs were probably around 100 at, 100,000 tons, maybe more. Of course, Hiroshima and Nagasaki was about 20 kt. So these were much more powerful weapons.

DePue: All of those numbers are rather sobering, just thinking about it, the power that—

Thunman: Yeah, 20,000 tons of TNT.

DePue: Do you recall how our technology, both for the nuclear submarines and for the missiles they carried, would have compared with the Soviets at that time?

Thunman: We knew a lot, because of our submarine special operations.

DePue: Because of what you were doing when you were in the *Plunger*, huh?

Thunman: Yeah, that's right, because they were testing their things too. One of our most important missions was to monitor whatever we could, any of their ballistic missile activity, and collect all the electronic intelligence that we possibly could.

DePue: When you were the commander of the squadron?

Thunman: No. When I was commanding officer of the *Plunger*. We had a pretty good idea of what they could do. They'd worked pretty hard at it. The Yankee-class submarine was built. They were building them as fast as they could, nuclear powered, fleet ballistic missile submarines, very much like the George Washington. I spent a lot of my time trying to watch that go on, as the new ones came online, they took them to sea and conducted their sea trials, and as they also did test firings, similar to ours. That was very high priority intelligence.

                  Their missiles were not solid fuel missiles. Ours [were] solid fuel rockets. Theirs were liquid. So they were a little bit more unstable than ours.

DePue: Unstable once fired or even unstable in storage?

Thunman: Well, even unstable in made handling and dealing with them, more difficult. Of course, our accuracies got better and better and better, 'til today, the accuracy is incredible. I don't know what theirs [is.] I'm sure theirs are, today, about the same. But we proved that we could do it.

                  During these operations, there were Soviet AGIs [advanced global imagers], they called them, trawlers that were really equipped as intelligence ships, there off Guam, that would try and trail us to the operating site. In some cases, [they] tried to insert themselves in the operation, to where you had to adjust your surface ships and your course and speed. There was that kind of harassment going on.

DePue: Normally, when you think trawler, I'm thinking a civilian ship.

Thunman: Yeah. It was a Soviet fishing ship, trawler, but reconditioned, pretty neat little ships, with all the electronic collection intelligence you can imagine.

DePue: But trying to disguise it?

Thunman: Well, they didn't really try. I guess they tried to a degree, but you knew exactly who they were.

We had the one funny incident that occurred. Part of our training workup was to have every submarine shoot a torpedo. We had these Mark 37 electric torpedoes that were homing torpedoes. We would have every one of the FBMs [fleet ballistic missiles], as part of it, shoot at a target, make sure they knew how to do it and everything worked.

So I'm in my office one day, and one of the boats was out there and fired its torpedo. The torpedo was supposed to fire inside four miles, because only in an emergency can you go inside four miles. Twelve miles, you're not supposed to go inside, but there are reasons you can do it. But, international law, at that time was, four miles, you can't do it; you can't go inside that range without special permission.

Well, the word came in; the skipper called, and he said, "We fired the torpedo. It ended up four and a half miles." We would recover them and then refurbish them and use them again. He said it got out to four and a half miles and, the AGI [Soviet trawler] ran over, picked it up, took off, headed for Russia, I guess. I told that submarine skipper, "You stay up on the surface, right behind that AGI. Don't you lose that guy. You keep with him. I don't care..." So here you've got this ridiculous scene, I'm sure. If you looked at this AGI, this little trawler, steaming along at ten, twelve knots, with this big, giant fleet ballistic submarine right behind it.

I sent a message immediately, to commander, submarine force Pacific that the AGI had picked up one of our torpedoes. I said, "Unfortunately, it was at four and a half miles." Fleet commander was good. He's the one who came back and said, "That torpedo was inside the four mile limit (laughs), and that's our position."

Immediately, messages came alive and a task force... They were going to take a carrier task force to come down on top of that AGI. A lot of that information went out. The Soviets were told our carrier task force is on the way. That torpedo was inside four miles and AGI had violated our territorial waters. So, then there were more discussions, I'm sure, at the State Department level.

The decision was made that we would... I also sent what we called a torpedo retriever, out there. I put the tender squadron commander onboard. I put about eight Marines... This is a big speedboat, is what it is. It's designed to go out and pick up torpedoes. It's got a big, long afterdeck and room down in the hold and powerful engines. They had about eight Marines down there. I said, "You put the Marines down there with the weapons." I said, "You lock that hatch where those Marines are. If you're going to let those Marines out of there, you do it yourself. You take the key, and you unlock it. I don't want

those kids running off and starting something.” You’ve got to have some sort of protection.

They got out there with the submarine. Then the submarine was stuck, trying to trail the trawler. The word came back. Okay, the Russians would give back the torpedo. So, the retriever and the AGI, they stopped. They got in the water. Our swimmers got in the water; their swimmers got in the water, and we took the torpedo back. They also gave us—I didn’t get it; the tender skipper got it—a bottle of vodka. (DePue laughs) It said—this is interesting; it goes along with what you said earlier—It had written on a label that had been pasted on it, “*Détente is détente.*” So that little episode was part of it. That was a tough job; it really was a tough job.

We’d go out; we’d work on the ships. Then we’d have to go out and run deep dives, test dives, to take them all the way down to operating test depth. I think I rode every one of those. He [the captain] had a brand new crew. He’d been off for sixty, seventy days, had some operational sea time and then [would] go out and do a deep dive. I would generally ride with him.

DePue: I’m sure the captain loved to have you along. (laughs)

Thunman: Oh, yeah, have the squadron commander there. There were some times that I’m glad I’m there, and I’m sure he was glad I was there.

DePue: Your story that you were just telling, it took me a long time to figure out that the territorial waters you were talking about were ours and not theirs.

Thunman: That’s right. We’re talking about Guam.

DePue: Well that changes the complexion a little bit. You’ve mentioned several times that this is the toughest job that you had. I think back to our discussions about the *Plunger*, and you’re the guy. You’re the one everybody’s paying attention to, and you’re playing this classic game of cat and mouse with the Soviets, every day that you’re out there. How is this job so much more stressful?

Thunman: The other one was fun. (laughs)

DePue: I knew that word would factor in here somehow.

Thunman: Yeah. You were more under pressure as a squadron commander. For example, we were lifting those nuclear missiles out of the submarines, putting them on the tender, taking them out of the tender, putting them on the submarine. I was responsible for all of that. That tender was old; its missile system was operable and was working properly, but it was antiquated; it wasn’t a modern thing. We had to qualify everybody in how to operate these things, be sure they knew.



I remember when I first got out there, I went got in the cab of the missile. I sat there with a young kid, who was handling the crane, and asking him how he got qualified. All of those things, which were unusual and were all very dangerous... You're handling nuclear weapons. That's a big deal, and you were responsible. There wasn't any team to come down from headquarters or someplace like that to help you out. You did it. You and your guys were the ones who did it.

You were just responsible for so many different things that you had to put your time and attention to, that you had to be sure... I was always a big believer in command. Part of command—and you probably know this better than I—is sampling. You keep sampling what's going on. You don't do it in any regular fashion. You show up, and then you spend enough time to evaluate the situation and, if necessary, step in and change it. Either change the people or change the procedures or change the equipment, but you had to know what's going on.

DePue: Management by walking around.

Thunman: Yeah. I used to find that... I'd go to sea when there were sea trials. That was a very good way for me to evaluate what the ship's status was, getting ready to go. Of course, the captains didn't like you there. That's true, but they also knew that that was my time. I was evaluating them too.

DePue: I was going to say, you're their rater, aren't you?

Thunman: Yeah. They knew that... And I did some other things. One of the things I was most proud of was, I started a football league on Guam. They had the University of Guam, the naval air station, Andersen Air Station, the Navy station and the Proteus. We had five teams. The problem was Guam had nothing. There was nothing for the kids to do. I had 1,500 young guys on this tender. The submarines were busy. They came; they didn't have any time. They were busy getting the ship ready to go. The other crew went home. So the submarines, you didn't need any entertainment. But there's 1,500 young kids on that tender. They didn't go home. And I had all the money in the world for welfare and recreation.

DePue: Wasn't there a community in Guam that had all the normal distractions for sailors?

Thunman: Well, there was some of that. [It was] not as bad as there could be in other places. But there was problems and fights. I had all this welfare and recreation money in my account. The tender skipper's a good guy. Nubs Greer was his name. He loved football. I think he played football somewhere. I think he's the one who said, "You know, maybe we'll try and play the University of Guam." We talked about it, and I said, "Hell, why don't we start a league?" I said, "I'll pay for it. We'll buy the finest football equipment that money can

buy. We'll buy the same stuff they use in the National Football League." They had a stadium there. "We'll refurbish it, grade the field, mark it. You pick out some people, train them up as officials. We'll pay them, and every Saturday night we'll have a football game." So he did that. I didn't do anything; he did it all, and it was really slick.

Pretty soon, it was full. We had to keep putting up more and more and more bleachers. The place was just jammed full of people, this little stadium. And everything was first class, the officials with their striped shirts. They had a place where I think they gave away free hot dogs. We always made them pay for the beer, because interestingly, people won't... Well, one of the things I learned out in Guam was, if you charge a quarter for the beer, they won't drink anywhere near as much as if you give it away. It was an interesting fact to learn.

But they were involved, gosh, and the emotions were high. A couple of times we had to have shore patrol down there, break people apart, like Notre Dame against Army. It worked very well. We did a few things like that too, for the youngsters.

DePue: Was this an accompanied tour for most of the people, meaning that they had the families there?

Thunman: No, all 1,500 did not. It was accompanied for the staff and for some of the senior people on the tender, the captain and some of his people. But it was not accompanied; the other 1,500, they were all—

DePue: I assume your family, or most of the families, were there.

Thunman: Yes, yes. We had a beautiful house, up on top of Nimitz Hill. We had the house that Nimitz lived in toward the end of the war. You could look out over the harbor. I used to go out there when the boats were due to come in, stand there and wait for... because you hadn't heard from them in sixty days, you know. Wait to see if they came in.

Only once did the guy not come in on time. That was a big drill. Then you'd call up the world, submarine is... SUBMISS/SUBSUNK, is the procedure.<sup>73</sup> That message goes out to the world. It wasn't there. Normally, they come in at 6:00 in the evening. It wasn't there. You had two hours from the time you were scheduled to be back. This was true in all of the submarine operations, the system procedure that had been put together, back when the *Indianapolis* sunk, this movement report system. Well, for the submarines, it was [a] very, very serious system.

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<sup>73</sup> An operation to initiate a fully coordinated search for a submarine that is believed to be missing when a Surfacing signal, SUBCHECK Report or a Check Arrival Report of a submarine is 6 hours overdue.

So [we] sent the messages and got our boats out, our local helos [helicopters] out, looking in the local areas. Maybe the guy was stuck on the surface somehow. I thought, Oh boy, this is going to be something. About three hours after we started all this, I was up in the tender. They came running into the room. They said, "The boat's coming in." My God, you can't imagine the relief. I'm out there, standing up on the rail, the bridge of the tender. The boat comes in, and everybody on the boat is white. You could see them; they were happy to be back.

The captain looks up, and he says, "Oh, Commodore..." That's what you were called, as the squadron commander. I said, "Where have you been?" All of a sudden, you'd see [him] deflate. He struggled a little bit, and then he says, "I forgot." (DePue laughs) They forgot to send the message, [which] you could change, if you had to, coming in. So then we go out with all the messages, everything's okay. But boy, those couple of hours were pretty tough.

DePue: All of this leads to questions I've got about communicating with these subs, like how you do it and how often you do it and whether or not, most of the time, they're out there, and you really don't know what's going on with them.

Thunman: Well, the communications systems is, you are always in communications with them, so that they can receive the war message. The way you do that is, you have a towed wire, 2,000 feet. It's dragged below the surface, just below the surface. It will receive a very low frequency signal, VLF. So, as long as you were going... You had to limit your speed. As long as you were within that speed envelope and the wire was not entangled in any way, then the submarine was receiving a signal from you, continuously. That was important. That's the way we'd get the war message.

Now, he could also be up at periscope depth, raise an antenna, communicate as well. If he wanted to communicate with you, he would have to do that. If he wanted to transmit to you, he would come up to periscope depth, raise an antenna, and then he could talk with you on HF.

DePue: But then the Soviets know exactly where he is.

Thunman: Yeah, know exactly where you are. So, only in an emergency would the submarine ever talk to you, or if you directed him to report his situation. The system worked well. We were always in communications. I had one experience when I was skipper of the *Plunger* though.

We were headed for Guam, after one of these operations. A typhoon was headed for Guam at the same time. COMSUBPAC called back and forth with me and said, "The typhoon's coming, so we're going to modify your track and put you on what was called a MODLOC situation, where you would stay in this area." I never liked that. I would have much rather them say, stay west

or so, north, or so and so. But they put you in kind of a square. I'm in this square and, of course, as typhoons always do, it changes course, goes directly over me in the MODLOC. I can't get out of there, because... You've got to stay there, because this is how you keep one submarine from hitting another; although I knew there weren't any other submarines around there. I was stuck. I was as deep as I could go, and I was still rolling, [at] test depth.

DePue: Even at that level, there's turbulence?

Thunman: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Wow.

Thunman: Terrible. Typhoons are something. It's hard to explain them. They're just... I do have the wire out, and I'm still receiving messages from them. Of course, there's no way I can go up and come to periscope depth and transmit that. They don't know the typhoon has changed course. They somehow think it's gone by, or the eye has turned in another direction. They're sending me messages, you know, "Report your situation, communicate, give me all these things." There was no way I was going to come up and answer them. They were getting really uptight about it. I'm not so sure; they may have already started a SUBMISS/SUBSUNK thing on me.

Finally it got to where I could get up. So I got up and communicated and headed up into Guam. There was still about fifty knots of wind, heavy seas. To go into that entry... It's a nice harbor in Guam, a protected harbor. The squadron commander, at that time in Guam, he was up on top of a point, with a communication system up there, talking to me. I was up on top of the bridge. No, I wasn't on the bridge. I was in the ship. I decided that I'm not going to put anybody topside, because the weather is so bad; green water is just washing over the ship. So I'll drive into the harbor, using the periscope, calm the ship, using the periscope. Of course, you had to use pretty good speed, because there was always a good current across the face of that harbor.

I remember the squadron commander was up on a roadie point there, high on the point. He called into radio, our radio, and he said, "The commodore wants to know, why don't you surface?" We were on the surface, with the water roaring over us. I said, "Tell him, goddamn it, we are surfaced," typical me, figuring he wouldn't use the goddamn it. But he did. He went back (both laugh) and says, "The captain says, 'goddamn it, we are surfaced.'" The commodore laughed about that when I came in. (both laugh)

DePue: Well, a change of direction here.

Thunman: Let's go back to the squadron command tour. That's about it. At the end, right after that missile firing, the flag selection board met, and I was selected for a rear admiral, very young guy, forty-two years old.

DePue: I still have a couple questions that deal with your tour as commander of the squadron. The first one, you were talking about how delicate and how dangerous working with these nuclear weapons was. You've talked a lot in previous sessions about Admiral Rickover and his intense focus on anything and everything nuclear. I'm wondering if his focus was pretty much on nuclear power plants, or did it include weapons as well?

Thunman: No, his was nuclear power. The Navy... At the same time that Rickover developed his naval reactors organizations, an organization was developed, called the Strategic Projects Office. SSP, I think, was the acronym. It was headed by a wonderful man, Rear Admiral Red Raborn, who was just as wonderful as Rickover, except he was an awfully nice man. (laughs)

Red Raborn was the one who developed the Polaris missile system. He wasn't a submariner. I think he was an aviator who had gone on to advanced engineering training. He set up this SSP office with the same standards, the same attention to detail, training, conservative procedures. Although Rickover, his organization was not focused on the nuclear weapons, this SSP was focused on that. They were just as thorough.

DePue: But as you've described before, Rickover seemed also to be intensely focused on choosing the right people to command these submarines, which would obviously extend to that as well.

Thunman: Yes. Well, and of course, you had a reliability system, which still [is] in effect today, that certain jobs on a submarine are in anything involving nuclear weapons, you have to be brought into what is called the reliability system. This is where an intense check is made of your record, your background. If you've had a problem, it will generally come out.

Now, we've had some really faulty COs assigned recently. I don't know if you've read the story about the skipper of the attack boat who faked his death? It just recently came out, that whole thing. I said to Owsley, I said, "God, if this would have happened in Rickover's day, it would have killed him. He'd have been so mad, he would have blown up like a bomb."

The reliability program, this is [where] enlisted officers and all those involved with those positions are brought into that program, and you're very carefully checked out. Selecting the COs was really not... Well, it was Rickover's... Yeah, he was always involved in it. I kind of took that over when he retired. I brought that into the job in the Pentagon. I would carefully examine the guys before we'd assign them.

DePue: Let's go back real quickly to the communications process. I'm wondering if there ever was a point where the message, to fire the weapons, needed to go out, would that have come through you, or would it have come directly?

Thunman: No, no. Directly from Washington, from the—

DePue: From NORAD?

Thunman: Not NORAD. It was directly from command. The command center in Washington is where it goes out. That goes directly to all the missile firing activities. And there's a secondary... In those days, I don't know if they still do, we always had an airplane in the air that could transmit. We also had, and I think we still do, the secondary communication system, with an aircraft in the air, streaming the two-mile wire, flying in circles, the patrol aircraft. So that if the communication system on the ground, the normal communication system, through EMP or something like that, is destroyed you still have this last communication system.

It was pretty interesting to me. We operated those aircraft out of Guam. Now, they weren't mine, but I kind of took them over, as to give them some help. There was only about four of those aircraft, and they didn't have very senior people. Nobody really seemed to care about them. I got mad at the system, that they didn't.

So I made them part of everything we had. We'd bring them in with a tender and let them eat and laugh and scratch with us when we had parties. But those poor bastards, they'd go up there and fly for hours in circles, big wide circles, with this wire hanging behind them.

DePue: You just mentioned something—and this is another big change in direction here—but you mentioned parties. I'm wondering if a new dimension of your job as the commander of the squadron was to host parties.

Thunman: Not many. We used to bring the ward room up for kind of a little reception, when the boats would come in, bring them up to my home. But that was about it. We had some dignitaries who would come out, like Sam Nunn<sup>74</sup> came out. I spent a couple of days with Sam Nunn. He and his wife came. And I remember Clements, who was the deputy secretary of defense, came out for a couple of days. The secretary of the Navy came out. That was funny. Middendorf, I think it is, he had...

The Navy was having a lot of engineering troubles with their ships, the regular Navy. I saw that when I was on a fleet staff. So Middendorf, who had been in the Navy as a young officer... He got out of the Navy and was in business and was interested in literature and music and those kinds of things, a good guy. He wasn't a regular, hard-driving military type. He decided that he would have a tour of ships around the fleet, to emphasize engineering, the importance of engineering. He would go and visit all of the... Every ship he went to, he would go back in the engineering plant, walk around with the

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<sup>74</sup> Samuel Augustus Nunn Jr. is an American lawyer and politician. Currently the co-chairman of the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), a charitable organization working to prevent catastrophic attacks with nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, Nunn served for 24 years as a United States Senator from Georgia (1972 until 1997) as a member of the Democratic Party.

people and look at the equipment and the bilges and pay a lot of close attention.

He came out to Guam, and he didn't know very much about engineering. So we go down in one of the submarines, walking through the reactor part, the engineering plant. Our ships were immaculate, engineering-wise. He looked at a big emergency propulsion motor that goes around the shaft. He looked at it, and he says, "Oh, gosh, I remember when I was in fleet. We had one of those diesel engines in my ship." I had the ship's skipper and the engineer with me, and I could see one of them starting to talk, say something. I said, "Oh, yes, sir, they're pretty much the same all over." (both laugh) They were about to say, "Hey, that's not..." (both laugh) But no, it was not a party job, by a long shot.

I got a chance to... With my younger son, we investigated the island pretty... That was interesting. We found a Japanese tank, remnants of a Japanese aircraft. There was still a lot of stuff around. I don't know the details, but I think a couple of the Japanese soldiers lived on Guam for five or ten years, after the war. You could go down and into Guam. You'd go down... Somebody had set up manila lines, going all the way down into a dense jungle. At the bottom of it was this wonderful, fresh water pool that you'd go sit in. By that time, you're damn hot and beat up from the jungle. But they still had some of that stuff there, in Guam.

The Japanese wanted to come—and we did make arrangements for them—to come and look for remains. They spent a lot of money. That was a big deal to them, to find the ancestors. They had detailed maps that they had developed before they got there, of where the remains might be, based on stories that they had with the survivors.

An interesting thing, the government of Guam was—I hate to say this—as crooked as any government that could ever be. They weren't maliciously crooked, but they were just very effectively crooked. Every year they would put together a budget, just like the U.S. budget. It had everything in it, every category. You name it, it was there, EPA, whatever area. You had dollars associated with each of those line items. Then they would get the money, at the beginning of the fiscal year, and they'd take it and put it into a pot, until all the line items disappeared. They'd spend it in any way they wanted to. Then, about three quarters of the year would go by, and all of a sudden, they'd have to go back and say, "Well we've run out of money for education."

DePue: Who are they going back to, the U.S. Congress?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah, the U.S. Government, yeah. Of course, what they'd done is they spent it on anything. It was funny. Of course, it was not an educated community. It was interesting people, the Chamorran people. Apparently, the

Spanish had taken over Guam in about the 1800s or so and killed all the men, massacred all the men and just kept the women alive. So what you ended up with was a mixture of Spanish and whatever the tribe was beforehand, not well educated at all, very few educated.

The politicians were well educated. They ran the show, and they spent the money. The U.S. Congress pretty much had to give them the money. There wasn't much they could do about it.

They sent Nunn out there. Nunn quoted me in Congress. My boss told me about it, that I had said that what we ought to do is put together a big training organization and develop a shipyard there, for the Navy, because I could see in the future, we would be using Guam more and more. It was said to be worth the money. My boss probably said, "You stop making political statements." (DePue laughs) But it is; it's an ideal port. I see now we've got more ships out there. We've got Marines there. It's all we've got in the Western Pacific.

DePue: I was going to say, because Subic Bay is not an option for us.

Thunman: Yeah, it's gone. And Okinawa is going down. Guam is pretty important to us.

DePue: For dependents, was this a nice place to be, a popular place to be?

Thunman: No, God no. They didn't like it at all. They did not like it. I had my son, my youngest son—my older son was in college—in high school there, which was terrible. But they had a little Jesuit school there that I sent my youngest son to, which turned out to be a wonderful school. It looked like it was left over after a bombing. It was as beat up as you could be.

They had these Jesuit priests. Even today, my youngest son, he will come out with, "Well, as father so and so used to say..." He'll come out with some profound statement that he got out of that education. But the schools were very poor, and that was... I'm sure they've made it better now, but that was a problem.

For example, one part of the year, all the roads would be covered with frogs. So when you drove down a road, you were just crunching frogs. I mean, it was not a place that was... It always had something going on. It was a beautiful place to go swim. But it was quite an experience. You really were kind of living on the edge and by yourself. Of course, the one nice thing about the job, which was one of the reasons why I liked submarines, was I didn't have any bosses there.

The flag officer there, I was not in his chain of command. The commander naval forces, Marianas, Morrison, we talked about last time, Admiral Morrison, father of Jim Morrison of *The Doors*. But I was not in his



chain. He was in the Marianas organization. Of course, I kept him informed of everything going on.

DePue: Your commander was a submariner?

Thunman: He was back in SUBPAC, back in Pearl Harbor, COMSUBPAC is who I reported to. Then, of course, I reported to CINCPAC. I reported to CINCPAC, from the Polaris missile side of the job. So it was quite an experience.

DePue: Before we started here, Admiral, you said that you had something going on at 11:00, and I just heard eleven bells.

Thunman: Yeah, I think it's time for me to—

DePue: Eleven bells, is that the way it's said in—

Thunman: Well, no. It would be, from bells, eight bells. Everything stops, you know. It only goes to eight bells, and then it starts over again. So, 8:00 is eight bells and then it goes by twos. I forgot. It's a plebe question that I can't answer, sir. I'll find out, sir. (both laugh)

DePue: I'm going to ask one more question then. You were awarded, or the squadron was awarded, the Meritorious Unit Commendation Medal.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: Any specific actions for that?

Thunman: Well, I think it came about that we'd had a successful... We did our job out there and handled unusual situations. I think the citation talks about the Vietnamese. It also talks about the effectiveness of... I think that six for six in '76 was a big deal. That's the largest number of missiles ever fired in an exercise situation. I think, whatever brought that out from Washington, something brought that out. You don't go out and shoot six Polaris missiles; that's a lot of money you send out. The fact that we were able to do that, and we were able to deal... It was a very successful tour. I thought about most of my tours, I thought, Well gee, I could have done this better, or I could have done that better. It's funny how that goes through your mind. I can remember when I was this. If I had that to do over again, I'd do it differently.

I don't think [there was] anything I did on Guam that I think I would have changed. I really think I was probably as good as I was ever going to be as an operating, senior naval officer. All of my decisions were good. The people were happy.

I remember one of the nicest things. After I retired, I had to have my first back operation. Of course, I wasn't on Medicare at that time. I was up in Pennsylvania, and you had to go through some office—I don't know what the

office was, it was some government office—to get their permission to have a civilian do the operation. I could have gone down to Bethesda, but I remember the doctor who I had seen about my problems. He looked at it, and he said, “You know Admiral, you don’t want the Navy to do this; the Navy doesn’t have doctors who know how to do this. You need a guy who does this every day.” He said, “You’ve got to get...”

So, I got the name of a doctor. I had dinner with him at Ambassador Annenberg’s home. Ambassador Annenberg was only worth \$3 billion, a wonderful guy. I really liked him, and he liked me. He said, “You’ve got to have Dr. Balderston do this for you.” Well, it turned out, in order for that to be done, I had to go to this office. I got in line. There were two or three people ahead of me and a guy at a table, filling forms and talking to people, shortly, about what they wanted to do and why, and why it couldn’t be done this way.

It came to my time. I gave him my name, and he says, “Thunman...” He says, “You were in the Navy. Were you ever in Guam?” I said, “Oh, yeah. I was there two years.” “Oh, God,” he said, “My brother was the chief petty officer in Guam when you were there. He thinks you’re the greatest guy in the world.” He approved my... I thought when I walked out, Boy, it’s funny. What goes around comes around. (laughs)

DePue: Well, what better way to finish than that? I don’t think there is one. Next time, we get to talk about going back to the Pentagon, a Navy personnel job.

Thunman: Yeah, that will be fun. Women in the Navy. (laughs)

DePue: Oh, boy.

(end of interview #8)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.09

Interview # 09: September 10, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, September 10, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here this morning in the home of Admiral Ron Thunman. Good morning, Admiral.

Thunman: Good morning, Mark.

DePue: It has been a while since we've gotten together.

Thunman: Well, it's been my fault, but you've now cornered me, and here I am.

DePue: I've been looking forward to this discussion. Even though we're not going to be talking about days on submarines, it didn't get any less lively for you in your next assignment in the department of personnel, I believe. We'll get into that in a little bit.

I wanted to start with some reflection, because we were basically at 1976. That's the post-Vietnam era for the United States. It's a timeframe that the military, I think especially the Army and the Marine Corps, were refocusing and rethinking about the nature of the military that they wanted, putting the focus squarely back to the Soviet Union, away from counter guerilla warfare and onto massive conventional warfare.

In the process of doing that, I know that the senior Army personnel were extremely worried, because if you looked at it based on numbers, the Soviet military was massive, artillery, armor, infantry divisions, just massive. I wanted to get your reflections on that, at a time also, when you had declining military budgets and a phrase that was often used in the military circles and Army circles, now as in back then, I think, that this was the days of the hollow Army.

Thunman: Well, it was an interesting time. It was a little bit different in the Navy, because deterrence was vital in this timeframe. We recognized that the Soviets had a massive military and were spending major funds in improving their military. We'd seen this... Certainly we'd seen it in the Navy, in our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions that we, in submarines, carried out. We've talked about those, ISR [Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance], those missions that we did.

Of course, the nation was cutting back significantly in the military, and the volunteers for the military, as I recall, had come down significantly. There were other things for those smart, young men and women to do, rather than go

in the military. So it was a tough time. You're absolutely right; it hollowed us out in several areas.

But deterrence was still funded, emphasized and, of course, that meant that our strategic ballistic missile force was maintained and expanded, and the missiles were improved. That meant, of course, the nuclear attack submarine program continued, maybe at a lesser rate in building. But the operations were hot and heavy, as they had been through the '70s. So, we in the submarine business didn't see a problem, didn't see a hollowing out, other than the fact that we were having difficulty recruiting and keeping the key people in the Navy. [phone rings]

Later, I recall, after I left the bureau in 1979, I went to visit a submarine. As soon as I got out there, I was commander of Submarine Force. I said, "I want to talk to the chief petty officers." I sat down, and about six guys came in. I said, "No, I want to talk to all of them." They said, "This is all of them." We were supposed to have ten, twelve, on the submarines. Actually, I was a little concerned. Am I doing the right thing, sending these boats to sea with only half of the senior leadership enlisted-wise aboard? So it was a tough time, although we had funding, and we had emphasis.

DePue: What was causing these more senior enlisted men to get out?

Thunman: Well, I think the job market. One was, during this hollowing period, '76 to '79, the people who would have subsequently become chief petty officers got out when they were second class and first class. Apparently, the job market was pretty good, at least for the technically-qualified people that we had in the nuclear submarine business. So it was tough.

It was also a difficult time for naval aviators. Naval aviators were getting out in droves. The airlines had a massive hiring program. I was involved with that in the bureau. The bureau was again, Bureau of Naval Personnel, and PERS-4, director of officer development and distribution. I was involved with recruiting, not running the recruiting organization, but I was vitally interested in how recruiting was doing, and I was vitally interested, especially, in both submarines and in naval aviation, because those were our key forces.

DePue: This is early in the timeframe when the country has adopted a volunteer force, across the board.

Thunman: Yes. Nixon, of course, brought in the volunteer force. This is 1976 when I went back to the bureau.

DePue: Right, so we're three or four years into that already. But I wanted to make the point that it's also the post-Vietnam era, when service in the military is generally pretty unpopular. I know in the Army especially, they ended up having to lower standards to get enough personnel in.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: Was the Navy more successful in drawing the kind of quality people you needed in the submarine force?

Thunman: We never lowered the standards in the submarine force, never, ever. Rickover would never permit that. But that was a very small group. The submarine force, actively at any one time, was 30,000 people. That was hardly anything. The Navy did, though, in its recruiting, have to back down on the requirement for high school graduates, and there were other things that were relaxed.

So the whole military was backing down, because, I guess...I didn't examine it at the time, because of the environment for employment for good people. The military had good people. They were not felons; they were not druggies; they had performed difficult tasks well and learned good discipline, and they were just ideal for industry to pick up and use. I think industry was more tuned to that type of person to work in the factories and the automobile plants, et cetera. They wanted that kind of guy or gal. So, it was a difficult time from that point of view.

The submarine force...Of course, I was responsible for all officer development and distribution. We received whatever funding was required to run the submarine force and naval aviation.

The surface Navy was not as well supported or funded, although we were building nuclear powered surface ships at that time. The *Enterprise*, the first nuclear powered surface ship aircraft carrier, had been authorized, I guess, in the early '70s. Then there were a couple of cruisers, the *Long Beach*, the *Bainbridge*. So the Navy was moving to modernize. It's a shame that they backed away from it, because those were wonderful ships that gave the Navy great capability that they could prove, under certain circumstances, like in the '72 to '74 timeframe, when I was inspecting the nuclear powered ships in the Pacific.

We had our first nuclear powered ships arrive in the Pacific. It was amazing to me how those ships could move around anywhere and almost at any time, because they had the unlimited fuel. When a typhoon came, I remember, I was up in the gulf, and a typhoon came. The entire fleet disbursed out of the Gulf of Tonkin, and the typhoon went by. The other ships, they had to get oilers out of there and get them refueled and all. The nuclear powered ships, zoom, right back into the gulf. They were there the next day, as soon as the weather would allow. To me, at the time, I thought, Boy, there's a big difference when you can have your forces move that quickly.

DePue: From the '72 to the '76 timeframe, was the Soviet military ramping up even more quickly than before or about the same pace?

Thunman: I'd say at the same pace, which was pretty rapid. That's when they were into developing their more modern, ballistic missile submarines, missiles, nuclear attack submarines. I can't tell you much about the other part of the military, because I really wasn't an expert there, but the Soviets never backed down. They didn't have a slowdown. There was a letdown in the Navy, after Zumwalt. He eliminated some standards, which had been longstanding standards, about uniforms and haircuts and that kind of stuff. Most of us regulars didn't like it at all. So, it was a difficult time to administrate the sailors.

I remember one story. Maybe I've told you this one before; it's a good one. This was about 1972, '73 or '74, somewhere in that timeframe.

DePue: Is this the one about moustaches and haircuts?

Thunman: No, this is the one about Admiral McCain, John McCain's father, a tough old bird. I used to play tennis with him. I think I've told you; he always wanted submarine officers to play tennis with him. He was a submariner. Then, he was commander in chief Pacific. But it was in about the... Maybe I'm a little bit late on it; maybe it was about the 1970 timeframe. Of course, Zumwalt was in charge and doing all these things to make it easier for—

Zumwalt's position was, we've got to make it easier. These kids will not enlist; they won't stay. We've got to align ourselves with society, with the change in culture that's gone on, you know, the long sideburns. Everybody can have a beard, and their hair can be longer.

Apparently, one day there, in Honolulu, a truck with about a dozen sailors in the back, going to some sort of duty, in dungarees. They looked terrible. They were a work detail, gathered from different sources, I guess. Admiral McCain's car went by and [he] saw these bum-looking sailors. So he made his driver pull the truck over. I guess he had to kind of swerve into the truck a little bit and pull it over there on Kamehameha Highway, a big highway. McCain gets out, and all these sailors, he's telling them to, "Get out of the truck, goddamn it!" That's the way he talked. I remember he used to yell at me when I would kind of flub the ball, when I'd play tennis with him, he'd say, "Goddamn it, hit the ball!" (both laugh) He had this raspy kind of a voice.

So he had lined up all these sailors, and he went up and down in front of every one of them, just chewing them out, to beat the band. Then he had his aide there get the name of their commanding officer and their command. Then he released them. Then the word went out to every one of those commanding officers to go up and report to Admiral McCain, Commander in Chief Pacific. I mean, that goes... You jump a few levels to get up there. He had them all in his office and chewed them up to a fair thee well for letting sailors like that exist in their commands.

But there were some who believed Zumwalt, and Zumwalt said we won't get the people to enlist unless we adjust. There were others, like me, who said that's wrong. It was in the '72 to '74 timeframe, was when we had started sensitivity training, associated with women in the military. I guess, kind of in preparation for bringing more women in. Now at that time, we didn't have any women on ships. But I remember... Also, the sensitivity training was also to adjust the more senior people to the lesser standards. They had a group who did that.

Every commander... I guess every rank, maybe lieutenant commander and above, had to attend this training. You had to have it in your record. Everybody had to do it. They were supposed to keep good data on it to ensure that everybody went. I was always late. I was always figuring out a way not to do it, until finally, I guess I was about one of the last in Pearl Harbor to have to go sit in front of it. I sat and listened to this boloney, as far as I was concerned, about how to be a leader today.

DePue: Did it deal with racial issues as well?

Thunman: Yes, it did. I never had problems... We never had problems with racial issues in submarines. Now everybody would say, well you didn't have many there. Well, that's true. It's not that we didn't want them. The only people we wanted on submarines were the people who could do the job. If they could do the job, hell, it didn't make any difference. [There were] many good officers, many good enlisted, mainly, who were black at that time, more coming in. We had no problems with that. There was never an issue that I ever saw or heard of. I think I would have heard it, one way or the other. But, of course, we had big problem with those who were—white or black—who were slobs, not doing their jobs, not pushing forward to improve themselves and relying on color or something else to get by, rather than their own abilities.

Of course, the Navy at that time, was building its sensitivity to blacks. I know we had one of our first black rear admirals<sup>75</sup> was in the Bureau of Navy Personnel, when I went back to that job. I got to know him pretty well, a good man. He's been recognized; he's gone now. I'm sorry, I can't remember his name, but I think he was one of the first black admirals. This was about 1976 when I met him. I think he made admiral about '74.

And then, [there's] my wonderful story about Chambers, Larry Chambers, who became an admiral. He was the captain of the carrier that pushed the helicopters overboard, in order to land the little Vietnamese plane. This is the day that we abandoned Saigon. The guy flying the plane had been working for the U.S. in some sort of capacity. He knew that, if he stayed there, they'd either kill him or send him to one of those terrible camps that they sent everybody [to]. So he piloted... He was a pilot too. His wife and his, I think,

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<sup>75</sup> Samuel L. Gravely, Jr. was the first black person to serve as a rear admiral in the United States Navy.

four or five kids in this piper cub cockpit—which was unbelievable in itself—flew that plane out to the carriers. The carriers had pulled away from the gulf, I think really, at the direction of the Congress. He came out there, tried to communicate with the carrier, couldn't, although he was on the right frequency—he thought he was anyway—flew around the carrier, dropped a stone with a note saying, "I've got my wife and kids, and I've only got so much gas. Can I come aboard?" We had Larry Chambers, who was skipper of the carrier, he had about a half a dozen of the big mother helicopters—you probably remember those, the great big ones. They used to call them big mothers—on deck.

DePue: The Chinooks perhaps?

Thunman: I don't know the designation. They're the big ones that they used to move troops around in.

DePue: That the Army used?

Thunman: Yeah. They had been using them to move people out of Saigon. The last person was out of Saigon, and this guy showed up in his plane. It's a wonderful story. So, this guy's up there. He's about out of gas. The deck is fouled, and really no time to move those things down, get them below or move them out of the way. So, Larry ordered them to push the helicopters overboard.

Now, these were big, expensive helicopters, and they did. They pushed them all overboard, brought the guy around. They raised the barrier. They do have an emergency barrier on a carrier. The guy flew into the barrier, okay. He and his wife and kids were okay.

Larry told me this story. He came back to the bureau the same time I did, back in 1976, one of the first black admirals to come into the bureau, Bureau of Navy Personnel. He said, "I went up to my room." He said, "God," he said, "I sat down and wrote a message to commander Seventh Fleet that I had pushed all the helicopters overboard, in order to rescue Vietnamese civilians." So I was going to need some more helicopters, if I was going to have to do more work in this area, move people around. He said, "I sent it out. I thought, Well, that's it; my career is over." He said, in a few hours he got a reply. It says, "Proceed to the Philippines to pick up more helicopters." (laughs) Not a word, [like] why in the hell did you do it? It was just... And he didn't make a big deal of it; he said it was to pick up a civilian.

The great part of the story is that a few years back, at the wonderful Naval Aviation Museum they have in Pensacola—incidentally, if you've never seen that museum, it's in my view, probably the greatest aviation museum in the world, certainly in the United States—they had that family back again, there. This is now... It's got to be in the two-thousands. They had



a day of recognition with that family they pulled out of there. It was well attended, and it's got a lot of publicity. So, it was a great success.

It was a great story for the Navy, because the commander Seventh Fleet, who I'm not sure I can remember at the time... It might have been still Admiral Moore, who later became chairman of the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff]. I don't know if he was still there. But anyway, nothing, just proceed to the Philippines and pick up more helicopters. (laughs)

DePue: You're talking about images at the tail end of the Vietnam War that, as I look back at it, are emblematic of our entire failed effort in Vietnam. You've got the shots of the helicopters landing on the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, and you've got the shots of these helicopters being pushed off an aircraft carrier. It kind of symbolized what went wrong in that war.

Thunman: Well, I think I've told you before; it was clearly the Congress failed to support the position of the administration.

DePue: We have talked about that a little bit. We probably ought to get to the position that you had that you started in 1976 and how you ended up as the director of officer development and distribution, Bureau of Naval Personnel and the Pentagon.

Thunman: In the bureau, which is separate from the Pentagon, the Navy Annex it's called. Well, I had had a tour in the Bureau of Naval Personnel as a young lieutenant commander. So I was probably one of the few submariners who had any bureau experience. I had no Pentagon experience. I thought I was completing that successful tour as a squadron commander in Guam. I thought I would probably get ordered back to the Pentagon to learn about the Pentagon. I had been early selected for promotion to rear admiral. My old boss, Jim Watkins, had been made the chief of naval personnel.

DePue: Now, refresh my memory, because it's been a while.

Thunman: He would have been skipper of the *Snook* when I was executive officer with *Snook*.

DePue: Was he the one who understood the way politics worked?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, the greatest politician and died here recently. They're still having memorial services to him, here and there. A good friend of mine, brilliant naval officer, Carl Trost—who later became the chief of naval operations—he had the job of director of officer development and distribution in the bureau. He was a very smart guy, stood first in his class. He was first in everything and a great man. A friend of mine, because he was class of '53; I was class of '54, same company. He had that job, and Watkins got ordered back there. Watkins didn't like him all that well. As a matter of fact, they didn't like each other at all. Trost, I think, because he was a political animal, had been the

executive assistant to the secretary of the Navy at one time and was pretty smooth and wanted to follow the system.

Of course, Watkins wanted to do it his way. He had a lot of ideas [of] what should be done. He wanted somebody who would support him in that job, because the director of officer development and distribution is a pretty powerful job. Even though you were young, you were pulling a lot of strings out there that either made or broke people, depending on what kind of people you gave them and how many you gave them. So Watkins ordered me in there, I think, because he said, Well, this guy will support me. He's one of the few guys that I know of who's had duty in the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

And I'd done pretty well in the job, from personnel aspects. I'd done some things that were new. The use of the first computers, which in those days were the cards, punch cards. I brought that into handling statistics involving people, how many, what rank, how many you're going to lose next year, how many you're going to bring in next year. All of that had been done by hand. I brought it into the nuclear power program, and then they had me brief everybody. All the program managers, I briefed them all on how we were doing this, use punch cards to keep track of people.

I have to say that it was not my idea. I made friends with a lieutenant commander surface officer who had been stationed in the bowels of the bureau. He was a guy who had gone to postgraduate school and nobody...He didn't have any sort of a sophisticated job, but he really knew his business. I used to have lunch with him. He was about my seniority. I got interested in what he was doing. Then we talked more and more and more and put together these records. It was, from my point, was to control the nuclear power personnel. Then it was expanded to the Navy.

So, I had a pretty good knowledge of the bureau. I was a good guy to go into it, except, politically, I was nothing. Carl Trost had been there, and he was on speaking terms with the Congress and various people in the secretariat. I was nothing but a hardcore submarine guy.

DePue: Weren't you seen as Rickover's guy?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, oh yeah. They knew that.

DePue: Which was a plus or a minus for you?

Thunman: It was overall a minus, although people respected me, and I was pretty good at working with the other communities. The aviation community I worked with. I did a lot for the aviation community that they had not been aware of. For example, I required...I said, "Your career paths have got to be so that before you command a carrier, you should be the executive officer of a carrier," just like in submarines, and that the navigator is selected by a board of people who could be a navigator and that there be a training program associated with it. I

brought some level of professionalism into the assignment of key people in aircraft carriers. Aviators had never thought of that before.

Now, they had a detailer, the head of their aviation detailer, but he would just pick the guys he thought was right. Well, I wanted board qualified people, people who'd sat down and said "Okay, let's see what's available, and let's be sure we get the best guys into these key jobs," executive officer of a carrier, navigator of a carrier, chief engineer of a carrier. They've got to be really top notch people, because they've got very difficult jobs. Now, the aviators did a great job at picking the guy to be the air boss and that kind of stuff. But the regular black-shoed kinds of jobs, they didn't quite understand why it was necessary to have any sort of standard assigned to them.

DePue: And I'm assuming the detailer answered to you. You would be the boss?

Thunman: Yeah, I was the boss. So, the one thing that they put in... You bring out an interesting point. Rickover went to Watkins—of course, Watkins had worked for Rickover—and said, "These skippers in the surface Navy were all screwed up." The surface Navy was a mess at that time, after Vietnam.

DePue: This is what Rickover said?

Thunman: Mm-hmm. The surface Navy recognized it, because when I was in... Another thing I didn't tell you, when I was senior member of the Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board, toward the end of my time there, they were having real bad problems with surface ships, material problems with the propulsion plant. The ships had been run pretty hard, but they had not spent any... They didn't do the things you needed to do to maintain them. They didn't give them the money; they didn't give them the time. The officers had not been developed to support that end of the Navy, and I had been.

I came in the Navy. I was chief engineer of a destroyer, so I was always... I didn't want to be one, but that's what I ended up being. And it was really great for my career, because I was always linked to the engineering department, from the point of, "Hey, you'd better take care of it, or it won't take care of you."

DePue: What you just said was the same kind of struggles the Army was going through, worn out their equipment, had neglected the overall maintenance, at the large level.

Thunman: Anyway, just to finish that story, when I was senior member of the Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board, the fleet commander called me. He said, "Hey we want that kind of an inspection program instigated for all ships," which was quite a decision. That's how Rickover entered the whole Navy, through develop propulsion examining boards. That means every ship would be examined, whether you were nuclear powered or not. My job was to train a

surface ship propulsion examining board to do what we did as the Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board. That was interesting.

They sent in six, eight very good officers, lieutenant commanders, headed by a captain, just like mine was. We took them on our examinations and showed them how we did it. The only trouble was, when they set up their own examining system. They went out and inspected their ships. They flunked them all. Of course, they deserved to be failed. That wasn't the problem, but the Navy couldn't afford to have all their ships tied up. (laughs) I tried to emphasize to those guys, I said, "Now look, when you go aboard these submarines, you're going to see they're in pretty good shape and squared away, but we've been working on this for years now. You're not going to get there overnight." Those guys went out, and they saw some of the disasters, and they just, bang!

DePue: Well it sends a pretty clear message to Congress, "Hey, we need the money to make this work."

Thunman: Yeah. Well, and also the attitude, the attitude of the surface admirals. Yeah, it was money, but attitude, with the right attitude those admirals could have been getting the money before their propulsion examining board. They'd been doing their own propulsion examining boards.

So anyway, Rickover then, the next step... I'm now in the bureau, a nuke linked at the hip with Jim Watkins, a nuke, both of us worked for Rickover—

DePue: Now we've back to '76 again.

Thunman: Yeah. Rickover says... You know, we make all of our submarine commanders go to a PCO school in Rickover's office. You've heard me say that before. But before you go to command, you had to go to Rickover's PCO school at naval reactors, there in Washington. The word came down—I didn't develop this; I was the action officer—develop that for all surface ship commanding officers, a propulsion prospective commanding officer school, same kind of school, same emphasis, not only emphasis on nuts and bolts, but emphasis on physics and things that are necessary in your thinking, when you think about material problems, every commanding officer, not only just the ship commanding officers, but the squadron commanders, the admirals. [If] you're going to go be commander Second Fleet, you had to go to that school, three months school, in Idaho (both laugh) at Rickover's, where we had our first... the nautilus reactor, Rickover's facility in Idaho, in barracks. It was austere, nothing fancy.

DePue: The Army equivalent to this school would have been the Army War College. That's when you're getting to the sub-lieutenant colonels, colonels, people

who are destined to be general officers. But it's not engineering or technically focused. It's strategy, tactics; it's command and leadership issues.

Thunman: And, of course, we had the Navy War College. It was the same thing.

DePue: So this would be in addition to?

Thunman: In addition to. Navy War College, you went, or you didn't go, depending on what your career was doing. Rickover would not let any of us go to the Navy War College in my day. He said it was a waste of time. He said, "You guys got to go out there and operate these ships and get experience at sea. All that [Navy War College] is just a bunch of malarkey." He said, "You're smart enough to do that on your own." Well, he wasn't right. I wish I had gone to the war college. I would have been a better officer, I think. But I don't want to argue that point. But this requirement... Of course, the surface officers, they really hated this. [phone rings] There was almost a revolt.



Chief of Naval Operations Jim Watkins and Vice Admiral Thunman are aboard the USS Trepang (SSN-674), under the North Pole in 1985.

Now, the CNO at that time, a wonderful guy, Admiral Jim Holloway, aviator, who had been the first commanding officer of USS *Enterprise*, picked by Rickover to be the commander of the first nuclear powered aircraft carrier. He knew the value of that kind of education. He had gone through it when he went to the *Enterprise*. He had to go to Rickover's offices for three months and go through that same regimen. So he supported it. There was the CNO and the chief of naval personnel, supporting this effort. The secretary of the Navy at the time, I'm sure supported it. All secretaries of the Navy got along with Rickover, because they knew their future depended on it, because of Rickover's power in the Congress.

DePue: You said that all secretaries of the Navy got along with Rickover. You didn't say that Rickover got along with the secretaries of the Navy—

Thunman: No.

DePue: ... which emphasizes that, in the real world, Rickover was more important than the secretary of the Navy?

Thunman: Yes, by a long shot, more important. [phone rings] Go back to the Eisenhower years again. My story about Eisenhower wanted the *Nautilus* to deploy earlier, to go up under the ice, and Rickover said "No, not ready." Eisenhower was angry about that. Remember afterwards, after the *Nautilus* went under the pole

and came back and they had the parade in New York, then Eisenhower had the whole crew there at a reception at the White House. He didn't invite Rickover, because Rickover had said no to him. That's an interesting story. Congress got all upset with that and immediately awarded Rickover the Medal of Freedom and promoted Rickover to vice admiral, in the face of Eisenhower.

So, it was a time of great change. The rest of the Navy, recognizing that the tenets, principles, practices of Rickover were necessary, if you were going to run a modern Navy. It just didn't have to do with nuclear power, all that attention to detail in the operation of the ship. It had to do with running a modern Navy. You no longer can do it by putting your finger windward to see what was going on. You had to have better analyses than that.

So anyway, I arrive at the Bureau of Navy Personnel, and immediately I'm stuck with that, build that school, and order these people there, and do it so that it conforms to the career and availability.

DePue: Were those exclusively your duties when you were there?

Thunman: No, no, no. I was assigning all officers in the Navy, no matter what.

DePue: In terms of their next assignment, their education and development?

Thunman: Yes, education. It was quite a job.

DePue: All officers.

Thunman: All officers, doctors, supply officers, engineering duty officers, everybody.

DePue: General officers vying for the next appointment?

Thunman: The chief of naval personnel did that.

DePue: Flag officers, I should say.

Thunman: Yeah, flag officers. Except, he would call me in from time to time. We'd talk about that. I'd look up records and backgrounds. I'd help him, but he made those assignments. Every once in a while, I might have been able to influence one or two, and I did. I'd say, "Well that's a good guy, I knew him back..." Or, I'd say, "God, you know, I wasn't very much impressed with him." But I didn't do that very often. It wasn't my job. But I did help him in putting together the facts, where he could make the decision.

Now, many officers, many of the flag officers in the Navy, thought I did have that power. I didn't. They were very careful about how they dealt with me, many, because they thought I had more power than I did. I didn't advertise it one way or the other.

DePue: Were you the guy who had to field all the calls from everywhere in the world?

Thunman: Yeah, everywhere in the world. I had a secretary in there, who did nothing but administer those calls, from flag officers all around the world. We'd put them down, the timing and the name. Periodically she'd come in, and we would organize my return of those calls. I've been chewed out by the best. I mean to tell you, it was a standard day, at least two or three times a day, somebody telling me that I'm the dumbest, the least knowledgeable personnel expert or so-called expert. But it was a great experience.

I got to know a lot of them, and I'm sure that helped me later on. Some of them were very, very impressed with some of the things we did, like squaring away the assignment process of the naval aviation. I did that because an aircraft carrier, I forget which one, had gone aground. You got into it, and you realized that the goddamned navigator didn't know anything about being the ship's navigator. That had caused the problem.

Also, they had the collision in 1975, 1976-ish. There was a collision where our destroyer got cut almost in half by a carrier, out near Australia. Several men were killed. It was due to the commanding officer really making poor decisions. You got into the background of the commanding officer, and he wasn't as well qualified as he should have been.

DePue: Of the carrier or the destroyer?

Thunman: Of the destroyer. Admiral Holloway was the type of guy... He'd been trained by Rickover, a wonderful guy, Holloway's still alive, still the chairman of the Navy Museum in Washington, quite a man, Jim Holloway. His father had been an admiral too, a vice admiral. His father had been chief of naval personnel, as a matter of fact.

So, I came into that job with that in my mind, about how you've got to prepare people, qualify them, assign them. You don't make any exceptions just because the guy had worked for the secretary of the Navy or some other admiral. All of them wanted exceptions. Most of those calls were, "Hey, I've got this really good guy. He's got orders to this. He's better than that. He ought to go on to this," a lot of calls like that.

DePue: So you were getting calls from admirals in the field who wanted you to do something specific for one of the people they were mentoring and bringing up.

Thunman: Yes. That's correct; most of it was that.

DePue: You weren't getting calls from the officers themselves, saying, "Hey, I want to do this"?

Thunman: No, that went to their detailers. All those calls went to their detailers. The detailers would bring me in the ones that were problematical, one way or

another. One of the things they did wrong... The only time Watkins ever said... All those years I worked for him, the only time he ever said that I did anything wrong, he said, "That was bad, bad work," he said to me.

There's an officer in Virginia Beach, who's an aviator. He's a lieutenant commander, never served in Vietnam, never flew in Vietnam. He stayed all that time in the jobs in Virginia Beach. On the side, his wife had built this wonderful real estate agency, which was very supportive of the local congressman, with money and other things. This guy would come up for rotation, get another job in Virginia Beach, some sort of a sidesaddle job, not on a carrier deploying or anything like that. A captain, detailer, aviation detailer, came in. He said, "We've ordered this guy to a job in Japan. It's an aviation job, important job; he can do it. He's been in Virginia Beach for all these years. It's time for him to go and do something more important than what he's been doing. He has objected strongly and has brought Congressman—Now it's coming back—Whitehurst into it. Whitehurst is objecting strongly."

So I call Whitehurst's office, and it was very clear that that son of a bitch was just sucking off the Navy. I said, "We need him to go do that job," I told his chief of staff. The next thing I know, I get a call in. It's, "Congressman Whitehurst wants to see you." I went there, and there was his staff, four, five on a couch and chairs and him. They took off on me like you can't imagine, making poor decisions regarding people, no interest in the welfare of people, and this guy should stay down there. I was a typical Rickover guy who did nothing but be involved in machinery types of decisions. I had no qualifications to do what I was doing. I think it went even further than that. I was mean tempered and dispirited. So I listened to it all. I didn't say anything. I'd come in and I'd said to him, "We need to send him there. It's time for him to go pay his dues out there." Boy, I didn't get more than ten words out; they jumped me. I sat there and listened to all that.

At the end of it I said, "Mr. Congressman, can you and I have just a few words privately? I'm going to do what you want us to do, but I'd like to have a few words with you about it." He goes, "Okay." So he cleared his staff out of there. I said, "I'm going to do this because of what you are and who you are, but that son of a bitch is getting away with it." And I had some other words like that. I know I used the words son of a bitch.

I went back to my office, thought about that for a minute. Really, Whitehurst sat there with his eyes that big. I lit into him. I said things like, that son of a bitch is getting away with it, and you shouldn't support him. You have no right supporting a man like that. All these kids have been out there, stuck their neck out. This guy never has, and he's making \$1 million. I went through kind of a lecture, went back, and I thought about it. Boy, I better tell Jim Watkins about it. So I went up to see him. I told him. He looked at me and says, "Bad work; that was bad work." That's the only time he ever said



anything in all those years. I still remember it, “Bad work; that was bad work.” But I felt a lot better.

DePue: What was bad about the work?

Thunman: Well, that I’d gone and chewed out the congressman. It wasn’t that I’d given him the job.

DePue: That you chewed out the congressman?

Thunman: We had no choice but to give it to him. It was either that... Whitehurst, I forget which committee he was on. But I had some other interesting [encounters] later on, sessions with him, when he was trying to build diesel submarines. He was, no question in my mind, being paid under the table by the German shipbuilding company that wanted to build diesel, electric submarines and sell them to the Navy. This is later on in my life. You know, things come around. Well, Whitehurst was supporting that, of course.

DePue: Where was he from?

Thunman: Virginia, from Virginia Beach.

DePue: His political affiliations?

Thunman: He was a Democrat.

DePue: But apparently not one of those enamored with Admiral Rickover.

Thunman: No, no, he was not one of Rickover’s... Well, he would not have crossed swords with him. I don’t know whether Whitehurst ever came back to Watkins or not. I got a feeling Whitehurst was smart enough to [know] “If I start griping about this guy...” I’m sure his staff told him, “Well here’s Thunman’s background. You take him on, you’re going to take on some other people.”

DePue: Well you did mention that somebody in that meeting mentioned Rickover in rather derogatory terms.

Thunman: Yeah, that’s right. I don’t know if he ever called. He was the same dishonest guy when we were dealing in the diesel submarine business. I was able to counter him once, because I had better intelligence than he did.

So anyway, that was the Navy at that time, ’76. Retention was going down; recruitment was difficult; we were in bad shape because of the Vietnam War; the heavy operations... Those had been heavy operations, those ships in the gulf, aircraft. So that’s what I went into. One of the solutions, probably one of the major solutions to the problem, was one, Jim Holloway had become the chief of naval operations.

He was the right guy for that job at that point. He had principles, and he wasn't going to bend very much. He believed in what Rickover had taught him, and he assigned people like Watkins, who picked up those principles and set them up into the Navy, and they've existed ever since.

Nobody ever canceled those propulsion examining boards for the surface ships. They're there today; they're just as powerful. You do bad on your propulsion examining board, you're going to have a hard time getting yourself promoted. It was Rickover's way of changing the Navy, interesting.

DePue: Was this a time period when the nuclear submarine fleet was growing?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. Of course, we'd grown through the '60s, still growing in the '70s, but the '60s were when we'd really grown.

DePue: So it was more manageable growth at this time?

Thunman: Yes. The '60s, I think they were launching a ballistic missile submarine every month for a while, in the early ships, the *George Washington*-class. At that time, the two years I spent in the Bureau of Naval Personnel, half the time I spent putting together crews, enlisted crews, for those ships.

DePue: This was your previous assignment?

Thunman: Yeah, when I was in the bureau. That was a difficult job, because I had to go out and find people and put it together from a talent point of view and experience point of view. We put the nuclear powered crew on there early, for the engineering organization. That was hard work; that was hard work. I had to go through records and try to balance experience.

So anyway, there I was, back in the bureau in that capacity. But you're right. I remember—maybe I told you this story—when... Of course, the Carter Administration came in at the same time. Boy, that was a shock. I'd been there a couple of months, met all the people involved, Republicans involved in the administration. This is, of course, before the election. Then the Carter Administration came in and just threw them all out, right on their ear. It was a great shock.

DePue: These people. Are you talking about civilian people in the Department of the Navy?

Thunman: Assistant secretaries of the Navy. There was a couple thousand people that were appointees. You get the secretary of the Navy, of course. Then you've got four or five very key assistant secretaries of the Navy. You've got the same thing in Defense.

DePue: But you've got a new guy coming in, who is not just a Navy guy, not just a Navy Academy grad, but a submariner.

Thunman: Oh, you mean me?

DePue: No.

Thunman: You mean Watkins?

DePue: I mean Jimmy Carter.

Thunman: Well, that's true. Carter was always liked. He liked me. I've got that a picture of him in there with...

DePue: Did you know him before he became president?

Thunman: No.

DePue: Did he know of your reputation?

Thunman: I don't know. All I know is that we took him to sea in a submarine.

DePue: What was his reputation among the submariners?

Thunman: I don't think it was plus or minus. I don't think any of us had any real... We knew who he was. We knew that he had been a submariner and a nuke, although he never went to sea in a nuclear powered ship. He was there for the building of the *Sea Wolf*. Rickover liked him. He and Rickover, as I understand it, on good authority, they spoke at least once a week. All the affairs that Carter had, he invited Rickover to. Rickover would attend a lot of them.

One of the things I did was to get the first black submariner, who was really destined to command a submarine, and I sent him to the White House as the aide to the president, a wonderful young guy. People would come up and say, "Hey, here's a really good guy." We were looking for an aide for Carter. The one that was over there was leaving. I'm trying to remember his name now and having a hell of a time. [He] later became a four-star admiral.

He had been one of my detailers there on the bureau. He worked for the director of surface ship assignments. I had met him and was impressed with him. I called him in, and I said, "I'm sending you over there for these interviews." And he was selected. I remember, I had this discussion with him. This is true. When he was selected, I called him in my office. I congratulated him, and I said, "Look, you son of a bitch," I said, "You're going to go over there, and you're going to wow those people. You're going to have the ability, at the end of a year, to go out and be anything you want and make yourself hundreds of thousands of dollars with the background that you'll get over



*Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford greet Admiral and Mrs. Betsy Thunman at a Washington D.C. reception for Admiral Rickover's birthday. July, 1983*

there.” And I said, “If you leave the Navy, I’ll haunt you for as long as I can.” (DePue laughs) I said, “You’re an investment. You’re our investment over there, and an investment for your race,” the first black aide, I think, that they had over there.

So he did and did very well. He was always very friendly to me. He would come over and see me once in a while. He would tell me the story, Rickover would come to the White House receptions and parties that they would have outside, in the back of the White House. Carter said, “Now you watch out for Rickover.” Rickover was getting on then now. This is then ’76, ’77, so he’s seventy-six or seventy-seven years old. He said, “You watch out for him,” because Rickover never wanted anybody tending him. I’ve told you that. He didn’t want anybody to waste their time tending him. He had to figure out a way that he could watch out for Rickover without Rickover really knowing that he was watching out for him.

DePue: You’re talking about this aide?

Thunman: Yeah. So they were having a big reception in the back, and Rickover had come up and come in the gates by himself. They were there, and then Rickover decided to leave. So he’s walking away from all the people, and this guy has got him in sight. So he’s following Rickover. Rickover turns the wrong way, heads down north of the White House, down there where there’s trees and stuff. It was the wrong way. The exit is the other way. He comes up to Rickover, and he says, “You want to go out here, this way. You get out the gate up here.” He looks at him, Rickover. He told me, he said he looked at him, and he says, “Were you following me?” And the guy said, “Well, yes sir, I was.” He says, “I always taught you guys to follow up.” (both laugh)

I’m trying to think of his name. I can’t think of it. But I’m told... Well this guy told me, he told me, he said, “Carter and Rickover would speak once a week.” Carter took advice from Rickover, I’m sure. That’s never come out very much, I don’t think, in any—

DePue: Was having a submariner in the White House seen as a plus for the Navy or a minus?

Thunman: I don’t know. You’ve seen that picture in there, “Carter, to Ron Thunman.” It was a nice thing. We took him to sea on a submarine. I didn’t go, because I thought that would be ostentatious of me to go with him. I could have gone, but I didn’t. They came back and had a great time. They spent the day out in the submarine. We got a picture of Carter on the periscope, as you’ve seen in there. We had a little plaque on it, *for President Jimmy Carter*. We had some nice words; I forget what they were, submariner, his visit to the whatever it was, whatever ship it was, had it on the bottom, wonderfully framed.

[We] sent it over there, and his aide came over to see me again. He said, "President Carter wants your name. Do you want it N.R. Thunman or Ron Thunman?" I said, "Ron Thunman." He said, "He just wanted to know, who was the guy responsible for sending this photograph over here?" I told him, and he wanted to know the name. So they disappeared, came back in a couple of weeks, a wonderful picture in there, signed by him, in his handwriting.

Carter was always faithful to the submarine force, never made a decision against the force. I think I've seen this a couple of times. Of course, we named a submarine after him, the *Jimmy Carter*, my SSN-21. That was now the SSN-23, the newest. The one that I had headed the conceptual design team on, we named her the *Jimmy Carter*. It's the biggest; it's quite a submarine, but it's a highly classified submarine. I can't tell you much more about it. I think he was pleased with that, although they didn't name an aircraft carrier after him, like all the other presidents have had aircraft carriers named after them. A submarine was named after Jimmy Carter. I don't know whether that made him feel good or not.

I know, that when they were trying to shut down the base in New London, Carter came out against that. It was in the Reagan years, the BRAC [Base Realignment and Closure]. In the '90s, not the Regan years, the Clinton years.

Going back to my job in '76 to '79, there in the bureau, when the new administration came in, they got a new director of the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], Admiral... I don't know, I can't remember, I'm having a bad day.<sup>76</sup>

DePue: I can't recall either; I should know. We can get that into the transcript.

Thunman: He came over to see me. He was going into the job. He says, "I want these guys ordered into me." He goes, bing-bing-bing-bing-bing [names them off]. He had a half a dozen Navy people. You know, "Yes, sir." Very short, businesslike, never any discussion of what else might be available. I took those names, and I went out to the detailers that I call on, the captains that ran the various organizations. I said, "Let's take a look at these people, and if you have a guy you think is better, let me know." Well, the guys came back and said, "Jesus, Admiral, these guys are not very good. We've got a lot better people, better qualified people than these." It had nothing to do with Republican or Democrat. So I thought, Well, maybe I ought to put together a book here, other selections, if he chose. I'm not saying that we'd do anything different. We put together a pretty nice book, and said, "Here's some other guys you might want to look at, as well." He called me, and he said, "Look, I want these guys here, and I want them here right away. I don't want any of the

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<sup>76</sup>The CIA director at that time was Admiral Stansfield M. Turner, USN 1977-1981.

people your detailers and guys are trying to push. These are the people I want,” very short, crisp, click, Stansfield Turner

Immediately, we got them ordered there. About four or five months went by, and I get a call [from] Admiral Turner, “How about sending me that book over again.” (both laugh)

DePue: Felt a little bit vindicated then, did you?

Thunman: Yeah. He had been president of the war college, and these are people I guess he'd known in the war college. In those days you had to rate...In your fitness reports, you had to compare that officer's performance with everybody else's performance, of that rank. If you were ranking three captains, you said the guy was one of three, two of three, or three of three. That was pretty tough. Subsequently, the Navy did away with that. It was too bad. I fought hard; I kept it as a rule, because I thought it was a good way to understand who was best in promotion boards. When they graduated from the war college and he had 100 or 150 captains, he ranked them all one of 100 or 150, and that was well-known in the Navy system. From that point of view, I had an interesting job, and I worked with some interesting people.

DePue: You mentioned, early in our conversation this morning, about getting sensitivity training, and that was in part because of women becoming more prominent in the military at the time. Was that a fact of what you were doing in this job in '76?

Thunman: Well, it started; it started. The first ones was putting women in the Naval Academy. I guess the first women in the Naval Academy had gone in, in the...It must have been the '72 to '74 timeframe; I forget.

DePue: The women got to West Point in July of 1976, so they would have been the class of 1980. I'm sure that it was the same for the Naval Academy and for the Air Force Academy.

Thunman: Well, that's because I'd gotten it wrong. I lectured them in, I think '78, and I thought they'd had longer times.

DePue: Obviously, it had something that had been in the plans a couple of years before that occurred.

Thunman: Anyway, it was in that timeframe. I talked to them. I brought all of those women midshipmen back to the bureau and talked to them. They were really feisty about jobs they could go to and jobs they couldn't go to. Of course, we weren't putting them on ships at all. We weren't putting them into straight stick naval aviation. The jobs they were going to were just plain kind of auxiliary jobs, important jobs.

DePue: Whose decision was that? Was that Congress'?

- Thunman: No, that was the way the Navy was run. But it would take a decision of Congress to put them on ships and to put them into flight training.
- DePue: Which is what they wanted, I suspect.
- Thunman: Absolutely, they all wanted it, and they were really feisty about it. I remember one of the gals was a qualified pilot, quite an accomplished pilot on her own. She couldn't believe that she couldn't go into flight training. They kind of beat me up in that session; I remember that.
- DePue: Why did you bring them there?
- Thunman: I wanted to find out about the kinds of assignments they would like to go to, make them understand what was available. These were an important group of people, the first graduates at the Naval Academy, women.
- DePue: At that point in your career, you weren't officially authorized to have an opinion. But, unofficially, I'm sure you did have an opinion about what was happening.
- Thunman: Well, I didn't think there should be any change.
- DePue: Does that mean you didn't think there should be women at the academies?
- Thunman: Frankly, yes. I did not believe they should be there.
- DePue: Why?
- Thunman: Well, it was a social experiment. It was going to change...I've always believed the academy teaches you to be a war fighter. That's the purpose of the Naval Academy, is to train and prepare and inspire. In my day, young men go out and fight the country's wars, be ready to do it, be qualified to do it, carry out the orders, and get it done. You get out of that landing barge at Omaha Beach and lead those guys up into that gunfire and that kind of stuff.
- DePue: Well, if the women had been successful, and they would have been able to go to ships and serve on ships, wouldn't they be in the position of being war fighters?
- Thunman: Well, to be a war fighter on a ship is the same as being a war fighter in the Army. You've got to be physically capable of doing it. I never have thought women were physically capable of doing either.

I wrote an article here that was not published. Maybe I can find it for you, if you're interested in that. It was the only one that was not published by the local [State] Journal-Register. I used to write letters to the editors, and they used to publish them all—they welcomed them—about different things going on. One of them was putting women in submarines. I wrote a pretty

good article about it, I thought. It was not a matter of them not being qualified or smart enough, capable from an intelligence point of view; they just weren't physically qualified.

DePue: Even to serve on submarines?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: The American public's perception is that's pretty much a pushbutton kind of a war.

Thunman: Well, when I put in there an article about my own experience, when we had the gas...Remember, the issue of carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide throughout the submarines? We were trying to get the sailors up and out of the engineering spaces, carrying them and dragging them along. It takes a lot of strength to pick up a guy. If I had to pick you up right now and carry you out that door, it would be a hell of a job, even if I was twenty-five. Or if they came to get me through just this living room, let alone all the machinery associated in a submarine and the compactness of the submarine. I know other occasions where strength, physical strength, was vital on that submarine, kept that submarine from sinking.

DePue: There have been others that argued against the integration of women in some of these combat roles because of the implications it might have on morale or discipline. Did you not find those arguments as persuasive?

Thunman: Well, I do to an extent, but I've always used a reason that everybody could understand. Now, I talked to an Israeli Army officer, a senior officer, I think was the equivalent of a colonel. Of course, they had the problem, and they found it in combat, with women in combat, that the men would be more worried about the women sitting next to them, protecting the women, than they were of killing the enemy, that they were worried about the women being isolated or being attacked. That became more important than carrying out whatever the mission was.

I just felt it was a social experiment that wasn't necessary. I had spent a lot of time on ships, the destroyer, the patrol craft, the submarines I served on, all of those surface ships and submarines that I examined. I examined, not only submarines, but the nuclear powered carrier and the other nuclear powered cruisers. I'd spent a lot of time at sea on ships, watching commanding officers do their job, a tough job. It's not a job where you should be vectored in any other direction, but carry out your mission and do it effectively, touch your people if you can. You don't need social experiments; you need an effective military. You can do everything you want outside the military, but the military's got one job, that's to go out and fight its wars. That's very old fashioned. I realize it's out of date and would make at least half the country mad at me, if I went out and announced that. (DePue laughs)



DePue: At the time—we're talking '76 to '79 timeframe—was the Navy changing its rules about where women could serve?

Thunman: Well, that's when my next story starts. So, in 1978, two years in the bureau, working the problem, nothing with women except that session I had with the women midshipmen. Who knows, maybe that session went up other places. Jim Watkins has left the bureau. There's an aviator, Bob Baldwin, is now the chief of naval personnel, a funny guy, good guy, typical aviator.

DePue: What's that mean?

Thunman: Well, you know, things are kind of loose, but smart. [He] always had a quip about everything. He calls me in one day, and he says, "I've got good news for you." He says, "I've got good news and bad news for you." He said, "The good news is we're going to assign you as commander Submarine Force U.S. Pacific Fleet." God, I couldn't believe it. Two years as a rear admiral in the bureau, going to that wonderful job, in my view, the best job in the Navy?

DePue: Two stars at the time?

Thunman: Yeah. I was a one-star, but I would have become a two-star. But, of course, in the Navy at that time, we always wore two stars. But on the record, I was a one-star, and COMSUBPAC was two stars.

DePue: Rear admiral stands for one star?

Thunman: No, it stands for both one-star and two stars. That's why the Army's never liked it.

DePue: Because you're trying to confuse us.

Thunman: Well, today we talk about, if you go all the way out, it's rear admiral upper half, rear admiral lower half.

DePue: What happened to the rank of commodore? I thought that was supposed to be the one-star.

Thunman: Well, it came in, and then it got thrown out, because the guys who were... Like, I was a commodore. But that was an honor. That was a position of respect and honor.

DePue: Okay, enough of that confusing stuff.

Thunman: But anyway, he said, "You're going to be commander Submarine Force Pacific Fleet." I said, "Oh my God, that's incredible." I said, "What could be the bad news?" He said, "Well, you're going to stay here in the bureau for a third year." I said, "Gee, Admiral, that's fine with me. [I'll] stay here and do

the best I can.” He said, “And...you are going to put together the policy to put women in ships.” God.

DePue: This is not what you wanted to hear, I suspect.

Thunman: I was astounded. **Me**, the nuke, the hardcore, terrible reputation, women in ships. I said...It was a dumb thing, I said, “Why me, Admiral?” He said, “Why not you?” And I said, “Well, I’ll do the very best I can.”

I went back to my office, got my executive assistant. I said, “Bring me the service records of every woman in the Navy, commander and lieutenant commander, who are now in the Navy.” They brought them in, a big stack of them. I sat in my office for a couple of days, going through those records, trying to ascertain who would be the women I would want to help me, have help me do this job?

It was kind of like what I did when I went...Remember on the *Plunger*, I sat and interviewed every sailor. I sat with their service record. The great thing, when I was in the Bureau of Naval Personnel as a young lieutenant commander, I learned how to read service records, because I was always reading service records of people, picking them to go serve on a submarine or whatever.

So I went through the service records on all of them, and I came up with two women. One of them was Bobbie Hazard and the other one was...I’m going to fail open on her now, Tracey, Pat Tracey. I’m not sure about the Pat. These were the two who seemed to be as balanced as they could be. Don’t ask me how I determined that, but I did, through looking at their backgrounds and what they’d done in college.

I ordered both of them in and told them, I said, “We’re going to put women on ships. We haven’t announced it yet, but we’re going to do it. But the first thing we do is going to figure out what we need to do to get ready to do that.”

DePue: Was this decision based on a congressional—

Thunman: I don’t know where the decision came from. It came from the CNO, obviously, probably from the secretary of the Navy. The administration, of course, was a democratic administration. Carter was there. I’m sure the people in DOD forced it. I knew the two women, Kathy Carpenter, who was an assistant secretary of defense.

DePue: This is a civilian?

Thunman: Yeah, part of the administration, part of that administration. The other one, who I may or may not remember, she was assistant secretary of the Navy, first time women assistants, brought in by Carter.

DePue: To put it into another context, this is the same time that the Equal Rights Amendment [ERA] is working its way through the states. Much of that battle occurred right here in Springfield, Illinois, because they were never able to push it through the legislature. But there was a spirited debate in the Illinois Legislature every year, from 1972 to 1982, when it was eventually, finally defeated. But the '77-'78 timeframe, most people would have predicted that it would pass.

If you'll permit me, I'll just read Section 1 of the ERA into the record here. "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." And opponents to ERA, often times their main argument against it would be this whole issue of women in the military, especially women in combat roles. So, having provided that background, I'll throw it back at you now.

Thunman: I would go up and talk to Baldwin and these two gals. I was always saying, "We've got to do this right." Now, the administration says, "We want women." Then the words against it came down. Then I started dealing with Kathy Carpenter and... I can't remember the other gal's name. Both of these are feminists. I'd never met feminists before, short hair, nothing but a T-shirt or, like just everything, nothing glamorous about feminists in those days. I'm trying to think of the other gal's name. She was Navy, and the other was Defense, and both of them were into it, "Bring them in ships right away."

So I sat down with my two gals, introduced them, of course, to Kathy Carpenter and the other. We started a discussion. These were two fine, young women, Pat Tracey and Bobbie Hazard, really wonderful young women. I'm sure they impressed the secretary. So, the first move I made was a good one.

DePue: What were their ranks?

Thunman: They were lieutenant commanders. So the first move I'd made... I had picked really, two good people, who were supportive of me and who, later on, interestingly, both of them, later in the Navy, were promoted to vice admiral. So it had been pretty good for them. Obviously, I'd picked the right people.

Anyway, I said to them, "You know, we've got to be able to support women properly, or this ain't going to work." I said, "So we've got to make the accommodations. We've got to do what's necessary in the accommodations of these women, so that this program works, so the women are supported." And I said, "That means we're going to have to change some of these ships. We're going to have to have a women's berthing compartment, a women's head. We've got to do all the things necessary to support women, hair dryers, whatever was necessary that we would put in there for men. Take out the urinal, put in a head and all of that. I'll get the money." I said, "I'm sure I can get the money to do it, but I want to know what it is we need to do to make this happen."

DePue: When this word came down, was it **all** ships and boats in the Navy?

Thunman: Well, the decision hadn't been made at that time. So, I went up to see Baldwin. I said, "We can start this, but this accommodations business is going to take some time and effort. And we've got to work our way into it. I recommend that we start off with auxiliary ships, submarine tenders, surface ship tenders, oilers, ammunition ships, auxiliary ships, not combat ships or submarines." I say, I recommend it, but I think that, to be honest with the system, I think that was also the feeling. I sold it very easily.

My point of view, I said "Hey, we're just not ready, and we've got to get some time to work our way into this. We've got to get some experience. We've got to get some women who are experienced at sea. We shouldn't start with combat ships." That was accepted, so it was going to be auxiliary ships.

We put together everything for those women, anything that was done in the assignment process of men were to be done for women. There would be no changes. I wanted maximum support. Early on, when I said no submarines, nobody in the Navy fought me, but these two women did, Kathleen Carpenter and Mitzi Wertheim, was her name. They looked at me as a submariner. I think they were trying to tweak me. They said, "Well why not submarines?" I said, "You know, they're just not going to hack it in that environment." I said, "Why don't you go to sea for a day in a submarine?" They said, oh, they'd love that.

So, I called down to the commander Submarine Force Atlantic Fleet, Kenny Carr. I said, "Admiral"—this story is still told all around submarine ports—"two gals are going to come aboard one of your submarines. You pick it out." Of course, he had to say, yeah. There was no "Would it be okay?" These were big time administration officials. I said, "I hope they have a good day." I said, "You don't lose the plant and have to secure air conditioning or the head runs over, overflows. I hope it works out okay, so they see how our submarines work." He says, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, got it." (laughs)

So they're off, and they're having their day. They come back. The next day, I'm back; I'm sitting there. I don't hear anything from them. So I go up over to the Pentagon, where Kathleen Carpenter was. She had a Navy captain EA [engineering aid], and I walked in. I said, "Hey, I didn't hear from the secretary this morning, how her ride went." This is even before I talked to Kenny Carr, because I wanted to hear her side of it first. "Well, she didn't say too much." Then I saw [Mitzi] Wertheim. Wertheim was good enough to say, "Well, a submarine's no place for women."

So I called Carr, got a hold of Carr. He said, "Well, it went okay. We had kind of a typical day, a lot of training going on. We did a major steam leak drill," which means you lose air conditioning. (laughs) He said, "We had some problems with the heads, but we got that straightened out." (both laugh)

I said, "Oh, that's too bad." (laughs) And that was the position they took. There was no more discussion of submarines. That was the end of submarines. (laughs) They went out and spent a day on the submarines.

I had to brief the secretary of the Navy a couple of times, even in my later assignments. Why no women in submarines? Why did I feel that way? These were four secretaries of the Navy, after the time I was there.

We're getting into the year, and we had assigned the group, the women, about a dozen or so, to a surface ship tender, the USS *Vulcan*, down in Norfolk [Virginia], the first women to go on the ships. This process is going on, and I'm thinking, I'd better go check on it. So, I went down to Norfolk, told them I want to talk with the captain, see how it was going. I remember walking down the pier, coming up to the brow, heading up the gangway.

There was the captain there to meet me at the brow. [I got] a good look at his face, that it was not a big smiley face. I came aboard, and I said, "Let's go up in your room. Let's talk a little bit." I sat down with him, and I said, "How's it going?" He had a stack of service records, the women's service records that had come to his ship. He said, "I'd like you to look at those, Admiral." So I picked up one or two of them and went through them. I said, "My God, these were the dregs." These were women who had troubles, been placed on report, had been involved with one thing or another, all bad. I said, "I've got the picture, and we'll have them off the ship immediately" and left.

[I] went back to the bureau. Boy, I was just storming. I had nothing to do with the enlisted assignment people, but I called that guy, and I just read the riot act to him. I said, "What in the hell?" Well, he checked into it. Chambers had gone by then. What his people had done was, the word came out, we want women treated the same way we would treat men, on the assignment process. He said, "So what we did was we asked for volunteers." Well, these were the women who volunteered. Well, naturally, the ones who had been in trouble with men in some fashion before, they volunteer. They took them and sent them to that ship. I raised a lot of hell with that. I fired some people, I think, for it. I said, "You just...My God, what is this?"

DePue: So, the people who were approving these transfers knew that they were sending poor quality people there?

Thunman: Sure, yeah, yeah. What they were leaning on was the fact that they were volunteers. Now, the really good quality women apparently were not volunteering. So what we had to do was go out and find them, review the records, send good quality women and order them there.

DePue: Any ship is going to have its complement of officer enlisted in various positions. I would assume that there weren't a lot of women who had the skills and the training to move into these positions.

- Thunman: No, it wasn't a matter of skills and training. We were going to provide the skills and the training for the women.
- DePue: Before they went onboard?
- Thunman: Yeah or part of it. The plan was to provide them the skills and the training, as necessary, or put them on the ships, and let the ship administer that, put them as extras, accommodate them to ensure that they were qualified.
- DePue: Now, was the Navy, at the same time, changing the entry status for all of these different skill positions?
- Thunman: No.
- DePue: What the Army would call MOSs [Military Occupational Specialties].
- Thunman: No, I don't think so. That didn't factor it. If they want to be an electrician or a gunner's mate, whatever, a boson, there were positions for them on the ships.
- DePue: And there were already women who were trained in those things?
- Thunman: Well, no, most of them we had to train in. But that was okay. The policy was, again, that we established was, we are going to put them on a ship, and if necessary, they would be in excess of allowance, until they got the trainings and the skill. But we were going to accommodate them. We were going to provide the accommodations and the skills as necessary.
- DePue: Excess of allowance meaning that they would have over-strength [extra] in personnel?
- Thunman: Yeah. But we would fully accommodate that. And we did that well, when it was all said and done. But the women, we had to order the women there. We had some volunteers. We didn't have a lot of objections. The women we were dealing with were good soldiers. They took their orders, and they went and did their job. So that wasn't a problem. The problem was we'd picked the dregs at that initial... [phone rings] That never got out, thank God. They'd have fired me.
- DePue: I wonder if, when your group was examining how to do this, were there issues of how to deal with the inevitable disciplinary problems that were going to occur?
- Thunman: Well, part of that, I think, was going into the perspective commanding officer process. We didn't have to put out...Fraternization was a big deal. It was made very clear there would be no fraternization, that people would be handled in a very positive, disciplinary manner, in case that came about.
- DePue: What does a positive disciplinary manner mean?

Thunman: Well, they would be court-martialed. If you're a senior, fraternization to this day, if it comes about, you immediately go into... You are placed on report, in violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. You're handled, if necessary, by a court-martial or through Captain's Mast.<sup>77</sup> It was not going to be tolerated in any way, shape or form.

DePue: How did the Navy at that time define fraternization?

Thunman: Well, it would be a senior—the senior is the one at fault—having relations, sexual relations, with a junior.

DePue: Officers and petty officers.

Thunman: Everybody.

DePue: How about an E1 and an E3, or E2 and an E3?

Thunman: Same thing.

DePue: Even to that extent?

Thunman: Yeah. I always felt it was important that the senior person understand that they are going to be treated harshly. They're the senior person, and they're the ones that's supposed to have the better judgment. That didn't mean that you let the junior person off. I'm just saying that the one that was hit the hardest was the senior person.

DePue: I have heard—I don't know if this is accurate or not—that oftentimes it's the executive officer on these ships that had the responsibility of dealing with all these fraternization and sexually related issues.

Thunman: Well, of course, the executive officer has all the personnel problems to deal with, but he takes them to the captain for Captain's Mast or for the deliberation of whether there should be a court-martial. The captain makes a decision. He's the one who conducts the Captain's Mast. The executive officer has put together all the facts and has interviewed the people, but he brings that up to the captain, with his recommendation of what they ought to do.

DePue: And here's the kind of thing that hits the rumor mill, if you will, or public. Some of these ships ended up being called the *Love Boat*. That was a popular TV show at the time. (laughs)

Thunman: Oh, yeah. Of course, right after this, as far as carrying it out, I was gone to be COMSUBPAC. I only had one year and put the policy together. But terrible

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<sup>77</sup> A session at which the captain of a naval ship hears and acts on the cases of enlisted personnel charged with committing offenses is called a Captain's Mast.

problems [accompanied] the first deployment of those carriers. Twenty percent of the women became pregnant. Many of the women got pregnant so they could get off the ship, because the Navy had come to forward with a policy that, if you were pregnant, you couldn't serve on the ship. [That's] still a problem, still difficult to deal with. It requires very positive leadership.

When I went out to COMSUBPAC, I had one big auxiliary ship. It was a missile support ship. We used it to support our R&D [research and development] and missile operations, a big ship. It was 20,000, 25,000 tons, a 20,000 ton ship. It had a fairly good size crew, a couple hundred, more maybe. That was the first ship out there that... That was one of my ships that I got women assigned to. Within the first six months of women coming to that ship, I had to fire the captain. I fired the executive officer. I fired two of the senior enlisted on that ship, until I got all their attention that we were going to deal with this in a professional manner. (laughs) I mean, it was a big...boom!

Interestingly, I thought, Boy, the newspapers are going to pick this up. But they didn't. As soon as I got into it, I really hammered them. There wasn't any "Okay, let's talk about it." It was, "Out of there."

DePue: At that point in your career, what was your opinion? Was this a successful move or a successful program that the Navy was implementing?

Thunman: Well, it sounded to me, from the overall Navy's point of view, it was not very successful. We made it work. Interestingly, in the submarine force, the women I got on the submarine tenders, that went very well. The captains of the tenders were submariners; they were successful submarines. You couldn't get command of a submarine tender unless you'd had command of a submarine, and you had done well. It was a major command, a tough job. They immediately recognized—nobody told them—but they immediately recognized, "Hey these young women are better than the men that are available to come and serve in my ward room."

None of the men wanted to go be on a submarine tender, I mean, ugh. That's not the most romantic job in the world. These young women wanted to go to sea on a ship and con a ship and do all the things a ship does. So they came aboard these submarine tenders, and the submarine captains were smart enough to know, "Hey, these are good people." They were smart; I can train them. [When] you've got a big enough crew, strength doesn't really mean that much. You've got a half a dozen young women officers. So, that went very well. In certain cases, it went well.

Where I think the Navy had the problems were ships like the aircraft carriers, where you had huge complements.



DePue: The submarine tenders, if I recall... When you explained that before, I had the impression most of the time would be spent in port someplace, that they didn't go to sea.

Thunman: Well, that's true; that's true. But there was off and on, and they'd move. They were at sea sometimes, and in some cases long times, when they would make the trip out to Diego Garcia to provide support. In my own case, I had a couple of incidents that kind of changed me around a little bit.

We had a submarine dry dock out in Guam, I remember. I was out there as an admiral, just walking around, doing what admirals do, and that is looking around. I went aboard. They had a floating dry dock, which was a miserable piece of equipment, no air conditioning, and all of this stuff was down in the bilges. It wasn't much [of a] fun place for sailors to work, but they had to, if we were going to operate the dry dock. I went down into the lower levels. I always made it a point to do that, because that's where you'd find out whether they were really taking care of the ship or not.

There was a gal down there, a young gal, good looking, capable, interested. She had this air compressor apart and had pieces laying all around. It was hot, and it was grimy, and she's there with a wrench. She's doing something, replacing the condensate cooling or something. I'm looking at that, watching her. I don't even know if she knew who I was. I just kind of came down. I said, "That's pretty tough work you're doing. Do you like it?" She said, "Oh, I love it." She says, "I've always loved machinery and equipment." I said, "You know how that thing works?" She said, "Absolutely." We talked a little bit about that air compressor. She, by God, knew what it was all about.

I walked out, and I thought, Well, I'm not sure I could have found a guy to go down there and do that and love it like she did. It kind of changed me around a bit. You know, there are women out there who want to do this stuff and who **can** do this stuff. We need to take advantage of it.

I had already learned, when I was COMSUBPAC, they wanted more women to be in the submarine business. So I said, "Let's put women in the weapons repair and support facility." We had a big facility to support weapons. We were always out shooting torpedoes, exercise torpedoes, so we were always overhauling torpedoes. We put about a dozen or so women in there, torpedo ratings, brand new women who had gone to Torpedoman School. I'm sure it would be women that could go forward to those billets, wherever. But it was the beginning of training for them.

Damned if our torpedo efficiencies didn't go up, like 15 or 20 percent with those women. I was talking to the CO of the base there, and I said, "Why is that?" I said, "That's really great," I said, "but you can't tell me it's because of your leadership. Why all of a sudden?" He said, "Well, Admiral," he said,

“the fact of the matter is, the women read the books, the manuals. The manual says you take a quarter turn; the women take the quarter turn. The guy goes, “Ah I’ll give it a little bit of that.” (both laugh)

So they were very, very capable. What it comes back down to, in my view, not capability or intelligence or desire, it’s if you get into that situation, where you’ve got to have strength and endurance, you’re just not going to find it very often, if ever.

DePue: How about the part of the argument that there are different emotions involved, that women deal with emotions differently?

Thunman: Well, I don’t get into that. I don’t think there’s a different... There are difference in emotions in all of us, but I think you can find women who’ll stand tall when they’ve got to stand tall, as well as men. And you’ll find some who won’t. You never know that until it happens, frankly.

DePue: Well, I know that we’ve reached the time when we need to be wrapping this up. What’s your opinion today about women in the Navy and specifically about women serving on submarines?

Thunman: Well, my opinion today is we ought to continue our efforts to have them serve on ships where the physical strength aspects are not as important, because you have more people. You’ve got a lot of strong men there too. But I would not put women in submarines.

DePue: Are they there today?

Thunman: Yeah. Well, they’re just now starting this, put them onboard. They have all this preparation, and here we’re going to do it. The first thing that happens, (laughs) they put four women... They’re putting them on the fleet ballistic missile submarines, because they’re big, and they can build little compartments between the missile tubes. So the accommodations work perfect for them.

The first thing that happens is a woman midshipman is out spending a couple of weeks in the summer timeframe, like we’ve done every year. We’ve always had some midshipmen go out on the submarines. She gets involved with the senior enlisted man on the boat, the chief of the boat, who’s supposed to be the representative, in many ways, more than the captain, Jack Armstrong, of your submarine, the guy who inspires all the sailors, the guy who works for the captain to carry out the mission.

The first person that goes wrong is the chief of the boat (laughs) and this young Naval Academy woman, midshipman. Of course, I’ve been interested in reading the news release as well. “That was the only problem; everything else has gone smoothly.” Well, I don’t know.

I had another interesting story about women. I'm now chief of naval education and training. I'd been a strong proponent; as a matter of fact, I had been the leader in the testing of sailors on a routine basis, for drugs, urinalyses, random urinalyses. I was a leader in the Navy. As a matter of fact, I was the one who brought that about.

DePue: What timeframe would that be?

Thunman: In 1981, '82, when I became deputy CNO. That's an interesting story.

DePue: We'll get to that here in the future then.

Thunman: But anyway, after that, I'm chief of naval education and training. My aide comes in, and he says, "We've got a woman lieutenant in Great Lakes who refuses to carry out these random urinalyses. She says it's degrading." [That's] because the way you've got to do it; you still do. You've got to do it in front of somebody, because the people had gotten so smart; they would hide samples under their arms. She refuses. I said, "Well, I can understand that. They're not used to doing that." I said, "Haven't we got some women doctors around that could go with her, so it would be a little bit easier?" "Yeah, but she refuses to have anybody. She refuses to do it." I said, "Well, okay, court-martial her." (laughs) They all go, "Now wait a minute." I said, "I'm serious about it. I am serious." I'm now coming to the end of my Navy career now. I figured, this ought to be fun. So, she has a lawyer, and it boils up in the newspapers.

DePue: A civilian lawyer?

Thunman: Yeah. It blows up the newspapers. Mary McCrory of the *Washington Post*, big pundit, immediately comes out with an article about male chauvinist Thunman, court-martialing this poor woman. So I call her, Mary McCrory. I say, "Why have you taken this position? What are we doing wrong in the Navy here?" "Well, you wouldn't have done this and this." I said, "Well, now wait a minute. I think we would." I said, "She was given an order." I said, "It's very important that we... You know, we brought our drug problem down from the twenty percentile to the one percentile, when we went to random urinalysis, a magnificent achievement in drugs, one of the best things we've ever done. I'm very proud of what I was involved with there. She said, "Well," she said, "but you'll just hide this. You won't give it the visibility it ought to have." I said, "What do mean? We're not going to hide anything." She said, "Well, you won't let anybody come to the court-martial." I said, "Sure, you want to come? Come on, delighted to have you there." She goes, "Oh?"

So, I hang up, and I call the CNO. (laughs) Carl Trost is then, by now, the senior. I said, "Well, Carl, I've just had this discussion with Mary McCrory. I don't know what you're going to read in the paper." I said, "But I

invited her to the court-martial, so I don't know who we're going to have there. We'll probably have every newspaper in town at the court-martial." He said, "Well, okay." Well, nobody came. Then the energy went right out, as soon as she found that we were going to let anybody watch it. We didn't court-martial.

Then, my lawyer, who was quite a guy, he came back, and he says, "We've looked into this gal at great lengths." She was, I guess, taken into custody by the Chicago Police for beating up her husband. (laughs) I said, "Oh, gosh." He said, "I'm going to make this known to her lawyer, that everything can come out in the court-martial, which would probably include this."

The other thing I offered her, before I said, "Court-martial her." I'm going to go back and say, I said, "Okay, tell her she's got to get out of the Navy. [If] she won't carry [out] this [order], get out of the Navy, resign. No bad conduct discharge or anything, just resign. We'll accept her resignation." That wasn't good enough.

So, they had that discussion, and the next thing I know, we had her resignation. So it never got to a court-martial. (laughs)

DePue: That's probably a fitting place to stop for the day. There's plenty more to come. But thank you very much, Admiral. I enjoyed it.

Thunman: Yep. (laughs)

(end of interview #9)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023

Interview # 10: September 28, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is September 28, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here today with Admiral Ron Thunman. Good morning, Admiral.

Thunman: Good morning, Mark.

DePue: I think this is our tenth session.

Thunman: Is it? Oh my gosh. Well, I hope somebody doesn't send me a bill. (laughs)

DePue: Well, I'd be the guy to do that. We just have to figure out how to get this transcribed, which takes a little bit of time, if not money. We talked the last time about that crucial position you had in the late '70s and working in the Department of Naval Personnel.

Thunman: Bureau of Naval Personnel.

DePue: Bureau of Naval Personnel. That sounded like a fascinating time, in part because you were thrown some challenges toward the end of that, trying to figure out how to incorporate women into the Navy in different aspects.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: Today we're at the point where we want to transition over to your next position. But I've got a couple questions before we move on to that command. Let's start with the fact that you're a flag officer, an admiral at that time.

Thunman: A rear admiral, yes.

DePue: A rear admiral second—

Thunman: Rear admiral, lower half.

DePue: You guys really can confuse us.

Thunman: Well, that's right. It's always upset the Army and the Air Force. The Army and the Air Force have brigadier generals as a one-star. We never had a one-star that was visible. We did for a while, but mostly the time was, you were a rear admiral, lower half. That's how people knew you were a one-star, but they couldn't tell from your uniform. So, in the joint operations, the Navy guy

was always...nobody could tell whether he was a one-star or two-star. It was a pretty good strategy, political strategy.

DePue: (laughs) To keep us all off balance, huh?

Thunman: That's right. (laughs)

DePue: Were there different expectations, living in Washington, D.C. and being a flag officer?

Thunman: Well, in that job, there were certain things you attended. Normally, some of the receptions given by various countries and organizations, you were asked to go to and appear, which was kind of a pain. You're working long hours. I'd get to work about 6:30 in the morning, maybe earlier. I'd never left work earlier than 6:30 at night. They're twelve-hour days in the job, and you're generally pretty tired when you got home. But somebody would have a reception, one of the local embassies, and you had to pick it up. There'd always be a few of us who had to be there. We'd kind of figure out which one was going to go. There were some other social events that you were expected to attend. That was the big difference was that the long hours of the day—

I don't mean to say we didn't spend long hours onboard the ships and all, but you know, intense, twelve hours, always dealing with tough personnel problems. The easy ones just never got to you. There was always, when they got to you as a flag officer, it was something that was pretty knotty, political, or something that involved people in an important way, something that had to do with their livelihood and their well-being. You were in that decision making process all the time.

DePue: I know that the Army today has a school for their general officers. I think a lot of that is focused on the protocol, the expectations of being a flag officer.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: Did you go through something similar?

Thunman: No, I did not. But we started that school after I became a flag officer. At that point, we weren't really smart enough to do it. The example for that, or the impetus for that, we got from the example provided by the Army. We found a lot of these young guys didn't understand some of the things, the fact that, for example, you could not accept any gifts of any sort. The rule, later in the schools, it would say, anything bigger or more valuable than a book of matches, you could not accept, indicating you could accept a book of matches, of course, but that was it.

DePue: How about meals or drinks from lobbyists?

Thunman: Well, that's the same thing. You were not supposed to do [it]. If you went somewhere on duty—you went to a shipyard, or you went to a factory, or you went some place like that for the day—and there was a meal there, it was perfectly all right for you to have lunch, and generally pretty nice lunches. All of that... You had to be taught that. I've got a couple of good stories about that, one at the end of my career that I'll tell you, which I always thought was a good one, about accepting gifts, where the criminal investigative service was after me. Well, I might as well tell it now.

This is during my last job, as the deputy CNO for submarine warfare. I would go to all of the ship launchings. Every new ship that was launched, I was—they were submarines—I had to attend. Those were big, gala affairs, big receptions. The last one I went to was at Newport News. As part of the reception, where they got up and talked about what the ship was going to do and what kind of ship it was, for all of the people there. [It was] a wonderful reception. It was all paid for by the taxpayer. It was part of the ship construction business, but it was all on the up and up. You were expected to be there.

The president of the shipyard, who wasn't all that friendly to me, because I had been pretty tough with him about costing of the construction process, he got up, and he said, "Well," he said, "you know, Ron Thunman has done a great job, and we really appreciate having him here and watching this process closely." He brings out this—I've got it upstairs—beautiful submarine model of the USS *Chicago*, beautiful. I had been there; I had been at the launching of the *Chicago*. As a matter of fact, I spoke at the launching and introduced the principal speaker. So, he said, "Now, Admiral, don't worry. We've checked, and it's okay for you to have this."

So I accepted it. I get back to my office and I—An electric boat, incidentally, had done the same thing with a painting, a wonderful painting of the 688-class, modified submarine, shooting missiles. It's in one of my pictures, I think, in here, that you've got, in the background—Anyway, I got back to my office, and I said to my chief of staff, I said, "I'm a little uncomfortable with this thing." He said, "Let's write a letter to the director of naval history," who also ran the museum there in the Navy yard. I said, "Write him a letter, and I'll sign it, just saying that I've accepted this model on behalf of the Navy and that I was going to keep it in my office." If he ever wanted it, he could have it. Otherwise, I'd just keep it in my office for people to see. That got filed, and that was it. I did the same thing with a painting.

Well, when I went down to Pensacola, on the next job, I shipped both of those things down there and put them in the office down there. I'd been down there six months, and my secretary came in. He said, "There's two officers, two commanders, out here from the Navy Criminal Investigative Service who want to see you." "Come in." They came in.

They kind of hung their heads, and they said, “Admiral, do you have a model of the USS *Chicago*?” I said, “Why, yes, there it is, sitting over there on that table.” I said, “[I’ve] also got a painting. There it is, up there hanging on the wall.” And they kind of... I said, “Well, you know, it’s not mine; it belongs to the Navy. I wrote a letter to the director of naval history. I told him—” I’ve got a copy of the letter— “that it belongs to him. I had them in my office; [if] he wanted them, he could have them any time. They said, “You have a copy of that letter?” Oh, yeah, we dug it out of the file. They were so relieved; you could just see it, ah.

What those bastards had done, in their pricing of the submarine, they set me up. I’m certain they did. All the things... You put everything in there, the nuts, the bolts, whatever is in that submarine, and there’s a line item. One of the line items, submarine model for Vice Admiral Thunman, \$750. The auditors who were going through those things very carefully, mainly because of me, at that time, had been because of Rickover beforehand. But I picked up [on it] and [was] raising such hell about, what do they really cost? And can’t we cut back? You know, all of the usual things. They set me up; this guy set me up. This is a couple of years later.

So they were just delighted, and they said, “Oh, gosh, fine.” I said, “Tell him ‘you can have them.’ If you go back to see the director of naval history for anything, tell him he can have those things any time he wants.”

The end of the story is pretty good. I’m retiring, and the chief of naval operations, Carl Trost, comes down to speak at my retirement. Carl Trost, from Illinois; he’s an Illinoisan, old friend. He was class of ’53, and I was class of ’54, smart guy, stood first in his class. So Carl came down, and we came up to the office. We’re sitting there having coffee, before we go down to the ceremony. He sent a submarine down there, interestingly. He sent the *Rickover* submarine down, that I could retire from a submarine, not—

DePue: On the deck of a submarine?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Wow.

Thunman: We had some boxes around that had been boxed up with stuff, and there was the model, sitting on the table, and there was the painting. He said, “Aren’t you taking those with you?” I said, “No, I can’t. They belong to you and the Navy. You’ll have to figure out what to do with them.” And I told him the story about the shipyards. He kind of laughed about it.

I left, of course, and I got to... We had kind of an apartment for a couple of months, while I was going through medical evaluations and all. One day there was a knock on the door. There’s these guys out there with these



great big crates. It was the submarine and the painting. So I said, “Oh my God, they’ve got it all screwed up.”

So I called down, back to Pensacola. I called my secretary, and I said, “Hey, Mary, they screwed up and you sent these things to me here in Washington. They should have gone back to the director of naval history.” She said, “No.” She said, “The CNO told me to send them to you and not tell anybody.” (both laugh) So, I got them.

DePue: Was there some paperwork to back it up, that you were now in legal possession of these?

Thunman: (laughs) No. I always thought, as long as I could... This is Carl Trost’s problem, not mine anymore. He’s the one who mailed it; I didn’t. (laughs)

DePue: Well, the secret is out now.

Thunman: I’ve got to do something with it. It’s a beautiful model—it’s that big—of the USS *Chicago*. I’ve got to do something with it. I think, get it up to Chicago, in the big submarine museum up there, sometime; donate it to them, if I can’t think of someplace here in town to give it. I’d rather to give it in town.

I forget how I got off on that train of thought. Oh, yeah, we were talking about the school. I had learned about that. I had one other case, in Washington, where I was on television. They had a program in those days—I forget—It was kind of a NBC program about things that may or may not be going wrong in the government and everything. One day it had an article about flag officers accepting gifts. It says, “Now, why were these men given gifts and attending receptions and other things in Washington that they shouldn’t have been.” They showed a picture of an Army general, Army four-star and Air Force three-star and me. I really got upset with it. It turned out that the guy who ran that program also worked for a committee in the Congress, investigating that stuff. He had leaked that information over, without investigating it.

In my case, they had a reception every year. It was, I want to say, the Elk Wallow or something like the Elk Wallow... Moose Wallow, that’s what it was, where they invited all kinds of members of Congress and military for a dinner. It was a funny affair. They had people there, making fun of the different things that went on.

DePue: Kind of a roast.<sup>78</sup>

Thunman: Yeah, a roast. I had sent my aide out to check that it was all right for me to go. He came back, [had] checked with CNO’s lawyer—always went to CNO’s

<sup>78</sup> A banquet to honor a person, at which the honoree is subjected to good-natured ridicule.

lawyer—and they said okay. Subsequently, it was approved by the Department of Defense lawyers that we could all go. But that came later on. They used that as an example, when later on it was approved. But the point, when they made the example, it had not been approved at the DOD level. The CNO's lawyer said it was okay. Anyway, so they used that for me, as the example. That really upset me. It was wrong. I had done nothing wrong. I'd followed the legal side of the Navy and subsequently approved the legal side of the DOD.

Your attendance at any of those things, you had to be very, very careful. The Army, I think, started off the program of six weeks of briefings on all aspects of Washington and the other services. We followed through with the Navy. I used to brief them. Every year, the new flag officers would be in the Pentagon. I always had an hour that I was called in there to brief them about submarines. I would always tell them the stories of the things that happened to me. Fortunately, I didn't get caught at it, but some guys did. Some guys were really stupid.

DePue: If you're a flag officer, what kind of punishment or reprimand would you get?

Thunman: Well, you could get a reprimand on it. They could prosecute you, I guess. They didn't do that. I think the ones who had been caught had been retired. I think, in a couple of cases, they dropped them down a star or a level. Most of the time, it was stupidity. There were some guys who just didn't believe it, and they just did what they damn please.

The first chief of naval education and training, for example, who was a highly thought of guy...He was a guy that they thought he was going to go up from there, maybe as the vice chief of naval operations. He started a bank on the base in Pensacola. Can you imagine that? (laughs) [He] owned a piece of the bank that they built. Now, the bank was run well. There was nothing wrong with the bank. It was there, handy for sailors and people to use. He didn't work there, but he owned 30 percent of it. He never checked with...never. It came out, and they retired him [snaps fingers] like that.

DePue: He was instrumental in it being located there?

Thunman: Yeah. First, it was completely illegal for a bank like that to be located there. Now, [there's] the Navy Federal Credit Union, which I'm sure has gone through all kinds of bureaucratic deliberation to be put on bases. But it's a nonprofit organization, and it's there for the sailors. This was a money making bank. The Navy built the building. (laughs) He was the same guy...It was funny; his daughter was a horse woman and going to college, so he would fly her horses back to the college, where they had the stables, after summer vacation, back and forth, using Navy transports, aircraft, there in Pensacola.

DePue: Let's change the subject a little bit.

Thunman: But we did have that education system, and it was vital that we have it.

DePue: I wanted to spend just a little bit more time—and this is at a larger level—’76 to ’79 is when you had this job?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: That’s a tough time for the United States Army, in particular, because they’re still suffering from the throws of Vietnam. It’s that period that we referred to, a session or two ago, as the hollow army and really struggling. You said that the Navy wasn’t nearly as affected by that?

Thunman: Well, I think that wasn’t true, if I said that. We were affected by it. I’ll tell you, in summer of ’79, I went to become the commander of Submarine Force U.S. Pacific Fleet. I got there, and I went out to sea in a submarine to see how things were. At that point, I hadn’t been to sea with a submarine force for three years.

I said to the captain of the submarine, I said, “I’d like to sit down and talk to the chief petty officers.” A typical submarine were allowed twelve or so chief petty officers. Anyway, I got the word that the chief petty officers were in the chief petty officers’ mess. I went down there, and I looked around. There was five of them. I said, “Wait a minute, I want to see all the chief petty officers.” I said, “Where are the chief petty officers? I want to see them.” [The captain] said, “These are the chief petty officers.” [They] were less than 50 percent.

Man, that really hit me. I thought, My God, I’m sending these submarines out with half of the manning and the senior ratings. Along with the rating comes the experience and know how, all that goes into being a chief petty officer. If you miss that, and you fill that job with a first class petty officer, you’ve got a good guy, but you don’t have all that experience. So, we were having problems too, with the hollow Navy.

DePue: What did you chalk that up to, that shortage of the senior enlisted personnel?

Thunman: Well, I went to the fleet commander, told him. I told the... who was a four-star, commander U.S. Pacific Fleet. I told him, I said, “Admiral, I’m having trouble. I’m worried about deploying the submarine with this number of chief petty officers. So I’m moving some other submarine chiefs before I send it west.” This is something I don’t like to do—You break up the crews—but I felt that I had to do it.

At the same time though, we in the submarine force realized... Remember, I was in Washington, and we all realized that this hollowness was present in the military. We were working very hard to prevent it, with bonuses, proficiency pay. We got ahead of just about everybody on all those things, to keep the people we needed.

DePue: Was this a problem of retention, primarily?

Thunman: Yep.

DePue: Too many people were leaving the service?

Thunman: The senior guys... Yeah, that's right.

DePue: Were they leaving because of the poor morale in the service or because there were so many enticements in the civilian world?

Thunman: I think it was mainly the enticements from the civilian world. It was also the fact that they had worked so hard, and they were deployed... The shortage of people meant that they had to work harder. But the biggest thing [was], they were being hired, hand over fist, with pretty good jobs, reasonable working hours, out in the civilian world.

DePue: In nuclear power plants.

Thunman: Yeah. Well, in other things too. At that point, I think, all the good guys in the Navy and the Army, probably, and the Air Force were people that they wanted to have, people who understood air conditioning plants and plumbing. People who were experts in these fields were needed, because I think... Well, I guess we had the terrible recession of '81, didn't we?

DePue: Yeah, and '79, '80 certainly were tough years as well.

Thunman: That hollowness, it didn't affect us as much in the submarine force, because we got ahead of the game. I'll say this though that the rest of the Navy was having real troubles, because so much had been taken out of it in Vietnam, the heavy operations of Vietnam.

[door opens. Thunman asks his wife] "Sweetheart, would you make me a cup of coffee? I couldn't find another cup in there."

Anyway, the fleet had been really heavily impacted by Vietnam. We were having trouble getting it back in the proper material condition.

DePue: So a bigger impact on the surface fleet?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: I wanted to ask you about a couple more events that happened at the international level. This is strictly as you as an observer of what was going on at the time. I think there were opinions that everybody who was in the submarine fleet would certainly have. You've got a president who's a Navy man—

But the first one I wanted to ask about was the SALT I, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, agreement, which was 1972. SALT I froze the number of strategic ballistic missile launchers at existing levels and provided for the addition of new submarine launched ballistic missiles, only after the same number of the older, international, intercontinental ballistic missile launches were dismantled. What was your view about that, at the time, and others in the service?

Thunman: We in submarines were always given the first place position of “Don’t affect the submarines,” or “Whatever you do in the submarine force, make sure you maintain that force in an effective condition.”

Thunman: Thanks, sweetheart. [wife brings coffee]. Our fleet ballistic missile submarines, the first submarines we had, the *George Washington*-class... You know, the ten submarines I had out in Guam? Well, they started to turn twenty years old in 1980, ’81, ’82. We were going to have to decommission them anyway. It was not a big deal. The important thing was for us to keep building submarines as necessary and modernizing. We moved into the Ohio-class at that time. So, SALT I did not bother the submarine force. We still had an effective ballistic missile force. We were modernizing the missiles.

When I was in the Pentagon, we built the Trident missile system in our submarines, Trident I and Trident II, very modern missiles, long range, highly accurate, multiple warheads, MIRV’d—you know, multiple independent vehicles. I don’t know what the R stands for...reentry vehicles, multiple independent reentry vehicles, MIRVs—very modern missiles. Then, of course, we were building the Ohio-class submarine, which was 16,000 tons, as compared to the ones we were taken off the line [that] were 8,000 tons.

DePue: Well, let’s move to SALT II. I think you might have a different opinion about that. I’m going to read some language that I got in an article about the SALT II Agreement. So, this isn’t necessarily my opinion, but it said, “SALT II was a controversial experiment of negotiation between Jimmy Carter and Leonid Brezhnev,” who, of course, is the premiere of the Soviet Union. “It was an agreement on June 18, 1979, between the two countries, which sought to curtail the manufacture of strategic nuclear weapons. An agreement to limit strategic launchers was reached in Vienna on that date and was signed by Brezhnev and Carter. The United States Senate refused to ratify the treaty, but the U.S. generally honored it until 1986.”

Thunman: Here again, the submarine force wasn’t impacted that much, because we were putting submarines out of commission and replacing them with much more modern submarines and missiles. We were able to do that and still end up with a more effective force. We had bigger submarines, more missiles, better missiles. We were putting ships out of commission that we had put out anyway, because those ships only had twenty years of effective life.

DePue: But was one of the intents of the treaty that there would be some equity between what the Soviets had and what the United States had?

Thunman: There was, but I don't know what they... All I know is what the result was, the numbers they came up with. The only thing I was interested in, when I was in the Pentagon, was to be sure that we could build the number of Ohio-class submarines that we felt we needed to carry on the missions. We would have more launchers per submarine but fewer submarines. So we kind of gamed the system. We modernized our fleet ballistic missile submarine force, kind of based on the SALT treaties. Now, we never told anybody that. That was always... I would sit and tell the CNO that... *Ohio* went to sea in 1981, the first Ohio-class submarine.

DePue: What you're saying is that the submarine community wasn't too concerned about SALT I or II then.

Thunman: No. Now, at some point, we did do away with our nuclear torpedoes. I guess that was in the '80s. We had torpedoes; they were anti-submarine warfare weapons. We also had sub-roc, the submarine rockets. These were also anti-submarine warfare weapons. I always felt they were a little bit too close, [laughs] the detonations were. They'd said they were designed... The tactic was track the guy, get contact on him, 20,000 yards, shoot, and you blow him up at 20,000 yards. Having been on the nuclear bomb tests in Bikini, I'm not sure everybody really thought that through real well.

So, I was never really for nuclear weapons, other than, I think I told you, when I was CO. I was ready to modify my sub-rocs. I was ready to blow up Vladivostok on my own, without having to worry about anybody else, which I'm sure some people would say, "Well see? They had skippers that would go off on their own."

DePue: A rogue skipper, yeah. The Army equivalent of that was the field artillery forward observer, who was expected to adjust fire for nuclear rounds on the battlefield. (both laugh)

Thunman: On the nuclear weapons side, in the submarine force, our job was... The fleet ballistic missile submarine force, in our view—and I think in the view of most—was the most effective deterrent that we had, ballistic missile deterrent. Khrushchev said it, in the Cuban Missile affair. He said, "I was always worried about the submarines." Because, if they started the war, no matter what they did—if they tried with a surprise attack or whatever happened—they were going to get the full force of the submarine launch ballistic missiles. There was nothing they could do about that; they [the ballistic missiles] were coming, if they [the Soviets] started the war.

DePue: Another event happened that I would think had an impact on the nuclear submarine fleet. That was Three Mile Island, which occurred on March 28,

1979 and caught everybody's attention, certainly the American public's attention. Obviously, Three Mile Island is one of the civilian nuclear power plants.

Thunman: Well, it was just a shame. I go back to when I was... If you remember, I was the assistant program manager for nuclear power in 1966, '66 to '68. I think I told you the story; I'll tell it again, because it's a good one.

Rickover felt that the Atomic Energy Commission should have the same standards, the same practices of qualification, re-qualification, that the nuclear submarine business had, the Navy's nuclear submarine business had. He talked to the people in the AC. He said, "I will give you a guy..." [phone rings]. Let me just see who this is.

[talking on phone] Hello. No, no, you have the wrong number.

DePue: So, your cell phone has *Anchors Away* on it. [ring tone]

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Can I ask you to power it down, perhaps, Admiral?

Thunman: Yeah, sure. I'll do it right now. Anyway, the... Let me see; where was I? I was talking about—

DePue: Rickover.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. So, Rickover said, "I'll give you one of my lieutenants." He had two or three senior people, one of his division heads, a real tough guy, scared the hell out of me when I'd get around him. He knew everything there was to know about nuclear power and expected you to know it too. So he turned this guy over to them. They would use him to run the commercial nuclear power program.

Six months later, they came back and said, "We can't use this guy. He's completely unreasonable. His requirements are just impossible to meet, so we can't use him." [It] infuriated Rickover, not because he was worried about the guy, but he said, "This shows that the civilian nuclear power program does not want to establish the standards required for this program, to ensure that there's never an incident or accident." Now, even today, the Navy's nuclear power program has never had an incident or an accident which has caused any release of radioactivity to the environment, and we advertise that broadly.

I was in the room, in the back, and he had several of his people there. I was there, I forget, but I was in there. Rickover was really upset. He says, "You know, they're going to have an accident. If they don't want to do this, they're going to have an accident. I don't want to be part of it. I don't want to

have anything to do with the commercial nuclear power program, because they do not want to meet the standards that they have to meet in order to operate this program. So I want us disconnected from everything that has to do with commercial nuclear power. I don't want us to be part of it, because I don't want to be tarred with that brush, when they have their accident."

Well, what that meant to me was, and I was told, anything where the Navy's nuclear power program and the commercial nuclear power program were joined, eliminate it, cut the tie, separate it. That's any joint training, any joint publications... We had several things we'd come together with. I had to go back, I remember, into the bureau and tell them we want out of all the books. Rickover, he wanted us out.

He wanted a new book. Like for example, there was a book, a major important qualification book, in which listed all of the Navy enlisted qualifications and what were the elements of those qualifications for certain, what we called NECs, Navy enlisted qualifications. But in that same manual or book, it had the commercial... requirements for commercial operators and the requirements for Navy operators. That had been joined. As a matter of fact, I'd been involved with that, and I thought we'd done a pretty good job. Rickover wanted that book canceled now, today. "We'll write another book with ours. They do whatever the hell they want, but I don't want to be in the same book with them." That's how far down he went with that. I can remember him saying, "They're going to have an accident. They're going to have an accident." Later on, of course, they did.

I wasn't in the Pentagon, of course, any more, but I was going back to Washington for different things, when I sat down and read the Three Mile Island report. I was absolutely astonished what had happened, and how this had happened.

DePue: Do you remember hearing the news, March, 1979, about Three Mile Island and your visceral reaction to hearing the news?

Thunman: We were all just upset. We immediately heard what had happened. As a matter of fact, several guys left the Navy and went to work in the cleanup, made themselves millionaires, because they were the only people who really could qualify and knew how to handle that kind of level of radiation.

I remember when I heard about it. You have certain "thou shalt nots" in operating nuclear power plants. You've got a stack of books, like this, of procedures that you use, and you have one casualty control manual. Symbolically, it was a red book. [These were] beautifully written books, a lot of money spent, a lot of money spent in the operation, in those books. Make them as clear, well organized as you could for people to operate the plants.



You started off in those books with the most important things you must do in the operation of a nuclear power plant during a casualty, during an abnormality. One of them is to keep the flow of feed in the secondary system. You've got the primary system, which has got the reactor, which you've got [a] temperature [of] 500 degrees and water under a very high pressure. It's transferring heat to a secondary system, to water going through the boilers—we call them, or steam generators—turning it into steam. You use the steam to operate the plant. [It's] very important that you keep a flow through there, because you want to be taking the heat off of the primary system.

As a matter of fact, it was so important that you had an emergency heat removal system, that if you had to shut down the entire secondary plant, it would automatically transfer heat into this emergency cooling system. You would be taking off enough heat so that there was no possibility of a meltdown in the reactor. The reactor's going to produce heat. Even though you shut it down, it will produce heat for some hours, as what they call the decay heat goes down. You've got intrinsic radioactivity in the reactor that has got to decay, until the heat levels come down to where they're manageable.

One of the "thou shalt's" are "keep that secondary system flow available." If there's a problem, ensure the emergency cooling system takes over. [This was] well designed, everything was...All commercial reactors had it.

[At] Three Mile Island, they were operating that reactor at 100 percent power. At the same time, they had taken apart their emergency cooling system. It was laying in pieces in the engine room. There was no emergency cooling system. They had the reactor scram.<sup>79</sup> I can't remember what caused the shutdown of the reactor, but there was no way for the primary heat to go. The temperature in the reactor started up; the water got even hotter than what it was. The pressure got higher. A relief valve, in what you called a surge tank, lifted inside the reactor compartment, and it stuck. That's the only casualty that occurred that was not manmade. It drained the water down to where it uncovered the reactor. Once you uncover the reactor, then it started to melt, the fuel system started to melt. [phone rings]

Even then though, the problem was [that] the operator didn't recognize that he had a stuck relief valve. He should have. It wasn't that complex of deduction to make. But the real problem was that they had completely disregarded a basic of reactor operation. None of us... You talk about visceral reaction, we all thought, What? You operated this reactor without having a standby emergency cooling system in operation? And you're operating it at 100 percent power? That was a personnel error. That was the stupidity of the

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<sup>79</sup> A scram is the sudden shutting down of a nuclear reactor, usually by rapid insertion of control rods.

Atomic Energy Commission and how it qualified and re-qualified. They had no Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board.

Those were some of the drills we would run, when I was the head of the examining board. We'd go out, have the ships running along at full speed, and we would scram the reactor. They'd have to do all these things to get control of the ship and all. We could hardly believe it; we really couldn't. That's what caused Three Mile Island. And, of course, it melted.

Now, one of the things about Three Mile Island, none of the radioactivity got outside of the dome, the containment dome. So there was not a release of radioactivity into the environment. But the American people... We went for twenty, thirty years, before we could convince them to build any more.

DePue: I don't think you were working closely with Rickover at that time, but do you recall, did you find out his reaction when he heard the news?

Thunman: Well, I was commander of submarine force, and I would see Rickover periodically. Oh, we had some discussions about it. I know in discussions, he would rant a little bit about it. When I was COMSUBPAC, '79 to '81, I would go back and see the old man. He would call me. We talked about different things. He could hardly...He'd sputter when he'd talk about Three Mile Island.

DePue: Sputter because he was so mad.

Thunman: So angry, yeah.

DePue: Let's talk about how you got what I would think was one of the plum commands in the Navy at the time, COMSUBPAC.

Thunman: It's a very romantic job, because all your World War II submarine stories are about COMSUBPAC did this with the submarines, COMSUBPAC. I mean, Lockwood was COMSUBPAC in World War II and all of those very famous submariners. It was just wonderful. When you think about it, I had been really trained up to do that job. I had been on a diesel submarine, although the diesel submarines were pretty much gone. I'd served on two nuclear attack submarines, under very difficult and intense operating conditions, in the Pacific. I served on a fleet ballistic missile submarine. Of course, it was in the Atlantic, but later on I was the commodore. I was the squadron commander of ten of these fleet ballistic missile submarines, all in the Pacific. I had been the Pacific fleet senior member of the Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board, so I was examining all the submarines. I had really...There wasn't anybody better qualified, in the Pacific. I'd done it all in the Pacific. I even served on a destroyer for three years in the Pacific.

I went to that job, and I was young, very young. Normally, they had a more senior rear admiral, two-star. I made my second star to go to that job. It was quite a change, because it had not been a junior assignment.

DePue: Let me ask you a blunt question. You came from the Bureau of Naval Personnel, you were fairly senior in the Bureau of Naval Personnel. Were you—to use an impolite word—politicking for this job?

Thunman: I was politicking to go be a group commander. I never thought that I would...As I said, normally, COMSUBPAC was a two-star, had been a two-star with a couple of different jobs. All of them [prior COMSUBPACs] had always been a group commander first.

DePue: What's a group commander?

Thunman: A group commander is a rear admiral, lower half. We had a group in San Diego of submarines, who worked for COMSUBPAC, worked for me. We had a group out in Japan. There was a captain as a group commander. We had the group commander up in Bangor. I really thought what I was really pushing to go to, to be the COMSUB Group 2 in San Diego, or I was also looking maybe to go to COMSUB Group 6 in Naples, which was a good job.

DePue: So how did it happen that you ended up being COMSUBPAC?

Thunman: I go back [to] when they called me in. Jim Watkins was leaving, and we had the new naval aviator running the Bureau of Naval Personnel, chief of naval personnel, Bob Baldwin. He called me in; he said...Remember the, "I've got good news and bad news? The good news is, you're going to be COMSUBPAC." That was a complete shock to me. I had no idea. "The bad news is you're going to have to stay here another year and put together the policy to put women in the Navy."

DePue: It sounds like a pretty fair trade to me.

Thunman: I just about went down to my knees with thankfulness. I got out there. I thought, Finally, in my Navy career, I'm qualified to do a job before I get there. There isn't anything that I need immediately jump into and try to learn or understand. With all that experience in the Pacific and all the submarine types of jobs, with also the personnel job in the bureau, which made you an expert in all things personnel that might involve submarines...I went there, and I thought, I'm really going to have fun in this job, because I know everything about it.

I got there, and all of the sudden, I was into everything. The place was going nuts, because I knew where to go. I knew where all the skeletons were and where all the weaknesses were. I had a boss who I really liked and who liked me, Red Dog Davis, a naval aviator, four-star.

DePue: His job was what?

Thunman: Commander in Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet.

DePue: What was his first name?

Thunman: Donald Davis, but he was called Red Dog, a real kick.

DePue: That's a great nickname if you're in the military.

Thunman: Quite a naval aviator, I think, well I'm sure, in the Korean War. It was interesting. There were a couple of political things that occurred that I won on. I'm not sure I should have.

One of the things that had happened was the new class submarine, the Los Angeles-class, was joining the fleet, nuclear attack submarine, fast submarine, designed to go over thirty knots, designed to be able to keep up with aircraft carriers. The Navy had sold this submarine, saying that's what we're going to use it for, with the carrier battle groups. They're going to be there to support the carrier groups. Got to have a submarine [that can] go that fast, that big. I get out to the Pacific, the first submarine, the *Los Angeles*, is coming...

Let me tell you about COMSUBPAC a little bit. COMSUBPAC, you are a type commander, so you are responsible for the training and the material support and all of the things involved with supporting submarines, overhauls, refits, training, qualification of people. That's what's called a type commander. You've got one type [of] commander in surface type commanders in the Atlantic, Pacific. [Then there are] submarine type commanders in the Atlantic and Pacific.

But the thing about SUBPAC that was different than anybody else, even SUBLANT didn't have... Well, I take that back; they had some of it too. But I had operational control of all of the submarines going on special operations, the ones that [are] all around the Soviet Union. I had direct, operational control of them. They reported directly to me. Just like World War II, COMSUBPAC ran those. That practice was kept in place, because it made a lot of sense. There was not sense of going from the submarine sitting off of Vladivostok to somebody in Japan or to some group commander somewhere. It came directly to me. That's what made the job so unique. I had operational control.

I was a big believer in submarine special operations, as policy. I believed—and I think I said it before—the most important thing we did, outside the ballistic missile submarine business—that was a different business—the most important thing we did in the attack submarine business was to have those submarines on station and ready. If there was a war we would just clean up immediately. Every ship and submarine at sea, we would

take on, wherever they were. We would be there. We'd be sitting off Vladivostok, off Petropavlovsk, off the northern sea routes. As they tried to put their ships to sea, we'd do away with them. If you had some rogue skippers like me, and it was a nuclear war, they'd be modifying their sub-rocs and blowing up Vladivostok and Petropavlovsk, if somebody else didn't. (laughs) We had them surrounded with these special operations submarines. I was a very big believer in it.

The other part of it was, by operating there and gathering intelligence as we did, we were also training our people. We knew what the Soviets had. We were there; we were watching them. We were intermingling with them from time to time. They were hunting for us. If they could find us, there was never any doubt in my mind, they'd do away with you, no question. As a submarine commander, I felt this way as a submarine commander. Hell, it wouldn't make any difference to me if we went to war. I wouldn't be saying, "Oh gees, this is going to be tough." I was already doing it. Rather than shooting torpedo, I was taking pictures of the guy.

So, from a broader sense, I always felt that the submarine special operations force, in a conventional war... Of course, I always thought that the mutual deterrents would prevent a nuclear war, as long as we kept our capability up there. So a conventional war, we would win it immediately. We would certainly throttle the Soviet Union. They wouldn't have any ships at sea.

DePue: From the naval standpoint. The Army had much deeper concerns in that respect.

Thunman: Sure. And, of course, the other thing—as I think I've told you before—I wanted weapons that were land attack weapons, and I was able to carry through with that when I went back to the Pentagon as the deputy CNO of submarines. We developed the tomahawk missile first. I took that missile development program over. I think I told you, I volunteered for it. It was a failure; it was a joint DOD program, and I volunteered for it.

DePue: We'll talk about that in a future session.

Thunman: See, the trend, in my thinking was, the most important thing we could do, the most important was strategic; set that aside. I felt the one thing that might happen would be a conventional war. The most important thing we could do to be ready for it and really hit them hard at sea, take control of the sea, you could do it with a submarine force. You didn't have to worry about naval aviation or anything else. You could do it with a submarine force. I had fifty submarines out there that I could turn loose on them.

DePue: That's ballistic and attack submarines?

Thunman: Well, no, I had fifty attacks and then ten ballistic missile. I had fifty attack submarines I could turn loose on them. I didn't care what the rest of the Navy did, frankly. That probably did me in later on, because I was always such a parochial submariner. Somebody said to me once, I forget, some fairly senior civilian said to me, "One of your problems is that you're too parochial." And I said, "If I'm not parochial about submarines, who is? That's my job." I don't think I convinced the guy. (laughs)

So anyway, I get out there as COMSUBPAC, the first new Los Angeles-class submarine is coming. The Navy, the CNO who was a naval aviator, Red Dog Davis, the naval aviator, they're looking forward to say "Okay, we are going to have our first nuclear attack submarine assigned to a carrier battle group." And he would become part of the battle group.

DePue: What kind of battle group would the Pacific have?

Thunman: Well, a battle group is an aircraft carrier and some destroyers and cruisers. It's a group that is put together kind of ad hoc. They put it together, and it travels together around and threatens the Straits of Hormuz today.

DePue: Would there be three or four in the Pacific theater?

Thunman: Battlegroups, yeah. You'd probably have three or four going. I went up to see Red Dog Davis, and I said, "We need all the submarines we got to carry out what we're doing, this throttling of the Soviet Union in the Pacific. We don't have enough submarines to give one to a battle group, certainly a highly capable one like the *Los Angeles*."

He said, "I'll be happy to give you everything we got, of course. But one of the things you've got to remember, if you take that submarine and put it under control of the battle group commander, you lose control of it. That battle group commander works for COM seventh fleet, or COM second fleet. Now granted, seventh fleet and second fleet report to you." I said, "But the system we've got set up right now is, I report to you, and I'm operating submarines. We'll do whatever you want to. You don't have to go through anybody else. You can pick up the phone and say, "Hey, I want to do this." Don't turn those submarines over to those three-stars, who don't know a goddamned thing about operating submarines.

DePue: I can see why you ended up being labeled as parochial.

Thunman: I said, "You ought to operate the submarines. You're the fleet commander. You need to put these submarines where they're most important. But that should be your decision. It shouldn't be these three-stars out there, who are all naval aviators." You can't be a battle group commander in those days without being a naval aviator. They don't know hell about submarines.

It was then that we started taking some submariners and making them chief of staff for these group commanders. It began with that, at that timeframe. He gulped a little bit, old Red Dog gulped, because he's going to have to talk to CNO. CNO is really hot to get a submarine attached permanently to a battle group. He gulped, but he told them, he said "No, we're going to keep doing it the way we're doing it."

I was very careful to do everything. For example, one of the things I did, which we did pretty good, was, I really beefed up the mining capability of our submarines. I got the mines ready; we had them set, ready to go. In Pearl Harbor, the boats, we ran credible training exercises about how to lay mines. We put together plans to lay mines off of Petropavlovsk and off of Vladivostok, how to do it, and how we would do it, and who would do it.

Every day, every submarine knew what his assignment was. If we raised the flag and said, "Go mine the Soviet Union," everybody knew. We checked them on that; we trained them. I went so far, once, to say, "Okay, I want to do it. I want the submarines to deploy with the mines. Each one will have them come up short by 500 miles or so and report on station, but never get up there." Oh, I forget. No, I think we actually had some go on station.

Anyway, it was valid, without anybody knowing. In just one day, out came the message, "Load up and go." That means they had to go through the system there in Pearl Harbor to get in and load those mines, get them on the submarines and go. That was a big logistic problem, as well, trucks moving, the whole thing, as you can imagine. But I did it, to prove that we could do it. It was one of the things that, I think, improved my reputation with the CNO, who was then Hayward. [That] was when we proved we could do it, and we met the timeframe. I forget what... He wanted to be able to mine the Soviet Union in something like ten days, from the time you said, "Go." And we did it.

I told him, and I brought that up as something I was going to do. I said, "Look, this is you. This is not those fleet commanders; this is you. If you decide you want to mine the Soviet Union, you do it. You don't go to anybody. Just pick up the phone and call me, and I will, by God, do it. The plan will be your plan, and it will be yours to run." And I said, "If you want a submarine to do anything else, call me." For example, we sent the *Los Angeles* to the Straits of Hormuz, when we had the Iranian... You know, the attempt to rescue the staffers. [It was] kind of a fiasco; that's a different story. But the submarine was ready and headed and did the job.

DePue: Would the Iranians have known that though?

Thunman: No.

DePue: You didn't have cruise missiles either, at that time. Did you?

Thunman: We were just bringing them in. The answer's no. We did not have them onboard yet. We were testing them. But we certainly would have controlled the straits and whatever efforts they had ongoing in the strait itself.

But the other piece of that was, the other very important piece of that, when that occurred, the Soviets came in force, into the Straits of Hormuz and in the area, the northern Arabian Sea. They brought submarines in there. It was important for us to have submarines in there, trailing them in that area. It was very important.

DePue: Would part of the equation have been to attack oil tankers?

Thunman: Well, we could have.

DePue: Or to make sure that the straits kept open.

Thunman: Yeah, keep the straits open. Again, I just said, the Soviets came in there in force, and we trailed them. This turned out to be beneficial to the fleet commander, because when their submarines moved into the northern Arabian Sea, he could move our submarines. We got into trail positions with them, and for all of my time that I was COMSUBPAC, we were using our submarines... We were pulling them off stations [in] other places to trail their submarines in the northern Arabian Sea. We were picking their submarines up as they came out of their ports, out of Vladivostok.

DePue: I'm trying to visualize the straits there. Are they narrow enough that you would have had to go on into a country's territorial waters to—

Thunman: We always did. That's a whole other story.

DePue: Just tried to stay away from Iranian—

Thunman: No. The right of access, that's been a whole issue here, even recently, about the law of the sea. The law of the sea, as it has been written, you can go wherever the hell you want, if it's a restricted area, geographically. The twelve miles does not apply to the Straits of Hormuz. That's a whole other... I was involved with the law of the sea deliberations when I was in the Pentagon.

DePue: Were you concerned, or was the United States concerned, that the Soviets would have wanted to close down the straits, to stop the shipping?

Thunman: Yeah, there's a possibility. They were certainly there, with submarines. They picked up... Right after the Iranian crisis, Soviet submarines went up there, and we went up there with them. That was for the rest of the time... That was going on, all the way until I left the Pentagon in '85.



DePue: I'm trying to recall. Of course, '79 is when the Iranian revolution began. But I'm trying to recall if the Soviet Union would have considered Iran as a client state or as an ally in any respect, at that time.

Thunman: I don't think, at that point, they were an ally. I think the Soviets wanted to be there to threaten those straits.

DePue: To make life more difficult for the United States?

Thunman: Yes. And, of course, this whole story here. This is very interesting. We were trailing their submarines. They didn't know it. They were not detecting us. Like it was all around the world, we were trailing them. Our submarines, when they would complete their operations—we'd bring a submarine in the yard; we'd bring a submarine out—would transmit a patrol report, how long they'd been involved, what type of submarines they were trailing, what they were involved with, a patrol report, fairly detailed.

They had to transmit it by HF, high frequency, which, of course, goes everywhere. It goes around the world, HF, at that time. It used a special encryption system. It was called "Orestes,"<sup>80</sup>—I don't know if that's classified or not. I don't think so anymore—which is what you use to break down, to receive the traffic and to break it down.

You go back to the '60s, '68, the North Koreans took the *Pueblo*. *Pueblo* had an Orestes encryption system onboard. They got the Orestes system, of course. There are some—and I'm a believer in this—the reason that North Korea took the *Pueblo* was to get the system, because the Soviets told them to get it, get us that Orestes system. [That was] very similar to World War II and the British and the German submarines, "Get that encryption device."

We were stupid enough to continue that type of technology in our encryption of traffic, HF traffic. What it is is a typewriter, and it does something. You type in an H, and a bunch of things happen; it comes out [as] an I or something. That technology stayed the same. Every day, you changed your ability to use it, by a key list. You carried these key lists with you. Every day you changed that. Five different letters had to go into this thing, or you couldn't use it. Every day that changed.

We kept that same system. We made some changes but not much, pretty much the same technology. So, if you had the key list, and you also had the machine, the technology in the machine, you could break that traffic. Along comes Walker and Whitworth in the '70s, maybe into the '60s.

DePue: You're talking about John Walker.

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<sup>80</sup> In Greek mythology, Orestes was the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. He is the subject of several Ancient Greek plays and various myths that were connected with his madness and purification.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: This is 1968 to 1985, he was spying for the Soviet Union.

Thunman: Along come those guys, and they, both of them, Walker and [Jerry] Whitworth, were involved with the communications. I think Whitworth was on a carrier. Walker was a submarine communications guy, expert. They were getting their hands on the key lists. They were giving the key lists to the Soviets.

The Soviets... You could intercept the high frequency, the HF. Anybody could intercept that. You took that intercept, and you plugged it into the machine that you'd stolen from the *Pueblo*. Along with that machine and the key list, you could read what the hell the traffic was.

DePue: In terms of sensitivity of information, I don't know that you can get any more sensitive than that.

Thunman: No. So what happened was our boats... Now, by this time, satellite communications had come out. But the HF system had been kept, because our boats was using it to transmit their reports. We were using HF to communicate with our submarines at COMSUBPAC. What that really meant was the Soviets were reading the patrol reports that our guys were sending. Now it took them a while—it was later, I think, showing them taking a couple of weeks, because they had to crunch it in their computers—but they got the full report within a couple of weeks, not real time, of all that we were doing, trailing them. I'm sure the Soviet submarine skippers were getting their asses kicked across... "How can you let that guy trail you for that long, and why didn't you hear him, and why didn't you do something?" I'm sure that's when the Crazy Ivan<sup>81</sup> was at its height, you know, "If you hear something, run down that bearing, collide, embarrass them."

DePue: What do you mean by Crazy Ivan?

Thunman: Well, if you read, *The Hunt for Red October*, the Crazy Ivan was something... This is what the Soviets did, and Tom Clancy got his hands on it. It was, because of this feeling, if they detected something they thought was a submarine, they were instructed to turn immediately and go at full speed toward it and try to collide with it. I guess they were hoping that they wouldn't get sunk as a result of it. It would certainly embarrass us. We'd have to surface, maybe kill us.

But it was a thriller, the Crazy Ivan was a thriller. I can remember trailing them, and they'd turn. You'd be trailing; everything would be going along; you were doing all this passively, with geometric constructions. And all

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<sup>81</sup> Crazy Ivan is a cold war term used in the US to describe two different concepts, most commonly, the name given to a maneuver used by Soviet submarines to clear their baffles to see if they were being followed.

of a sudden, the son of a gun would turn. Now, all your data wasn't applicable, and you were just, by bearing.<sup>82</sup> You were watching his bearing rate, and you're trying to determine which way did he turn? But he would turn and come right back at you. You had to wait until you think you really knew what he was doing, and then make a turn away from him. It was kind of a thriller. It was a chicken type of operation.<sup>83</sup> You had about a minute there to figure out, which way am I going to go?

DePue: This kind of incident would be going on for a lot of years?

Thunman: Yeah, all the way back to my days as a submarine skipper.

DePue: Were there ever any collisions?

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: Is that something you can talk about?

Thunman: A little bit, because it's been in the papers. Not catastrophic, but there've been some collisions.

DePue: Were there any during the time you were in command at COMSUBPAC?

Thunman: Yes. I'll tell you that a little bit. But anyway, when I was in OP-02 is when we found out about the Walker-Whitworth. I had left SUBPAC. Initially I was angry. This ended up in *TIME* magazine. I think I showed you a copy of it, at some time.

DePue: You mean when the news came out about the Walker spy case?

Thunman: Yeah. They called me and asked me, what did I think about it. It was a guy. I thought I was on background, and I was called by this really good newspaper friend from the *Baltimore Sun*. He said, "What do you think they ought to do with Walker?" I said, "They ought to hang the son of a bitch." That ended up in *TIME* magazine. My boss said, "Well, I don't disagree with what you said. I think you could have said it a lot better." (laughs)

DePue: Seems pretty clear as to what you meant. (both laugh)

Thunman: I got to thinking about it though. I thought, Hey, that was great. That's exactly what we want them [the Soviets] to do. They knew that we were so much better at it that they were dead men if they did anything. It was good for us. We couldn't have planned it any better. We couldn't have planned that

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<sup>82</sup> In nautical navigation, the bearing of an object is the clockwise angle in degrees from the heading of the vessel to a straight line, drawn from the observation station on the vessel to the object.

<sup>83</sup> Chicken is a dangerous game, where two vehicles race toward each other, in order to discover who is the bravest. The first to pull away is the chicken (coward).

conspiracy any better, to let them know what we were actually doing to them, day in and day out. You could tell that they were really concerned about that. They were doing everything they could to design better submarines and build better submarines. I always used to think, Boy, with the motivation that they've got in the submarine world... Well, it was because they knew what the hell we were doing.

I remember, when I left submarine command, I was naïve as hell. COMSUBPAC, then COMSUBLANT, they said, "I want you to go back to the Atlantic, COMSUBLANT, and attend some of their meetings, and learn about what they're doing with the Soviets in the Atlantic." So, I got on an airplane... I thought, Wow, a civilian airplane, fly all the way back there. That was a big deal.

I get back there, and I'm in the SUBLANT's headquarters. There's a meeting with Admiral Ike Kidd, wonderful guy, I'll never forget him, one of the most outstanding admirals the Navy's ever had. I had known him when he was... When I was midshipman at the Naval Academy, he was a commander there, big, blustery, brilliant, what a real admiral really ought to be. He was something.

DePue: Was he a submariner?

Thunman: No, a surface guy. His father had been at... I'm not sure. I think his father was in command of the *Arizona*, when Pearl Harbor was attacked. But his father... The Kidd name had gone back in naval history.

I ended up... There was a meeting. They were going to talk about special operations. COMSUBLANT at that time said, "Well, you've got to come along with us."

It was funny; it was my first real taste of politics, because SUBLANT and SUBPAC didn't quite get along. And COMSUBLANT, this admiral there, who was a pretty good guy, was chewing me out for all the things he didn't like about SUBPAC, as if I was doing them. I was a brand new captain. I'd finished my command tour and got assigned to COMSUBPAC staff—This is before I went on the Nuclear Propulsion Examining Board—got sent immediately to SUBLANT to see what they were doing.

I'm trying to think which the admiral was, but he would chew me out. He said, "Another thing you're doing, you guys..." I was making notes of these things, because he knew what I was going to do, is go back and tell the admiral. It was a way of transmitting that information, without having to yell at him on the phone. I was sitting there with eyes that big.

Anyway, we end up in Admiral Ike Kidd's office. They start talking about special operations. He was reviewing what was going on. Ike Kidd, he thought he ran the whole world, everything, whatever. If it made any

difference, he thought it belonged to him. He said, "It's clear that they know what we're doing." He said, "They're..." and then he started yelling. **"They're reading our mail. God damn it, they're reading our mail!"** Wham! He slammed his fist on the table. The intelligence guys are in there. Their eyes were going around, dancing around. "You guys have got to figure out how they're doing it!" "Well, Admiral, there's no possible way they can read it." "They're reading our mail," he said, "God damn it, their...!" Well, he was right.

DePue: When did this happen?

Thunman: This was 1971. But I remember him smashing his fist and saying, "They're reading our mail!" There's a young captain in the intelligence world on his staff, and he yelled at him. I sat and listened to that. I kind of thought, Boy, this guy is kind of off the track. How could they read our mail? How could they do that? Well, he was right. (laughs)

So, anyway, that's the story. But it was important in SUBPAC that we had submarines up there in the northern Arabian Sea, countering the Soviet submarines. So by maintaining control of our submarines, we were doing the right thing.

DePue: You mentioned that during your command, you did have an incident or incidents where they were successful to ram American subs.

Thunman: Well, the point was their Crazy Ivans didn't bring them about. We brought them about. I'll tell you the next piece of that story. This is after the operation started going on in the northern Arabian Sea. I said to the CINCPACFLT, I said, "You know, we need some submarine guys on your staffs there, because when the submarines get up there, and they're operating, and your carrier groups are operating, there's got to be some joint communications." I had no problem with the submarine getting up there and working for the battle group commander or at least keeping the battle group commander informed of where he was, because you had carriers and our submarines and Soviet submarines up there, all mixed up.

I went up to see Red Dog Davis one day. I said, "I'd like to go up there and see what all the elements are," which he was delighted, because I was going to put some submariners up there with that battle group commander, put them on their staff, temporarily.

DePue: Does that mean that they'd be working on the aircraft carrier itself?

Thunman: Yeah, but they would be able to translate the submarine language and stuff that was going on. These naval aviators didn't have any idea what was going on, trailing, and when can you talk to submarines, and when can't you? So he said, "That's a great idea." He said, "Go!" At the time, I knew why he was so anxious about it, because that would give him the opportunity to go back to

the CNO and say, "Look, we're moving now, down that path of using submarines to support battle groups." It wasn't until the Iranian crisis did we end up with our submarines, Russian submarines, our aircraft carriers, all mixed up in the same area.

Of course, we had the Navy P-3 patrol aircraft operating around the Pacific. We had a squadron there in the Pacific. I called, and I said, "I'd like them to take me out there." "Okay." So, off I went. This would have been great for my career, because I would have then gotten mixed up in with the carrier Navy, the rest of the Navy. Rather than just being a parochial submarine guy, I would have been the guy who had experience operating with battle groups. I expected to go out there and operate for a couple weeks or for ever how long. I think that Red Dog Davis thought he's going to leave me out there for a while, from a training point of view.

We got halfway there, and we got a message that one of our submarines had collided with a Soviet. Our submarine was trailing. It wasn't up in the northern Arabian Sea. Our submarine was trailing a Russian submarine in the northern Pacific. I thought, Oh, shit. I knew this from my past experiences; whenever that happens, the rest of the Navy wants to hang that submarine skipper, immediately.

So I said, "Bring the submarine to Guam." I told the patrol commander, aircraft commander, "Go to Guam; drop me off," so I could be there and really kind of defend the guy, which is what I did. Our submarine had clipped the Russian. There was a hole in the Russian tank evidently, because we brought a piece of the tank back, one of his tanks. It didn't sink him.

DePue: Fuel tank?

Thunman: It was ballast tank probably, definitely a ballast tank.

DePue: That wasn't a light tap then.

Thunman: Well, no it wasn't. He got clipped. This has happened several times, but it's always been initiated. We've never had a Crazy Ivan type of collision. I protected that guy, and later on, the guy became an admiral, the skipper of that submarine. He never said anything to me about it, but I heard, "Man," he said... He told everybody, "If it hadn't been for Thunman, I would have been done."

Of course, I then lost my chance to go up with the battle groups. Shortly thereafter, I got orders to be deputy CNO for submarines. It would have been very good for my career; it really would have been. I think I could have qualified to be something like CINCPACFLT [Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet], something like that. It would have been, "Hey, I'd been operating with battle groups." Somebody would have thought differently.

One of the things was, at the end of my time, when I was OP-02 [Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Submarines], I heard discussions—certainly I wasn't there, but I heard the leaking discussions—"What are you going to do with him?" "Well, what can we do with him? He's done everything you can do in submarines."

DePue: And nothing anywhere else.

Thunman: Yeah. It always made me mad, because I was on the destroyer for three years. I commanded a patrol craft. I always felt I knew more than the surface guys did about what the hell they were doing, from the point of view of a resume.

Well, the other thing that happened to me was, they wanted to make me the chief of naval personnel, but the secretary of the Navy didn't like that. John Lehman, he turned it... I was told—believe this or not—by Jim Watkins, who was the chief of naval operations when I'd been there in the Pentagon for almost five years, and I was waiting.

I wondered what the hell was going to happen to me. I'd been in that job longer than anybody had ever been. He said, "Well, I'd like you to think about going to be the chief of naval education and training," which was kind of a lateral arabesque.<sup>84</sup> I said, "What happened?" Because I was hoping that maybe I would get a numbered fleet command. He said "Well, I tried to make you the chief of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, twice," he said, "I tried, and the secretary wouldn't buy off on it."

Now the secretary and Jim Watkins did not get along at all. It's interesting, if you read the most recent [*U.S.*] *Naval Institute* [monthly publication of the U.S. Naval Institute], John Lehman wrote an in memoriam page on Jim Watkins. It was the coldest in memoriam page I have ever read. Even in there, in it, he says, "Well, there were a lot of things we didn't get along with."

I was Watkins's hatchet man in a lot of ways, certainly in the submarine world. When Watkins was CNO, he hardly ever did anything in submarines, other than that I'd tell him what was going on. We never sat down and said, "Let's do this, and let's do that."

DePue: We're talking 1986 timeframe now; is that correct?

Thunman: Yeah, 1985, when I went off to be CNO.

DePue: We probably ought to pick that up in a later session.

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<sup>84</sup> Dr. Laurence J. Peter in *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong*, wrote in the early 1960's of the "lateral arabesque," describing how companies promote incompetent employees, sometimes by sending them to another department or division to get them out of the way of progress.

Thunman: But going back to the session I was in when I was COMSUBPAC, I was headed out... In my own mind—talking about politically—I thought, Boy, this will be a great thing for my resume, to get to a fleet command, would be to go out there and mix it up, the first time it had ever happened.

I felt certain that I could go out there and get along with whoever the admiral was on the group—Each group has an admiral aboard—and handle the submarines for him, figure out what needed to be done, and then assign people accordingly, qualify them. I would have made the move that they wanted to make, that the then CNO, Hayward and Red Dog Davis wanted to make, that I'd kind of held up when I got there, in order to maintain the special operations.

There's a couple of other things that happened as COMSUBPAC. One of the things I did was, the fleet ballistic missile submarine operations were boring, so I said, "What we will do..." We invented a new condition. You put a submarine on alert, a fleet ballistic missile submarine, on alert [to] be ready to shoot in fifteen minutes. That was it. You had to report any time you went off alert. That was in your report; very careful statistics were maintained. So, I developed a mod alert period of operating, where a submarine could go mod alert. Then, in that one, he would just have to maintain his readiness to fire. I forget what it was, eight hours, twelve hours, because he had to be able to... There was a communications limit.

What we would do is put a submarine on mod alert, and we'd send him off for a port visit, Chinhae, Korea, different places. You had to be careful, because nobody wanted those big ballistic missile submarines, nuclear weapons. We couldn't send them to Japan. I'd also arrange training operations for them, so that they could learn, and they could make attacks on a nuclear attack submarine tactics. It was to put some spice in their life.

The skippers loved it, because they got to do what an attack submariner did. Of course, that was always a terrible feeling. You'd order a guy to be command of an FBM [Fleet Ballistic Missile submarine], it was tough, an important job but dull as hell, as far as operational stuff.

DePue: I was wondering if you had any control over the assignment of these sub-commanders.

Thunman: Yeah, I did, as COMSUBPAC.

DePue: The next question then is, were you looking for a different personality profile to be an attack submarine commander, versus ballistic sub commander?

Thunman: Sure. You had to be a better guy to be an attack... You had to be a good guy to be a ballistic missile submarine commander. The attack guy, he had to be more imaginative and innovative. So, your better guys went to attack submarine command. We controlled that fairly carefully.



When I was OP-02, one of the things I did from the very beginning, I said to myself, Well, what can I do as the deputy CNO of submarines? What's the most important thing? I thought, Hell, it's people. So I want to approve everybody who goes to submarine command and above. I want that guy's record to come across my desk. Everybody gulped, because that was the Bureau of Naval Personnel's prerogative.

It was one of those things. I told the CNO—we were playing golf somewhere—I'd say, "You know what? I'm going to do this." He'd go, "Oh, okay." There was never any... So the rest of the Navy knew that. They knew that whenever I said I wanted to do something... "Hey, be careful. He's already cleared that with CNO, probably, over a drink somewhere."

Anyway, getting back to this problem. Our SSBN, ballistic missile submarine, he's on his way to Chinhae, Korea. We've hooked him up with a patrol aircraft for training. The patrol aircraft is trying to track him, and he's trying to stay away from the patrol aircraft, as he makes his way up through Chinhae, [an] exercise. It's rainy, kind of foggy. The submarine comes to periscope depth, raises the scope, looks, sees the patrol aircraft circling around, drops the periscope without looking all around, because he didn't want that patrol aircraft to detect him, with his periscope up.

Clunk, [he] hits something, goes down, moves away a couple of thousand yards, comes back up [to] periscope depth. A huge Japanese fishing fleet, which is always out... It's a real problem when you're operating around in those waters. And he's in the East China Sea there, not too far from Japan. He contacts the aircraft. They stop the exercise, and he has the aircraft, what they call rig, every fishing boat in the area to see if there's a problem. The aircraft comes back and says, "I didn't see any problems with anybody. Everybody just seemed to be okay."

So our guy secures the exercise, sends a message to me in Pearl Harbor—it's a Sunday—says that he had bumped a Japanese fishing boat, but that they'd rigged the area, and they hadn't found anything, and he's on his way again now to Korea. This is two, three, four hours after it happened, when I get the message. My comment was, "You don't bump anything in an 8,000 ton submarine; you collide." And I said, "We've got to notify the Japanese government of this."

I went up to see Red Dog. At that time, interestingly, Carl Trost, who's later CNO, he was COM Seventh Fleet. I called Carl, and I said, "Hey, this has happened. You'd better tell the Japanese government." Carl says, "Well I don't think so; I don't think we need to." I said, "I don't know, Jesus Christ, the guy, he says it wasn't... He said he calls it a bump, but I don't know what the hell he may have done." Carl said, "Well, we'll wait and see." I told Red Dog Davis about it. He said, "Well, okay." Now, I was not comfortable with it. The next day, my chief of staff comes in, and he said, "The Japanese are

picking up survivors in the area of where our submarine bumped something.”  
(laughs)

It turned out that our submarine had hit a 5,000 ton commercial supply ship, sunk it. The captain was killed, and I think one other drowned. They picked up two or three other people. All hell broke loose. It was the day that CNN had just started around the world now. This is now 1980. CNN was just starting to pick up. This was one of their first stories.

DePue: And they're saying "Oh boy!" (both laugh)

Thunman: I know. So, I go up and see Red Dog. I said, "Well, you know, somebody's got to take charge of the PAO. If you want to do it, or what do you want me to do?" He said, "Well, you do it."

DePue: PAO meaning public affairs?

Thunman: Yes, [they] make the announcements and all. He said, "You take it over until the heat gets too hot. Then I don't know what Washington will do about it." The next thing I know, I'm on CNN. The Japanese are just going bananas about it. Turn the illegal submarine skipper over to the Japanese for trial. Hang the rotten submarine skipper. Riots in Japan. Here, I'm in front of the television going, "Huma-huma-huma-huma." (laughs)

People are on top of me, saying, "You've got to relieve that skipper immediately." CINCPAC made that statement. I said, "Well, I want to find out what happened." I said, "I've got submarine skippers out here, but for the grace of God... That goes for my own time. The only reason I didn't hit something was the Divine helped me out."

DePue: Was this one of your ballistic sub commanders?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: So you had pretty much put him in that scenario in the first place.

Thunman: Yeah. This was funny. This was the funniest story I know, at least to me it was. I'm into the first six or eight hours of this thing, and the chief of staff comes in. He said, "Admiral Rickover is on the phone." I go, "Oh shit." Everybody else has been beating me up pretty bad. I thought, Well, I'm going to hear it from the old man. I get on the phone, and he said, "Well, I hear you've had a problem out there." He said, "That submarine skipper is a pretty good guy. He's had command for four years. [He's] done a pretty good job." He said, "You don't want to do anything too quickly." I said, "Admiral, I'm going to do this right. We're going to investigate it, and whatever is called for, we'll do. I'm not going to let pressure affect the decision-making process."

I said, “I realize...” and I said this to CINCPAC and others, I said, “Look, I’ve got a dozen submarine skippers out there. If I relieve this guy, when he really hasn’t done anything wrong—He was trying to do his job—then I’m going to really affect the morale of the submarine force.” I said that to them. They didn’t like that answer. But I got into it and looked into it.

We brought the submarine back to Guam, and I decided to relieve him. The reason I relieved him was not because he’d hit the guy—I really thought this thing through. The reason was because he didn’t stay and search. He had hit something; he should have known. He should have had the same reaction that I had when I heard about it, which was you don’t bump something; you collide with something. The law of the sea is, you stay, and you make sure that everything is okay. You don’t turn it over to an airplane. It’s foggy and rainy; you don’t turn that over to an airplane.

I was able to do it in good conscience, and I was able to make this known throughout the submarine force, why he was relieved. It made sense. The guy shouldn’t have left. Had he not left, I don’t think I would have relieved him. I don’t know what they’d have done to me, but I would have told them, “I’m not going to do it,” even though I was being told to do it. I was holding everybody off saying, “Wait a minute. I want to investigate it.”

That was the big deal in that SUBPAC job. (laughs) The pressure slowly went down. CNN lost interest, and then life goes on. But we handled it pretty well. We answered the questions and talked about investigating it. The answer, which I’ve always thought was a good one. You know the law of the sea. If you do something at sea, you should put the people whose lives were at stake, put them first, and find out what you can do to help it, if there is a problem.

DePue: So, it’s analogous to leaving the scene of the accident.

Thunman: Yeah. We had a hearing. His defense was—which wasn’t bad—he said, “Wait a minute; I was on a modified alert.” When you’re on alert, you’re required to stay undetected. That’s true, if you were alert, but he was on **modified** alert. My thought was, Wait a minute; we made you modified alert in order to have exercises with people. Of course people are going to know where you are. His point was, “The reason I didn’t stay and search myself was because I was trying to stay undetected.” That was that legal—

DePue: Did that pretty much end his career?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah. Nobody gave me any more heat on it. It all just went down. But I remember those days of trying to talk to CNN. CNN was being shown in Japan, and my picture was... I wish I had some of that stuff now. I do remember, “Turn over the illegal submarine captain to the Japanese for a

trial.” That was a big deal for a while. Why wouldn’t I do that? That question I got—

DePue: I assume that there was a lot of restitution, that we paid for the ship; we paid the family of the dead captain.

Thunman: Well, the one guy that I thought got through it without any problem was Carl Trost. He later became CNO. He never told the Japanese. When I called him, he said “I recommend that you tell the Japanese that we bumped something there, that we hit something, so that the Japanese would have found these guys swimming in the water.” Carl was the one who said, “No, let’s wait.” So, it’s an interesting...But that was the most excitement in the career in SUBPAC.

DePue: Did you consider, personally, that you had a successful command?

Thunman: What at COMSUBPAC? Oh, yeah, I was very successful. Our readiness was better. We did some extraordinary things in the operational area. Nobody ever looked at something that I had done wrong in the operation of force that caused this. It was bad luck. When he came to periscope depth, he was on an exercise and probably the...He had all these fishing boats around. So, it’s very easy to have had the noise of this tanker hidden in all of that. It’s happened to every submariner, happened to every one of us. So he came up, and he hit him.

DePue: Wouldn’t the sonar have told him that there—

Thunman: Well, the point I just made to you, it’s all passive sonar. So, if you’re in the midst of a fishing fleet, you’re blanketed with noise. You can’t pick one out from another. As a matter of fact, I think maybe I was given some...I think maybe the system thought, Well, he’s capable of doing a lot of different things. It was beneficial to my further assignment, because I went from there to being deputy CNO of submarines. That was no minor assignment.

DePue: What kind of recognition did you get at the end of this command tour?

Thunman: I got a Legion of Merit, which was kind of the standard. It’s just like I got the DSM [Distinguished Service Medal] when I left OP-02 and the DSM when I left CNET [Chief of Naval Operations for Training]. Those are standards.

Really, the most extraordinary awards that I got in my career were the two Legions of Merit that I got when I was in command of the *Plunger*. To get one was unusual. To get two...I don’t think I know of anybody else who ever got two. The other one was the Navy Commendation Medal that I got when I was the XO of *Snook*; which was because of that terrible casualty we’d gone through.

So, no, it didn’t affect my career at all. Again, to go back as the DCNO [Deputy Chief of Operations], as young as I was and with as little experience I

had...Of course, I was a submariner. Again, I don't know anybody in the Navy at that time had as much experience in submarines, had done as many different things. It not only applied to SUBPAC, it applied to the Navy. There, for five years, I was Mister Submarine.

DePue: I think that's probably a very good way to finish off today. We'll pick up with your next assignment, deputy chief of naval operations for submarine warfare?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: I'm looking forward to that. Thank you very much, Admiral.

Thunman: Okay.

(end of interview #10)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.11

Interview # 11: November 5, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, November 5, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here for my eleventh session—going for a record—with Admiral Ron Thunman. Good afternoon, sir.

- Thunman: Good afternoon, Mark. I'm sorry we haven't been together for a while here. I had a trip to Washington and a little bit of a medical problem. I'm back to battery now, as we say in the Navy and looking forward to some more sessions with you.
- DePue: Well, it's going to be a short one today, because—I'm not surprised—you're in demand, and you've got to head off in a little bit. So, we'll have a short one today.
- Thunman: Thank you.
- DePue: It's an interesting day to be meeting, November 5. Tomorrow is Election Day.
- Thunman: Yes. Yes, it is a big day in our country. I tend to agree with just about what everybody says; it's probably the most important day, almost, in our lifetime, because it's going to be a watershed election.
- DePue: I couldn't help but think of you a couple times. The third debate, which was about national security and defense issues, submarines came up in that debate.<sup>85</sup>
- Thunman: Yes.
- DePue: I wonder if you have any reflections you'd like to share with us, before we get to the meat of the discussion.
- Thunman: I think if I would have been there I would have said, "Mr. President [Obama], there are two types of ships; there are submarines and targets, not the types that you've just described." Let me say, I thought that was a very petty thing. He was condescending. For him to talk to someone who was nearly his peer, not his peer, in that way, as if Romney had absolutely no idea what was going on in the U.S. military. I thought that was not a very strong thing to do.
- DePue: Of course, that was in response to Governor Romney's comments that he thought we needed to have a strong national defense and not a smaller Navy, but a robust Navy. That's what elicited the response we got from President Obama.
- Thunman: Yes. Well, there's a lot of politics on both sides; I've got to be honest. Romney, of course, is talking about building three submarines a year, which is coming up one more than we're building now, although some will say, "Well no, that extra submarine is the ballistic missile submarine." Others would say, "No, it's three attack submarines plus one ballistic missile submarine." But I have to say that's probably political, in a way; although I believe Romney will

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<sup>85</sup> [Barack Obama mocked Mitt Romney over his comments about the military during the final presidential debate](#) on October 22, 2012.

do what he says, because there is a need for that building program. But also, remember, a lot of submarines get built in Virginia.

DePue: Which is one of the tossup states.

Thunman: In my job as—I think we're going to talk about it a little bit today—the deputy CNO of submarines, when I was selling the SSN-21—as I've said before—I headed the conceptual design team of SSN-21. Then my job and the reason I spent so long in the Pentagon—almost five years—was to sell it, first to the Navy, then to the defense and then to the Congress and make it a part of the president's budget. I was able to do all of that by the time I left, in '85. So, I probably interviewed, personally, half of the U.S. Senate, maybe more, and God only knows how many congressmen.

DePue: Well, we've gotten into the very political part of your career. You've talked a lot about politics before and certain commanders who had political skills and the savvy to go along with it. So, it's probably appropriate, especially today, to start with this. November of 1980—a lot of people make comparisons to our election cycle this time around—but obviously that was the year that Ronald Reagan won, and he won in a landslide. He changed the directions.

One of the things he had run on was a strong national defense. So, I wanted to start with, first, your thoughts about what was going on in Afghanistan and Iran at the time—both those places still in the news today—how that might have impacted your job as a submariner? Then reflect on Ronald Reagan's victory and what that meant.

Thunman: Well, let me take Iran. Of course, while I was commander of Submarine Force Pacific, we had the attempt to rescue the hostages and failed, the helicopter problems and all, had to pull back. Jimmy Carter had to pull back during that time. [It was] very badly handled, frankly, by the administration. I had to immediately get submarines out there, into the area of the Straits of Hormuz. The concern was that something would stop the flow of the shipping through the straits. So, we put submarines in that area, but so did the Soviets. So, there we were, nose to nose, with the Soviets, in the Indian Ocean and right at the straits, there at the northern Arabian Sea. Frankly, we never left, again. That was kind of the beginning of our involvement there, on a continuing basis.

I left there in the spring of '81. Reagan had been elected. I came to Washington for my first time, in the Pentagon. Got the job as deputy CNO Submarine Warfare, all of it very, very political. I don't know everything that went on. But Reagan was elected, and one of the things that he would, I think, see... Well, I feel pretty certain. He said, to his big buddy guys, big buddy businesses, if he's elected, "I'll get rid of Rickover."

Rickover was still on active duty. Rickover was eighty years old and had to be confirmed every year, to stay on. But it was clear that John Lehman came in, as the secretary of the Navy. He was tasked to get rid of Rickover. The reason was, Rickover was after big business, the big shipyards, who he felt were charging too much for the submarines that they were building. He was after them, and he was right.

It turned out that he was right. They got rid of him, but I continued the same program. I didn't do anything different, as far as the allegations and the indictments and all that went on. The president of the electric boat shipyard, he was about to be indicted when he left the country for Greece and has never come back. Veliotis<sup>86</sup> is his name.



**Official portrait of Vice Admiral Thunman, while he served as the deputy chief of naval operations for submarine warfare in 1985. Thunman was stationed at the Pentagon at the time.**

DePue: What was the name?

Thunman: Veliotis. He was a Greek, had a Greek background. As I understand it, he left the country in the middle of the night, just when the Feds were going to walk in and serve him. He's still over there in Greece. (laughs)

DePue: You mentioned that you went to the position of deputy chief of naval operations for submarine warfare in March of 1981?

Thunman: Somewhere in that area, yeah. It was no later than April or May, I don't think.

DePue: So this is only a couple years after Reagan is president of the United States.

Thunman: No, he was coming in as president. He entered the office in '81.

DePue: Yeah, January of '81 was his inauguration. So, if you want to move Rickover out, why would you bring in one of Rickover's people?

Thunman: Well, I think the deal was... I think maybe the old man played part of it; I don't know. He said, "Okay, I'll go, but you've got to put my guy in there. You've got to put [in] somebody that I approve." Or the system somehow said

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<sup>86</sup> P. Takis Veliotis is general manager of the Davie Shipyard. He went public with charges that General Dynamics had filed \$640 million in fraudulent claims against the Navy. He secretly tried to compel General Dynamics to settle a civil lawsuit in his favor, according to information the firm gave congressional investigators. ([www.\\http:articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-12-04.](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-12-04))



“Well, okay. We’ll get rid of Rickover, but we better put in another guy who carries forward the Rickover principles.”

DePue: What were you being told was the reason you got the position?

Thunman: I wasn’t. I’ll tell you a story, which nobody will ever believe. Since it is so incredible, I don’t tell it to people, because I think they would all look at me and say, “Baloney.” I was still out in the Pacific, about April of ’81. I was called, first by Admiral Rickover, saying, “Congratulations, you’re going to be the superintendent of the Naval Academy.” Then I was called by Bob Long, Admiral Bob Long, who was the senior submariner in the Navy at the time, CINCPAC, who said, “Congratulations, you’re going to be the superintendent.”

Shortly thereafter, John Lehman came out to Pearl Harbor. I escorted him around Pearl Harbor. He went back to Washington. (laughs) So, there was probably something wrong with me. He went back to Washington and... Well I don’t know; it could have been good, or it could have been bad. Superintendent of the Naval Academy would have been kind of the end of your operational career.

The word came back, “Whoops, we’re putting in a different guy,” an aviator, who was an older, respected, good guy, aviator, to be the superintendent. I said to them at the time, “Well that’s fine with me. I’ll keep the job I’ve got. I love the job I’ve got,” commander of submarine forces Pacific, a great job. They said, “No, no, something else will happen to you.” Then, shortly after, they said, “You’re going to be the deputy CNO of submarines. You’ve got to get back here now.” So I left in about a week or so.

DePue: If they had asked you which of the two jobs you wanted, which one would you have taken?

Thunman: I think I would have taken the DCNO [Deputy Chief of Operations] of submarines, because that was right in the center of all the action. Although, the superintendent of the Naval Academy, I would have enjoyed doing that. But that’s more of a hosting job. There’s a lot that you have to do with midshipmen and inspiration, et cetera and setting up a good learning environment. A lot of the time you’re escorting people around, trying to get their support for the Naval Academy and for the Navy. I was not unhappy with that.

The only thing I was concerned with is I’d never been in the Pentagon. I’d been in the Bureau of Navy Personnel. I understood the personnel system as good as any man in the Navy. But I had never been in the Pentagon, in all of that budgeting and programming and planning from the weapons acquisition side. As the deputy CNO of submarines, the way the Navy was arranged in those days, I had the control of the funding that was going to go

into the submarine force, some \$18 billion a year, in those days, which was a lot of money today.

The new CNO, though, was designated as Admiral Jim Watkins, who was a submariner and who I had been his executive officer. So I don't know, he may have got into it too and said, "This is the guy I want." Of course, he and Rickover were very close as well. But I was never involved in any of it, other than I had been told I was going to be the superintendent of the Naval Academy. I never told anybody that, that I'd been called and told that. I was smart enough in those days. You don't ever count your chickens until they're (dog barks) hatched.

It was interesting to me. It looked like Rickover and Bob Long were both racing to see who could tell me first that I was going to be the superintendent. (laughs)

DePue: Apparently, the superintendent position was a prestigious one to have, if they were so excited about telling you.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, very prestigious. There's no question about it. Think of West Point; it's the same situation, yeah.

DePue: Not only that, but it's something the public can understand. What's the deputy chief of staff for naval operations for submarine warfare? I'm sure—

Thunman: Well, from the point of view of power in the future of the Navy, you weren't deputy chief of staff; you were deputy, big difference. Deputy means you can sign for anything you want in the Navy. Now, the CNO will chew you out for signing it, but you are the deputy, and you have all the powers of the CNO.

DePue: I revealed my Army bias here; I called you the chief of staff. The chief of naval operations would be the same thing as the Army chief of staff.

Thunman: The same thing as chief of staff, yeah.

DePue: So, you're just one step lower than that position.

Thunman: Yeah, that's right. There were three of us. We were the next three senior guys, not necessarily by numbers, but by position, in the Pentagon, to the CNO. We controlled the future of the Navy. And I ended up doing it for five years.

DePue: Was this a position that had to be approved by Congress?

Thunman: Yes, oh yes. I had to go through interviews by the Congress. I had my interview with the Senate Armed Services Committee, Senator... Who's the guy from Texas—boy, I'm getting old—the head of the Senate Armed Services Committee? Tower, John Tower. I had to go in and be interviewed, as well. I was also interviewed by the standard panel.

DePue: If you would have been the highest ranking officer dealing with personnel issues, was—

Thunman: That's the chief of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

DePue: Okay. Was that a three-star billet as well?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Was that what you were thinking you might end up doing?

Thunman: Yeah, I thought I would end up with that. As a matter of fact, that was what Jim Watkins was trying to send me to, at the end of my five years. He felt that that's what I should be doing, because I did know that system better than, I think, any admiral in the Navy. I served there twice, as a young guy and as an older guy. But then I started having medical problems.

It was a lateral arabesque, to go down to Pensacola. John Lehman wanted me to go there. That was a political situation too, because the Congress in Pensacola wanted... There had been some discussion of maybe doing away with the naval education and training command in the Navy and taking it out of Pensacola. It became a huge political issue. Lehman had asked Watkins to send me down there, because they knew I was having some medical problems. Initially I said, no. Lehman came back again and said, "Think about it again; would you?"

I was going to leave the Navy. I thought about it, and frankly, I went ahead down there, because I thought, Gee, if I stay on active duty, I'll get better medical treatment than if I get off of active duty. That was my reasoning. Plus, the other thing down there... Although it wasn't all that easy a job, it was fun. I got to see a lot of different things and do a lot of different things.

But as CNET, as you were called, you were not only... All of the training in the United States or anywhere is done under your aegis.<sup>87</sup> You are also Florida's admiral. That was pretty nice. (DePue laughs) [dog barking] I had never been in a job like that, where I had that kind of... If I wanted to call the governor, I wanted to call... I was now... People would invite me here and there.

DePue: You mentioned medical issues. Is that something you care to talk about?

Thunman: Well, it's when they found that I had a neuropathy. It ended up causing me to have a neurogenic bladder. The nervous system didn't function to cause me to urinate.

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<sup>87</sup> Under the protection, backing or support of a particular person or organization.

DePue: Did it have anything to do with all those many months and years in submarines?

Thunman: I don't think it had...It probably had something to do [with it] somewhere. I used to think...I had some doctors later tell me...This one very, very good neurologist, he's the top guy in the country. He said, "Surely, with all the exposure to radiation you've had, it's remarkable that you've got this problem. There's got to be some connection." I told him, I said, "I don't think I got it in the submarine, although I was exposed to radiation a couple times, but the Bikini bomb tests...I was right in the middle of that stuff, running around in the fallout."

If you went all the way back in my record—and they did, my medical records—after I came back from Bikini, they started to find white corpuscles in my urine. That's the beginning of an infection. Now, I didn't have infections. They used to say, "Why do you have some, not many, but some?" They would take me through that terrible torture of a cystoscope and everything, look for some problems. There were never any problems. I felt fine. I remember saying, "I don't know what you guys...I'm fine." [I] played tennis, did all kinds of stuff. They'd all kind of scratched their heads.

Well, when I was COMSUBPAC was when I all of a sudden started having these urinary tract infections. The reason I had those was because you weren't completely voiding yourself. So the urine sits in the bladder, and it's wide open for infection.

Anyway, I did go down to CNET. I was going to leave the Navy. As a matter of fact, I told CNO, I was getting ready to announce it. Then Lehman asked me again. I really made the decision. I thought, I've got a problem. If I get out of the Navy, nobody's going to be interested. If I'm CNET, and I've got a medical problem, they'll run around in circles trying to fix it.

DePue: What year would this have been?

Thunman: That was in 1985, late fall of '85.

DePue: Well, there's quite a bit of territory to cover before we get to that point.

Thunman: Yes

DePue: Let's go back to the early time that you're deputy chief of naval operations. One of the things Reagan is known for, to this day, is his emphasis on building a 600 ship Navy. Did he come out with that right at the beginning?

Thunman: No, he didn't. John Lehman picked up on that. But Reagan...I say today, frankly, I think Romney's doing the very same thing. I got to the Pentagon; I'd never been there before. I'm stumbling around, trying to figure out how

things work. How do you authorize ships? Who has to approve a new ship? The submarine force was anxious to have a new attack submarine.

DePue: A new type of attack submarine?

Thunman: A new type, yeah, which turned out to be the Seawolf-class.<sup>88</sup> I went to my first three-star meeting. They used to have a meeting once a week with the CNO. You would cover broad issues and policies. The first one I went to was the shipbuilding plan for the next year. Everybody talked. I didn't start off talking; I just kind of sat there and listened to them. Finally I realized, at the end of the discussion, they talked about carriers and destroyers; nobody said anything about submarines. I finally said, Well I've got to say something. I've got to find out. So I said, "Admiral, what can we expect, as far as submarines are concerned? Our force is getting smaller, and the requirements are increasing." He said, "Well I don't know; we'll have to think about that. Maybe we'll get one a year; I don't know." That's what he said.

DePue: Who was this?

Thunman: Admiral Tom Hayward, aviator. [He] never liked submarines.

DePue: So this is before Watkins was there. He was the chief of naval operations at that time.

Thunman: Yeah. My first year I was there was under Tom Hayward. He wasn't very happy that I became deputy CNO of submarines at all. [As a] matter of fact, when they promoted me to three stars, he didn't even come. The vice chief came, which I thought was kind of unusual. He didn't like... He was an aviator, quite a distinguished aviator. But he didn't like Rickover, didn't like any of that nuke stuff. But I turned out to help him out, as we went along, finally.

Anyway, I went back to my office and thought, Boy, this is... I'm in big trouble. Nobody gives a damn, and I'm this brand new three-star with no experience here. I decided that I've got to do what the other, more senior... They've been around a long time in the Navy, the other deputy CNO for air, deputy CNO for surface. They'd been vice admirals three or four years, and they all had relationships with the Congress, good relationships. I didn't know anybody. So I thought, Well, I've got to get into that.

They used to have these receptions, over in the House, different groups, committees and all. You'd go there, and you'd have a glass of wine and a potato chip and stand around and talk. All the other Navy guys who were there, who were invited, they had their friends and people they were

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<sup>88</sup> **Seawolf-class submarines** were designed to operate autonomously against the world's most capable submarine and surface threats. The primary mission of the Seawolf was to destroy Soviet ballistic missile submarines before they could attack American targets.

talking to. I didn't have anybody. I'd go over and talk with a group, then I'd go talk to another group.

I got back at my office. I was called by this lobbyist, who used to be the senior guy on the Senate Armed Services Committee staff. I'll think of his name in a minute, a wonderful guy. He said, "I'd like to come over and see you." I said, "Oh yeah, sure." So he came over, and he brought another friend with him, another lobbyist, who had also had that exalted position on the Senate Armed Services Committee staff. Both of them were guys who came out of the system.

They turned out to be lobbyists for Newport News Shipyard for [General Dynamics] Electric Boat. I talked a little bit with them. One of them turned to the other one... The guy I'm trying to think of his name was a wonderful Virginian, Armitage, Gray Armitage. His family went back to the Civil War, Brigadier General Armitage, the Battle of Gettysburg. It was all... wonderful guy, very southern gentleman. He turned to the other guy—We'd been talking about a half an hour—and he said, "Well, I think he'll do." And the other guy, "Yeah, he'll do all right."

I said, "I'll do what?" [speaking with a southern accent] "Well, we just want to be sure you're going to be able to get along with all the people you're going to have to talk to." (laughs) I thought, Well, I'll be happy to talk to them. Of course, I have to get my permissions and all. "Oh, we'll take care of you. Don't worry; we'll take care of you." So, that was the beginning. I was talking to them about the status of our submarine force and where we needed to go and what my thinking was. It was all off the record. I wasn't talking to Congress; I was talking to them.

The shipbuilding plan is put together, of course. The budget is put together. [It] goes into Defense first, comes out of Navy, with the decisions all made of what it should be. Then it goes into the Defense. Then you've got to defend it in Defense. Then it comes out of Defense, and it's called the president's budget. It goes to Congress, and the Congress wrestles with it. The Congress gets the president's budget.

Well, the thing came out of Navy and it was... I didn't quite understand how many submarines were in the plan; one or two was there, with some words about maybe, maybe not. It goes into Defense, comes out three [submarines]. Everybody goes, oh, man. Nobody in the Navy had put together a budget that had three submarines. Each of them, in those days, were about \$800 million, \$900 million. They were getting close to a billion, in those dollars. Everybody was just astounded. CNO was mad. I think he was mad at me. I know he asked me, he said, "Have you been talking to the Congress?" I said, "I didn't talk to any congressmen."

DePue: Did they get a plus up on aircraft carriers or surface ships?<sup>89</sup>

Thunman: That money came out of the hide of everybody else. Well, no, I'll say that's wrong. They got a plus up in the destroyers. The aircraft carrier program stayed steady, nuclear aircraft carriers. The only one that got plussed up was the submarine force, by three submarines. That money, of course, some of it came out of other areas. I have no idea.

DePue: During the Carter years, had it been at a pace of about one submarine a year?

Thunman: That's right. So, away we went. Two years later, it's five, plus the Trident submarine, plus the Trident missile, plus the Tomahawk cruise missile, plus the new torpedo. You can't imagine. (laughs)

It was the biggest buildup the submarine force has ever seen. New attack submarine authorized, building more of the current attack submarines, which was the Los Angeles-class; modifying the Los Angeles-class to put in vertical launch cruise missiles; a new torpedo, modified, advanced capabilities torpedo; the Tomahawk cruise missile.

The whole program, we ran it in my office. It was something. It came down, supported by Defense, supported by John Lehman. Everybody loved the submarine force; we had money; we were the big guys in town.

DePue: Who was your supporter at the Department of Defense that helped you that first year? Caspar Weinberger was the secretary of defense.

Thunman: I briefed Secretary Weinberger. I don't think I impressed him significantly. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was an Army guy. I spent a day with him, took him out on our ship and all, a nice guy. He was the... Was it Cascabeli??

DePue: Cascabeli?

Thunman: Yeah. He was chairman, I think, for at least one of the years. But I didn't make any big... I didn't have anybody at those levels that I could sit and talk to. Jim Watkins, of course, was the CNO during that time. Watkins, interestingly, he didn't have that many discussions with me. We'd play golf once in a while. I'd have a big decision that I wanted to talk to him about. He'd be in a sand trap, and I'd say, "Admiral, I think we ought to do this." He'd say, "Okay, go ahead and do that." You know, he just let me do it. I used to think sometimes he did it so he wouldn't have his fingerprints on it, that if it failed politically, that I would be blown up, and he'd be okay.

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<sup>89</sup>The term plus up means the funds were added to the entity's budget, instead of being taken from existing funds.

That maybe was unfair, but I knew Watkins. He was the greatest politician, next to Rickover, in the world. He never got himself into a corner. But I took advantage of it. I kind of said to myself, Hell, why not? I'm not going to do anything dishonest, and I'm going to build the submarine force.

I went out and got the Tomahawk cruise missile. I remember several people... That was a Defense Department program, development of the Tomahawk cruise missile. It was going very poorly. It was not working. It had been designed as a three humped camel. God, they had the wrong engine; they had the wrong configuration, little tiny wings. That meant you couldn't turn that thing around for ten, fifteen miles.

DePue: We're looking at a picture here, of a Tomahawk.

Thunman: Yeah, a Tomahawk.

DePue: Was this a completely new type of weapon?



Thunman: Yeah, it was a... Well, we had developed cruise missiles, way back in the '60s. [interruption] So, the technology was there. A cruise missile could fly; it's not ballistic; it flies 500 feet, 1,000 feet. The Germans were firing cruise missiles in World War II.

DePue: The V1 rocket was essentially a cruise missile?

Thunman: Yeah, a cruise missile. But nobody was firing one, submerged from a submarine. You had to be up on the surface to shoot it. I was a big believer—Of course a lot of people will claim the same thing—but I wanted to have a land attack weapon.

I told you my story. When I was a skipper of a submarine, I was ready to jimmy the nuclear, anti-submarine warfare weapon and make it one that would explode over Vladivostok or Petropavlovsk, if we had to. I knew how to do that, and I was ready to do it if we got into a war and we lost communications. Anyway, I'd always that in the back of my mind. Well, I wanted a land attack weapon, so I said I'll take it, OP-02. We'll build it.

DePue: When you say, "I'll take it," there's the surface fleet—

Thunman: At that time, it was defense.

DePue: ...that was perhaps more interested.



Thunman: Yeah, the surface fleet was not interested in it. It was just another weapon that they would shoot from the surface. They, frankly, didn't understand the importance of the weapon. It was perfect for a submarine.

DePue: Well, the public became aware of cruise missiles in the First Gulf War, in 1991. The story then was, here's this missile that's flying parallel to the ground. It makes a left-hand curve and goes into the bunker with incredible precision and kills the enemy and no collateral damage. Was that all part of the concept, right from the beginning?

Thunman: From the beginning. We had designed the guidance system, which was as Rube Goldberg as you could possibly make.<sup>90</sup> We had a digital scene matching system, where we had a scene in the target area digitized. Then, as the missile flew to the target area, it had two guidance systems. One, it could track the topography, the altitude of mountains or coasts, then shift to the digital scene matching system. It would look down and see what it was seeing. Then it would compare that to the scene that it had stored in the missile. They'd match up, and it would fly to the point that you wanted an attack. It was incredible.

Well, to carry on, I was involved with that for five years. I got beat up by the Congress; I got beat up by everybody. Jim Watkins used to roll his eyes. I'd say, "Well, the Tomahawk's not going too well." He'd kind of roll his eyes around. I kept battling it, working on it.

I was watching television, the First Iraqi War. I listened to the CNN announcer saying, "I don't know what happened, but it looked like a missile just went down the street, turned right at the corner and hit the Ministry of Defense." I turned to my then wife, and I said, "Tomahawk."

The other thing that we designed with it, which was even more powerful, a very, very highly classified weapon—It's been in the newspaper since then—one of the highest... We designed this in my own offices; my guys did it, where you put the streams of metal shavings—Chaff is what it used to be called in the Navy, metal, magnetic—You put that in a warhead, take that thing and fly it over the power plant; explode that warhead. All of that came loose and short-circuited every electrical generator within thirty miles, twenty miles, and the lights [makes an exploding sound and gesture]. You completely put the power out.

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<sup>90</sup> Reuben Garrett Lucius Goldberg, known best as Rube Goldberg, was an American cartoonist, sculptor, author, engineer, and inventor. He is best known for a series of popular cartoons depicting complicated gadgets that perform simple tasks in indirect, convoluted ways, giving rise to the term Rube Goldberg machines for any similar gadget or process. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rube\\_Goldberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rube_Goldberg))

I remember, right after he talked about the fact that the missile turned right and hit the Ministry of Defense. He said, "Oh my God, all the lights went out." I said, "Tomahawk." And the submarine shot them. Those were fired from submarines.

DePue: Why was this such a tough sell? You said that, for a variety of reasons, you'd been beaten up for it. What was so tough about it?

Thunman: Well, we couldn't make it work.

DePue: Was it too expensive as well?

Thunman: Well, as it turned out, not at all. I mean, it was cheap, based on what it was able to do, especially in Iraq and subsequently. But yeah, it was way over the program costs.

The initial program had been so poorly put together, you had to correct all of that. For example, it would fly to the target, but it had no program to bend down and hit the target. It would just fly to the target like that. You had to do something to make it go down and hit the target. You had to change out its entire control system.

DePue: Looking at the missile here, you mentioned the tiny wings. They are tiny. This can't turn at all.

Thunman: Yeah. And that engine was not powerful enough, the one they picked. The engine they had picked—this was the Defense joint program—was the engine that was used to strap onto a man's back, to make him, a foot soldier, capable of running around in the air, as a means to get around.

DePue: One of those jet packs.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: So was this a jet engine?

Thunman: It was a jet engine, yes. But we did it. We got 1,000 pound warhead in it; that's what it had. But that wasn't the big deal. The big deal were those special capabilities.

I went to St. Louis; I'll never forget. McDonnell Douglas was building the Tomahawk or part of the contracting team. [There was] a lot of money in it. I went into a warehouse. I swear to God, Mark, I couldn't see either end of it. [It was] full of engineers at drawing tables, doing the digital scene matching. What we had to do was send satellites over the areas that would be likely targets, take pictures of those likely targets, bring that information back, and have the engineers put that target area—They digitize it—put that

information, such that it would be put in the missile. And as long as you were operating in those areas, you could attack any target inside the area.

DePue: Now, to put this into perspective in another way, I got my first Kaypro computer in late '82, '83, when I was in graduate school. This was about as basic a personal computer as you could get. We're talking about the dawn of the computer age.

Thunman: At the dawn of the computers, yes. It was a dawn for me as well. We were writing millions of lines of codes, millions of lines of code for the control system. I didn't quite understand computers, when I got to the Pentagon. This is before Tomahawk. I took my son, my youngest son and I. On a Sunday, they had a big computer day. You could go look at computers and buy them. So I took my son and I. He was just finishing high school. We went in, and we bought, as I recall, it was the best computer they had. This is before the graphical display. The best computer they had was an Atari computer, used to play games. I think it had 400K of computer memory, which was incredible in those days. Mike and I used to have more fun; we still laugh about it today.

We took that home, and we'd sit at night...He liked it too; he liked doing it. We'd buy these Atari game magazines. Then we would try to write the program for a game that you could play on the computer. You make one slip in writing that program, then, of course, the whole thing doesn't work. Then you had to go find it [the error]. It was a mess, but we both taught ourselves computers. [We] taught ourselves what a computer program was and what software was.

Of course, we couldn't write programs. [But] I then knew the basics of what goes into it. So, I could sit and talk during the day about well, how many lines of code and all this. The people used to look at me like I knew anything. (laughs) I got it off of a toy, not a toy computer, but a computer designed to play games, for kids. (laughs) But that was the beginning of it, and huge amounts of money went into that.

Also, with the new torpedo, which would track a target of twenty-five miles, wonderful. [It's] still in effect today, the Mark 48 torpedo. And then Trident, we put the D5 missile...We completely redesigned the missile for the Trident missile, D5.

DePue: So you're talking about a delivery system for nuclear warheads.

Thunman: Yeah, the Trident ballistic missiles.

DePue: Was that at the time that they were able to MIRV the warheads as well?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, this had all to do with MIRV, and it also had to do with making them invulnerable during reentry, the different things you did to have them

enter without being attacked by defense systems, [a] very fancy weapons' system. We had all that going on at once.

DePue: Did you have a sense, at the time, of what the Soviets were doing?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, we were tracking them as close as we could, whatever we could get info on.

DePue: Was this driven by wanting to stay ahead of the Soviets and concerned that they were catching up or wanting to bury them with our technology?

Thunman: It was wanting to bury them with our capability. I didn't catch on to that early, but I finally caught onto it, that that's what Reagan was all about.

DePue: Was that something that really wasn't even discussed?

Thunman: It was never discussed. Toward my last couple of years...and I'll say this for Jim Watkins, I think he probably was the one who convinced Reagan to do it. Watkins almost became the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He got knocked out by another guy, a wonderful man, Bill Craugh.

I think Reagan had made the decision to make Jim Watkins the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He went out to Japan, and he stopped in Pearl Harbor. Bill Craugh was CINCPAC. Bill Craugh could have been a standup comic; he was the funniest guy, a damn good naval officer, and he was a submariner. But he had not been a nuke. He was the most personable man, nice man. So, Reagan stopped and went up and had met with Bill Craugh for a few hours—I guess maybe they had brunch or lunch—and came back and said, "The new chairman is Bill Craugh." He was so funny; he was the kind of guy I think that Reagan could understand, because Craugh could stand up in front of a group of people and have them in tears, laughing.

I had him come out here to Springfield to...this is about 19...Well, it was right after 9-11.<sup>91</sup> They didn't have a speaker for the Abraham Lincoln birthday [dinner], which is a big deal, as you know, in Springfield.

DePue: Are you talking about the one the Republicans put on every year?

Thunman: No, the one here in town, Springfield. The Abraham Lincoln Association has an Abraham Lincoln Birthday Dinner. They always get a really distinguished speaker, like we had Obama here two years ago, three years ago. Last year we had [U.S. Senator, Dick] Durbin. We always have great speakers. Well, the guy who was supposed to be the speaker—This was right after 9/11. This is the February following—somehow canceled out. I heard about it, and I said, "Well..."

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<sup>91</sup> 911, the number to dial in case of emergency in the US, is also the day (**9-11, 2001**) of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

I had just come back to town. Maybe it was two years. No, it was the year after. So I said, "Why don't we get Bill Craugh, Admiral Craugh?" "Oh, gee, I don't know. Do you think he'll come?" I said, "I'll get him." So I called him, and [he was] very nice. I expected him to say, "No," or "I can't." He said, "Okay, I'll do that for you." I'd had some good relationships with him.

So he came out—I'll never forget—and he gets up there... You know, that's a big dinner; there's 500 people there and all, lots of distinguished people there. He gets up, and everybody's looking at him. He looks around a little bit—All this hell had broken loose in Washington during that time, as you can imagine—and he said, "Well, not much going on in Washington." (both laugh) The place just roared, and it just kind of brought everybody down.

Anyway, so Reagan picked him, and that was the end of Watkins, because Watkins, he left the Navy shortly thereafter and became the secretary of energy though. But going back to Reagan, what he was about, he was going to bury the Soviet Union by building capabilities they couldn't deal with. The last couple of years, up comes the SDI, the Strategic Defense Initiative. I don't know if you remember it during that time, but this is the one where we were going to develop a system to intercept their missiles. Initially, the Soviets chuckled about it and said nobody can do that. Well, all of a sudden, huge amounts of money got poured into it.

I remember flying over Los Alamos. I was flying out west. We flew over the capacitor field. They had a field of capacitors in order to put together enough energy, electrical energy, to detonate a fusion device, which they were making as part of SDI, which was part of a defense system.<sup>92</sup> Again, everywhere I could see, this field was full of these capacitors. A capacitor's about the size of you and I put together. In my mind I thought, My God, he's really going to do this; he's going to figure it out.

Of course, lots of positive reports coming out, oh yeah, well we've got test so and so; we did test so and so. All of this is leaking into the press. Then this is what... I think I've told you this story before, that I heard from Jeane Kirkpatrick later. She was with Reagan at that time.

DePue: I know she was the Ambassador to the United Nations for a while.

Thunman: Yeah, for a while, but she was also... She was involved with defense. I'll think of it in a minute, but she was involved with and traveled with Reagan in the defense world, about that time. But she told me this story, and she's written it in a book too, that when he went to Keflavik—

DePue: Iceland.

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<sup>92</sup> A capacitor is a device used to store an electric charge, consisting of one or more pairs of conductors separated by an insulator.

Thunman: Yeah. When he went to Keflavik and met with Gorbachev, Gorbachev said “Okay, we’re ready now to change the nuclear defense, nuclear armament agreement.” They were going to agree to some changes that the system, the U.S. system, had come up with. According to Kirkpatrick, she said Reagan said, “Well that’s it. The meeting’s over.” [He] got up and walked out, and they were all shocked, and they ran out after him.

She said, “I ran out, and I said, ‘Mr. President, Mr. President, what’s wrong? What’s happened?’ And he said, ‘We won; we won. We don’t have to worry about it. They’re afraid of our SDI system, that we will end up building a system that could knock their missiles out of the air,’” which meant that our missiles could go there and destroy them. That was in his thinking. Well, of course, that was the beginning of—it was about 1985—of the fall of the Soviet Union.

DePue: But at that time there was very harsh criticism about some of the things that Reagan was doing. Certainly SDI was roundly criticized in the liberal circles. There was also the language, the terminology that he used, calling the Soviet Union “the evil empire.” What was your thought about that? Did that make you nervous?

Thunman: No. At the time, I thought it was a good idea. The Soviets were just as mean as they ever were. There was no efforts on their part to compromise anything. They were putting together, as best they could—I knew that, —a submarine force, ballistic missile submarine force and attack submarines. They were pushing around the world. So, there was no place that we got along at all with the Soviets. And, of course, they controlled Eastern Europe. I don’t know if you’ve ever been over there. We went to Poland, Owsley and I. The junkie apartments and stuff the Soviets were building...It was just a great example of how terrible Communism is, was to see what they left over in Eastern Europe. They were an evil empire.

DePue: But it certainly was regarded as some serious saber rattling.

Thunman: Sure.

DePue: Did that concern you?

Thunman: No. No, it didn’t concern me, because I knew that we...The only thing that we ever really were worried about, as far as saber rattling, was the concern that the Soviets would go across Europe, that huge land army, not using nuclear weapons, but using that huge land army and [taking] it across Europe. I never believed—and I don’t think the administration believed—that we would ever have used nuclear weapons first, and without the use of nuclear weapons, I don’t think we could have stopped that army. We didn’t have enough forces there. What did they have, twenty, thirty divisions, sitting in Poland, something like that?

DePue: The numbers, if you looked at the ground forces, were usually something like seven-to-one in terms of infantry forces, ten-to-one for armored forces, maybe an even higher ratio than that for artillery. It was all against us in that respect.

Thunman: They were really worried that they'd do it, and we couldn't stop them. But, at the same time, we were letting it [be] known that we had these nuclear capabilities. The Soviets, if they'd done it, they'd have to bet that we wouldn't have used the nuclear weapons. Nobody could be sure of that.

DePue: Well, I think you need to get to an engagement here. What time do you have to be there?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. I've got to be there at 3:00. So, I've got to—

DePue: So, we're going to have to cut this off. I think next time I'd like to start with Rickover's retirement. Then there's plenty more to talk about as the deputy chief of naval operations for submarines.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Thank you very much.

Thunman: It was an interesting time. But as I said to you earlier, when Romney got up that day and said, "I'm going to build three nuclear submarines," I thought, Oh, here comes Reagan again.

(end of interview 11)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.12

Interview # 12: November 14, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Wednesday, November 14, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here for my twelfth session—believe it or not, sir—with Admiral Ron Thunman, and we're in his home. Good afternoon, sir.

Thunman: Good afternoon; welcome again. It's been a while, but I'm happy that we can continue.

DePue: Well, I think we met a little bit over a week ago, more than a couple of days before the presidential election.

Thunman: Yes, yes.

DePue: Do you have any comments to make about the presidential election?

Thunman: Well, I'm not going to comment on who I voted for, but I think that the election hasn't solved any of our problems, in that we are headed toward this, what they call, "the cliff." From my point of view as a retired military man, I wonder how that's going to affect the military, because you've got people on both sides saying that you shouldn't impact the military. As a matter of fact, the secretary of defense says it would be a disaster.

DePue: If I can just put this in context for people who are encountering this a few decades from now, the fiscal cliff that we're talking about is this grand compromise that was made in the Congress—I don't know—about how many months ago?

Thunman: Well, it was a year ago, when they were facing whether they should increase the debt limit, the debt ceiling. Finally they came up with... One of the things they said was, "Well, we'll come up with something to meet the requirements of our deficit. If we don't, then we're going to take..." I think it's \$500 billion out of the military and \$500 billion out of entitlements. "So, we've got to make our decisions on what we're going to do before 1 January of 2013."

They haven't made that decision yet. So the military, I think, is on the line. I think it's \$500 billion that they will lose in their budget on January first, if they don't resolve the whole process. The military budget is what, \$700 billion, roughly, per year? So you're talking about taking away 60, 70 percent of—



DePue: Well, I don't know how many years that \$500 billion amount is stretched over, but it's huge cuts that nobody, either inside or outside the administration, says that the military can really afford to take.

Thunman: I don't know either, about how many years, except, for some reason I had the idea they, if they don't resolve the debt ceiling, that you've got to do it immediately. (laughs) The ceiling's got to be corrected, and the way you correct it immediately is take these dollars out of these budgets. I can't believe they'll do it.

But the military is already being impacted, and it will be impacted further. I'm sure that the military and the military industrial complex, frankly, was saddened because of Romney's loss, because Romney had some big promises that he was going to move forward with, certainly in the Navy, where he was going to build more ships.

In my area, he was going to go to building three submarines a year. He announced that in his speeches. So your big companies, General Dynamics, Newport News, plus companies all across the country which participate in the building... I'm most acquainted with submarines. You've got the companies in Ohio that are building the fuel elements for the reactors and building the reactor vessels. This stuff is all across the country. Frankly, we kind of made sure it went across the country, so that everybody would be reluctant not to build another ship or another—

DePue: In other words, so that every congressman felt that he had a vested interest in spending more money on the Navy?

Thunman: That's right; that's right. I'm afraid that's... I participated in that; although I think we can prove we always went the cheapest and most effective way of doing things.

DePue: Well, let's get to the subject at hand this afternoon, sir, if you don't mind. You spoke extensively about your experiences on your last assignment. That position again was?

Thunman: Deputy chief of naval operations for submarine warfare.

DePue: I wanted to start today with the retirement of Admiral Hyman Rickover, because you were there for that as well.

Thunman: Yes. I think Reagan came in—This was in '81—was elected. It was time for me to leave commander Submarine Force Pacific. I think I'd been there a little bit over two years. Normally you serve two years in that assignment. Initially, I was called by Admiral Rickover. Not many people know this, because I always felt that I shouldn't tell people this, because they wouldn't believe it anyway. I was called by Bob Long, who was at that time, commander and

chief Pacific. I was told I was going to go be the superintendent of the Naval Academy.

DePue: We did talk about that a little bit last time.

Thunman: Okay. But instead, I think, because I was a Rickover guy, I was not sent there by the new secretary of the Navy, coming in with Reagan, John Lehman, who didn't like nuke submariners very much, although he's remained a good friend of mine over the years, interestingly. So, I was diverted to the Pentagon to become the DCNO of submarines, OP-02, unusual job at that time. It's been done away with.

There were three jobs like that in the Pentagon, reporting directly to the CNO, deputy CNO force, air; deputy CNO for surface; deputy CNO for submarines. These were deputy jobs; these weren't assistant; they were deputy. That meant we could sign for the CNO. We had that authority, very powerful jobs. They used to call us the barons, because we did the budgeting for our area, the things in our area. We submitted our program. Then the three programs came together, and then were reviewed by the CNO [phone rings] and by the fiscal guy, which was a very powerful guy.

There were some adjustments made there and some infighting, but you were always brought into it. They would say, "Well, we're not going to build two submarines." Then you made your plea for why it is you wanted to do this, and what you could show that this would improve the Navy, improve the fighting ability and all. But the big egg first came out of your office. It didn't get any look, unless it came out of your office, unless maybe the secretary or the CNO. Of course, they could pull whatever they wanted, but you ran it, in my day. Of course, it doesn't sound like much today, but I had an \$18 billion program each year, that I spent.

DePue: Was that both operation and purchasing?

Thunman: That's everything. That was acquisition, and that was operations and maintenance, O&M as it's called in the Navy.

DePue: But not payroll.

Thunman: No, not payroll. That went into BUPERS, Bureau of Naval Personnel. We funded training, but we never funded people, as far as their support. Our monies would go into other areas. For example, when I was chief of naval education and training, everybody had to give me money. Then that's what I spent for all training, which was a funny story, but I'll save it for later.

So there I was, and it was very uncomfortable, because I immediately made three stars. I'd only been a two-star for two years. I don't think that sat

well with everybody else. The E-Ring is where all the three stars were.<sup>93</sup> Those were all distinguished and experienced naval officers. Most of them had spent four or five years as a two-star before. They'd had a couple, two or three jobs.

And here this young guy comes in. I was young enough at the time, [and] bang, as a three-star. I was this nuke submariner who had served Admiral Rickover, Rickover being my mentor. [dog barking] I just went in there without any friends at all. Even the CNO they had there, he didn't particularly like me, again, because of the Rickover connection.

So I was there, and it was shortly thereafter, in '81, when Admiral Rickover called me one day and said that they'd made the decision not to continue it. The decision had to be made early, because Admiral Rickover, at that time, was eighty-one years old. So the law was, you can continue a person on active duty, but after age, whatever, sixty-five or something like that, it's got to be reauthorized every year. And every year he had been reauthorized.

He called me, and he said, "I wanted you to know that the president has decided not to continue me." I said, "I'm so sorry, Admiral, about that. I think that will hurt us in many ways." He said, "Well, I want you to call every submarine admiral in the Navy and tell them that it was industry that got me." It wasn't the president; it was industry. They had made that a requirement for their support of Reagan during the election was to get rid of Rickover.

DePue: Why did he want you to get that message out to these other admirals?

Thunman: Well, he wanted to know... He was a prideful man, and he didn't want people to think he'd done anything wrong or his performance was anything less than what it had always been, superb. He was involved, at that time... He was subpoenaed, over and over again... [addressing the dog] Do you want to go in there? All right. Owsley?

He had been subpoenaed and was involved with the courts. Owsley?

DePue: Admiral, there's a lot going on here right now. (laughs) Let's pause here.

[pause in recording]

Thunman: The poor guy at that time, was spending a couple of days a week in court, subpoenaed. He had charged these major manufacturers with overpricing in the building of equipments and submarines and Electric Boat, especially, which was part of General Dynamics. He charged the president of the shipyard, Valiotis was his name, with overpricing. So, they were after him. I think John Lehman was told—I can't prove this, but the way he acted through the whole thing—that he was told, "Hey, one of your jobs is to get rid of

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<sup>93</sup> The outer ring of The Pentagon, occupied by the most senior officers and their planning staffs.

Rickover.” The president had obviously approved that. I was not brought into that at all.

Then, one of the things he said—[door opens] Can you let her in?

One of the things he said to me, he says, “They want to make me a scientific adviser for the president,” typical Rickover. He said, “They don’t have one now. Why do they need one now?” He said, “It’s just a bunch of BS. They’re just trying to placate me. I’m not going to do any of that.”

Anyway, my response to him, when he said, “Call every admiral,” I said to him—and I was always honest with the admiral—I said, “Admiral, I can’t do that. That would not be loyal to the Navy, if I did that.” I said, “But I will assure you that throughout my career, whenever I get the opportunity, I will tell people that, that it was the administration that got rid of you, and it had nothing to do with your performance.” And I have; I’ve told everybody I’ve ever known, (laughs) so I’ve met my responsibility to the old man.

Some of this you can read in John Lehman’s book. Lehman was honest about it. They called me up, and then the process started, “Well who’s going to relieve Rickover?” And there were big discussions at the top, CNO, Rickover, Congress. I was told to stay out of it, because I was a candidate, so that I would not participate in it at all.

DePue: A candidate for what?

Thunman: A candidate to relieve Rickover. To take his place.

DePue: To take his place? Okay, to relieve him, in the sense of, “You’re relieved of your command; I’m taking over.”

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: What was his specific position at the time?

Thunman: I don’t know. I don’t know; he didn’t tell me.

DePue: You mean, you didn’t know what Rickover’s job position was?

Thunman: Oh, no. He was the director of the Division of Naval Reactors. He was a four-star. He ran the entire nuclear power program of the Navy. But more than that, he ran the submarine force. You never made any sort of a big move in the submarine force without getting Rickover’s approval.

DePue: But as I understand, you didn’t answer directly to him; you answered to the CNO, correct?

Thunman: That's correct, except, like earlier in my career, like all of us, if Rickover got down on you for one reason or another, you were done. He ran everything. He ran not only the design and the construction, the R&D of submarines, he made sure every individual met his approval, certainly, anybody who had an important position. And he could make it stick. Nobody made admiral in the Navy, who was a nuclear submariner, that did not have his blessing. That blessing was passed under the table.

When I was member of the selection board, Flag Officer Selection Board, when I first went back to Washington, I was selected to be among the—I forget what there was—eight admirals. They had a four-star and some three-stars and some two-stars, and I was selected to be on that board. But I went over to his offices, and he asked me what I was thinking about. We talked. I remember I had one officer, a friend of mine, Admiral Bob Long was commander and chief Pacific. I said, "You ought to really look at this guy hard. He ought to be a flag officer." I went and I talked to Rickover about it. He said, "Absolutely not." So, he went off the list. (laughs)

DePue: Let me make sure I've got this whole process clear. Rickover has a specific duty position in the Navy. You've already talked about why he had three actual positions going for him. My assumption is, once he's relieved, somebody else is going to move into that specific position but never have anywhere near the clout that Rickover had.

Thunman: What they did, in order to ensure that the guy had continuing clout, was one, required that he be four stars. Well, that doesn't give you the power that Rickover had, granted. But the other thing they did, which was good, was they made the job an eight year position. There were specific guide—If you were going to relieve that guy early, it had to be approved by Congress. The secretary couldn't do it on his own. He had to go to Congress and get their okay.

DePue: I don't know of any other flag officer in the military anywhere that would have been locked in for eight years. Why?

Thunman: Well, that was to be sure that he would outlive everybody else, that nobody could attack his positions, until it came to the eight year point. Maybe then you could make your attack. But by then, whatever his positions were or whatever the guy's interests were, policies were, were going to continue, without serious attack. I mean, if you've got the job for eight years, then they know that there's no way they can outweigh you.

DePue: But why? Is it the concern over security, that you needed to have the stability for that reason?

Thunman: No, it was to ensure the Rickover policies continued, to ensure the standards of excellence stayed the same, to ensure that everybody would be held

accountable and responsible for what they did in the nuclear power program, in accordance with the principles and standards set up by Admiral Rickover in the very beginning.

DePue: What drove this? Was this a DOD decision or Congress?

Thunman: Well, it was Congress. Rickover drove it; he participated. He accepted it. When the president said, "I'm not going to continue you," he didn't go into a wild rage or anything like that, or he didn't try to counter that decision in any way. But he immediately—as he would, as the kind of man he was—he said "Okay, you're going to do this, let me tell you how you've got to do it. If you want to keep me quiet, this is what you've got to do." The decisions that were made were made for the good of the program and not for the good of Rickover.

DePue: What did you personally think? Did you think it was time for him, at eighty-one, you said, to be stepping down?

Thunman: No, I didn't think they should have done it, and I told them that. The reason is, he had that loyal cadre that I told you about to begin with, the people that he picked up, kind of weird people. (laughs) I hope they don't read that in a bad way.

DePue: Well, you're in that classification too; aren't you?

Thunman: Brilliant people who always thought a little bit to the right of where everybody else was and who always got things done. He had this cadre. They were all there; they're still there. And they had brought people in. He brought people into his offices, a couple every year. He interviewed them, vetted them. So he had this group who were so dedicated and loyal to him. My point was, don't disturb that.

Now, granted, the old man can't go down and get on these ships and crawl through the engine room any more, although he was still trying to. He was doing it better than I am at eighty. The old man can't do a lot of things he can't do, but his mind was still good. The most important thing he had was his incredible loyalty in this program, people who have dedicated their lives to these high standards. They would never, ever counter, without reason, from maybe a technical point of view.

I sat down with the then CNO. I was called up early; what did I think about him leaving? I went through that same, kind of emotionally saying, "Look, you're making a mistake. Leave him there. If it comes time when you can point to an error or point to the degradation of what his job is, then, of course, you would."

But, you see, the people who got him were those who were angry with the way he was doing the contracting and his oversight of the contracting. He

was a dictator in the contracting process. He went further than the Defense accounting agencies, in oversight. He honestly wanted to keep the prices down, of things. A lot of companies out there couldn't do what they normally wanted to do, as far as pricing their contracts. He would tell them what the price was going to be. He would say, "I'll give you that, but this is what you're going to do it for." All this bullshit of competition, although it existed in law and whatever, the only competition that really existed was him. Nobody ever investigated that, because he got the cheapest price. The process, if you used the standard process, you'd probably have paid twice as much. They wanted him out of there. Boy those big companies wanted him out of there.

One of the things that I did, I think more than the guy who went in there to relieve him, was I kept it going. The guy went in there... Kenny McKee was a good guy, a brilliant guy, had been in the nuclear program and, frankly, was better connected politically than I was, by a long shot. He had been a three-star for some time, been a numbered fleet commander. He'd been around longer, but a really impressive guy. I don't say that I was a better guy, but he wasn't as dedicated to that. Of course, he knew that people were angry about it. He knew he had to be in the job for eight years, and he had to build his own organization and his own community of support.

But I decided that I would not... I didn't like it. I started looking into the costing and pricing and especially General Dynamics. I spent some time, a couple of days, going through the line items, the cost of line items, charged by General Dynamics. They were absurd. This was about the time of the \$500 toilet seats, I think, or it was fairly near there. I found some things like that.<sup>94</sup> I sat up there in New London, with big books on my lap, going through page by page, just looking at what the things cost. It didn't take me long to ferret out some fairly unreasonable costs. The criminal investigations continued.

When they were about to bear fruit, and they were about to... Well, as a matter of fact, they had. They had decided they were going to charge Valiotes with criminal acts. He left town in the middle of the night, went back to Greece. He had a dual citizenship. He's still in Greece. He's still under subpoena.

At the same time, the Lehman guy, Lehman comes in, very strongly supportive of building more submarines. Not [that he] necessarily liked it, but I think discussions that he had with the president and the new CNO, who had been my skipper when I was his exec, Jim Watkins, came in, and all of the sudden we were building three, four, and then five submarines a year. I was

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<sup>94</sup> In the mid-1980s, military spending became a scandal when the Project on Government Oversight reported that the Pentagon had vastly overpaid for a wide variety of items, including toilet seats. In response to the scandals, President Reagan, by Executive Order 12526, created the President's Blue Ribbon Commission on Defense Management, informally known as the Packard Commission, to study several areas of management functionality within the US Department of Defense.

then armed with what these bastards have been robbing us for years. So what I did the first year...I think it was my second year there; maybe it was my third, we were going to build four submarines. Generally, it was 50/50 between Newport News and EB, I mean that's the way it would come out.

DePue: EB being Electric Boat.

Thunman: Electric Boat. General Dynamics, of course, owned Electric Boat. I told Lehman, I said, "Hey all of this is going on. I can sit down for hours with you, Mr. Secretary, and show you where these bastards have just robbed us blind." I said, "We got to send a message. And the way we send the message, I think, is, this year, we give three to Newport News and one to Electric Boat." He's, "Okay."

Oh, man, you talk about a flap. General Dynamics was just furious. But interestingly—I can't remember the exact amount—the next year, when the bids came in on what each one would charge, Electric Boat's numbers came down by something like \$350 billion.

DePue: My guess is that General Dynamics has congressmen they can lean on to put pressure on you guys.

Thunman: Oh, sure.

DePue: Do you remember who that would have been? Where is Electric Boat?

Thunman: It's up in Connecticut. Lieberman was there, Senator [Joe] Lieberman, and Senator... Who was the guy who was involved with the legislation to change the banking business?

DePue: Dodd?

Thunman: Yeah, [Christopher] Dodd. They had some congressmen. It was broader than that. Kennedy was involved.

DePue: Ted Kennedy?

Thunman: Yeah. There were others of that order of magnitude. I'm sure they heard from it, but we did it. Electric Boat didn't argue too much, because we just chased their president out of town. They didn't have a foot to stand on, as far as them being mistreated.

DePue: Valiotis was their president.

Thunman: Yes, the president of Electric Boat.

DePue: Do you recall, was there some kind of a ceremony once the decision had been made that Rickover was going to leave?



Thunman: Oh, yeah. Well that's a funny story. This is the one that's in Lehman's book. Hayward was CNO when I was brought back. He was an aviator, didn't like nukes very much. I think that's why he didn't like me very much. They called me up. The vice chief was there. They said, "Look, there're..." They were really reluctant to talk to me about Rickover. Of course, I was still being considered, I think, to relieve him.

But they said to me, "We ought to do something for Admiral Rickover. The president's going to give him the Medal of Freedom," which is, of course, the number one medal in the country. They said, "They're going to have some sort of ceremony. Do you have any suggestions?"

I said, "Well, I don't pretend to know Admiral Rickover, everything he does and what he does, but he does not like to be treated in any sort of a special way. He does not like it. It angers him. You've got to understand." Some of us—This didn't happen to me, but I know that it's true—working over at naval reactors, getting ready to go do something and being there. A medal would come in, Legion of Merit, for somebody, a pretty high award. Rickover would call the guy in, (laughing) and, of course, it had come into his organization, because the guy was there. He'd just take it and throw it on the desk and say, "Hey, this came in for you." He didn't believe in any of that stuff.

So I said, "I wouldn't make it anything special." They said, "All right and thank you very much." That was the last I knew anything about it. Well, they decided to have Reagan present it. They had at least listened a little bit to me. They decided to have it in the White House, not that many people there. John Lehman was going to be there, I don't know, a couple of others. Nobody in the Navy, other than John Lehman, no uniformed officers.

Rickover arrives at the White House. Lehman tells this story, so this isn't just me. He's there and whoever else was there, the chief of staff I guess, maybe, to the president, maybe somebody else. Reagan comes into the room. Of course, Reagan never wanted anything that was argumentative going on in front of anybody but people he just totally was involved with. His chief of staff handled anything that had a problem with it, before it got to Reagan.

Reagan comes in and graciously says, "Why Admiral, it's good to have you here..." whatever words you would normally use. "I'm very proud to meet you" or "I'm proud that you're being recognized." He got out about four or five words, the president did, and Rickover said, "Mr. President, you and I have to talk. This piss ant..." and he points to Lehman, "This piss ant has been lying to you." That's the God's truth. I heard about it immediately afterwards.

Again, I was glad to see that it appeared in a book, because I thought, I'll never be able to tell anybody this. They won't believe it. I got it from a

very, very close source. I think from the chief of staff of the White House is where I got it. So, Reagan just...He couldn't...He didn't know what to do with that. He just kind of turned on his heel and left. But, he did call Rickover, and they sat and talked, by themselves. So Rickover had a discussion with Reagan.

Now, Rickover used to talk to Jimmy Carter a lot. Jimmy Carter would call Admiral Rickover once a week, and they'd have a discussion of everything going on in the world. Of course, Jimmy Carter, as you know, was a former nuclear trained submarine officer. Carter loved Rickover, as we all did. He never lost that, that great respect. Jimmy Carter's the only president that an aircraft carrier is not named after. An aircraft carrier is not named after Jimmy Carter. A submarine is. But the Medal of Freedom never got transferred.

Then the next thing that happened was Congress heard about it and convened, or I guess they were in session. But they all came, just like it was a presidential speech, and made the presentation to Rickover. Every man, Jack, all 435 and the 100 senators, they were all there. There was only one military guy there, me. I sat up in the...Well, by that time, they hadn't selected McKee yet. I got an invitation, and I sat up in the upper section. I'm looking around, and there wasn't anybody else there. It was all full of the Congress.

DePue: Who was the lead congressman? Was it Tip O'Neill? He would have been Speaker at the time, I would guess.

Thunman: Yeah, I think so. I guess it was. I can't recall. It must have been Tip O'Neill.

DePue: What were the claims that Lehman was lying? Do you know the specifics to that?

Thunman: Well, I don't know what they are, but I got a feeling that Lehman had got into this...Whatever the allegations that Rickover had made against these companies, about overpricing, Lehman had said probably, "No, that's not true. I've looked into it; it's okay. Mr. President, don't go after these people." Of course, I have to believe that Reagan, who I am very strongly in support of, but Reagan, that helped him get elected. I think that meant a big deal, that the big industry guys came in and said "Okay, I'll support you. Here are the things I want, though, from you" and bing, bing. I've got a feeling one of them was, get rid of Rickover.

DePue: Was Rickover better behaved when he went before Congress, or did he have the same fundamental problems over the fuss they were making?

Thunman: No. When he went before Congress, they were beautiful sessions. They were wonderful sessions. He answered their questions in the most magnificent way.

DePue: But you were talking about when they honored him at the end of his—

Thunman: No. He had his uniform on, and he spoke, not long. When he testified—just to go back a little bit in his career—Whenever he testified, his answers... There would be big roars of laughter from some of the things he would say. He was funny. And normally, when he was saying something funny, he was sticking something into somebody else's side. (laughs)

DePue: Does that mean he wasn't meaning to be funny? He was just meaning to—

Thunman: No, he was meaning to say something humorous. But then he had his farewell dinner. All of his old time friends were there, Stennis, all of the old political people who had supported him. His staff, that cadre that I talked about, were there.

It was a pretty large affair, 400 people. I was there, and my deputy came too. So there were two naval officers there. Rickover got up, and it was a wonderful session, to listen to him. He talked about his career in a very kind of an informal way, wistful way and funny. He told stories that people didn't know about.

He told me, he said, "People have asked me why I'm Hyman G. Rickover. What does the G stand for?" He said, "Well, you know, when I stood in line at the Naval Academy, and it came up to me to sign in..." I guess they signed in that way. "I noticed everybody else always had a middle name, a middle initial, so I made one up." (both laugh)

Another thing he said, "People always allege that I was treated badly, because I was a Jew." That was thought by many, many people. There was a book written back in the '50s about that, a novel about a naval officer who had the same traits as Rickover. He said "No," [that] he was treated well. He said, "Nobody ever mistreated me."

And he told the story about how he got his appointment, in Chicago. I think I've gone through that, about his uncle was on the draft board, and they traded an agreement with a congressman that, if he wouldn't draft the congressman's son for World War I, that he would give Rickover an appointment to the Naval Academy, which he did. He just came from the bottom. His father was a tailor, immigrant.

Then the game started, and boy, things move pretty fast and furious when you... All of a sudden, we were into building five submarines, a lot going on there. We were doing a hell of a lot of contracting, selection of new equipments.

[We] got into a lot of new systems, the Tomahawk cruise missile. We took that program over, we, the OP-02, DCNO subs. I made the comment, "We need a land attack, conventional land attack weapon." So we took that one and improved, almost a remake, of the torpedo, the Mark 48 torpedo weapon that went twenty-five miles and homing, the spectacular performance

weapon. We moved to continue, or to build, a Trident submarine every year, and we modified the Trident missile, changed the missile lock, so that we had MIRV capability, multiple entry vehicles.

DePue: Now, in what timeframe would the Trident have been constructed?

Thunman: I went to sea on the *Ohio* in '81 or '82. I can't recall.

DePue: Eighty-one?

Thunman: Yeah. That was the first ship.

DePue: The first of the Trident-class?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: I might be confused here. Just reading about the Los Angeles-class, and I thought the Seawolf-class replaced the Los Angeles.

Thunman: No, that's attack submarines. Trident [is] ballistic missile submarines, two different... We were also building a Trident a year, along with these five attack submarines. We had an improved Los Angeles-class. Some people used to call it the Thunman-class, because we modified so much in that ship.

I didn't do it, but I had a brilliant admiral engineer, Jim Wilson, over in the Naval Seas Systems Command. He came up with a number of really great ideas. Those were where we put launch tubes, so we could shoot the Tomahawk missile from the bow, vertical launch tubes of the attack submarine.

DePue: I would think that's a dramatic redesign.

Thunman: Dramatic. It really was. It put us in the game, which was always in my mind. Nobody else really keyed on it as much as I did. That was to give us a conventional land attack weapon. I think I had more vision in that area than others.

DePue: And this would only be on attack submarines?

Thunman: Yeah, cruise missiles. A cruise missile is—

DePue: Yeah, we talked about the Tomahawk last time.

Thunman: Yeah. But that made a huge difference to the future of the submarine force.

DePue: How about the Harpoon anti-ship missile?

Thunman: That was the first thing we had. That had been developed earlier. But, of course, Tomahawk replaced that. Harpoon was just anti-ship, and it was short range, but it was not a land attack missile.

DePue: During the timeframe that you were deputy CNO, were you involved with discussions about transporting SEAL teams?<sup>95</sup>

Thunman: Oh, yes, yeah. That's really where we made some significant progress. We came up with the dry deck shelter—It was designed and built while I was there—that you could fit on the back of a submarine, put swimmer delivery vehicles inside of it. You'd carry SEALs in the submarine.

You would submerge. While the submarine was submerged, [you'd] open a hatch into the dry deck shelter. Then they would go into the shelter, flood the shelter, open the door and take the swimmer delivery vehicle, which was a free-flooding vehicle. The SEALs, of course, wearing their scuba gear, et cetera, they'd go off and do their mission, come back into the shelter, shut the door, drain the shelter and let them all back in through the hatch access to the shelter. It was pretty slick.

DePue: I'm assuming that on that kind of deployment, you'd sit right outside the twelve mile limit?

Thunman: Or maybe go inside. You'll go wherever you think you can go. You don't want them to go any further than they have to, to do their job. It was quite a capability.

DePue: Did they have the equipment to stay submerged until they got to the beach?

Thunman: Yes. Again, it was free-flooding, and they kept their scuba gear on.

DePue: Free-flooding means what?

Thunman: Well, that they were all exposed to the water. It was a submarine, but it had no room for them to be in an enclosed space that wasn't flooded. You were in a vehicle that was exposed to sea pressure and seawater.

DePue: Well, I've got this image of basically a big propeller that's pulling them through the water.

Thunman: No. It's a vehicle. But there are no doors. It looks like a big, long torpedo, with openings, so you go in and out.

DePue: And all of that was developed during your watch as deputy CNO?

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<sup>95</sup> SEAL (Sea, Air, Land) teams go through what is considered by some to be the toughest military training in the world. Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training is conducted at the Naval Special Warfare Center in Coronado and includes obstacles to develop and test stamina, leadership and the ability to work as a team.

Thunman: Well, no, no. Way back in the '50s, we had a couple of diesel boats that they had built into the submarine itself, the capability to launch SEALs, where they had seals, and they could flood it. And they had swimmer delivery vehicles.

But during my time, we developed the dry deck shelter. You could sit it on the attack submarine. It wasn't there all the time. We improved this sort of delivery vehicle, and we had a capable system. It's interesting, that's what I'm working on today, the company, EVT Global, Inc., here, which is a small business up near Peoria, brilliant designer with about ten patents. He has developed a motor that we are now about to put into all the Navy swimmer delivery vehicles.

It's a direct drive, high torque, low RPM, magnetic motor, with no gear box, unusual capability. Most motors you deal with are induction motors. They run at a high speed. In order to use them at low speeds, you've got to have a gear box; you've got to have some sort of a gearing system.

Well, this inventor, Rittenhouse is his name, Norm Rittenhouse, he has developed this permanent magnet motor, and by geometrically using the flux of the permanent magnet and the stator—the stator is electromagnetic—By directing the forces properly, he's able to get high torque out of it, without having a gear box. You're just using the inner reaction of the stator and the permanent magnet motor to produce the torque.

He's got about ten patents. It's quite a unique thing, and it's been a lot of fun for me. I've really enjoyed it. I've been working it for him for about five years, now and trying to sell it. It's been difficult, because nobody's got any money they want to put into anything like that, nowadays. It's too bad. This thing, at best, you could end up with every truck on the road could have wheel motors, because this is a perfect wheel motor. The motor, you just put the tire rod around the motor.

What you'd have is some sort of a power plant, diesel power plant, a gasoline power plant, centrally located in the truck, wires going to the wheels. All of the stuff that you've got now in a truck or a car, drive shafts and all of that, you don't need it. You've just got wires going to each of the wheels. So, if this process works, you could end up powering every vehicle that required a high torque at a low speed, farm vehicles for example, tractors. It's perfect for all that.

DePue: And much more fuel efficient as well?

Thunman: Oh, yes, 20 percent more efficient. Not only is the motor itself more efficient, but the fact you take all that weight off of the vehicle. Anyway, I came to the company, and I immediately... Everything we had was on paper. You have to demonstrate that you really do have a capability for real, with real motors, with real demonstrations.

So I thought the best thing to do would be to go for some smaller motors. The one that really came to my mind right away was these swimmer delivery vehicles that needed more efficient motors, because the more efficient the motor was, the farther that thing could go back and forth. You needed something that could operate in seawater. This thing operates in seawater, flooded; it makes no difference, perfect.

So that's what we came... I took to the Navy, and I think my past business in the Navy helped quite a bit, to get to see the right people. But we were able to demonstrate and show that this was a technology that worked. And we'll go ahead with it.

DePue: You said, "We took to the Navy." You're talking about just within the last few years?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: I do want to get you back into the 1980s, though, Admiral. What I wanted to ask you about... I think you were quite heavily involved with the development of the new Seawolf-class of submarines.

Thunman: Oh gosh, yeah.

DePue: I want to quote. I think I'm quoting from this book that you had loaned to me, *Cold War Submarines*, by Norman Polmar and K.J. Moore, Kenneth J. Moore?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Here's the quote that I had put down from the book. "Group Tango..." I think, Tango for Thunman.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: "A group of submarine officers and engineers to help determine the characteristics for the SSN-21. This all-Navy, classified study group addressed seven characteristics, (1) speed, (2) depth, (3) torpedo tubes, (4) weapons loads, (5) arctic capability, (6) radiated noise, and (7) sonar effectiveness." Can we go down the list?

Thunman: Sure.

DePue: Let's start with SSN-21, a large, 9,000 pound displacement—

Thunman: Let me tell you how it became SSN-21, which is interesting.

DePue: SSN stands for, again?

Thunman: Well, again, submarine, attack submarine, nuclear. As you know, we've numbered our submarines from the beginning. We started with SS-1 and on and on, up to 700s, when I was selling. What I did more than just from Group Tango, we had to sell this submarine. I had to sell it to the Navy. I had to sell it to Defense. I had to sell it to Congress. That's why I ended up there five years.

DePue: Well, maybe I should back up a little bit and ask you how Group Tango got started in the first place.

Thunman: When Hayward left CNO, Lehman was in place; Rickover was leaving, was gone, I got a memo...It was interesting. Hayward had not left. I had been trying to push a new submarine, but I wasn't the first. The people ahead of me had been trying to push a new design submarine.

DePue: Something to replace the Los Angeles-class.

Thunman: Yeah. I had tried, and I had not succeeded. But all those political decisions had been made, and I get a memo...I wish I'd kept it; I didn't. My good friend, George Sawyer, who was the assistant secretary of the Navy and who John Lehman had great respect for, he had been a submariner. George Sawyer had been at nuclear training prototype with me, years before, a tough guy. I was afraid of him as a young lieutenant. I get the memo from him, "You are hereby authorized to design a new submarine."

Then, about an hour later, a memo comes down from the CNO that Hayward had left. "You are hereby authorized to design a new submarine." Each of them wanted to be the first (both laugh) to authorize it, so they could say it. I always made everybody understand it was George Sawyer who ordered it first, because I didn't like Lehman either.

There I sat. My God, we've got to design a new submarine. Rickover is gone. Rickover had always designed all the submarines, had always been involved with what kind of submarine and had never really let the Navy do its own thing. So, I went over to see Ken McKee, who had relieved Rickover. McKee was as much involved with this, as well. I can't take it away from McKee.

McKee said to me, he said, "Well." He was a four-star, and I'd known him for years. And I said, "I frankly don't know how to proceed." I said, "Your offices have always designed the submarines, and now for the first time, the CNO is going to design a submarine." I said, "I'm not sure I can hack that. I don't know what to do, exactly."

He said, "Well, get together a group of people to establish the single ship characteristics, very important. I understood that. Every ship has got a set of characteristics. Why [are] you building the ship? It's to do this, this, this, this. The Navy had gotten away from that, pretty much. He said, "Why don't



you establish a group. Name it something like Group Tango.” It wasn’t me. I said, “Okay, that’s a good idea.”

So I went back, and I picked out about ten of the brilliant submarine minds in Washington, a couple of McKee’s people, people from Naval Sea Systems Command, people in the Pentagon, people out in the fleet. We would meet every day at 4:00 and go to about midnight.

DePue: Were these people engineers?

Thunman: Some were operational submariners; some of them were engineers. Rickover’s people, of course, were brilliant on their side of it, but I had some operational people. I had COMSUBLANT would come up periodically. It was Group Tango.

There were certain things I wanted to get done, as I’ve said earlier. I wanted, of course, [to] emphasize land attack. I wanted as many weapons as we could get. Now, the books are all wrong, and I fight with these guys. They say, “Well, this was the submarine that they designed to defeat the Soviet submarine force.” Wrong. That was not the way. That was not in my mind at all.

I’ve got to tell you, I drove what this submarine was going to be, because the CNO said, “Do what you think is right.” [He] never got into it, never said, “Oh, that’s too many torpedoes, or that’s not enough.” He never got into it. I’d go up there and talk to him about this. He’d say, “Whatever you think.” [He was] busy, doing other things.

McKee wanted a 12,000 ton submarine. The other senior submariner, who later became CNO, Carl Trost, said, “No that’s too big. We ought to have an 8,000 ton submarine, where there should be just maybe 1,000 tons or so more than the Los Angeles.” I said, “Well, I think the weight should be enough so that we could have eight torpedo tubes.” Our attack submarines only had four in those days.

DePue: Front and back?

Thunman: No, just put it in the back. You’ve got the propulsion plant. So it would have eight torpedo tubes, and these forward tubes should be capable of firing all the weapons. I didn’t want any vertical launch. I felt that we could come later with vertical launch, make the submarine longer if necessary or put them up in the bow, but let’s put them all inside the ship, because if you put them inside the ship, then you give the commander the opportunity to shoot either Tomahawks or regular ASW and anti-ship weapons. Because you’ve got them all stored inside, you can change out.

DePue: All through the vertical—

Thunman: The forward end of the ship, in the torpedo room. If you've got all your weapons, fifty weapons. Up to that time, the most we could carry in a submarine was twenty-five weapons. This submarine carried fifty weapons. That's what I said, eight tubes and fifty weapons.

DePue: Why would you need that many tubes?

Thunman: So that you could fire a lot of weapons, without having to reload. It takes a little time to reload.

DePue: What, a few minutes?

Thunman: Yeah. But you may want to fire, depending what you're doing... If you're going to go shoot land attack weapons, you may want to go shoot eight right now, pull out, then reload. So, I thought all of that through, that land attack and also the capability for the commander to make the decision, "What are we going to do now?" If he decides he's got to go up against a ship force, he doesn't want to have a bunch of Tomahawks in there that maybe he can or can't use. Or, if he's going to go up against other submarines, of course, he can't use the Tomahawk. And incidentally, I've recently read—I may have told you this before—that the commanders, the combatant area commanders, love those submarines. They come out and say, "This gives me the ability to make decisions, one way or the other, of what that submarine's going to do, because I've got—

DePue: A little bit of versatility?

Thunman: Yeah, tremendous versatility. You've got twice as many weapons, and half of them... or whatever mix you want. If you want to make them all Tomahawks, you can.

So, it was Group Tango. I'm up there now starting my first testimony to Congress about this new submarine. Boy, this went on and on. I'll tell you, it was... I think I had the opportunity to brief, I'd say, at least half of the senators, one-on-one, and (interruption).

Are you still down there? Owsley? Owsley? Bess, [the dog] you are just going to have to stay out here.

DePue: We're talking to the Scottie, your faithful Scottie.

Thunman: I'm in the Sea Power Subcommittee, and old Charlie Bennett, he was the chairman...

DePue: This is the Senate, you say?

Thunman: This was Congress, the House Sea Power Subcommittee, with Charlie Bennett. I'm in there talking about the Los Angeles-class submarine and the

new attack submarine, back and forth. And he's sitting there, looking at me. He says, "Admiral," he says, "I don't know what you're talking about, which submarine [are] you talking about?" And he said, "Why don't you name it something?" I said, "Well, yes, sir, we'll do that." He said, "Why don't you name it SSN-21, submarine for the 21st Century?" I said, "Mr. Chairman, that's a great idea." (laughs) I went back...

Here [is] the history of the submarine force. [They] had named their submarines from one up to 700 and something, and we became SSN-21. We started all over. We sat down, and by that time, they'd been naming attack submarines Los Angeles and Albuquerque, you know, after cities. But we decided now we're going to go back to the old World War II. It was a lot more romantic.

So we went back, and we studied what submarines had done the best in World War II. There'd been two submarines named *Seawolf*. One was a World War II submarine, which had a great record during the war. Then there had been a *Seawolf* built after the war, which had been a Regulus missile firing submarine but then had been converted to launch SEALs too.

It was a good name; *Seawolf* was a good name. The name itself was a rocky name. So it became SSN-21 *Seawolf*. I've been criticized... You find people criticized me [on] how I had screwed up the numbering system for submarines. They got three of the *Seawolf*-class. Then they stopped building them, because they were too expensive.

[interruption] I'm going to have to let him [the dog] in, I think.

DePue: Okay, let me unhook you here. We'll pause.

[pause in recording]

DePue: Well, Admiral, we've been talking for a little bit, about the *Seawolf*-class. I had started by talking about these various criteria—and you'd mentioned them yourself—Is it worth going down the list?

Thunman: Sure, we'll very quickly go through them.

DePue: Speed.

Thunman: Speed, the fastest submarine we ever built. I can't tell you what speed it is. We came up with a number. Admiral McKee, of course, was the guy putting together the propulsion plant and all, but we beat that number by two or three knots.

DePue: This might sound like a stupid question, but why was that so important?

Thunman: Well, to get from A to B. You go from Honolulu to the Straits of Hormuz. When I was COMSUBPAC, I sent an attack submarine to the Straits of Hormuz at thirty-knot SOA, speed of advance; [it] still took you about two weeks.

DePue: Was that submerged or on the surface?

Thunman: Submerged, always submerged. These ships are not designed to operate very fast on the surface.

DePue: So they can go faster submerged.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, yeah. They're designed to operate submerged. You want the speed and the quietness to go along with the speed. As you see, one of the requirements is it's got to be quiet. You want to be able to go fast and quiet, so that you're not detected.

DePue: Radiated noise, is that what that means?

Thunman: Radiated noise, yes.

DePue: Now, can you talk about where you guys were in relation to the Soviets at the time?

Thunman: At the time, our submarines were a little bit better. But the Soviets were building. They had been working hard, and they started to come out with new designs. They were getting close to us.

DePue: In terms of both radiated noise and speed?

Thunman: Yes. As a matter of fact, their submarines could run up and go faster than ours. They had a couple of designs, and they were doing some... They had done some magnificent things in the world of materials. I'm trying to think of the name of that submarine, but it could go deeper. I think they advertised it could go down to 5,000 feet and things like that. They were doing a lot of things in their submarines.

DePue: Since you just mentioned it, let's talk a little bit about depth and what your criteria was for that.

Thunman: Okay, speed, fast, you've got to have that, just to get from A to B, so you can bring your weaponry to bear. The quietness is essential. You've got to be able to detect the other guy, and shoot before he detects you and shoots. That's a basic. That's what we'd been involved with for several years, trailing their submarines, always in a position to fire before they could fire, if necessary. The depth didn't need to go 5000 feet, in my view. My concept was, build the torpedo to go to 5,000 feet. You can do that. That's a heck of a lot cheaper than building a submarine to go to 5,000 feet. I felt 1,000 feet was enough.

DePue: To build it so it can go deeper means you've got a thicker hull, which means that's heavier and heavier?

Thunman: Oh gosh, yeah. All of your piping has got to be more robust, the hull, of course. You're talking about a lot of money to make a capable, 5,000-foot submarine. But you can build a torpedo to do it for a lot cheaper. So the concept was, build, go to the depth you think would be reasonable. I just decided 1,000 feet was enough. Of course, it wasn't just me. [It was] all of us sitting there, night after night after night, agonizing over this.

Quietness. One of the things we did was design a completely new torpedo tube that was quiet when you launched a torpedo. That was hard, a big torpedo, to get it out of the submarine and launch force it out, using air, compressed air, to push it out. It's a noisy operation.

DePue: So the torpedo is not going out on its own power; it's being forced out?

Thunman: Yeah. It's ejected, and then the propulsion system starts at the same time. But it's launched with air.

DePue: I would think that's quite a signature you're letting everybody know too.

Thunman: Absolutely. What we did was we turned it over to one of the big laboratories, Westinghouse Labs, to build a torpedo ejection pump, which would, rather than forcing air and launching the torpedo with air, you had a pumping system that built up the pressure and forced it out, which was very quiet an operation. It was designed that way.

DePue: With seawater?

Thunman: Yeah. The design of that was almost an eighth wonder of the world. We spent a hell of a lot of money doing it. But they did it. It was about ten years ago now, maybe six or seven, two four-star admirals, submariners, called me one day. They asked me to go to sea on one of the SSN-21s. I went to sea on the *Connecticut*, just these two admirals and I. They had both worked for me when we were putting together the twenty-one process. They'd been commanders.

I thought it was awful nice of them to do that. When I got there, I thought, Well, they've got probably twenty, thirty admirals here that could go out. It was just them and me. They wanted me to see what had happened. How [far] had we come in meeting these criteria? It was a very nice thing.

We went out, and they had one other guy, an assistant secretary of the Navy. That's a different story. He wanted to talk to me about putting women in submarines. I knew him from my congressional days. We were in the torpedo room, and I told the skipper that was with me, I said, "You know

skipper, I'd like to hear a water slug fired. Let's see how quiet you got the water slug."

DePue: What's a water slug?

Thunman: Rather than shoot a torpedo, you go through the same process—

DePue: It's a dummy round.

Thunman: A dummy, yeah. So I'm standing there talking to these guys. Finally, I turned back to the skipper; I said, "When are you going to shoot the water slug?" He says, "We shot it." I thought, Huh? I hadn't heard a thing. (both laugh)

DePue: Well, it had to make you feel really good, though.

Thunman: Yeah. So, that's part of the quieting story. Plus, we went to a propulsor, rather than a propeller. A propulsor is kind of like a jet, where you force the water into a tubular area, into a big tube. It was first talked about in the *Hunt for Red October*. That was supposedly the new propulsion system in the *Hunt for Red October*.

DePue: The Soviet sub.

Thunman: Yeah. That's when I first heard of a propulsor.

DePue: But the sonar guy was picking up the difference in the sound, as I recall in the story.

Thunman: Yeah. That's the first time I heard of a propulsor. I remember, we brought that up, "What about a propulsor?" Of course, the propeller, although we had gone as far as we could in propeller design, there was still noise there that you would like to get rid of. We were talking about it, and I said, "What's feasible with a propulsor?" Well, the design had not gone along too far, and you can't get a lot of speed out of it. This was now about the time of the Argentine war [with] the Brits.

DePue: The Falklands.

Thunman: The Falklands. Then one of the guys said, "Well, the Brits have designed a propulsor, and I understand it operates pretty well. They've got it on one of their submarines." As I think I've told you before, I was a hero in Great Britain, because I'd given up partial use of the satellite that we used to control our submarines, the fleet ballistic missile submarines.

The Brits asked us, "Can we use some of that satellite, so that we can talk to our submarines out in the Falklands, in our ships." I went in to see Watkins with it. He said, "You do what you think is right." He said, "Don't you screw up that ballistic missile system though." I went back, and we

looked and worked and finally decided we could do it. We would not threaten our [the U.S. Navy's] use. Of course, that was our strategic deterrent, being able to communicate with those submarines.

So I was a hero with the Brits. We called over; could I go over and look at their propulsor? "Absolutely, come right away." [I] got on a plane and went over there and was met and taken to the Vickers Shipyard in Great Britain, immediately. Boy, [there were] cars waiting. I mean, you talk about royal treatment. Got to the shipyard, big luncheon in Vickers.

They had these old offices, wonderfully paneled offices. Drank a little too much and all that, just hail fellow well met. Went down, and they'd gotten the submarine. They pumped out at dry dock, put it in the dry dock. It was like two days. All I'd said was I want to look at one. There I stood on a platform they had built, looking at this propulsor.

DePue: Did you have anybody with you?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. I had a couple of my guys with me. We looked at it, and my God. The great thing about it was, you could not...It's a shrouded propeller kind of arrangement. You didn't have that really finely honed propeller sticking out for somebody to hit. We took all the dope [information] they had. They'd done a pretty good job in developing it. So that's what we put on, the propulsor, quieting.

DePue: Are you saying then, the *Seawolf* did not have the conventional—

Thunman: Propeller, no. It does not. It's got the propulsor. Subsequent to that, even the Virginia-class now, the new attack submarines that came after *Seawolf*, went to propulsors. But that was an interesting story.

So, we addressed the quieting. The major points of quieting were involved with the propulsion plant, the propulsor, of course, the firing of weapons, of course. Quieting is essential for a submarine. The unique capability of a submarine is nobody knows it's there.

DePue: You mentioned before, though, that initially, when you're looking at the propulsor system, the speed wasn't the same as you had with the propeller. Were you able to achieve that?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, we were. Again, the submarine goes faster. I was amazed when I went out to sea on the *Connecticut*. We were back, between the main engines, and I said, "Well, I'd like to see you wind her up the flank, emergency flank." We were doing five or ten knots or something, and let's go. They gave them an emergency flank bell. I stood there and just marveled at the fact that you could hardly tell that they'd changed speed. They went from five or six knots, up to thirty-plus, like, just wound her right up.

DePue: Well, a couple other of your criteria...One was arctic capabilities.

Thunman: You had to harden the sail, harden the mast, et cetera, harden the topside, so that you could break through the ice.

DePue: My thoughts about that is watching *Ice Station Zebra*, or reading the book.<sup>96</sup> Why do you need to do that?

Thunman: Well, if you have an emergency, you may have to get up through the ice, or you're just going to die. If the plant for some reason goes down, and you can't get it back in twenty minutes, you're dead. You've got to have electric power. You've got to be able to break up through the ice and use your emergency diesel.

DePue: So we typically do have ballistic missile submarines that are floating underneath ice?

Thunman: Everybody is ice hardened.

DePue: Everybody?

Thunman: Yeah, of our newer submarines. From the very beginning, with *Nautilus* and all, they were all ice hardened, because we always have had the requirement to operate up there. It turned out, in my day is when the Soviets started operating in the ice. They designed their new ballistic missile submarine, the *Typhoon*, huge, 25,000 tons.

DePue: Over twice as large as the ones you had.

Thunman: Yes, yeah. They designed that submarine to operate in the ice and to break up through the ice and launch.

DePue: Did you have a thickness of ice that you were going for?

Thunman: Well, it was four to six feet. It's about, maybe... Yeah, around that, maybe six feet. Generally though, you can find the polynya...I don't know if you speak polynya, but there are areas, the areas of the ice, where the ice is continually moving. It cracks, and then it freezes over. There are kind of pools in the ice that are thinner, as they are in the freezing process. Now, a lot of the ice is twenty feet thick. You can't break up through that.

DePue: The last one is sonar effectiveness.

Thunman: Well, you want your sonar to be able to detect them before they detect you. It's the same. You've got to maintain your quieting so that you're

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<sup>96</sup> The story of a U.S. Navy nuclear sub, the USS *Tigerfish* that must rush to the North Pole to rescue the staff of *Ice Station Zebra* weather station.



undetectable to them, to their best submarine or detection system. You've got to also have a sonar that will detect them first. So, quieting and sonar come together. You've got to have the better sonar, which we did, and the quieter ship. Both of that goes together. You can't give away one, without losing some of your combat effectiveness.

DePue: According to the book, *Cold War Submarines*, Group Tango only achieved three of the seven goals.

Thunman: I don't know why he said that.

DePue: Arctic capability, radiated noise and sonar effectiveness.

Thunman: See, well, that's Norman Polmar. Now, he's the one I told you about, who wanted us to build diesel powered submarines. I saw him here the other day. I went back to the Submarine League.

DePue: In Washington, D.C.?

Thunman: Yeah. He and I have been enemies for so many years. He's the one who snuck into the Senate hearings. I told you that story, I think. It was during this timeframe. We were working on all of these things, and he didn't like what was going on with 21s [SSN-21s]. He wouldn't have liked anything we did. He wanted to build diesel electric submarines. That was it.

DePue: Because?

Thunman: Mainly because there were some shipyards who wanted to sell diesel electric submarines, to be honest with you. It was all that, starting [with] HDW in Germany.<sup>97</sup>

He had Congress helping him out too, Cohen, Senator Cohen, Congressman Whitehurst, down there in Virginia. But they had under the table deals going, in my view, with HDW. Now, I can't prove it, but those bastards, they weren't interested in anything other than building diesel submarines. Of course, they're cheaper than this submarine. That made a lot of difference to him. So that's baloney.

The [SSN-21] submarine is the fastest submarine in the world; it still is. He can't say we didn't achieve what we wanted there. And it's the most heavily armed submarine. So there's no way he can... So he just made it up. He's the one who goes around and says, "Well, submarines are no longer very useful, because the Soviets, they're no longer your major threat," which is nuts, which is crazy. Our combatant commanders today, on their own, say, "This is the best weapon I've got. I can move it into the South China Sea,

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<sup>97</sup> Howaldtswerke-Deutsche Werft (often abbreviated HDW) is a German shipbuilding company, founded in 1838 and headquartered in Kiel.

where they're trying to prevent our entrance today...not only move it in there, but come in there with a lot of weapons, come in there quickly and quietly.”

DePue: There are several different directions I want to go here. Let's start with this one. I understand that not many of the *Seawolf*-class submarines were built. Is that correct?

Thunman: Three.

DePue: Just three. Why so few?

Thunman: Well, this was in the big...Clinton came in. The Soviet Union was gone. The peace dividend was taken. So, they decided to stop building these ships and go back to [the] design of a cheaper class.

DePue: So, in other words, after the demise of the Soviet Union in '91, I believe—

Thunman: Yeah. We were going to build thirty of them.

DePue: Obviously you have a lot invested in this. What's your reaction to that decision?

Thunman: I can understand it, and I would have carried it out. I thought, for a while, at that point, maybe I ought to jump in and start writing some articles, especially with Polmar's baloney. But I decided that...It wasn't because I was lazy or anything, but I thought, That's not the right thing to do. They had a funding problem.

The administration had made a decision to address the problem. But the administration had not cut its...It still kept—if you notice, over the years since then, since they went away from the *Seawolf*-class—they still kept submarines at the top of the list of what they're building in the Navy.

DePue: Which administration? Was this the tail end of the Bush one, or the beginning of Clinton?

Thunman: It was the beginning of Clinton. I get angry when they say, “Look at what Clinton was able to do. My God, this amount of taxes and this kind of...” Well, he got all of his money out of the military. He took all that money, and he dumped it into entitlements. A couple of my SSN-21s are— (laughs)

DePue: Until 9/11.

Thunman: Until 9/11.

DePue: Which is the same old story, repeated over and over again in American history.

Thunman: That's right. (laughs)

DePue: I wonder if there are any other stories to tell about your attending this *Seawolf* launching, the class of submarines. You had alluded to a story about the assistant secretary of the Navy and women on submarines.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. This wasn't the launching; it's we went to sea. I said I was surprised to find that I was the only admiral there. There was this assistant; this was the assistant secretary of the Navy, who I had known. He had been on the Senate Armed Services Committee staff when I was [on] active duty, and he had attended all my briefings.

I guess one of his jobs was to follow the *Seawolf*. I knew him fairly well. He had left that part of government and gone and become an assistant secretary of the Navy. He was probably the number two guy. I can't remember his name. So, I'm there with these two admirals. I thought, I wonder why he's here? Then I thought, Well, I guess maybe he just wanted to see how I was doing or something like that.

We went out and went to sea for a day. As we went along, he kept talking about, well, if you had women, how would they fare in this environment? I realized why those two admirals, although they were being nice to me. But why they had invited me was they knew how much I was against putting women in submarines. They didn't want to ask me, "Hey come and help us" or anything like that. That would have been wrong for them. But I thought, An, I got the signal. They want me to take this guy on. They don't want to take him on; I take him on, in a respectful way.

Then I start my spiel. Wherever we go, I start talking about how difficult it would be for women to operate in this environment. I remember they had one passageway, it was about this wide—

DePue: About four feet, two feet?

Thunman: Yeah, and you had to back up. If somebody was coming the other way, you had to back up, and you slide by each other. I remember saying, "You know, Mr. Secretary, that would be really great to...I wished we'd had that after thirty, forty days at sea, with women. I'd have been up and down that passageway all the..." (both laugh) He was looking at me; he knew I was—I was having fun at it.

We got into the crew's compartment, where the bunks... There's only maybe a couple of feet passage between the bunk. You had a bunk here and a...I said, "You know, Mr. Secretary, I come from Illinois, kind of like Kansas and all, the Middle West. The mothers are not going to be real happy out there if they've got Johnny's rear end over here and Mary's over here, and there's only a couple of feet between them." I said, "That's not going to go

over too well with those people out there. It would be all right for New York, maybe, but..." (both laugh) He said, "Well, yeah."

Then I'd talk about, "You know, we would go to the showers." I said, "All the years I spent in submarines," I said, "Most of the time, in the showers, we kept potatoes, because we didn't have room to put them anywhere else." I said, "You're still going to be stacking food on the decks, if you go for ninety or a 120 days."

So, by the end of the day, he said to me, "I've got it very clear. You're very much against putting women in submarines." He said, "What is your bottom line, big picture bottom line, about that, right now?" I said, "Well, one thing," I said, "If you put women on a submarine, and you lose that submarine, you will have lost the administration for the next eight or ten years. People will never forgive it. It was the women who caused the problem. There'll be those who say it. You conduct these social experiments on a submarine, then you have a problem with the submarine, they're going to turn to that social experiment."

I said, "You ask people, what is the *Thresher* today? Everybody can kind of tell you what the *Thresher* was. We lost a submarine. They made a bad decision on how you take care of the piping joints." When I hit him with the potential political impact, that was it. They didn't say a word.

Now, this was a good eight years ago. Nobody said anything about women in submarines, until this current [Obama] administration. It was dead.

DePue: Are there women on submarines now?

Thunman: They just made the decision, within the past year, to put women in submarines. And it got off to a terrible start. The first thing they did was they put women midshipmen on submarines for a week or two, periods in the summer, when the midshipmen, like cadets, go out and do practical things.

The first one they do, they assign women... The chief of the boat, of the submarine, who is the senior submarine sailor, enlisted sailor... The captain talks to you about morale. He's [the chief of the boat] the driver of the troops; he's the sergeant major of that submarine crew. [phone rings] So they're out there, and it turns out he and one of the women midshipmen get together and have an affair on the boat, unh!

DePue: I think you and I discussed that one before. I think it's a little bit ironic that just last Friday, just a few days after the election, the news breaks that CIA director, former General David Petraeus resigns, because he had made the mistake of getting involved in a relationship with a young woman. He was being compromised, because of it, so he had to resign.

Now there's General Allen, who's the current commander in Afghanistan. I don't know if any of this plays into your views about women on submarines, but I'll put it out there for you.

Thunman: Well, it's been a difficult problem for the Navy, the 20 percent pregnancy rates in the aircraft carriers. There are certainly indications the women get pregnant on purpose, so they don't have to make their deployments, because once you become pregnant, they take you off the ship. Apparently the medical people have indicated that that's the right thing to do to protect the woman and the baby. The rest of the world has done it; I would agree. They used to come at me with that. But the rest of the world only goes out for a few days. The rest of the world doesn't go out for 100 days or more. Then you get into a real terrible situation.

Back when I was sending submarines out to the Straits of Hormuz from Honolulu, I had one submarine out there for 110, 120 days. We were throwing oranges over, because we couldn't get small boats in the water. The seas were too bad, so we were throwing oranges over to it, like baseballs, just to get them a little bit of food.

I just think there's...I think it's very difficult to find a woman who could withstand all of that and have the physical strength required. You and I have been through that too, I think. It takes kind of a special guy, in my mind, to be a submariner. It's kind of a unique environment, and there are so many different requirements in your capabilities. I just don't think you can find many women who can do that.

DePue: I want to change subjects a little bit. You've talked a little about this already, but a big part of your job, in this last assignment, must have been testifying before Congress.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, it was almost **half** of my job.

DePue: How much training, if any, did you receive from the Navy to do that in the first place?

Thunman: I didn't. Today we do. There's a course now; they call it...The strategic study group, I think, it's called. When you make admiral, you spend a couple of months, and they go over how to do that. My first testimony was terrible, just terrible. My problem was that I was trying to answer their questions. In this environment, you answered a question. You answered **the** question. You go back to the old Rickover interview days, ATQ, answers the question. Well, I found that destroyed you. What you did was, you answered the question that you wished they had asked. (DePue laughs) I watch these politicians today, and they're all expert at it. I had learned that the hard way.

After that first one that I went in to, I was talking to those... I go back to those consultants, old Gray Armistead, who worked for Newport News, but came in and mentored me. [phone rings]

DePue: Gray Armistead?

Thunman: Yeah, Gray Armistead. He was the one who was the Newport News lobbyist that came in. Remember the story? When they came in, they said, "Well I think he'll do." They befriended me.

DePue: Yeah, we did talk about that.

Thunman: They watched me pretty closely. Anyway, afterwards, he came... He was there during the hearings, and he said, "It's terrible. You've got to answer the question you want to answer." So, I got better, and I got better. But the best thing I did was... Maybe I told you the story about where my deputy, Bruce DeMars, who relieved me when I left. He said, "We ought to show them our pictures that we take through the periscope during these special operations." And I said, "Oh, gosh, no, nobody does that." You sit there at a table, in a semicircle around you. Nobody gets up and shows TV pictures and operations.

I'd had a young guy who, when I was skipper of this patrol craft, who was a Princeton graduate. He turned out, he stayed in the Reserves for all those years, and he became a very successful public affairs guy. But he would do his two weeks of active duty every year. One year I saw him. He asked if he could come and to do active duty for me in the Pentagon. I said, "Sure." He was really good in public relations, public affairs. He didn't know anything about the Navy. (laughs)

I had him there one day, and I said, "Well, my deputy thinks that we ought to put this stuff on tape and show it to Congress. I'd give my briefing, standing up and referring to this." I said, "I don't think that's very good at all." He said, "Oh, no. God, that'd be wonderful," he said. He said, "You know, you used to come out and talk to our little crew of fifty. That was the best thing that you could do. You'd get out there and talk and wave your arms. They loved it." And he said, "You do fine that way. You're better off doing that that way."

So we went into the first one. We had to clear the whole room. We had special people in there, with wands and things, to be sure that we could bring this material in, because it was highly classified, what we'd been doing. We sat down, and I got up, and I said, "Mr. Chairman, I'd like to show you these pictures we've taken on our submarine patrols." These congressmen [are] all sitting there, going, "Oh shit." You could see it, and I thought, Oh, this is going to be terrible.

DePue: Is this in the House or the Senate?

Thunman: Well, it started off in the House. I had about a dozen or so guys there, maybe more; they're all kind of sitting there. So I got up, and I say... We had very carefully picked out the scenes. I nicknamed it, *The Best of Groucho*.<sup>98</sup> Remember, Groucho used to have a program called *The Best of Groucho*?<sup>99</sup> Well, I named this *The Best of Groucho*.

We opened this thing up with a Soviet submarine, launching a surface to surface missile, the submarine submerged, and the missile coming out of the water and going and hitting a target. One of our submarines had taped that all, through the periscope. I never saw a bunch of men... (laughs) They go, "What? Look at that!" (both laugh) All of the sudden, they were on the edges of their seats. You're sitting there; they're elevated, and you're down, when you testify. They're all up.

I'd say, "Well, this is this class of submarine, and this is what they were firing, and this is their capability." Then I'd go to the next scene. Pretty soon a couple of them were up on the desks, on their hands and knees, so they can see better. This went on. It was the most successful thing I ever did.

Then it became a big deal in Washington. If you hadn't seen our testimony, then you weren't anybody, because we had just not limited any of the congressmen. We'd gotten the authority to show all this stuff to these people. Everybody wanted to see it; come to their offices. Then the Senate got into it.

Maybe I told you the story. Old Senator Stennis, who'd lost both of his legs from diabetes. He wanted me to come over and show that to him. His staff, I remember, said, "Now look, five minutes. You've no more than five minutes; it's all you get."

DePue: Yeah, we have heard that.

Thunman: They came out in four hours. (laughs) So, it was probably one of the most successful things that we did. That was damn near half my job. I had a great relationship with the Congress. When I left, Senator Warner put together a luncheon, and there were several—

DePue: Is this John Warner from Virginia?

Thunman: Yeah, John Warner put together a luncheon for me. There was about a dozen congressional personages there. I just saw John Warner here, two weeks ago at the Submarine League. He was there. He was being recognized as a

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<sup>98</sup> Julius Henry Marx, 1890 -1977, was known professionally as Groucho Marx. An American comedian, writer, stage, film, radio and television star, he was known as a master of quick wit and was widely considered one of the best comedians of the modern era.

<sup>99</sup> Syndicated in the 1970s as *The Best of Groucho, You Bet Your Life*, was an American comedy quiz series, hosted by Groucho Marx, which aired on both radio and television. It made its radio debut on October 27, 1947.

distinguished friend of the submarine force, over the years. We met. They put the dinner together, so I sat at the head table, next to him. We hugged each other. My God, I hadn't seen him for all those years.

I had a great relationship with the Congress. One of the reasons I know I did was because...I forget under what circumstances, I was up in Jim Watkins's offices. This is right before I was leaving to go to down to CNET. At that point, I was thinking of leaving the Navy, not go to CNET. Watkins was on the phone, saying, "Well, I'm talking to Thunman about..." whatever. The other person said something that I didn't hear, and he [Watkins] says, "Well, I've got to tell you, the Congress sure likes him." I thought, For Watkins ever to say anything nice about anybody was unusual. So, I had a great relationship. But I don't know that there are many military officers who had such a close relationship with Congress as I had.

DePue: I want to take you back to the very beginning of this discussion and your first lesson, to not answer the question, to answer the question you wanted to answer. Why was it so dangerous to answer their question?

Thunman: Well, they'd box you in. They'd ask you a question...Much of the time they'd ask you a question which was going to lead you into negative territory. They'd kind of like what you did in the beginning here. "Polmar," they said, "You didn't meet...Norman Polmar says you didn't meet these requirements." You'd say, "Well, we did in this one. This one we didn't quite meet it or we've..." Rather than dwell on where you might be missing the mark, dwell on where you hit the mark.

Just like you, I watch them every day. Of course, this administration is incredible. They **never** answer the question. You can see these newsmen, in today's system, how they work very hard to write out questions that, if you answered them, you'd really get some information. But then nobody ever does.

DePue: Let's change gears again. I think this probably was happening during your timeframe, as well. Were you involved with looking for some of these submarines that had been lost over history?

Thunman: Yes, the *Thresher* and the *Scorpion*. That's a long subject, but I'd be interested to talk to—

DePue: The *Thresher* was lost in April of '63, and the *Scorpion* in May of '68, I understand.

Thunman: Yes. *Thresher*...My submarine, *Plunger*, was the sister ship of *Thresher*. I was executive officer of *Snook*, which was the sister ship of *Scorpion*. I knew these submarines pretty well. I came back to Washington in '81, and I wanted...We knew where both of them were.



DePue: I've got a map here. They're both in the Atlantic, it looks like.

Thunman: Yeah. One is just off Portsmouth, about 100 miles off Portsmouth.

DePue: I don't know if you can see that; it's marked there.

Thunman: And the *Scorpion* is about 200 miles northwest of the Azores. *Thresher* was lost. She was the first of the new class, exotic new class submarine, and she was built—

DePue: I think we talked about that. That was the one that was lost, just diving too far, being tested to see how far it could dive?

Thunman: Well, she didn't dive too far. The skipper didn't go down in levels; he went all the way down to the limiting depth. Rickover told me that story—He said, "You'll screw it up, just like that skipper did."—to say goodbye to me, as I went off to Korea by submarine. (both laugh) But *Thresher* was the fastest then. It was the deepest, diving [13,000] feet. You've got a hell of a lot of pressure down there. I used to take my crew into the crew's nest, the new people in the crew, when I was going out. We would tie a piece of line from one bulkhead to the other, taut, across the crew's nest, which was the expanse of the submarine. Then we'd dive down [13,000] feet, and that piece of line would be laying on the deck. That's how much that hummer was squeezed in.

But anyway, she was built. They had used a defective, a dangerous construction technique of silver brazing the joints, rather than welding the joints. Silver brazing being a lot easier to do than weld joints and piping. They went out on trials. The boat operated pretty well. [It] came back into Portsmouth to address some of the minor material problems.

One of the things they found [was] that they didn't have proper bonding in some of the welds. But they sent her out for more sea trials. They were late getting out there. That's when the skipper made the decision to go straight down, apparently. You could pretty much tell this from the communications that we did have with the submarine before it was lost, that a pipe ruptured, and the spray grounded the electrical systems, the switchboards. It caused the reactor to scram. They lost propulsion. They tried to blow up, using their blow system. One of the things they didn't realize, if you try to blow up from that deep a depth, the filters that they had in the air piping froze with ice. So he had no propulsion; he had no blow system, and they lost the ship.

DePue: Let's move ahead, to looking for it now.

Thunman: Then the *Scorpion*, we didn't know why we lost it. So one of the things, when I came back, when I came into the job, I said, "We've got to look into the *Scorpion* more." There had been a lot of allegations that maybe the Soviets sunk it. Here again, it's up off the Azores, 200 miles.

DePue: It also looks like it would be in awfully deep water, where it was lost.

Thunman: Well, it was about the same as *Thresher*, about 1,300 feet...13,000 feet. I got it wrong, 13,000 feet.

DePue: Well, that's a different equation altogether.

Thunman: Yeah. Bob Ballard, who worked at Woods Hole, had developed a lot of deep water search capability and operational capability, with unmanned vehicles. Much of that was new, and I'd heard about it. I called him in—He's a young fellow, enthusiastic—and said, "Can you go down and take pictures of these sites? A couple of things I'm interested in. One is, has radiation affected the sites in any way? Can you get samples to determine what the radiation is, because the reactors are still there?" In the case of the *Scorpion*, she also had nuclear weapons onboard. So she's not only got a reactor but nuclear weapons. "Two, in *Scorpion*, "Can you get close enough to see what caused her to go down? Why was she lost?" Ballard says, "Well God, great, we can do that. "He said, "But what I'd really like to do, along with it, is look for the *Titanic*."<sup>100</sup>

DePue: Ballard is a civilian, correct?

Thunman: Yeah, up at Woods Hole Laboratories.<sup>101</sup>

DePue: Woods Hill?

Thunman: Woods Hole, up near Portsmouth.

DePue: Where's the money in this for him? He's under contract for the Navy?

Thunman: Yeah, oh, yeah. I said, "Okay, what would it cost?" He said, "Well, I'd like to look for the *Titanic*." And I said, "Hell no. We can't do that." I said, "My God, this is a top secret operation. And we don't have the money to do that." He was a young guy, and I was an older guy, in my fifties at that point. I was kind of tough on him about it.

But he kept coming back. He really wanted to do it, and couldn't we just do that. Finally I said, "Look, I don't care what you do, outside of what you're doing for me. But this is what I'm going to pay you..."—using the old Rickover competitive technique—"...and this is how long you're going to take. You do something else; it's okay with me. I don't care." In my own mind, thinking, You'll never find the damn *Titanic*. They'd been looking for

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<sup>100</sup> *RMS Titanic* was a British passenger liner that sank in the North Atlantic Ocean in the early hours of April 15, 1912, after colliding with an iceberg during its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York City. There were an estimated 2,224 passengers and crew aboard, and more than 1,500 died.

<sup>101</sup> This Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) is an international center for research and education in biological and environmental science was founded in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in 1888.

it...He admitted, he'd spent his life looking for it. He said, as a boy, he always dreamed of finding the *Titanic*.

So off they go. This takes a couple years to get through. They go out and do the *Thresher* and do a good job. [He] comes back. They had good pictures, and things were okay. The radioactivity was not a problem. He said, "I learned something about the *Thresher*, how you would find the *Thresher*." He said, "A ship sinks, and the big pieces go down; the smaller pieces kind of follow the current, as they go down, because the current acts on them for a longer period of time. So, you end up with a trail that leads you to the big piece." If you can find the trail, you can proceed along, because you can only see fifty feet down there, even though he's got powerful lights and cameras.

The next year, he's out looking at the *Scorpion*, in '85, not too long before I left. I get a call from the sea marine telephone, and my EA comes in and says, "Bob Ballard's on the phone; he wants to talk to you, on the marine telephone." I pick up the phone. He says, "We found it!" kind of excited. I said, "You found what?" We knew where the other two ships were. He said, "I can't tell you what we've found, over this phone, but we want to meet you in Portsmouth. The press is going to be there." I said, "All right," and hung up. I said, "Oh my God, they found the *Titanic*." I hadn't told anybody about the *Titanic* being part of that operation.

So I went up to see Jim Watkins, and I said, "I've got good news and bad news." He said, "What's the good news?" I said, "We found the *Titanic*." He said, "Oh my God, that's great, wow! What's the bad news?" I said, "We don't have a program for this. The intelligence committees have not been briefed. This was a top secret operation, and we have merged a unclassified [unclassified], highly visible program with it. We're going to get the hell beat out of us by these intelligence committees for doing that without even telling them that we're doing it."

DePue: And how do you keep that thing a secret?

Thunman: Anyway, I go up, and Watkins says, "You'd better go tell the secretary of the Navy." I go in there, John Lehman, typical politician. I said, "Mr. Secretary, I've got good news." He said, "What's that?" I said, "We found the *Titanic*." He jumps up in the air, "How wonderful! Wow! My God, you've found the *Titanic*!" I said, "And they want you to meet them in Portsmouth." (both laugh) It's one of the smartest moves I ever made. "And they're going to make the announcements and all there." [He said] "Oh, that's great!" And then I kind of slide out of his office, before he asked the question, "What the hell were you doing looking for the *Titanic*?" (laugh)

DePue: It sounds to me like you set the guy up.

Thunman: Well, he goes and tells Reagan. Reagan is delighted. So, it really kind of blunted the committees, the lower level guys, saying, “What the hell were they doing that for? What program is that? Where’d they get the money to do that?” None of those questions ever came.

Afterwards, it came out. But I noticed—and this is due to John Lehman; it wasn’t due to me—that they would say, “We found it,” and “Bob Ballard found it,” and “Bob Ballard of Woods Hole found it.” But nobody said, “Why was Bob Ballard looking for it?” or “Where did Bob Ballard get the money?” or anything. That never came out. It was the fact that he found it, worldwide acclaim. And everybody knew Bob Ballard. That was the beginning of his wonderful career. He stayed a very good friend afterwards.

It wasn’t until the ‘90s when they declassified the Navy’s part in it. There’s a program, a *National Geographic* program, the name of it is, *Titanic: The Final Secret*, is the name of it, which has a guy playing me, talking with a guy who plays Bob Ballard, arguing about whether we ought to go see it.<sup>102</sup> Well, not arguing... They didn’t play it the way they should have. There was arguments, but they played it as if we were doing this together and talked about the fact that we used these two submarine sinkings as an excuse to go look for the *Titanic*. Well, that’s not quite the way it went.

But we did learn a lot about the *Scorpion*. We found that she hadn’t been affected by a torpedo or something like that, that clearly, if you looked at the evidence, the after end imploded. That meant that they got the after end sealed. So, they went down to test depth and then imploded. The forward end though, was pretty much intact. That meant that it had flooded, that there wasn’t an implosion. So, whatever happened, happened inside the submarine, not from outside the submarine.

DePue: So, there was no foul play involved.

Thunman: No, there wasn’t, even though the Soviets, at the time, had a task group about 100 miles away from them, down near the Azores. It was a successful operation on my part, but it was funny that...

I have to tell you, I thought, in my Navy career, I’d done a lot of good things. Nobody remembers any of them, except one thing, that I found the *Titanic*. Later on now... It wasn’t declassified until the ‘90s. Then in the 2000s, *National Geographic* got a hold of me. They brought me back to Washington, and we did this television program. It’s funny, I said to Owsley, I said, “The only thing anybody ever remembered me for was that I was involved with the finding of the *Titanic*.” (laughs)

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<sup>102</sup> *National Geographic* is the world’s premium destination for science, exploration, and adventure. *National Geographic Magazine* is popular for its articles, written by journalists, including science communicators and photo-journalists, and curated by an editorial staff.

DePue: Were you one of the talking heads on this documentary then?

Thunman: Oh yeah, uh huh.

DePue: I'll have to go looking for that.

Thunman: Yeah, you can find it. I've got it, I think, on one of my things. But there are two or three things like it. The name of this one is, *Titanic: The Final Secret*. It's a pretty good program.

The other part about it is, I thought it was a one-time program. They show that thing about once every two or three months, the *National Geographic* Channel. It really tees me off, because they didn't give me a dime. (laughs)

DePue: You could have been a wealthy man.

Thunman: This has gone about five years. If I had just said give me \$100 for every showing. I'd probably be able to buy a new car with it by now. (DePue laughs)

DePue: Did you go looking for any Soviet subs that had been sunk over the years?

Thunman: All of my involvement in that has been fairly classified, but the one area, the *Glomar Explorer*. When I was skipper of the *Plunger*, I was sent out to look... When our operations with *Glomar Explorer* was going on, I was sent out to look in the area to see if there are any Soviet submarines out there poking around, but that's the only thing I was involved with.<sup>103</sup>

One of the operations that was unusual... We used to have what they call these SICRs, Special Intelligence Collection Requirements. They have a list of all kinds of things they want to know in the intelligence world. One of the SICRs was to get a sample of water at the entrance to Vladivostok. They wanted you to get it ten feet off the bottom, which was a little bit close to the bottom.

My first patrol, I was so anxious to do good that I told everybody we're going to go down and do that. So we did it. I think that was done in case they ever wanted to send a SEAL [Sea, Air and Land] team or something like that in or to have some sort of access near the bottom.<sup>104</sup> They wanted to know what the water was like. That was the only thing I ever got involved with, was maybe looking at what the bottom was all about.

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<sup>103</sup> *Glomar Explorer* was a deep-sea drillship platform, initially built for the United States Central Intelligence Agency Special Activities Division's secret operation Project Azorian to recover the sunken Soviet submarine K-129, lost in March 1968.

<sup>104</sup> A SEAL is a member of the Special Forces unit for the U.S. Navy who is trained for unconventional warfare on sea, air and land.

I know off Vladivostok, they used to put buoys in the water, those big mooring buoys; they'd be out there. I caught one of them on my sail plane one day. It scared the hell out of me, because I thought it would get back in the propeller. I put the rudder over right away, turning, trying to slip it off the plane. It slipped, and you could hear it going all the way down the side, "bang, bang!" Each of the compartments reporting that something just went by and hit us. But it didn't hit the screw. The Good Lord was looking out for me. Those are the only exciting things that I've ever gotten involved with [in] underwater operations.

We'll close with this. Back in the *Plunger*, we would do underwater hull inspections of Soviet ships, Soviet submarines, when they'd be up on the surface. We'd come underneath them with a scope, bring your ship about six feet from their bottom.

DePue: And they wouldn't know you were there?

Thunman: No. Come in from behind, and then take pictures. Those were some of the pictures we showed to Congress that they thought were so neat. Of course, we were able to determine a lot about their ships from that surveillance, underwater hull surveillance, about their ship design, the propellers and what their sonars looked like. It was a lot of fun. I used it as a tactic when I came back from my last patrol.

I got involved with this major fleet exercise that Zumwalt wanted conducted, off San Diego. They developed an area the size of the Mediterranean, and they had all these ships and carriers there. My boss, the COMSUBPAC, asked me to go back there and do that job. They said they'd set us up in San Francisco for liberty if we went. He said, "You don't have to do this," because we'd been operating so much. But I thought it was a great thing for the crew to get liberty in San Francisco. So, I says, "Yeah we'll go there."

What we did was, because we were so good at this underwater hull surveillance, and they had all kinds of ASW tricks and plans and things, we got underneath the carrier, and we stayed there. (laughs) None of their ASW... They were fifty feet—We wouldn't be ten feet—fifty or 100 feet under the carrier, just steaming along.

DePue: So they never knew you were there.

Thunman: They never knew we were there. They had aircraft; they had ASW aircraft, and they were going slow at times and speeding up, trying to fake us out. They had all of these tactics.

DePue: Did that include the aircraft dropping microphones, essentially, into the water?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, all of the...their sonar buoys and everything. Of course, we were the carrier. We were sitting there, fifty feet from the carrier all the while. The only thing I'd do was, I'd wait until it looked like the carrier was slowing; it looked like a good point; it didn't seem like there was much going on. I'd quickly pull out, right astern of them, come up and get the antenna up, and I instructed the radio, immediately just break into the net. Don't go to your normal; just break into the net and say, "*Plunger*, position so and so." Then back down we'd go, and get under the carrier again.

So, my boss, Admiral Lacy, said they were just having a great time, because these were the guys observing the exercise, and they're saying, "Well, we know the carrier is now over here." "How do you know that?" "Oh, yeah, we know that." They're giving him the tracking points of the carrier, all around. They're going nuts, trying to figure out how the hell we know where that carrier is.

DePue: Well, didn't the carrier or somebody figure it out when you would fall behind and surface close enough?

Thunman: Well, I know, but we wouldn't surface, no, no. [We'd] just pull back, come up to periscope depth, stick up the antenna, break into the net, and send maybe ten words.

DePue: But at that point, they'd be able to find you. Wouldn't they?

Thunman: Well, at that instant, in that five minutes, if they had one of their ASW aircraft. We're still in their field of noise, but they would have to have somebody looking directly behind the carrier. We would only be maybe fifty yards or 100 yards behind them. I guess the senior guys of the submarines just had more fun with that.

I'll have to say this for the aviators; afterwards they had a big reception there in Ford Island. The three-star aviator admiral was very good about it. I came to the reception. I had a picture like this, that we had developed and framed, of the carrier, on the beam, at about 250 yards. (both laugh) We used that technique for that operation. That's the last one I ever ran, and it was successful.

DePue: Well, Admiral, that's probably a pretty good place to end today. We've been at this for over two hours. We've got to talk about Tom Clancy and a few other things, and then get into your retirement. Maybe next time will be our last session.

Thunman: There's not much to tell in my retirement, other than I got old.

DePue: Thank you.

(end of interview #12)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.13

Interview # 13: November 29, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Thursday, November 29, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. This afternoon I have my thirteenth session with Admiral Ron Thunman.

Thunman: Good afternoon, Admiral. Good to have you back in the house again. (laughs)

DePue: Thank you very much. Well, now we're post-Thanksgiving, and it looks like we've both managed to survive.

Thunman: Survived it, with a great turkey dinner.

DePue: This **might** be our last session, but I know you've got a lot of things that you still want to talk about. I want us to start with something. We're going to have to jump back a few years, to around the 1974 timeframe. For a long time, I believe, this was top secret, classified information. But I wanted to ask you about Project Azorian. Am I pronouncing that right?

Thunman: I don't know whether that's the name associated with it, because I didn't know the code word name. It probably was correct, but I don't know. I do know about the operation that was done in that timeframe. The operation was conducted by a ship called the *Glomar Explorer*. It had been built by Howard Hughes. It was built specifically to raise a portion of a submarine hull or a



submarine hull off the bottom, [a] highly classified, very sensitive operation. It was about 200 miles from Pearl Harbor.

DePue: Why was this one so much more classified than some of the other operations that involved American submarines or even Soviet subs?

Thunman: Well, we never looked at other Soviet submarines on the bottom. This was the one that we knew about. We know they'd lost a submarine there. I can't tell you how we knew about it, whether that's classified or not. But somehow, we intercepted the communications that indicated that they'd lost a submarine there.

It had been a year or two before... I left submarine command in '72, but one of my last jobs was to go into that area and search around to see if there were any Soviet submarines there, as I recall. I didn't know why they sent me up there to do that. It was, "Run up there and see if there's any Soviet submarines around in the area." It was one of the last things I did in command. I found nothing. I figured something was going on, but I just got to know what I needed to know.

DePue: So you had no direct involvement with the project.

Thunman: Not at that time. There is an organization in the Navy that ran this, that continued on for many years, that organization, which I ended up running when I was COMSUBPAC. There were other things that were done that I can't bring out, but this was my first exposure to it. It's quite a ship, the *Glomar Explorer*, a big ship. The bottom opened out, and they had a hoisting apparatus, lifting and hoisting apparatus, that could go down, pick up a submarine, pick up a piece of a submarine, bring it up into the ship, and close the bottom. It was really a James Bond kind of thing. It really was extraordinary.

DePue: But this wasn't an actual submarine that could go to those depths; it was just equipment that could—

Thunman: The equipment, yes. That's right. Interestingly, Howard Hughes is very interested in this stuff, and he paid for most of it, I think, in the initial days. Then later on, we picked it up in the navy funding.

But they got there. They knew where the submarine was. I'm pretty sure they continued our own submarine patrols in the area to find out if the Soviets were going to go and survey all the area as well, on a periodic basis. They got the apparatus down. They got a hold of the submarine on the bottom. I don't know what the depth was. I'd have to go and... I would expect it was 10,000, 15,000 feet, somewhere in there.

They brought it partway up. I guess the after end broke off. You can probably find out better from other revelations on this. But they were able to

bring the forward end, and they were able to bring some of their missiles up. See, that was the big deal.

DePue: We're talking about missiles with nuclear warheads?

Thunman: Yes. This was a... I think it was a Soviet, ballistic missile firing submarine. But it was a diesel electric; it was not a nuclear submarine, as I recall. I think it was a Golf-class. We brought the piece up that had either the whole missile or a portion of the missile. It gave us a great deal of intelligence about what their missile system was, its capabilities, and how you might deter it.

DePue: Well, I believe that the—

Thunman: Let me just add this. You see, that was a mission that we were on for years. It was my entire command tour. Anything having to do with the Soviet missile systems, that was a high priority. To learn, not only the capability of their missiles, but to learn how they actually operated and how we might counter them. That was a special mission, and we had been very successful with it, in the *Plunger*. I can't tell you much more than that. [phone rings] But this operation, which was a couple of years later, was to get their hands on really the missile, was most important.

DePue: I would think the Soviets, 1) knew where their own submarine had gone down and 2) would have been shadowing anybody who was snooping around in that area.

Thunman: Yeah. And that was why we were periodically sending submarines up there to see if they had submarines in the area, shadowing. I'm sure they knew where it was.

DePue: I would guess they knew you were looking for it too.

Thunman: No, no, I don't think so. [It was] all pretty highly classified stuff. The *Glomar Explorer* was constructed like a regular R&D marine survey kind of ship. It had a civilian crew. It was pretty interesting, the way that thing was all put together. I got into it later in the game, when we did other things; then I became part of it. But we're talking about when I was COMSUBPAC. I was... You're talking about now '79, so five years later.

It really was James Bond, the whole thing. I'll never forget, one of the most impressive mariners I've ever met was the skipper of *Glomar Explorer*. He was something. You never met a tougher guy than that. Everything that was done, that was his life. It went above, beyond home and family and anything. It was whatever we were asking him to do. He was an interesting guy.

DePue: Was the CIA involved in this as well?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, yeah, very much involved with it. As you know, we had CIA people. I carried CIA people on the *Plunger*, when I went to sea. I don't know if I've told you that. On each of my patrols, I always had a CIA representative. One of my specially equipped submarines when I was COMSUBPAC, was conducting probably our most sensitive mission. I was in the Pentagon—it wasn't when I was COMSUBPAC; it's when I was COMSUBPAC II—I went out.

They were getting ready to go. They would leave in the black of night from San Francisco area. So I was very uptight about the whole thing. I just wanted to make sure they were ready. Finally I said, "I'm going to go out and look at this thing," at the equipment that we had to support the operation with.

There were a couple of CIA guys there, a typical CIA guy, a great big guy with a big buckle, arrogant, son of a buck. I didn't like him. He just said, "Well, well, it'll be okay. Don't bother me, Admiral. I know what the hell I'm doing." I said, "How do you know it works?" [He said,] "Oh, we've tested this thing. It's in good shape. We're ready to go." I said, "I want to see it work." He said, "Well, we can't do that right now, because we'd have to reset it." I said, "Well, that's okay. Turn it on. When you've convinced me that it works, then you can reset it." [He said] "Yeah, but we hadn't planned on that." I said, "Well, plan on it."

DePue: What is it you're testing here?

Thunman: Well, the equipment that we had. I can't tell you any more than that. It's complex.

DePue: You're being purposely vague on this one.

Thunman: Complex equipment. He said, "Well, you can't do that." I said, "Look, you're not going until you test that thing and show me that it works; prove it to me." [He said,] "Oh, okay." Well, then they tried to turn it on, and it didn't go on. It didn't turn on. He said, "Oh, we know what that... We'll get that fixed on the way. That's a minor thing."

I said, "No, no, no. You're not leaving until I see that equipment work." "Well, you can't do that. I'll go back to Washington, and the director of the CIA and the whole... You can't stop this thing from going." I said, "You just watch. (laughs) This submarine and this captain will not leave this pier until I say so. There ain't nobody you can talk to, unless you, maybe, get the president on the line." He glared at me, and he disappeared to a telephone, came back burning. "All right." he said, "We'll fix it here, and then we'll show you." I don't know who he talked to, but they told him back there, "Hey, if he says that submarine's not going to leave, he's the operational commander; that submarine's not moving a foot."

DePue: Well, they might have been as interested in it actually working, just like you were.

Thunman: Well, he was... I don't know, he never told me what was wrong. But he said it was something they had to reset and all. Frankly, he was just lazy, was what he was your typical CIA; they think they know everything.

Those were very sensitive operations, and I ran them. Of course, as commanding officers, we had missions that supported the CIA. When I was COMSUBPAC, I ran those missions directly and controlled the submarines involved. I had the operational control. When I was deputy CNO of submarines, I was involved with planning them directly, the highest levels in the government. It was a really interesting part of my career, to be involved with all that. We were very, very careful.

There was a book that I would never testify... There's a book called *Blind Man's Bluff*.<sup>105</sup> They wanted me to talk, to interview me, and I wouldn't. It talks about some of the alleged operations. All I'll tell you is there are some of the alleged operations [in it]. My name is in the notes at the end of the book, saying I was a good skipper in Pearl Harbor. That was about all it said [about] me. But I wouldn't interview [with] them. Now, they've interviewed a bunch of other guys, but I wouldn't do it, because I didn't want to go to jail.

But anyway, going back to all this, Azorian clearly was the one that involved the *Glomar Explorer*, which permitted a piece of the submarine and the nuclear missiles to be brought in and analyzed and looked at to see how you might counter it, in its operation.

DePue: Can you tell us anything more about why you would oftentimes have CIA with you, what the CIA representatives were doing?

Thunman: Well, I can't. But we needed **special people** who could review anything that we intercepted that was Soviet and advise us what it might mean.

DePue: This is a different question line altogether, but I wonder if you have any opinion about the Soviet model of command, especially how that worked out on submarines? I'm talking about having a political chain of command as well as a military chain of command.

Thunman: Well, of course, they had the political commissar at their elbow everywhere. I saw that in action when I went to China, when I was chief of naval education and training. I'll talk to you about the China thing. They sent me, and I headed

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<sup>105</sup> *Blind Man's Bluff: The Untold Story of American Submarine Espionage* by Sherry Sontag, Christopher Drew and Annette Lawrence Drew, published in 1998 by Public Affairs Press, is a non-fiction book about U.S. Navy submarine operations during the Cold War.

a group of nine Navy captains to study the Chinese naval training system. They had come to the U.S., and I'd shown them the U.S. Navy training system. Then they, in turn... This was right before Tiananmen Square,<sup>106</sup> when we were as open as we have ever been with the Chinese. It was a very interesting trip, two weeks, seven cities. We went to every part of their Navy. I went to sea on their new destroyer. I toured their submarines.

DePue: Do you recall what year that might have been?

Thunman: Nineteen eighty-eight. It really was an extraordinary opportunity. I probably saw more of China than anybody had up to that time. They took me to their leading technical university, very interesting, about a 100,000, maybe more, students, all studying engineering, an incredible university environment. [I] went through the classrooms and saw that they [were] all learning English, advanced mathematics. I picked up a couple of books. I could see that they were studying the advanced calculus and things like that, necessary for engineers.

The province I went to, which is where they do most of their R&D [research and development] deliberations, Wuhan Province. It's on the Yangtze [River]. I had a wonderful photo album of this damn thing that floated away in a flood here, too bad, that they gave me. I may have some of the pictures if you want to see that. They're kind of water-soaked. But that was quite an opportunity.

As I say, I went to sea on their brand new destroyer. I went out on a patrol craft, and I went through a submarine. I went to their submarine base. I spoke at their submarine school, through a translator, of course. I spoke at their war college. [phone rings] I went to the war college. It was just a great opportunity.

Every night, we'd go to a banquet, and in every province we went to, the senior military guy would be there. In most cases it was an Army guy. The Army guy would get knee-walking drunk at these banquets. The Navy guys were okay. They were a little bit more sophisticated. But it was quite an experience.

I sat with their equivalent of the chief of naval operations, although I later learned he was someone that they looked at pretty hard to be the premiere of China. I sat with him in the typical arrangement you have, where you sit in a chair. Then there's a little table with a bowl full of oranges, and then he sits in a chair. Then your people go out in chairs in kind of a banana

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<sup>106</sup> The Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, known in mainland China as the June Fourth Incident were student-led demonstrations in China's capital of Beijing in 1989. More broadly, it refers to a national movement sometimes called the '89 Democracy Movement. The protests were forcibly suppressed by the government in what became known in the West as the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Estimates of the number of civilian deaths have ranged from 180 to 10,454.

arc, and his people does the same thing. They don't say anything. You and he talk. They have a translator there, although the guy that I talked to spoke pretty good English. It was really my experience in international affairs.

We talked for about an hour and a half, about all kinds of things going on, about the military and the capabilities and deterrents. I felt like, my God, here I am, in the middle of State Department operations. God, I've risen to the top, with nobody there to check what I say.

When the trip was over...It was two weeks and, as I said, seven cities. They gave us our own plane; it was kind of like a DC-3. It had stewardesses in it, Chinese stewardesses, and lunches and booze. They treated us royally. I would try to look at everything I possibly could.

I went to sea on the destroyer. I wanted to see what the engine rooms looked like. I kind of assumed, well they're probably pretty bad, dirty, oily. So I told my aide, and they were walking me around the ship, I said, "Now, you get to that passageway up there, you kind of step in front of me. I'm going to go around you and down that hatch, because I think that leads to the engine room. It's about mid-ship." So we did this. Of course, I had the nine captains always with me. Actually, it was kind of like my line in front of me. I'd position them, and then I'd take off in another direction and get there before the Chinese.

DePue: At this time, you're a three-star, retired admiral, right?

Thunman: No, no, no, I was chief of naval education and training. I was not retired.

DePue: I thought you said this was '88.

Thunman: Yeah, that's when I retired. I retired that December. This is in the spring. So they were my blocking backs. We would block out—they'd get kind of upset with me—We would block out the political commissars, who was always at my elbow, just real thugs is about the best thing I could say.

I remember, I took off and went down that hatch and got all the way down to the bottom. It was the fire room. The place was immaculate, clean, shiny, as clean as any ship I've ever seen. The young sailors down there, young boys, all looking like this, big-eyed. My aide was there, and he had a camera. I had my arms around these young sailors, having him take pictures. The Chinese are coming down. They're smiling, and I'm smiling. It was a good experience.

It was funny. When I talked to their submariners—of course we had a translator—I got up, and I said, "Well, you all look just like American submariners." They're all looking at me, and I said, "You're all very handsome." They all stopped, and they didn't say anything. Then the guy, the translator, laughed. Then they laughed. (both laugh)

DePue: They needed permission to laugh.

Thunman: They needed permission to laugh. That was quite an experience. At the end of it, we came back to the States. We had to brief the PFIAB, the Presidential Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, PFIAB. It had distinguished people on it, including Henry Kissinger. So, we worked all night, putting together a typical presentation, pictures and points and things that we learned, things like we found that their submarines were designed to sit on the bottom and attack you as you went by, but not to make any noise by operating with propulsion.

Not all the members of PFIAB were there, but Kissinger came. I thought, Ugh, Jesus, this could be something. So, I get started with my brief, and he said, "Admiral..." he said, "What is the most important thing you learned on your trip?" It's the one question that I hadn't even thought about. Always, it happens to you in those briefings. And I said, "Mr. Secretary, I guess the most important thing I learned was that China has one hell of a lot of people." (DePue laughs) I didn't know how well he'd take it. He started laughing. He says—you know that German voice— "Exactly! That's exactly what we all must understand." (both laugh) That was quite a trip.

I don't know where I was, back in the...I guess we were still talking Azorian.

DePue: No, that's fine.

Thunman: We're done there? Okay.

DePue: Unless you have something else to say.

Thunman: No, no, other than the things that went on in this program, beyond this, were extraordinary.

DePue: I did want to pick it up now where we left off last time. That's talking about your tour as the deputy chief of naval operations for submarines.

Thunman: Warfare.

DePue: Submarine warfare. And there are still a few more things that I wanted to ask you about. There are probably some memories that you have, as well, that you want to pass on. But let's turn to Tom Clancy and your experiences with Tom Clancy.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. He is a good friend. In 1983, I guess it was, I was the deputy CNO. My guys came in one day, and they said, "You've got to look at this." It was the book, *Hunt for Red October*.

DePue: That was published in '84, so the timeline is probably right.

Thunman: Yeah. In the book, it discussed...It's a wonderful book, fun book, novel is what it was. It talked about our ability to trail Soviet submarines. It used classified terms like "Crazy Ivan," which, as I've told you about before, where if a Soviet submarine thought he had contact with you, he would turn and run right at you, try to collide with you. I'm sure they were ordered to do that. That was their means of trying to embarrass the United States, their means of trying to keep us from being so close to them and following them.

I thought, Oh my God, this...And the interesting thing about it was, it was published by the Naval Institute Press. They hadn't even bothered to tell us about it. So I told my boss, Watkins, about it. I said, "God almighty, the intelligence committees are really going to be upset with us about this."

So, I called this guy, Tom Clancy, and I said, "I'd like to talk with you. Why don't you come and have lunch with us, in the Pentagon." He was an insurance man in Maryland. So he came, kind of looked like an insurance man, suit maybe a little bit tight. We sat down in my office. I decided to stay in there, because I wanted to have a witness of what was said, because, on the classified side...I had my executive assistant there in the office too.

I said, "Now, where did you get the information, Tom, for this?" And he said—And this is the first time I've ever heard this phrase used. I think he invented it. You've heard it thousands of times, but this is now back in '84, '83. I'd never heard it used before—He says, "Well, I just connected the dots." He said, "I read everything there was to read about submarines, including your testimonies to the Congress. I put it all together and figured it out." "Well," I said, "Some of that you could only know by talking to somebody who'd done it. But," I said, "I'm not going to dwell on that."

Shortly thereafter, Reagan read it. It was like the finding of the *Titanic*. He thought it was great. So the energy went out of investigating Tom Clancy, and how did you get it? He probably got some of that information, sitting in a bar with a sailor somewhere, pulsing that, trying to get that information out of him.

He became a good friend. The next book he wrote, which was *Red Storm Rising*, he sent it to me in a draft form. He said, "I want you to correct it, where you see that I'm using classified information." I had wrote him back and said, "You know, I don't know everything there is to know about the military." *Red Storm Rising* was about the Army and the Air Force and capabilities and modes of operation and...But we stayed fairly close. After I retired, I visited his home. It was fun. I went to his home, there in Maryland. It had grown considerably. He sold a hell of a lot of books in all of those different titles.

DePue: And movie rights on top of that.



Thunman: Yeah. He had me come up there. They were doing a TV production of the book. What he wanted to do was to give this to all the owners of the National Football League, because he was trying to buy a football team or buy a piece of it. This was how he was going to introduce himself to the other owners. [He] had me there and had the former chief of staff of the Army, Carl Vuono there. We were there to kind of give him some military background. The guy was and is a genius. He really is. There isn't anything he doesn't know about what he writes about. He goes to extraordinary lengths.

When I got to his home, there's a big iron gate and the box you talked into. You talked into it, and the gate opened. You started up a road, heading up a hill, and you saw a yellow warning sign—what we would see on the highway for a warning—and it said, "Caution, tank crossing." You got up to the top of the hill, and there was a tank that he'd gotten somewhere. (both laugh)

You went into his room where he wrote. He had a giant Mac computer. That room, gosh it was big as the first level here, with his books, copies of his books, in all the different languages that they had been published. It was extraordinary, the number of books he has published.

This was right after the first Iraq War. I've got a copy of this somewhere, if I can find the stuff I'm looking for. The first sea lord of the admiralty—This is how...Clancy knew everybody by then—The first sea lord of the admiralty asked his executive assistant to contact Clancy and ask him what he thought about the Iraq operation. This is before we made the attack. Clancy wrote about a four or five page letter to the first sea lord, telling him exactly what he thought would happen in the operation, about the flanking, and there are other things that went on.

DePue: I know that Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait around August, I think, of 1990.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Then we went in and actually invaded Iraq in early '91. So this is in-between that timeframe.

Thunman: Yeah, it was when he wrote the memo. Yes, somewhere in there, fairly close to the operation. He had it exactly right. He'd figured out how they'd do it. One of the things they did; I don't know; you would know better, as a military historian. But apparently there was a left hook, where they went in and surrounded a good portion of the Iraqi forces. But he had predicted all of that already. At that point, we didn't know. The operation hadn't begun. That's what he predicted, and he sent it over to the first sea lord of the British Admiralty, just to show you how knowledgeable he was. The interesting thing about his books was that he knew the name of everybody involved, like lieutenant colonel so and so of the 206 Mountain Troops. He

just knew it all; he knew everything there was, what he wrote about. He was a good friend.

As a matter of fact, when I retired, and he heard I'd this physical problem, he called me and said, "You got to get over right away to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore." It turns out he was giving them \$20 million a year or something, donation. He was their number one donor. He told them that he wanted them to look at me and see if they could find out what this neuropathy problem that I've had was all about. As a result of that, they brought us radiologist specialists from Europe, from Austria. They did special tests on me, trying to find out why I was having the problem. They finally came to the conclusion I had a problem with my spine that they might be able to find later through an MRI, as it grew.

Of course, I had to stop MRIs when I got a pacemaker, but that's a whole different story. He did that. He was very, very... and when I was the president at Valley Forge Military Academy and College, I would have him come up and talk to the cadets. They loved it. [I] never paid him anything. The kids would listen to his stories, and they'd bring everything they had, their skivvies, whatever, to sign.

One story that you'll get a kick out of was he was always looking for another story. I told him—maybe I told you this before—that I said to him, "Tom, I'll give you a scenario, and you can write the greatest book you've written so far, using this scenario. Embellish on it as long as you want." He said, "Well, why don't you write it?" I said, "I can't write like that. I can't do it." I said, "All I want out of it is .1 percent of whatever you get out of it," (DePue laughs) He said, "Well, no." He didn't want to do that. He said he'd write it if he could use me as a source of background. They can't do that; they'll put me in jail. (laughs)

He would come up to Valley Forge, and he'd spend the night I there in the house. We'd sit there and be drinking a little brandy about midnight. He'd start off by saying, "Well, you know, it's like what you did. What do you know about Project Azorian?" It was another name he had. He said, "Have you ever heard of Project Azorian?" or X—I'm not going to use the real name. I'd say, "God, Tom, I haven't heard of that one." Of course, it was one of the biggest things we'd ever done when I was... [He said] "Oh, I'd heard something about it here the other day. I just wondered if you knew anything about it." "No, Tom, don't know anything about that."

A year later, again we're sitting there drinking brandy, in the middle of the night, tired and a little tipsy. He said, "Do you remember I talked to you about that project X. Did you ever hear anything more about that?" I said, "I guess I do recall you talking... I don't know. I don't know anything about that one, never heard of that one." (laughs) He was still trying.

DePue: A little bit of cat and mouse.

Thunman: He stayed a good friend.

DePue: I know the initial reaction was, “Holy cow, how did he find out all this classified information?”

Thunman: Well, he just said that he connected the dots. That was the answer.

DePue: But, ultimately, was he good for the Navy?

Thunman: Yeah, very good. It was good at that time that the country and the world realized, knew, that we had a capability that far exceeded the Soviets. We could trail them. They couldn't trail us. We were watching them like a hawk. It was all part of bringing the Soviet Union down, the fact that we could trail their ballistic missile submarines.

DePue: Did it help on recruiting?

Thunman: Oh sure, sure it did, sure. I'll show you a recruiting poster—I've got it upstairs—that I'll show it to you before you leave, one I devised that the CNO wouldn't let me use. He said it was a little hawkish. But, oh yeah, *Hunt for Red October* brought the whole submarine capability... We would not use the word “trail” in any documents, in any paperwork, messages. The fact that we could trail them without them knowing us was a hell of a capability.

DePue: Well, then there must have been some discussion, maybe a lot of discussion, about whether or not to even allow the publication to occur.

Thunman: No. That was the problem with it. He wrote the book, takes it over to the Naval Institute organization there in Annapolis—they print a lot of books—

DePue: The press?

Thunman: Yeah, the Naval Institute Press. They publish it, and they sell it. And, of course, the Naval Institute Press didn't think to call us and ask us, “Hey, is this a good idea? Is this okay?”

DePue: So you only found out about it after it had already gone to the printing press?

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Wow.

Thunman: Well, the guys came in my office. It was hot off the press. I remember the young commander came in and said, “Admiral, you've got to look at that.” I go, “Yeah, let me take a look at it.” (DePue laughs) I start thumbing through it. I said, “Where the hell did that come from?” The guy didn't know. I

immediately went down to see the CNO, Jim Watkins. His response was, "How did you let this happen?" (both laugh) I'll never forget that.

But it turned out... More than recruiting, the world learned that we had one hell of a capable submarine force, because you could read into that... You read that book; you realized that that was based on a lot of fact.

DePue: Well, let's bring it up to the international level and the strategic levels. This is at the time of this massive buildup of the American military. It's right in the middle of the Reagan years. Part of the Reagan buildup was SDI. We've talked about this before. Part of the strategy was to try to get the Soviets to match us, step for step, with the technology, and bankrupt them in the process.

Thunman: Yes, and we did.

DePue: This almost plays right into that.

Thunman: Yes, it does. That's part of the time when we're building five nuclear attack submarines a year, and we were designing a new one. We've already talked about the design. We were also building one fleet ballistic missile Ohio-class submarine a year. And we were building a new Trident missile, a more capable missile. We were developing this SDI program, which was a little bit bogus. I mean, there was an awful lot you had to do to make that work.

We don't know how to do it yet, how to hit a ballistic missile. We hit cruise missiles, but we don't hit ballistic missiles from the ground. That was a massive effort, from the Soviets seeing that coming down the road. When it broke, our submarine force was growing in leaps and bounds. When the *Hunt for Red October* broke, it was "Oh my God, that's what they're doing with it." What do they do with all those attack submarines? Well, they're obviously out there following our ballistic missile submarines, ready to shoot any minute.

DePue: For a country and a nation that is paranoid to begin with, that must have pushed them to the limit.

Thunman: Oh sure. They were developing new submarines. We were there monitoring every phase of their development. They were developing missiles, but we knew about it, how the ship had done at sea, before they did.

DePue: Let's switch the equation here. Things that make the United States military and intelligence community very paranoid are some of the spy cases. Now, you and I have already talked about John Walker.

Thunman: Walker, Whitworth, yes.

DePue: I wonder if we can add a little bit more to that, based on what we were just discussing.

Thunman: Well, I don't know what we'd said, but let me go back. Back in the early '70s, I remember old...I told you this. Admiral Ike Kidd, wonderful, four-star, surface guy, his father was a four-star, old Navy name, wonderful man. I was a young commander—it was right after I had left command, while I was a young captain—they sent me to Norfolk. He was commander in chief Atlantic, Ike Kidd. This is now in '72. They sent me back there to kind of get me into the more senior world of strategy and those kinds of things, to prepare me to go on. I'd finished my submarine command. I'd done all that.

The first briefing I went to, Admiral Kidd was sitting in there at the table. I'm, of course, at the end, way back. They're talking about where they found Soviet submarines in areas where we were about to send our submarines. I forget exactly, but I remember, Ike Kidd jumped up, took his fist and smashed it in the table. He said, "They're reading our mail!" Those were his exact words, "They are reading our mail!" I sat there, and I thought, How would they read our mail, with the incredible crypto system that we had established? How could they do that? That went through my mind, but I didn't say it. I thought, The poor old guy doesn't really understand how our crypto system works. Well he did. He was right; they were reading our mail.

You put it all together—I believe this is a good scenario. A lot of it is my own—*Pueblo* occurs in '68. Strange that they went out and took the *Pueblo*. Of course, the dumb skipper of the *Pueblo* made it so easy. That's a whole other story about that guy and the whole *Pueblo* operation, which was poorly planned and not cleared with senior authority.

DePue: We did talk about this a little bit before.

Thunman: But anyway, as part of that, when they took the *Pueblo*, they got the crypto machine. That machine was pretty much the same machine that we had at the end of World War II. It looks like a typewriter, and it's got all kinds of gizmos that when you punch a letter, it goes through and ends up...an I ends up as a B, that kind of thing. But there's all kinds of stuff in there that you can't possibly break, according to the people.

But the Navy continued to use versions of that machine, upgrades, but still the basic operational systems in it. The most important thing you had, to use that machine, was the key list that changed every day, or maybe it changed every eight hours. This was a series of letters that you had to put into the machine. You had to insert it, in order to make the machine work. Without those letters, no way. The entire U.S. Navy used those machines. In those days they had what was called ARESTES communications, which was the way you communicated at sea, the top secret information.

So all of our submarines, when we'd make a report ashore, we would send it via ARESTES. But, of course, for anybody to break it, they had to have that machine, and they had to have the key list. The key list was

changing every few hours. Where did you get the key list? Well, you took them with you to sea. When you went to sea, you had big lists of key lists with the dates, periods when they would be applicable. So we think we're pretty much secure.

Well, along comes Walker, Whitworth, both of them with incredible communications backgrounds. We still don't know how long... There may have been more than Walker and Whitworth. I don't know. Of course, their son was involved to a degree. Not all of it came out. We think it was going on longer than what was admitted later on. Well, what they were doing were selling the key lists. They were in the communications centers. Whitworth was in a carrier. Walker was on a communications staff. They get their hands on the key list. That's all you had to sell, because, apparently, the Soviets had gotten the machine from the *Pueblo*. I believed they went to the *Pueblo* to get the machine. I think they got the key list first.

DePue: Well, of course, there was the North Koreans, who captured the—

Thunman: Yeah, but they were the ones who told them to go get it. And, of course, Walker and Whitworth, I think, only admitted... Walker, who started it, he only admitted to going back to about '76 or so with it, maybe '74. Of course, *Pueblo* was taken in '68. But I believe the Soviets told them, "Go get that ship." (telephone rings)

[talks on phone]

[pause in recording]

Thunman: They figured it out. This dumb U.S. Navy's got pretty much the same communications system they've always had. All we need is the god-damned machine. They had run into Walker somewhere, and Walker said, "We can get you the key list." They told the Koreans, "You go get that ship."

DePue: I can't recall. I should know, but I can't recall when this all broke, when they discovered Walker was doing this. Was that in the '90s?

Thunman: Eighty-three.

DePue: Eighty-three.

Thunman: Eighty-two, '83. I've got a copy of *TIME Magazine*, where they quote me in there. When they asked me, "What do you think we ought to do with Walker and Whitworth?" I said, "You ought to hang the son of a bitch." I remember Watkins said to me afterwards, he said, "I read what you said. I agree with what you said. I think I would have said it a little bit differently." (laughs)

DePue: What kind of shockwaves did that cause in the Navy community, in the intelligence community?

Thunman: Well, there was a big rumble. I was in the Pentagon when it went on. It made the newspapers. Congress was upset that it could have happened; you know, how could it happen?

DePue: I would think it's the kind of thing that you'd expect some heads to roll.

Thunman: Yeah, yeah. I wasn't involved in it. I was just using the... We, the submarine forces, the surface forces, the aviation forces, were using the stuff the Navy gave us. The people who really got the black eye was the CIA and intelligence organizations of the Army, Air Force and Navy. They're the ones who put together the crypto service for everybody to use. By that time, a lot of that use of ARESTES had gone away. They had gone into satellite communications. You didn't use the ARESTES system. ARESTES being a high frequency system. Submarines had to get up to periscope depth, raise an antenna, transmit the message in HF, which means it went everywhere, all over the world. If you could receive those frequencies, high frequencies, you had the message.

Now, the only way you could break it, though, was to have the machine and have the key list. So, I'm sure the Soviets said, "Hey, these Dumbos..." I mean, they didn't even a different set of key lists for the Atlantic or the Pacific. They just had one key list for the world. They [the Soviets] said, "Well, these Dumbos, we've got a way to get them." I'd bet my ears on it, that they went to North Korea and said, "Get that ship." And they got it. I'm sure that was going on since, probably, within a year of the time they took the *Pueblo* in '68, and they were reading that traffic.

The interesting thing about it, at that time, we, the submarine force, was using ARESTES. I think we were probably the only ones left using it, because our submarines were in the Indian Ocean, trailing the Soviet submarines. The Soviets had a lot of their submarines in the Indian Ocean. At the end of these patrol periods, where we'd pull the guy out, he would send a report of what he did, via ARESTES. That meant the Soviets got a report, complete report, from our submarine commander, what he had been doing with their submarines.

DePue: Which means that they knew we were trailing them, I would guess.

Thunman: Yeah, sure. That's why they were so skittish all through the '70s. That went on. That's why *Crazy Ivan* came about. They were so upset about being trailed, any noise, they'd turn and run at it. That was the *Crazy Ivan*. I think that's because the Soviet senior people said, "Look, god-damn it, we're sick and tired of you people being trailed. So, you're going to have a collision. If you detect somebody near you, you collide with them. That's the only way we can stop them." It was very clear. That's an actual maneuver.

Anyway, it turned out we got to thinking about it—I remember talking with Admiral Watkins about it—and we started to laugh. He says, “You know, those poor Soviet submarine skippers are getting the hell beat out of them whenever they come home, because they’re going to say, “God-damn it, you were trailed; you had that guy there. Look, I’ve got this report here. (laughs) What were you doing? Why didn’t you do better?” They were beating up their technical system, their shipbuilding system. “Why can’t we have a submarine as quiet as the Americans? Why can’t we do what the Americans can do?” I’m sure that whole system was bubbling and a lot of sensitive things going on. It turned out it was good for us.

DePue: I think this one occurred also during the time that you were deputy chief of naval operations. That would have been CNET?

Thunman: After I left deputy chief of naval operations.

DePue: When did that occur?

Thunman: In November of 1985.

DePue: And the next assignment for you?

Thunman: Was CNET. Then I became the chief of naval education and training. I was the chief of naval education and training until November of 1988. Maybe it was October.

DePue: What led to that next assignment for you?

Thunman: Well, I was starting to have problems with this neuropathy. Initially, Jim Watkins wanted to make me the chief of naval personnel, because I’d had that personnel experience, that fairly significant three years in the bureau when I was a brand new admiral.

DePue: Is that a four-star position?

Thunman: No. Chief of naval personnel is a three-star position, but it is a very, very distinguished... It’s probably the most... maybe one of the top three-star positions in the Navy, personnel, in any of the services.

DePue: But I thought you were already at one of the chief, most important, prestigious positions?



*Vice Admiral Ron Thunman assumed command of CNET from Vice Admiral Jim Sagerholm 10/31/1985*



Thunman: Well I was, but it was an important position. I would have been honored to do it. And Watkins told me this... To be frank here, Lehman wasn't anxious to make me chief of naval personnel, because it was the nuke thing again. Not that Lehman didn't like me or didn't respect me, but my nuclear flavor was not one that he ever liked. He's the guy that fired Rickover.

The other thing, they were putting in a new commander and chief of the Pacific fleet, very distinguished naval aviator, who had become a prisoner of war in the Vietnam War. He had some physical problems.

DePue: What was his name?

Thunman: Lawrence, Admiral Billy Lawrence, great guy. He's out of the class of '51. There is a ship named after him now. I didn't know this, and this may have been about a year before, but they decided they were going to send him out there to be commander in chief Pacific fleet, four-star and send me out to be his deputy, kind of to do the work. But he tripped off the line. He started having problems, mental problems. So that didn't happen.

Watkins wanted to send me to be the chief of naval personnel, and Lehman didn't like that. He didn't want me there, controlling all of that personnel policy. Then, at the same time, I started having this problem, where I had this neuropathy, this neurogenic bladder. I was having troubles with it, and I wasn't really in a condition to—

DePue: What were the symptoms for you, if you can talk about that?

Thunman: I couldn't urinate. I still have the same problem. A neurogenic bladder, there are no signals that are sent. It's not a matter of being blocked. It's a matter of the nervous system failing in some way or another. Ever since I retired in November of 1988, December of 1988, I've had to self-catheterize myself every four hours. It's not been fun. That's why Clancy got into it. He thought that was a terrible thing to have to do. He did everything he possibly could to send the world's experts, to try to figure it out, and they couldn't.

I remember, supposedly the expert in the military, not the Navy... At Walter Reed, there was a young colonel they brought me in to. He gave me every test there was. We spent a whole day going through different tests. Finally at the end of it, he looked at me, and he said, "Don't you have to urinate?" And I said, "No." He said, "I've just put—I don't know what—a couple of liters of water into you, and you have no indication you have to urinate?" I said, "None." He said, "You're just going to have to self-catheterize yourself.

The bad part of that is infections." I've had periodic infections ever since. I had the last one here in April. It's very important that you do it every four hours, because your bladder is very pure. When you urinate, your urine is very pure. Any bacteria will grow very quickly. If you want to grow bacteria,

you can grow it in urine. So, if you've inserted bacteria into your bladder, immediately you've got an infection brewing. That's why you've got to...and you can't miss. If you miss two or three hours, you oversleep or something, you have a chance...I used to have a lot more of them. Now, I've fairly got it on a routine basis.

DePue: But apparently, all of this really came to be an issue around '84, '85?

Thunman: Well, it started getting worse. Eighty-four, '85, that's when it was... Well, frankly, I wasn't telling everybody everything at that time. Then I finally kind of came clean.

DePue: Well, it's kind of an embarrassing thing to talk about, I would think.

Thunman: Yeah. So anyway, Lehman, though, was in trouble with the Congress, because he wanted to pull the staff of the chief of naval education and training out of Pensacola. There was a senator and a congressman who were really upset about that. Congressman Hutto, who was a powerful man in Florida at that time—I think he was on the Appropriations Committee—a powerful man, supporting the Navy programs, Earl Hutto. He was upset when he heard that. Then there were some newspaper articles about it. Then, the senator was... I can't think of, a good guy. You'd know who I was talking about. But both of them really raised hell with Lehman.

DePue: About what?

Thunman: About pulling the chief of naval education headquarters out of Pensacola, pulling the three-star—CNET at that time was a three-star—pulling that organization, a big organization, huge. Really an organization you didn't need. Later on, I tried to do something about it, couldn't.

DePue: Pensacola, was that also the base for naval aviation?

Thunman: Yes. And, of course, as chief of naval education, you controlled all flight training; you controlled all surface, all submarine training and NROTC, recruit training. I had—What did I have?—70,000, 80,000 students working for me. I had 40,000 people across the country involved in training. So it was a significant job.

I told Jim Watkins, though, at that point, I said, "Well, Admiral, I'm starting to have these problems, and I think I should retire." He said, "Okay." He said to me; he said, "Why don't you go down and be commander submarine force Atlantic? He said, "I'll send you down there." I said, "No, I've already done that." I was commander of submarine force Pacific. I said, "I'm having these problems. I just don't know that I should do that." So I was going to retire. He said, "Hold up. Don't tell anybody that until Friday," I remember, it was Monday or Tuesday.

Then, we were walking down the corridor of the Pentagon on about Thursday, Wednesday or Thursday, walking down. He says, "How would you like to be chief of naval education and training?" And I said, "Oh, God, me?" I said, "Do you need me for that?" He says, "Yeah," He said, "as a matter of fact I do." He said, "Apparently..."

You know, I had a great reputation with Congress. I've told you that before. The guy that I had used all along, working in the SSN-21 program, Gray Armistead—I've told you about him—was a lobbyist. He had gone to Lehman and said, "You got to do something about this problem with Earl Hutto and senator..." I can't think of his name. He said, "The way you can fix that problem is send Thunman down there. People in Congress like him. He's got a great reputation. You keep CNET down there. Send him down there, and he'll do a good job for you. He's a smart guy; he'll do a good job for you. And you'll get out of this political trouble you've gotten into." This is a true story.

So, Lehman went to Watkins and said, "Let's put Thunman down at CNET." I thought about it. I said, "Let me tell you tomorrow morning." I thought about it, and I thought, I've got a physical problem. I know I had it. I could urinate once in a while, but I had a problem. I knew it wasn't... I thought, I'd better not leave the Navy until they know what it is. That's what went through my mind. Once you retire, you drop off the top of the stack. As long as you're on active duty, and as a three-star, they're sure as hell going to see you, if you've got a physical problem.

DePue: In other words, rank has its privilege, but only if you're in the Navy. (both laugh)

Thunman: That's right. So I told him that. I said, "Okay, I'll do it." I said, "I don't know how long I'll stay down there, because I've got this problem." He knew about it. I said, "Maybe they can help me and I can..."

So I went down there, and I had a hell of a lot of fun in the job. I had more fun in that job than any job I had, because I was a king. I was Florida's admiral. That's the way I was treated. The senators and the congressmen and the politicians and the baseball, the New York Yankees practiced down there. I had Steinbrenner inviting me to come down and watch the Yankees in the spring. What I did was I decided to have fun.

One of the things I did to Lehman, I went down there, and I went back up to see him. I said, "The headquarters are terrible down there. They're old, World War II." I said, "We've got an old hospital down there, beautifully built hospital that's no longer used. I'd like to move the headquarters to this hospital, change the hospital into the CNET headquarters." I said, "I'd really like to do that." I didn't say it, but I think [how] he read it was, "Well, if we're not going to let you do that," I would have said, "Fine, find another admiral."

He said, “Okay, how much?” I forget what I said, \$2 million, something like that. He said, “Okay.”

So we completely refurbished this hospital, wonderful, old time, all marble, concrete. I did everything, including having paintings made of training activities, by an artist I’d hired. It was a wonderful place. It had a huge atrium in the middle of it, with flowers. It was the most spectacular headquarters in the Navy. I had more fun with that. I spent a couple of billion a year. Back in 1985, that was a hell of a lot of money, just running Navy training.



*Vice Admiral Thunman visited Florida shipyard owned by Yankees owner George Steinbrenner during commissioning of the USNS Richard Mattheisen, an auxiliary ship, in 1988.*

I did as much of the flight training that I could do. I’d go up and fly with my aide. I got an aid who was a naval aviator. We’d go up and fly those training aircraft. I’d go out and try and shoot those fields. Florida is full of small training fields, leftover from World War II. I’d go out there and shoot landings. I did all of the things that the young aviators had to do, as far as learning how to eject out of an airplane.

The other thing I did is I brought the community in. And this was fun. Carl Trost, then, was the CNO; he was a friend. He had been in the same company as I was at the Naval Academy; he was class of ’53, a smart guy, stood first in his class. He would call me, and he’d say, “Hey, we’ve got these people coming—You know, the CNO of the Indian Navy or the so and so from wherever—How about taking them down to Pensacola?” So I’d say, “Sure.” I would put together these wonderful receptions. My house had 17,000 square feet. It was a pre-Civil War house. It’s a historical preservation home, beautiful home, with ghosts, equipped with ghosts. (DePue laughs)

DePue: With ghost sightings?

Thunman: I never saw them, but my predecessors had, others. I never saw them, but I sensed them. I can tell you that story a little later; it’s a funny story.

But anyway, I would invite the community. I’d invite 200 or 300 people from the community. I’d have these big receptions in my backyard. The Officers’ Club would prepare all the things, and I’d just have these wonderful things.

We had a Battle of Midway symposium there, which I supported, which was really interesting. I had Japanese pilots who participated in the Battle of Midway, and I had a company, with some of the people involved, including Ensign Gay, who was... So I just had a wonderful time down there, doing all these things that I'd never done in the Navy. I'd always been looking through a periscope. And the people loved it. They liked me. Some of that, you'll see in there. You'll see the editorials that they wrote about when I left.

DePue: We're looking at a stack of articles that you gave me, that we're going to include with your—

Thunman: They include a farewell article, when I left Pensacola. The one sad thing about it was we had a... very interesting, didn't turn out to be a big deal; certainly could have. I always had any message traffic which described any injuries in the training system, I wanted on my desk every morning. Anybody got hurt, I wanted to know who and why. I pulled the old Rickover rules in there about that. If something goes wrong, we've got to know why, so it doesn't happen again, and no bullshit about it; we're going to find out.

I remember, we were losing two or three young aviators a year in training. I called those aviation squadron commanders in, and I said, "We're not going to lose any more." They said, "Admiral, you don't understand; they're always going to lose one or two." I said, "No more. We don't lose any. You'd better believe that." My last two years there in Pensacola—I was there three years—we didn't lose any.

DePue: Well, let me take a philosophical turn. Here is my speculation on it. You can correct me if I'm wrong on this. Naval aviators are some of the, let's say ballsiest, biggest risk takers you've got. They're not people who adhere to the same zero defect mentality that naval submariners would have.

Thunman: Yeah. That's right.

DePue: Was there some friction just because of that? I would think they'd push back on that.

Thunman: They did a little bit, but... One thing about naval aviators, if they respect you, they'll go with you. I think they respected me. I fired one of the squadron commanders, because he, in flying his airplane, had not done the check of the plane you're supposed to do. He had his aide do it. His aide screwed up and didn't ensure that one of the panels on the side was locked. It came open, and then it flew off and hit the windshield. The windshield was cracked. One of the rules of naval aviation is, you've got to get out if that happens, because that windshield's going to come right into your face. So he lost the airplane. He was okay. He went over the ocean and punched out.

I called him in. He's a good guy. I said, "Gee, I'm sorry, but you broke the rules. You're supposed to check the airplane, not your assistant." Yeah, he

understood that. I said, “We have to take you out of the job.” I said, “That’s the way it goes.” I said, “There are some things you don’t get a second chance at. That’s one of them.” I thought afterwards, I remember my aide came in, and he said, “Boy, that’s going to ricochet around the naval aviation community.” I never heard anything, and I always had a good relationship with the aviators and the people down—

You know, Pensacola, that is the home of naval aviation. They had all of these older naval aviators down there from World War II, back in that time.

DePue: Those guys must have been gods, walking around that place.

Thunman: Yeah, they were gods; they were gods. I was able to, I think pretty much, without bragging too much, establish a great relationship with them. I remember that the Naval Aviation Museum... If you’ve never gone down to that museum you ought to see it. It’s the most wonderful aviation museum in the world. They ran that thing, a foundation. The museum is on the base, and they just have everything in that museum. Really the Navy supports it more than they should, frankly, but I thought, What the hell.

The president of the foundation, Mickey Wiesner, was a four-star admiral, who had been CINCPACFLT, and I worked for him when I was head of the ORSE board. He would call me and say, “Come on; you’ve got to come to lunch with so and so.” I’d say, “Gee, Admiral, I’m kind of busy.” “No, no, you’ve got to come.” We’d go to some elegant place, and he’d been soliciting money from somebody for that museum. I got to know all those older guys. They loved it that I flew, that I got... I went through the ejection process, got pumped out of the thing into the water, got screwed up with one of the halyards [lines] or whatever you call them.

DePue: The risers?

Thunman: Yeah, one of the risers [piping used to deliver fluid, gas or electrical signals or power upward]. You’re supposed to release them both at the same time. I released one, then the other, spun around. [It was] dragging me through the water backwards. They all thought that was neat.



*Admiral Ron Thunman ditching and then being rescued in aviation and water training. 1986*

One of the things you had to do, you had to tread water for five minutes, with everything on, without your life jacket, but everything else, all that stuff, your parachute harness, your helmet and everything, boots, the

whole rig. You had to tread water for five minutes, when you were going through this qualification process. So I did it. But I [had] all the young kids, the trainees, the young naval aviators, all were around the pool, cheering me on. (both laugh) That's where I was...

They asked me to go over and take the Chinese. The Chinese came here, I escorted them all around the country. Then they had me...I picked a delegation of nine Navy captains to go.

DePue: In this position, you said this is the chief of naval education and training. That extends to the submarine force, as well.

Thunman: Oh, yeah, yeah.

DePue: My question there is, from everything else you've told me, as long as Rickover was around, and he had loyal assistants like yourself, he was going to be god of submarine training. He wasn't going to be interested in anybody having any oversight over him?

Thunman: Yeah. You see, I didn't force the submarine training, because it didn't need any help. We had other areas, big areas. The one thing that I did really well for that command was on the financial side. I convinced them to start outsourcing some of the things we did. We spent a hell of a lot of money maintaining aircraft. I put together an outsourcing program, which saved the Navy a couple of hundred million dollars, which was very unusual, very unusual. Right before I left, retired, GAO wrote us a letter of congratulations.

DePue: The Government Accounting Office.

Thunman: Yeah, which they never ever did. What I had to do was, I had to find a company that could do it, and at the same time convince the naval aviators that we should do it, because we had all those aircraft. We had 1,000 aviators in training in those days. We had a lot of aircraft down there that the jet trainers and the regular trainers...Unfortunately, since you know about my problem, I have to go up and do my thing. Maybe we should schedule—

DePue: Okay.

Thunman: Maybe we can schedule another or call it quits, whatever you think is right.

DePue: Well, I think we need to schedule for another day; don't you?

Thunman: Sure, sure.

DePue: Because we're not done yet. I'm shocked that we're not done yet. Thank you very much, Admiral.

Thunman: It was a whole different world, and it was fun.

DePue: Can I ask you two very quick questions here? Did you have oversight over SEAL training?

Thunman: Yes. I'll tell you that story.

DePue: Now, or next time?

Thunman: Next time, yeah. I fired the guy who ran it.

DePue: And did you have oversight over the Naval Academy?

Thunman: No. That's the secretary of the Navy, although I could get into the Naval Academy. If I found problems I thought existed, I could get in. I wouldn't hesitate. At this time, I was the senior three-star in the Navy. I was number nine in the Navy. I used to walk around the Pentagon and walk into people's offices, raise hell with them. It was a lot of fun. (laughs)

DePue: That's it for today. We'll pick it up next time. Thank you, Admiral.

(end of session #13)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.14

Interview # 14: January 14, 2013

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, January 14, 2013. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm with Admiral Ron Thunman. Good afternoon, sir.

Thunman: Good afternoon, sir. It's good to have you back here again. It's been a little while, most of it my fault, but I'm glad we're back in the harness.

DePue: Well, we made it to 2013. Those people who are listening to this many years from now might not realize there were all these predictions that the world would end on December 21, 2012, I think.

Thunman: No, it hasn't yet. It looks to me, though, listening to the news, all they did was delay it. (both laugh)

DePue: We're working hard to make sure it does happen someday. Well, let's get back to your life. I believe when we last stopped talking, you were talking about being the chief of naval education and training. There are a few more things we want to talk about, in terms of the tour that you had. Refresh my memory. In what years were you there?

Thunman: Well, I left my job as the deputy chief of naval operations in November of 1985. I served for three years as the chief of naval education and training. That command was located in Pensacola, Florida. We were responsible for all education and training in all warfare communities, across the country. The only thing I was not responsible for was the Naval Academy. It was really a wonderful job, because you just traveled all over the country. You were involved with the basics of preparation of young people to go out and join the fleet and be valuable members of whatever service they were involved in.

I think I indicated before that I'd been very involved with naval air training, because that was very expensive, a lot of people involved. I wanted to look in to see if there was some way we could cut those costs. For example, for every pilot that we were training, we had an instructor. Our pilot training rate, in those days, was about 1,000 pilots a year. So, that meant we had upwards of 500 to 1,000 [phone rings]—Just let it go—pilots there, who did nothing but are involved in air training, naval air training. We were able to do some good things.

The most important thing, I think, we did that was good was we outsourced the maintenance of the large fleet of training aircraft that we had. We were commended for that by the GAO, which was really unusual. GAO generally doesn't...in those days, certainly didn't commend anybody for anything. That was an important part of the career.

The other part of that tour was that I came from the Pentagon, had been so much involved with the handling of money in the submarine world, the \$18 billion or so that I handled every year. So, what I did was took a hard look at each community, the monies that each community had promised to the

chief of naval education and training to support their training effort, to find out if they were really using it properly. It was pretty funny. I found that a lot of money got funneled away from what the people in the Pentagon thought it was being spent for, to other things that the chief of naval education and training decided that he'd rather do with it.

So I formalized it. I said, "No, no, no, the submarine guy wants to spend this much money for this; that's what we're going to do. The air guy wants to do it this way..." All the way, intelligence, special operations, I did it the way the budget had been put together. I was surprised that, after all the agonies we had spent in the Pentagon, arguing about how much should we spend on training over here, as compared to over there, that wasn't done exactly the way it was planned. It was done the way the chief of naval education and training wanted to do it. So, it was a very powerful position, again, because I held the purse strings.

A couple of things we did, I was having physical problems. That's one of the reasons I went down there. Initially, I was going to retire, and the secretary of the Navy asked me to go down there. One of the things that he let me do, which I really enjoyed, was rebuilding the headquarters down there. The chief of naval education and training has a beautiful headquarters down in Pensacola. I took the old hospital and completely refurbished it.

DePue: I think we did talk about that a little bit last time.

Thunman: That was well done, in my mind anyway. I completely overhauled the Navy's Reserve Officer Training Corps selection process, made it as much like the Naval Academy and West Point as I could. We put together a process where we got the same caliber of people as the service academies were getting. I wanted that selection not to be so political. It had developed into a political system. I thought that was a very meaningful thing.

And I think I told you, I did all the things I could possibly do to qualify myself in naval aviation.

DePue: We did talk about that quite a bit.

Thunman: That was a lot of fun, although I found I was a little bit old to do some of those things those young guys do.

DePue: I wanted to ask you. It was toward the tail end of the Reagan Administration that you were serving in this position. By that time, were you beginning to see a difference in the quality of the young recruits and the officer candidates you were getting?

Thunman: No. At that point we had an all-volunteer force. We had worked hard when I was in the Pentagon. All of us worked hard to improve the military system as regards to supporting the youngsters and educating the youngsters. We all had

a big understanding—I certainly did, because of my tours in the Bureau of Naval Personnel—of how important it was to keep the recruiting up at the high level we were in.

Of course, by that time, we had gone to a point where everybody coming in was a high school graduate. That was quite a change from the days when I was back in the bureau, in the late '70s, when, across all the services, I guess; I don't know, 75 or 80 percent were high school graduates. We had a very high quality force and understood the importance of maintaining the support of that force. So we did that.

I was funded well. There was a sequestration—the first time it ever came—it was the sequestration of the Gramm-Rudman Sequestration<sup>107</sup> about 1987, where they required every government agency to cut 10 percent. That was incredible, with the howling and moaning and groaning. It was difficult, because normally, when you're running a big program, you spend most of your money at the beginning of the year. Well, this thing went into effect in the March timeframe. So already spent a lot of money in the fiscal year; half of the year had gone by.

It was a very difficult thing, but we did it and we survived, with a lot of gnashing of teeth and arguments. I remember calling my boss—I reported directly to the chief of naval operations, and I did not report to any fleet commanders, but I went directly to the chief—I called him when that came about. I said to him, I said, "Well, I've put together my plan for this, and I'll send it to you all. You guys can tear it up, whatever you want to do. But this is the best I can see." He said, "I don't want to look at it back here; you just do it. It's your fault, not mine." (both laugh ) Oh my gosh, the cries and hues.

The political side of it was incredible, because we're talking about... I had bases all over the country. Of course, a base is an important thing to the political community, because that is an insertion of a lot of money and a lot of different things. When all of the sudden the number of doughnuts and everything else that you were buying from the local community was cut in half, then all of the sudden you heard a lot from the Congress and from the local communities.

DePue: Was this part of the BRAC? They called it the Base Realignment [Commission].

Thunman: No, this was before BRAC. This was when Gramm and Rudman had decided that today's political situation would never support it. But Gramm, as you know, was quite a fiscal guy and Rudman. They got that bill through, and it

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<sup>107</sup> Gramm-Rudman: Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Deficit Reduction Act; Gramm-Rudman Sequestration. The law's procedure for automatically restraining spending growth if the projected deficit exceeds the target by more than \$10 billion.

got signed, a 10 percent cut. I guess it was across the government, very political thing.

I got in trouble with Jamie Whitten of Mississippi, who was the congressman who was head of the Appropriations Committee. That's a pretty powerful guy in the Congress. I tried to cut an admiral and his staff out of Millington, Mississippi, where we had a chief of naval technical training there and a big staff, where all the technical schools reported to, and then he reported to me. I looked at that, and I said, "We don't need that kind of staff. They were fine people, but why are we doing that? Why don't we just have it all report up, directly to us, here at Pensacola?" So I went in to see the boss again.

Carl Trost was CNO, and he said, "Okay, you can do it. See if you can do it. Just be careful. It'll be hard to do." Then I started working with Jim Webb, who was secretary of the Navy. Webb was very nervous about doing anything like that. We'd cut about ninety billets or so out of the business, which doesn't sound like it's big. But again, there it was in Millington, Mississippi. It was Mississippi's admiral and his staff.



*Vice Admiral Ron Thunman, Admiral Morris and Jim Webb, Secretary of the Navy, Pensacola, 1987*

DePue: Billets in the Navy vernacular would be people, right?

Thunman: Yeah. So it all came down to me going... All of a sudden, I was dealing with the Congress. I went down to see Sasser<sup>108</sup> of... Was he Tennessee? Anyway, he's a pretty good guy. But he said, "I'm not going to support this unless you can convince the people in Millington that this was a good thing to do." The people that I had to go and see were the Navy League and the Navy Reserve Officer Organization. It wasn't in Millington, but it was in that area.

So I went down there, and I prepared a speech and all. I got in front of a big outfit, there in that hotel dining room and lunch. I'm surprised I left there alive. (laughs) Wow! They just would not listen to you. They were so adamant about us taking those people and those billets out of there. The most

<sup>108</sup> James Sasser was Democratic U.S. Senator from Tennessee from January 3, 1977 to January 3, 1995

important thing was the prestige of that admiral that I was going to take out. That was their admiral. I went back and told them...I gave up.

I went in to see Carl Trost. I said, "I give up. I just can't make it happen." Of course, I'd gone in to see, right before that, this Jamie Whitten, who was really upset about it and intimated that I'd lied to him. I had not. That upset me, and I got a little bit tough with him, which I shouldn't have done. I said, "Nobody calls me a liar and gets away with it," or something stupid like that. (laughs) So that didn't happen. That was my big effort to get something meaningful done in that cut.

One thing happened there, which was, I think, very interesting and important in the Navy. We had all the schools, everything, every bit of training. [We] had a lot of smaller schools, but important, very important schools. One of them was the Rescue Swimmer School. This is to train young guys to jump out of helicopters in raging seas, to rescue a pilot in the water or to rescue something or do something in the water.

DePue: Did you do that school in conjunction with the Coast Guard by chance?

Thunman: Yeah, the Coast Guard people were in the course as well. We were the Rescue Swimmer School. Every morning I would come it, and I required a stack of any reports that came in if anybody was injured or killed during the night, in training. I really emphasized that part of it. As a matter of fact, I cut down the naval aviation training rate to zero, which I was very proud of. They all told me, "You can't do that," and I said, "Yes you can." We took a number of steps. I had a lot of emphasis on, we're not going to hurt these people, because of the training process.

I sat down and read. There was a message that a young guy had drowned during the rescue swimmer training that he was receiving. I said to my chief of staff, I said, "How do you drown in rescue swimming training? Your instructors are the finest swimmers in the world." It's all done in a pool. Then subsequently, they go out and do it in the water, but this had happened during



*Vice Admiral Thunman is interviewed by Navy Times reporter John Burlage in his Pensacola office. The subject being discussed was the training death of a rescue swimmer.*

the guy's first week in training. I said, "How did the guy drown then? You've got the finest swimmers in the world ten or fifteen feet away, who can jump in and pull him out of the water. What the hell's going on?" "Well, we'll look into it."

The chief of naval air training, who was an admiral, up and coming naval aviation admiral, he called me later on. He said, "I hear you want to know more about this." And he said, "We're going to investigate it. We'll have a formal investigation and get back to you on it." I said, "Okay, good."

This was a couple of weeks later, and I had not heard anything. So I called my lawyer in, and I said, "Do you know anything about what's going on in that investigation?" He said, "Well, I know they're holding it. They're having the investigation. Nothing has come out yet that's bothersome." I said, "Well, is it legal for me to take a look of what some of the interviews have found, because there were a lot of people there in the class, and I'd just like to know what the people had to say about it? What happened? What transpired?" He said, "Okay, I'll get you some of those interviews."

So I was getting ready to go to Washington in the afternoon. I was going to fly there that night. He came in with a stack of the interviews. I sat there, and I started to read them. I couldn't believe it. I mean, I've never been so shocked in my life, of what had gone on. They had literally killed him.

DePue: They being?

Thunman: The instructors... Now, these instructors had wonderful records, good people. They had a procedure called "sharks and fishes." It was not part of the course. But the new guys who came in, they would get them into the pool—It's kind of their own screening process— [phone rings] and they would have them swim on their backs. The youngsters... They wouldn't take the guy into the course unless they were superb swimmers to begin with. That was already determined somehow. They'd have them there, swimming on their backs. Then the instructors would dive down and go under them and reach up and grab them and pull them underwater and hold them. The guy would try to fight his way out. They'd make the guy fight his way out.

Now, they didn't hold people underwater for a long time, but they did it. This one young guy, when they did it, he got out of the water, crying, saying, "I want out of here. I want out of this course. I don't want any part of this." That's what the purpose of it was, was to see if... because a rescue swimmer's pretty tough. Many times, that'll happen to you. You jump out of a helicopter, and there's a pilot, panicked. He's going to grab on whatever he can, and you're going to have to control him, physically.

So the kid goes back to the locker room. His buddies come back with him. They say, "Come on, you can make it. They'll do this, but we can get

through it. You'll get through it. You've got to try it. Come on, tomorrow, try it again." Well, the procedures required that, if you had ever non-volunteered in any course, that before you could say, "I will go back and try it," you were supposed to be interviewed by one of our doctors. That was a typical naval aviation requirement. You can say, one day, "I don't want to do it." The next day, "Yeah, I'd like to do it." Before they'd let you back in there, somebody's got to talk to you, to find out what's going on, in any of those difficult courses.

Well that didn't happen. He came back in the next day. The instructors threw him in the pool, or he went into the pool, and all the students [got] out. These were in these interviews. Took all the students of the course out, lined them against the wall, turned their heads to the wall, made the guy enter the pool and do his on his back thing. The kids up against the wall were required to sing the *Star Spangled Banner*, without linking what was going on, without watching, although some of them did.

The instructors got in there, and they did the same trick again, swim around and bring him down, up and down. He was fighting to get out, and he got out. They threw him back in and still doing that. All of a sudden he went limp and was dead. Not all of that was in the interviews, but that's what came out in the following. I went, Oh my God!"

I was getting on a plane to go to Washington. I got to Washington, and I went in to Carl. I forget about what it was [that I'd wanted to see him about]. I said, "Hey, we've got a real problem." I said, "We're going to have terrible publicity; it's going to be in all the papers. You may want to send your entire press organization down there." I told him essentially what I'd gotten through the interviews. He said, "No, you handle it." I said, "We need to tell the secretary of the Navy right away." He says, "Yeah, you go in, and tell him."

I skipped something important here. About a week or so after it happened, I called the flag officer involved. I said, "How's that investigation coming?" His response was, "It's okay... It was a bad thing that occurred with a young guy." That can happen. It happens to black people many times, where they just fall over dead, because of some sort of physical exertion. I'd heard of that, sports and everything else. Although, he wasn't a black person. He said, "It's nothing big here, nothing unusual."

At the time, being as cynical as I am, I thought, That may have been a cover-up. Maybe I'm not getting everything. That's when I made the decision to go look at the paperwork myself, personally. And that paperwork came out of there without them knowing it. The lawyer went down there. He got it from the lawyer down there.

So then it came out. There was a big deal in the press about it. I was handling it with the press and ultimately directed that the instructors be court-martialed, charged them.

DePue: How many instructors are we talking about?

Thunman: We're talking about four. It got a lot of press exposure. I knew that the naval aviation community had tried to cover it up. They were hoping they could just slide it by. I think it would have just slid by, except I jumped on it so hard. I got all my training commanders across the country together. I told them that maybe we're operating too close to the edge in some of this training. I fully understand that rescue swimmer training has got to be a pretty vigorous thing. But it's also got to be handled in such a way that you're mindful of what's going on to the person. And I think I told you, right after I got there, I fired the commander of the special operations school for killing the guy or not recognizing the guy was dying in the water, in this terrible swim that they had him doing.

The press, Mary McGrory of the *Washington Post*, she was a big time newspaper woman. She called me, and she said, "Well, you all are going to cover this up, like you always do." And I said, "No! It's all out there. Talk to anybody who wants to talk about it." I said, "And we've directed a court-martial." She said, "Well, we won't know what goes on in the court-martial." I said, "Why not? Why don't you come?" She said, "You don't normally let people come to your court-martials." I said, "Well in this case, you can come if you want to. I don't care." Then I hung up and called Carl. I said, "We're going to do something we haven't ever done before. We're going to have the press at one of our court-martials." (laughs)

And then I was back with the Congress with it. I had to brief... It ended up there was a briefing of some committee back there involved with that. Proxmire<sup>109</sup> wanted to see me. I went in to see Proxmire and his staff. They all were sitting there. I told them my story and what we'd done. I waited to really get hammered, because he was a tough guy. He said, "Okay," and that was it.

And the hearing that we went to was okay. So we got out of it pretty well. McGrory didn't come to the court-martial. All of them were convicted. They were sentenced to a year; each of them got a year. The defense attacked me in a big way for saying, "Well really, you were responsible." They went through that, and I had to go up and appear before the court-martial. It was a bad time. It was right at the end of my tour, when I was really bothered, physically, at that time. I was really hurting. You know, I couldn't urinate. It was a bad time, but I'm hanging in there, doing it. But I stood by it.

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<sup>109</sup> William Proxmire was Democratic U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, August 28, 1957 to January 3, 1989



They each got a year. The appeal went through me. What they didn't want me to do was handle the appeal. I said, "I'm not going to give up that." I could have just given up, and said "Hell," because the guys were caught. I mean it was... They were not bad guys. They were good men with wonderful records and families. They're the kind of guy you would have picked for the job. But they had somehow put together this rite of passage of their own, that the only way you're going to get in this course is to do something like this, which nobody had ever thought about, especially do it the first week, when the guy is there. Surely, you might have to do it after they're used to this business. The families came and pled with me about, you know, they had their children and their reputations, and to let them off. I never let any of them off. They all served a year. It was an involuntary manslaughter finding.

But a couple of things came about. Right after that, the movie, *A Few Good Men*, came out. A similar situation had occurred in the movie, in the Marine Corps. Do you remember? It was the Marine Corps with this guy. They had him in training, and they treated him badly, and he died. They were trying to cover it up and—

DePue: Oh, that's the movie with the famous line from Jack Nicholson, "You can't handle the truth."

Thunman: You can't handle the truth, yeah. I always look back and thought, Thank God, it came out, because this would have made a tremendous movie. If you go back and the cover-up that was clearly attempted... Now, I never accused that admiral of cover-up. And he went on. He was okay.

I told him privately, I said, "You don't have to respond to this, but goddamn it, I know damn well you tried to cover that up." I said, "You're crazy if you think that's the way you're going to be successful." I said, "The way you'll be successful in this world is to give it all the visibility you can." And I told him, "I'm not going to go forward with it, but in my mind—and you don't have to respond—in my mind, that's what you were attempting, because you knew after a week that this stuff was going on, and you were trying to hold it back from my headquarters."

So that's kind of how I ended my career. I've never had any criticism. The people in Pensacola... I think I gave you some of the articles, the nice articles that they wrote in the paper when I left, that I'd done the right thing. The secretary and the CNO and everybody accepted the whole thing, the Congress. It just went by. Frankly, because we had made it visible.

But I learned then, as I'd already learned, after all those years in the Navy, that you have to be careful. When something happens, people are not going to tell you the truth, when it's bad, especially when it reflects on them. You've got to go find it yourself. The smartest thing I ever did was to get

those interviews of those guys in the...because none of that would have come out.

DePue: You've got a lot of years between those events. Have you had any thoughts about taking the appeal?

Thunman: Yeah, I've thought about that. I thought it through very heavily then, and I've thought about it. Today would that happen? Would they put them away for a year in Leavenworth? Probably not. It's pretty hard to get a murderer into Leavenworth, let alone...I mean a real murderer. But I wouldn't have done it any different. I look back on that time—maybe this was feeling too good about myself when I shouldn't—but I handled that perfectly. The reason I did was because I'd seen so much in my lifetime in the military, about whether they're going to deliver good news or bad news to you, whether you hold somebody accountable, or you don't hold them accountable. Of course, the Rickover element was in that, **accountability**. If somebody does something wrong, he's held accountable for it. That's all very, very powerful Rickover stuff. I've said it many times; he would say, "If something goes wrong, and you can't point to somebody responsible, then you've never had anybody responsible" for whatever it was that went on.

DePue: Well, that means, then you're responsible.

Thunman: Yeah. My responsibility and everything I did, and the fact that I'd brought the training world together and talked to them about, let's take a look at all of our courses to make sure we don't have these things going on, that these guys haven't invented their own systems.

The other thing that I did, which is still used today, I was interested to find out...I'd play basketball, and you could always call timeout in a basketball game. If all of a sudden you found yourself trapped in the corner, and you're about to lose the ball, because they had you trapped, you could yell, "Timeout," and everything stopped. That went through my mind with that. We started a system of timeout in all military training, where any trainee, in the midst of anything, if somehow he doesn't like it, for whatever reason, he can call timeout. Everything stops, and he can tell people what he thinks is wrong, or why he's scared, or what's going on, but it stops. So he has that protection. I looked at it that way. What went through my mind is when I play basketball how, when you got trapped in the corner, you could say, "Timeout," and everybody would stop. You kept the ball, and you were okay.

I was talking to someone the other day, and they were telling [me] "They took a training time out when something happened," and I thought Hmm. There it is; it's still there.

DePue: Let me play devil's advocate, Admiral. I suspect you've heard this plenty of times. You don't get a timeout in combat.

Thunman: I know that, but you're not in combat. You're preparing for combat. I used to say, "It doesn't mean the person gets away with it." Then the person gets looked at pretty hard, about whether you ever want to put him into combat. The person has pointed [out] that there's a problem with him, not a problem so much with the training.

The way I suspect it's used today, the way this person talked about it, that was a big deal. Somebody never called a training timeout. You, all of a sudden, had the system looking at you. What's wrong? And maybe that's what you want. Certainly, in that rescue swimming, if he'd have been able to do that, he'd be alive. I hear you, and I heard that from many people, saying, "You were too easy." I guess maybe I was. I don't know.

But you can't have a lot of respect for the system who wouldn't recognize what had gone on, who was hiding it. They were going to hide this thing. So if they're hiding that in training, where they're making a terrible mistake—you can't link what they were doing to that kid to combat—so if they were hiding that, what the hell else did they hide?

DePue: The school that has the toughest reputation for the training, I think, fell under your supervision as well. That would be the SEAL training.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: Everything you hear about the SEALs, it would be anathema for a SEAL to ever say, "Timeout." Can you just—

Thunman: I hear you, but you see, the first thing I did when I got there was I fired the commander of the SEAL Training School, because of his lack of interest in protecting people.

DePue: Was that the one at the time of the death of the person swimming?

Thunman: There was a guy swimming, where they had to swim from San Diego out to San Clemente. It was a ten or fifteen mile swim. It was a long swim. And they had a boat full of instructors—not full, but they had four or five—going along with the swimmers. They got about a quarter a mile away from San Clemente. This one kid was having a hell of a time. The water's not warm, and you've got hypothermia always to consider when you put people in the water. He was saying, "Gee, I've got to get out. I don't feel good. I've got to stop." and his buddies, again—which is always the problem, you know as well as I, you never want to embarrass yourself in front of your buddies—said, "Oh come on. You can make it. Come on, come on, you can make it."

The guy, he was almost dragging when he came out of the water. [He] laid down on the beach, and it was clear that he had a bad problem. There had been no preparation to treat anybody like that. The naval hospital is not set up to use their emergency helicopter equipment and procedures, the naval

hospital, a big hospital, excellent procedures, where there's always a helicopter standing by when they're warned that things are going on. None of that had been done. Guys on the beach, they didn't have the facilities to even call anybody. The kid died.

The commander was a typical SEAL. You know, those guys can do anything. He said, "Well, you know, it's too bad it happened." What do you mean, it's too bad? What the hell preparations have you made to ensure, when you've got a problem in these very difficult training sessions that you're conducting, that you can't respond? You haven't even thought about it, and none of your people have even thought about it. They didn't even know what the hell to do. None of you had even thought about the effects of cold water on somebody swimming fifteen miles. You've got to be kind of prepared. You didn't even have a corpsman available. You had corpsmen all over the place.

So I fired his ass, right on the spot. I said, "You're finished." Man, that came out. He was from Texas, and he had a congressman that he liked. They got together, and that congressman came after me. I said, "I don't give a goddamn what you do to me." I said, "That guy is not going to be responsible for any people that I'm responsible for." By that time, I wasn't feeling all that good, and I didn't care what he did.

DePue: The commander of the SEAL training, what was his rank?

Thunman: He was a captain; he was the commander of the school. I know the guy went back to Washington, and everything was very quiet. Nobody ever called me. I told the CNO, I said, "You're probably going to have to fire me within a couple of weeks." The next time I saw him, a couple of months later, he says, "I don't think I have to fire you. I think you did right."

The other things I found in there, for example, in the swimmer delivery vehicles, which the SEALs ride, going in, they're free-flooding. So you are exposed to full submergence pressure. I just stumbled onto this when I was out there raising hell about the other part of it. I looked in one of them. They have gauges, depth gauges, to tell you how deep you are, which is pretty important. If you're going to be exposed in the vehicle, underwater, then you're exposed to sea pressure.

All depth gauges have got to be tested. It depends on what kind of a gauge you've got, but it's got to be tested something like quarterly or semiannually, but pretty often, because you got to know that that's the real depth that you're operating. I just happened to look in this one vehicle and looked at the depth gauge. It hadn't been tested in three years. That really upset me too. It's very unprofessional. It's very professional in teaching people how to kill, but not very professional in teaching people—

I went down to SEAL Team 6. I decided, What the hell? What's going on here? It was incredible. We found... One of the things was when... I told you about putting you in the room, and they come in, and they bang in through the windows and shoot at mockup people. I'm sitting, and there's real live ammunition. I'm sitting there at a couch, and they used to do that as a PAO [public affairs] operation. After it was over, I said, "Did you ever hurt anybody doing that?" They said, "Yeah, we did. One guy came in here. The bullets ricocheted. You wear a flack vest, and one of the bullets went in between the two slots of the flack vest." said, "Who did you tell that to?" This was a congressional staffer, "Nobody ever..." I told him, "You're never going to run that PAO thing again. Is this what you want to do with your people? That's okay, but for God's sake, we're not going to take civilians and put them in the middle of this place and shoot them, just because you're trying to impress them."

While I was CNET, after a couple of years, they reorganized the Navy. They came out with SOCOM, Special Operations Command. So everything involving special operators and the SEALs, went under SOCOM, down there in Florida, not in Pensacola, but over on the other coast. I said, "Oh, okay, not ours anymore." We turned it all over. We've got to do a good job, telling them how we do it. Make sure they're ready to handle it.

DePue: I think that's where the Special Forces and the Army Rangers and the Delta Team and the Air Force elites are trained.

Thunman: Yeah, everything's under there. So I said, "We'll go ahead and do it." I wasn't upset about it. I thought, Great, you know. This is a good organizational thing. There was an Army general; I don't remember his name, the first SOCOM. So I get a call one day saying general so and so wants to see you down in—

DePue: This is during the time you were still on duty.

Thunman: Yeah, I was still CNET. He wants to see you down in... I'm forgetting where... Where CENTCOM is now. CENTCOM and SOCOM are in the same area, down there in Florida. So, I go down there, and this general, a nice guy, I liked him very much, very straightforward, easy guy to talk with. So he said, "Tell me, what's involved with this training?" Oh, I know, at this time, I'd just gone through the rescue swimmer thing.

DePue: So this is at the tail end of your tour.

Thunman: Yeah. But he wasn't asking me about that. He just wanted to know, what are we going to have to do, as far as training? I went down. I had studied it carefully and got with the staff and made sure that we were really covering the proper turnover. So, I told him, and I said, "You've got to be careful on things like this. These young guys are pretty much like the guys you know, and you've got to have good procedures; you've got to make sure they're carried

out, and that there are ways that you don't end up hurting people, unless it's the luck of the draw."

We had a nice conversation. And he said, "I got a good idea." I said, "What's that?" He said, "We're just setting this whole thing up. I want a dotted line drawn to you, and you keep the training." (laughs) I said, "Okay. I'll make sure the CNO knows that." He says, "Yeah." He says, "I got too much on my mind to worry about all that stuff." (both laugh)

DePue: He was happy to hand it over to you, all those potential problems.

Thunman: (laughs) All those potential problems. But it was interesting. Two things afterwards was, one, I'm glad that... Who was the actor, Jack, the guy who said, "You can't handle the truth"?

DePue: Nicholson.

Thunman: Nicholson. I'm glad he made that movie, because that would have made a good movie for me. Although the movie might have been different, I'm sure the movie would have ended up with me—which really happened—with me and the wife and the two kids sitting in my outer office, telling her that her husband, who had been a 4.0 sailor, promoted at every opportunity, recommended for everything, got thrown in jail for a year. (laughs)

DePue: Any idea what happened to those four sailors afterwards?

Thunman: No, I don't. They all got busted too, dropped a rank. I'm sure most people would criticize me, but that's the way I had been raised. That sure as hell's what happened. I go back to my first tour, when we lost the man overboard, and that captain of that ship made a bad decision. And he was held accountable.

DePue: We haven't talked about submarine training. Maybe we mentioned it in the last session, but as I understand, you didn't have a lot to do with submarine training.

Thunman: Well, I could do whatever I wanted to. But I knew submarine training so well—I'd been funding it for five years and been pretty much involved with who was doing it and how it was done—it wasn't anything I had to put any time and effort in. It was pretty well organized.

Submarine training was... I go back to my days of submarine training, when I entered the Navy, when in submarine training. We made the youngsters go up the tower, free ascent. That's a pretty dangerous thing to do, but it was done well. We had swimmers at various levels, in the tower, with tanks. So if a guy going up stopped blowing... You had to blow to keep the pressure equal in your lungs with the sea. If you stopped and just went up, your lungs would blow up. You'd have an embolism. So it was well prepared.

But it was scary. That was just as scary as just about anything anybody else does.

They had to go into smoke-filled compartments and put on oxygen breathing apparatus. All of that was part of the training process. But it was always well handled. Everybody was always standing by, in case something went wrong. They grabbed him, got him out of there. That was an attitude that I was used to in submarines, that you always stayed in control of what you're doing.

Of course, the training we did on the submarine was extensive. My own submarine, the first time we'd go to sea, after we'd been in port for two or three weeks, the first thing I'd do was angles and dangles, I used to call them. We'd take thirty downs and thirty ups. That's scary. You better have control, or you're going to keep going down.

DePue: Is that in part to make sure the submarine is functioning properly or the crew?

Thunman: Somewhat, but what's most important is that you get the crew used to doing it again. You're not used to it. When all of a sudden you're headed down, and the depth gauges start spinning, that's something that... But after you've done it two or three times, then it's kind of okay, more angles and dangles, but it's not a big deal. The other part of that was to go into test depth. [That] was part of testing the submarine. That's how pressure was lost.

As I told you earlier, Rickover told me that Wes Harvey had done the wrong thing. He'd gone directly to 1,300 feet, rather than going down step by step to test. And [he] really ridiculed Wes Harvey, who was kind of a hero in the submarine force, the captain of the *Thresher*. He [Rickover] beat on me and said I'm dumb enough to do the same thing. He told me that before I went to command. I never have figured out what that inspirational speech was all about. (laughing)

DePue: I want to ask you kind of a philosophical question. This is going to be my own understanding of the military mind, if you will. You're in the submarine business. You're dealing with nuclear weapons; you're dealing with nuclear power plants. And everything you've told me so far about Admiral Rickover and the whole officer corps that serves on submarines, suggests that, by necessity, it has to be a zero defect kind of a community.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: And now you're in this training command, and you're dealing with Navy aviators, and you're dealing with SEALs, and you're dealing with a completely different kind of a combat experience that they have to train for. My guess is that they have a different mentality, that it's not zero defect, that they want to have an opportunity for people to make mistakes and grow and improve because of that.

Thunman: You have to define the word mistake. We all make mistakes, although the old chief... At the beginning of the submarine training, they had one chief up in New London who oversaw the training program. This is back in the '20s and '30s, in the Navy submarine force. He was a legend. I forget his name. He's buried somewhere, recognized by all the World War II submariners, this legend, who [established] the fundamentals of their training. And he always said... I remember he said, "There's room for everything in a submarine, except a mistake." Now, that was said back in the 1920s and '30s, by the guy who ran submarine training.

When you define mistake, you've got to decide, why was the mistake made? Was the mistake made due to a lack of attention to duty, lack of attention to your job? There are a lot of mistakes like that, that people are willing to accept as, well gee, that's too bad that that happened, when it could have been prevented if the person had been doing their job properly. There are a lot of mistakes made like that in life. In my view, you had to be held accountable for that.

There are a lot of things that happen to you that, but for the grace of God... I fought for people when I was COMSUBPAC. People wanted to hang my skippers, and I stood in front of them and got in some trouble. They said, "How can that submarine have come up and hit that ship? You know, we sank a ship; we sank a Japanese ship.

I was just reading about, just recently, one of our submarines hit somebody in the Straits of Hormuz. The periscope was peened over. But in our case, I defended that skipper. He was doing what he was supposed to do. But for the grace of God... I use that term, but for the grace of God there goes everybody who's ever commanded a submarine. I don't know when I ever came to periscope depth when I wasn't swinging on that periscope, waiting to see something that I didn't know was there, and then many times there was.

Now, if the guy had not been swinging on the periscope and looking for it, that merchant, then I'd have hung him as high as I could. But he was. He was doing the best he could. So the word mistake really depends on how the thing comes about. If you want to put the guy in danger, that's fine. I think you should.

I go back to the submarine training. What did we do? We went up to the tower; we went into the smoke-filled compartments. We went into another compartment, which was flooding. It was rigged to flood while you were trying to fix it. [There were] a number of things that went on. I know, in some cases, some people had problems with the ascent up to the tower. It was really a problem with them to begin with that nobody knew about. It wasn't a problem of how the training was conducted.



If you're going to be put in charge of people, and I think it's true of every service, if you're going to be put in charge of people, put them into dangerous situations, when they don't have to be... When you're training, you don't have to be endangered every time you get involved with something. But if you're going to do it, you'd better be ready to do it; do it right; prepare the people; train them; train them how to do it.

I got in trouble again when I was OP-02 in the Pentagon. A guy—and you see him in the news now and again—he was assigned to be commander in chief Pacific Fleet. He was a contemporary of mine in the Pentagon. It was toward the end of my tour there. Again, as I say, I was not in really good shape physically. COMSUBPAC came back to see me and my deputy—they were both rear admirals—They said, “We’ve got a plan.” The new commander in chief Pacific Fleet has got a plan. I didn’t like him very much. I suppose you can say, well, you were jealous. Possibly, but I thought he was an arrogant asshole. (both laugh ) What he wants to do is, he wants... The Russian submarines are operating up off the west coast, and they’re quiet. So what we want to do is to get one of our submarines and put a noisemaker on it and have it operate around there. Then, when he detects it—because we’ve got this noisemaker out there—and goes in to trail him, then we’ll have a third submarine come in and trail him. This is the plan.

This is in my last year there at the Pentagon. Naturally, I was disappointed that maybe I hadn’t gone on to be CINCPACFLT, although it would have been best that I didn’t, because a couple of months later, I really went and got into problems with my urinary tract.

But I said, “That’s the dumbest goddamned thing I ever heard of.” They tried to convince me, both of them. Both of them I liked very much, but it was clear to me that they’d been ordered to come back by Ace Lyons—this guy’s name is—to say, “Hey, get this approval.”

Now, why Ace—I never knew this—why he thought he had to have my approval or not... He was commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet; he could have just told the guys to do it. But he said, “No, you’ve got to come back.” They, in order to stay on good terms with Ace, they put together... I could tell that they had already planned the discussion with me beforehand.

They went together with their... Their responses were clearly thought out, to my questions. I forget what question I hit them with that they couldn’t answer, [among those] about what if, what if, what if, what if. And I said, “No, absolutely not.” I said, “Have you ever trained at this? Have you ever taken some submarines to sea and trained at it and given them depth bands so that they won’t hit each other? Have you ever done that?”

[They said] “Well, no, we don’t have much time to do that.” I said, “Come on, you don’t have enough time? You’re talking about losing the

submarine,” because there’s no limit. You don’t know what their limits [are], where they’re operating, at what depth they’re operating. That’s what the scare of trailing always was, was where is the guy? You don’t know, as far as whether you’re in the same depth band or whether [you’re] with him. But that was the question that got them, Have you ever trained...?

I said, “Well, I’ll tell you, I do not agree, and I’m going to go up and tell the admiral that I don’t agree. It’s unsafe. You guys want to do that, be my guest,” I said. “But you’ve never trained at it, and you’re recommending it.”

DePue: It sounded like they wanted you to be some cover for them.

Thunman: Yeah. Well, it sounded like Ace Lyons wanted me to be the cover. That was it. There’s no question about that, that asshole. (both laugh)

So, I went up and told my boss, Jim Watkins, the CNO. [I] didn’t know how he would respond. He looked at me; he said, “Write me a message and tell him that’s a bunch of bullshit...” He went on, really tough. You could send a message. I thought maybe he’d probably make a phone call or something. What I really thought would happen was we’d all would get together, and then there’d be a training operation conducted first, no. “Write the message and...”

So I went back and wrote a personal message. I tried to make it as level as I could. I took it back to him. He thought it was terrible. He wanted some teeth in that. He took it, tore it up, and put in some tough words in it, and out it went. It never happened.

About a year or so later...My deputy is the one who relieved me when I left DCNO submarines. He’d been there about two years with me.

DePue: In this case, being relieved means you’re simply being replaced in the job.

Thunman: Yeah, replaced, yeah. He called me about a year or so later. Neither one of them were too happy with my response. I knew that.

But I’ll say this for him—and I’ve always admired him for it—he called me and said, “I just wanted you to know that we decided to run a training operation to do what we recommended to you.” I thought, Oh, okay, he’s going to tell me...He said, “Well, I wanted you to know that it failed. We would have had a collision. We might have lost a submarine. I just want you to know that you did some good things here.” I have never been so pleased with a “well done” in my life. The guy had the—

DePue: He didn’t have to do that.

Thunman: No, there was no requirement for it. He just did it. I was so shocked that he did it, because we’d had a pretty heated discussion about it.

DePue: We have to respect somebody who does that.

Thunman: I think so. You've got to understand whether you've got a handle on what you're doing and whether you don't, especially when people are involved. I get really violently upset when they talk about the Benghazi thing, and they say, "Well, they only lost four people." Gee, we lose a hell of a lot of soldiers every day. We lose contractors, civilian contractors, nobody makes any noise about them. A civilian contractor gets killed; nobody has anything to say about it. They're over there in Iraq, Iran, some of the soldiers who get killed.

My response to that is, "Wait a minute." Those guys get killed, I hope, because it was the luck of the draw. That was the way... There wasn't anybody who could have done much better. I guess some people could do better than others, but the mistake was not caused by their own lack of preparation and attention to the job. So, yeah, I feel bad for those contractors who get killed and certainly feel bad for the soldiers, but those four people who got killed in Benghazi, there was a hell of a lot of lack of preparation and consideration for putting those guys there, and somebody deserves to hang.

DePue: Well, that's very much contemporary affairs. We're going to steer clear of that, beyond the comments you just made.

Thunman: Well, now you know. But it's pertinent to my attitude and what happened in my career.

DePue: A couple more questions about your time with CNET. You said before, that you didn't have any involvement with the Naval Academy. Do you have any stories to talk about in that respect?

Thunman: Well, the Naval Academy, of course, I had big involvement with setting up that selection process for NROTC [Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps], and I talked a lot [about that]. I tried to make the selection process the same as the Naval Academy. I'm very proud of that, because that still remains. Because of it, I couldn't get my grandson into the NROTC, so I knew I'd done a good job. (both laugh)

DePue: He might not think so.

Thunman: Because the gal who runs it was the gal I put in the job. So I always thought, If I didn't have enough impetus to get it done, nobody would. But I do recall, when I was commander Submarine Squadron 15, down in Guam, we got a midshipmen in the summertime, midshipmen cruisers. [In] my day, we went to sea on ships. Today, they kind of send them everywhere and do different things. I got about fifteen of them.

DePue: Kind of like an internship for these kids?

Thunman: Yeah, yeah, summertime. They come out there, and you, as the commander, was kind of responsible for what kind of training you're going to give them, what you're going to have them do. That was my responsibility.

What we planned was to send them out with the submarines, when the submarines were available, what submarines were available, have the submarines do certain things, detail the submarine commander to make sure that they covered certain things. But I always wanted them to have a good time. I wanted them to look at submarining as fun, the people are fun, and they are, good senses of humor. And so, I'd work them. Then I'd send them off to Japan or Korea, down to the naval air station they had there. I'd call the commander and say, "How about flying over to Tokyo and let these guys spend two or three days over there, yahooping it up?"

But one of the things I said, "I want you to do... The only assignment that I'm going to give you is that I want you to go down to the submarine during these three or four weeks, and I want you to study the basic steam cycle, which is the basis of ship propulsion. Steam, turbines, boilers, have been the basic propulsion system since the 1900s, really, and write me an essay on it, on what it is, how it works, the basics. Why does it work? Is there anything better you can think of to do than what we do?"

So I would get these papers. I don't know, we had so many words in it. It had to be so many words. I forget what it was. And so I sat up there on the submarine tender, in my offices, and I'd read through them. Well, they were good from a technical point of view. The English was terrible, absolutely terrible. (DePue laughs)

So, I wrote a letter to the superintendent of the Naval Academy—I forget who it was—and I enclosed a copy of these fifteen essays. I said, "You know, these kids are doing okay from a technical point of view. But," I said, "They can't write anything." I said, "I pity the poor commander who's got to read their messages when all hell is breaking loose somewhere, and they can't put two words together to describe it."

DePue: Were these papers handwritten or typed?

Thunman: The papers were handwritten, because they didn't have... Nobody had a typewriter to give them. As a matter of fact, I wanted them handwritten, because their penmanship... Most of them really couldn't communicate very well, cursively. So I wrote that back there, and I got a good letter from... I'm trying to remember who it was. I can't recall. I got a good letter back. He says, "I have distributed these to all the departments, and we're going to take a round turn on this, teach these people to write." So that's the only impact I ever had on the Naval Academy. (laughs)

DePue: I have one more question for you during this tour.

Thunman: I'll say one other thing. One of the things...I'd told you that they'd said I was going to be the superintendent, and then it didn't happen. But one of the things happened, which...It embarrassed me, frankly, quite a bit. When I got back to be the DCNO, OP-02, all of a sudden, I was invited to go down and review a Naval Academy parade. No one was ever asked to review a Naval Academy parade. That was normally some distinguished president or senator or whatever, maybe commander and chief of a fleet, but not a DCNO. I was kind of embarrassed, because I'm sure the other DCNOs said, "What the hell, how come he gets to go down and...?" It's a wonderful thing. You're seated with the parade, and they read your career. Then, of course, the entire brigade marches by. But I always thought that that was some sort of an also ran like present. (both laugh) I embarrassed me. That was the only other thing I had to do with the Naval Academy.

DePue: The last question, during your training hitch, deals with ghosts in the residence.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. Wonderful quarters in Pensacola, the best quarters in the Navy, 17,000 square feet. The house was built...It's antebellum [Civil War period]. The commander of the naval facility in Pensacola always lived there. The original commander was an Army colonel, maybe lieutenant colonel. Pensacola, they'd built this big brick wall around the [naval] station. It's a beautiful place down there; it really is nice. They built a high wall around, because they knew that the mosquitoes...They felt that mosquitoes were causing...not TB, but...What was the—

DePue: Malaria?

Thunman: Malaria. The mosquitoes caused malaria. So they had a fence around the whole naval station. Then they had this big, beautiful house, three floors and a cupola up on top. The commander there always stayed up on the second or third floor, because he was always trying to stay away from the mosquitoes. Well, he had become a ghost. That tradition had gone on in Pensacola. As the different commanders came down there and lived there, many of them commented about the ghost, seeing the ghosts.

DePue: Well, what's an old, dead Army officer to do but to haunt Navy officers?

Thunman: Sure. So, I go down there, and the guy I relieved, a wonderful guy, very kind, he was a nuclear submariner as well, a three-star, a very common sense, logical guy. His wife was the same. They were not flighty in any way. They talked about the ghosts when we went down there and had dinner. She had seen the ghost. No, she had seen the mistress of the ghost a couple of times. I don't know that anybody that I knew of ever...Some said they had seen what might have been the ghost. I heard a couple of stories about it. I'm yeah, sure.

I had this big, beautiful white cat, a Himalayan cat, that another admiral gave me when he had to go to England. They have such difficult rules about animals over there, so she was my... And she just loved me and followed me like a dog. She didn't have any claws; somebody had de-clawed her, earlier in her life. So you couldn't let her outside, because she couldn't defend herself.

But anyway, the first night we got there, all the stuff came, and it's late and... Every bedroom had its own fireplace. This is an incredible house, a beautiful place, windows that opened down; the doors opened out underneath the window. It had a whole basement full of rooms that you could use for your help. Of course, in those days, they had four, five or six people helping them. I had one, which was fine, which was really more than I needed.

So we get there, and we're in bed. I'm tired and laying there in bed, and I smell pipe smoke. A submariner, you're always tuned to smoke of any kind. I smell pipe smoke; something's burning. I jump out of bed immediately, and I immediately thought about the fireplace, that maybe something is coming down the fireplace, down the flue or something. I go over to the fireplace. No, it's (sniffs) not there. The further you get away from the bed, the strength of the smell goes down. You get back around the bed, and it's fairly heavy. Then it slowly goes away. I'm there for about an hour, an hour and a half, flapping with this, running around the house. You get away from the bedroom; you don't smell it. You get back in the bedroom; you smell it. So I finally, at the end of it, I thought, Well, what the hell. I guess this is just something blown down that chimney. Went back to bed.

I get to work the next day. I had this wonderful secretary, a southern gal. She comes in. I'm sitting there, and she said, "Well, how do you like the house, Admiral?" I said, "It's a wonderful house, incredible house." She said, "Well, have you smelled the pipe smoke?" (DePue laughs) I go, "What?" She says, "Have you smelled the pipe smoke?" I said, "Well, I hate to say it, but I did." She said, "Well, he come to see you then." (both laugh)

So the rest of the time I'm there, three years, and this cat... Whenever I came into the house, the cat would run from wherever she was and jump up on my lap. This is funny. She would jump up on my lap, [phone rings] sit on my chest, and then take her paw—it probably had something to do with her paws being de-clawed—and she'd go... She'd salute! (both laugh) That was always funny.

But she would come and sit on my lap. Then, every once in a while, she would shriek, jump off my lap, and go out of that room. In one case, she'd go up the wall and out the transom. I used to have a feeling after those... I'd have this nice warm feeling. I always felt like something made me feel good. No matter what my troubles were, I just kind of, gosh... So I decided myself—I never told anybody about it—I'd say, "Well, he'd [the ghost] come to see

me.” And he was just being nice to me. I’d have this feeling for a while, and then it would go away.

I heard more stories about him from other people who had lived there. The wife of the guy that I lived with, she said she saw the mistress go by one day. She was sitting in one room. There was another room like that, adjacent, and she just saw her go by, kind of diaphanous. Then one night she woke up, and the mistress was there, had her purse in her hand, stroking the purse. There were a lot of stories about... Well, anyway, the day we’re leaving—

DePue: This is the apparition, the purse was an apparition as well?

Thunman: Oh, yeah. These are people; these are apparitions.

DePue: But it wasn’t this wife’s purse?

Thunman: No, no, no. The day that I’m leaving, I’m up on the third floor that led up to the cupola that had a stairway that goes up to the cupola. I’m up there, and I’ve got a chest opened up. I’m taking stuff out of there. It’s a nice warm afternoon. I’m sitting there on the floor, and all of a sudden—This is the only other time—[there’s] this really heavy pipe smoke. I don’t mean just a whiff. I’m sitting there; I’m smelling it again.

I thought, Oh my God. I thought, Well, the stairs are right behind me, going up to the cupola. Everybody said that’s where he lived, to stay away from the mosquitoes. So he must be up on those stairs. Do I dare look at him? Then I thought, Well, it will probably be the only time in my life I’m ever going to have a chance to see a ghost. It really went through my mind that way. So I turned around and looked. [There] wasn’t anything there. But the smell was there.

That night, we left, and we stayed in the guest quarters. We had a big, beautiful guest quarters there. In the middle of the night, the head—we had a big bathroom up on the third floor—the piping blew up, inside the... It blew apart, inside the tank, where the float is. That night water came down, and the next day they were having a hell of a time. There were a lot of water on top of the ceiling. It came down through the rest of the house.

I was talking to the engineer over there, and I said, “What the hell happened to it?” He said, “I don’t know.” He says, “The pipe, we went and looked at it. It just blew apart.” I said, “Did it have proper bonding?” “No.” He says, “It blew apart.” I thought, Well maybe he was sorry to see me go then. (both laugh) That’s the story, but it’s a prevalent story. If you go down there today, there’s a little story about the ghost at Quarters A is what’s the name of it.

DePue: Admiral, it sounds like you’re definitely a believer now.

Thunman: Well, I know one thing, that night that I arrived, there was heavy pipe smoke. The day that left it was there. And I'm not talking about it in a light way, and the guy smoked a pipe.

DePue: Did you ever have any concerns about your own personal safety?

Thunman: No, I always felt good about it. I always tell people the ghost liked me. I really believe that, because I'd get these... The cat would shriek and go running out of the room, and all of a sudden I'd have this wonderful feeling of being. (laughs) So, I never had any feelings that there was somebody there, out to get me.

DePue: Well, time to change subjects once again. I think this is the time—You can tell me what the right order is—to talk about the decision to retire and the actual retirement, or about naval department reorganization. That was something you suggested we talk about.

Thunman: Well, the decision to retire was... I'd kind of made the decision about a year before I retired, because I was having difficulty with my urinating. I couldn't urinate, and they couldn't figure out why. And it was getting worse and worse and worse. It wasn't just a standard problem that men had. This had to do with my nervous system.

The CNO called me about six months before. He said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I'm going to have to go." He said, "Well, we could keep you down there longer if you want." Of course, the nice thing about being

down there was you had that big naval hospital there. I said, "No, it's time. Somebody else ought to get the job, three-star job." So that's kind of the way it came about. It was a real

shocker. The doctors down there said, "Well, you're going to have to see some specialists." The CNO, he sent a submarine down. He sent the submarine, *Rickover*, down. I had my change of command onboard. He came down.



Commissioning ceremony for the USS Rickover, New London, CT July 21, 1984.



DePue: Rickover did.

Thunman: No, no, Rickover was out of the [static]...No, Rickover didn't come down.

DePue: When you said, "He came down..."

Thunman: The CNO, the chief of naval operations came down, which was not normal, for him to go around with three-stars. But the doctors down there said, "Well, you're going to have to go back. You're going to have to get some experts in on this."

So we left. Had very good community relations with the community. I had a lot of fun doing that. And the CNO liked it. He would send me people down to entertain, like the CNO of the Indian Navy, or the first lord of the admiralty would come and visit him, and he would send them to Pensacola. I would have these big receptions. Of course, I had this big officer's club down there. But I'd hold receptions at my quarters, which were just beautiful, indoors and outdoors.

I'd not only invite Navy people, I would invite the civilian community. The civilians... That had never happened there before. Some of those receptions were 200, 300 people, maybe more. I would use the full strength of that officer's club to prepare the hors d'oeuvres and the booze and everything. People loved it. You got the money from the secretary of state's organization for entertaining these people and their big deals. So that was a lot of fun.

So, the civilian community really liked me. I did that just for them, so that it always just wasn't the Navy and their own little organization. You know, bring in the whole civilian world. Some of the higher ups and some of the lower... I used to have my barber come. I had everybody involved.

Anyway, we got up to Washington. They had the best urologist they had in the DOD. He was an Army doctor, a lieutenant colonel. So, I went over to Walter Reed. I was in Bethesda, talking to the doctors there. They said, "Well, we've got lieutenant colonel so and so coming in." I was given an apartment there at Bethesda. You come in there, and you've got an appointment with him tomorrow, the next day.

So I go over there. This kind of young guy, a good guy, really good doctor. We start the day of all these tests. It just wasn't a ten minute day. They did a bunch of things to see whether the pressures were right, whether I was generating the right pressure to cause the bladder to force things out, to force the urine out and all. After about two or three hours, he's standing there, looking at me. I'm sitting there, and he says, "Don't you have to urinate?" I said, "Why, no." He said, "Don't you have any indication that you've got to urinate?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, I've just put"—I forget what he said—"two or three or four liters of liquid in you, well beyond what you should be

able to stand. And you have no indication that you have to [urinate]?” I said, “No.” He said, “I don’t know what it is. I can’t think of what it is.”

So, it was, “You’re going to have to self-catheterize yourself. It’s the only way you can get it out of you. There’s an operation we can do, but I don’t recommend it. It’s where they take your appendix that you still have, and you go into your stomach and into the bladder and use that as a way to provide for connection to the catheter.” He said, “You may have to do that later on, but let’s start it this way.” So that’s...

Boy, that hit me like a ton of bricks, just like a ton of bricks. It couldn’t have been worse. I don’t think I’d have felt as bad if they’d said it’s cancer.

DePue: Just the understanding that you’re going to have to do this for the rest of your life?

Thunman: Yeah, every four hours.

DePue: Day and night, in the middle of the night.

Thunman: Yeah. Set your alarms. And when you miss it...I’ve gotten sloppy a couple of times and bang; you get a urinary tract infection, a lot of blood.

DePue: That’s if you do it incorrectly, or if you miss doing it?

Thunman: Miss doing it and if you do it incorrectly. What you’ve got to be careful of—you’ve really got to be adept at it—is the catheter’s about that long.

DePue: About eighteen inches or so.

Thunman: Yeah. And you come in with it...You’ve got to kind of estimate where you are. You’ve got to keep moving slowly. Then toward the end, toward about this point, you turn it about twenty to thirty degrees. It turns sideways to the prostate, so that you don’t dig into the prostate, because one of the things that happens is you dig into the prostate. That’s how you get infections. It’s the worst torture you could have; it really is. Man, I was down. I was down, and I was offered a lot of really good jobs. I went up to be the—

DePue: You mean in the Navy still?

Thunman: No, the civilian community.

DePue: What timeframe? When did you retire?

Thunman: January of 1989. I consulted for a year or two. I guess more like a year and a half. I did really well, made a lot of money in a short period of time. Not

great, huge amounts, but people would pay me well, just to come over and look around at what they did.

DePue: What kind of organizations were you—

Thunman: Well, one big company was involved with special operations in the military, and they wanted me involved with that. Another was one that built a lot of materials in the nuclear reactor plants. But they did a lot of other things too, just not that.

It was interesting. The president invited me over and said, “How about going around, looking at all my companies”—He had about five or six companies—”and tell me what you think?” I’d say, “Well, what the hell can I provide you?” He said, “Well, just go around and look at them. Send a day or two with them, and then look at them and come back and tell me. Tell me what you think of the president, and tell me what you think of their operation.”

It was interesting. I thought, Well hell, I’m never going to help these guys at all. Well, [I] found out that I was able to help them. In that one particular regard, I found that they had so many redundant things going on...I went back, and I said, “You’re spending an awful lot of money for people doing the same thing.” That was the financial side. Subsequent to that, he reorganized his whole financial organization.

I consulted for the Los Alamos. I used to fly out to Los Alamos a lot. That’s a funny story I’ll tell. I go out there...This is right when they had decided that all of the civilian nuclear facilities would be inspected once a year by a team that operated like the ORSE board that I’d headed. You may recall; I told you about that.

DePue: Right.

Thunman: They implemented that and told all these facilities, “You’ve got to be ready for this inspection.” I got called by the director of the Los Alamos, really a nice guy; I liked him. He said, “You’ve been head of the ORSE board. You’ve been in this business a long time.” He said, “How about coming out and taking a look at what we do out here?” I said, “I’m not sure I can give you much help. I’m not that technically oriented.”

They had this plutonium facility, where they made plutonium. They were still making it there. “Well, if you just come around and take a look at the plutonium facility.” I said, “Well, okay. I don’t know much about it, but I’ll go look.” So, I went out there. It’s a huge place, Los Alamos. At that time, I think they had 500 PhDs and their families.

DePue: That’s a lot of ego in one place.

Thunman: Yeah. And that's part of the story. I go in there, and they all kind of look at me like, who in the hell is this guy, this Navy guy? I walk around, and it was a mess. It wasn't a mess from a technical point of view. It was just, there was absolutely no housekeeping going on. They had barrels with plutonium residue. They had stuff, unlabeled bags. The glove boxes, the huge glove boxes that you go into, [put] your hands into gloves that are affixed to the box, hadn't been cleaned. The boxes hadn't been cleaned in years. So they've got plutonium dust and stuff inside.

I walked into this one...It was their health physics facility. They had a list of people, written in pencil, who had been contaminated in the last week. It was a long list, like fifteen or twenty people. Now, I came from a community, the Rickover community. If you ever contaminated anybody, you had to write Rickover, and tell him why and what you've done to keep that from ever happening again. Here, these guys, in a week, were getting...(laughs) [There was] nothing technical that I did. I was just—

I went in to see him. I want to say his name was Strickter (??) or...He's gone on; he went on and went fairly high in the technical world. He was a young guy then. I went in to see him, and he said, "What did you find?" I said, "I've got to tell you, you've got a terrible problem. You've got a mess." I said, "I'm not talking about a little problem. You've got a big problem. Anybody smart enough to know what they're doing in the world of nuclear contamination is going to come in here and take your head off." I said, "That's my evaluation."

Hof, he was just shocked. He said, "Well, what is it?" I went through it all. He said, "Oh, my God." He said, "In the Navy, you were there, close to Rickover and all. What would you have done if you found a place like this?" I said, "Well, it wouldn't have been any question. We'd just fire all of your directors, maybe some others. But we'd immediately take out...We would fire every one of your directors." These are guys that had been there for years, who had their own political organization of their own.

He said, "I can't do that." He said, "I don't have enough power to do that." He hadn't been there long. He said, "What else would you do?" I said, "Well, if I wasn't going to fire them, I'd haul them up in front of me, and I would have chewed their ass and laid down requirements and specific things that they were going to do and what they were going to report to me on, and really lay it to them. It would be pretty harsh. If they wanted to quit, then let them quit." He said, "Well, I like that." He said, "I want you to do that."

I said, "Well, you know, these guys are PhDs that have been here for fifteen, twenty years." He said, "No." he said, "I want you to do that, put that together, and I want you to talk to them"—this was funny—"the same way you would talk to people in the Navy." I said, "I don't know if you want that."

DePue: Why wouldn't he be doing this himself?

Thunman: Well, I didn't ask him that. Of course, he didn't want to do it. He didn't want to be the bad guy. He said, "I want you to use the same words, the same way." The next day, I'm there, and I'd spent the night going through all the things they were going to have to...the reports they were going to have to make to him and different types of things. I laid up a bureaucracy of oversight.

I get up there, and there's four or five of them, responsible for different parts of Los Alamos. Los Alamos is huge. They're sitting there, in kind of a semicircle of chairs, and he's there. I got up, and I just ate them out. I just chewed...I just waved my arms and yelled and shouted at them and told them what they were doing and how they were—

DePue: Admiral, it sounds like you had a good time doing it.

Thunman: I did; I loved it. (both laugh) They'd never heard...They sat there, just like spellbound, and they all left. I thought, Well, that's probably the last time I'll see this place again. But no, they kept me going for a year, a year and a half. I was back there once a month. They paid me pretty well. They paid me \$700 a day and paid all the travel.

They're wonderful people out there. I really got friendly with several of them. I'll tell you, you talk about an overhaul of a building. The next time I came out there, they had...I don't know how many resources had come in there to completely scour that building and collect the contamination and handle the contamination.

I did that until the former Marine commandant, P.J...He was commandant when I was in the Pentagon. He recommended me to be the superintendent of Valley Forge Military Academy, marine commandant, was a wonderful guy. So I went up there.

DePue: Where were you living before that time?

Thunman: I was just consulting.

DePue: Were you still down in Pensacola?

Thunman: No, no. I'd moved up to Washington. But after I'd gone to see the doctors at...There were some more doctor things they wanted to do. So I settled in Washington.

I made a mistake here. I decided...The doctors told me...I said, "Should I tell the people at Valley Forge that I've got this problem?" They said, "Oh, yeah, you ought to tell everybody." Well, I decided I wouldn't. That was a bad mistake. I thought, Well, I can handle this by myself. But it turned out I couldn't. It turned out I couldn't do all the travel. I did well at that

school. The people were shocked when I was leaving. But I just didn't have the mobility, with my problem. I made a mistake; I hadn't told anybody about it.

My wife didn't understand it. I said, "I can't live like this." I'd have these infections. You had to travel all around. They wanted me to go around and see all these people in the fundraising business. It was fun. People would have alumni parties and all. One of the things that amazed me about Valley Forge, that alumni, they just loved each other. They loved that school. I'm not sure I'd ever loved the Naval Academy like those people loved that little high school. They loved it. And most of the people who were involved had a lot of money. So you were treated like a king. By God, if you were the superintendent at Valley Forge, and they were a Valley Forge graduate, it was better than being governor. (both laugh)

DePue: But I'm thinking about your comments about travel. Your condition and having to do this every four hours with air travel must have been a nightmare.

Thunman: Terrible, yeah.

DePue: You don't do air travel, I would think.

Thunman: Well, you did and tried to do it on an airplane, is what I did for a couple of years. I finally reached a point where the whole thing just got too much for me. I never thought that, psychologically, anything would ever get too much for me. I never thought that there wasn't anything I couldn't do or handle or get through. Never entered my mind. But this really wore on me.

DePue: There's one other thing I wanted to ask you about. We might be getting this in the wrong timeline, chronologically, but I don't think you've talked about Rickover's passing away.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. Well, when Rickover retired, I was in the Pentagon. I was given the responsibility of kind of taking care of him. It was funny. They gave him a yeoman to support him, a writer. He had offices, there on the Navy yard. Initially, they couldn't get a yeoman to work for him, because he'd chew them out so badly. (laughs)

There was a guy who had worked for me early on that I knew had been an ex-California highway patrolman, had been a torpedo man on submarines, and he'd come back in the Navy as a yeoman first class, tough as nails, good guy, smart, not dumb. I found him, He was in the Navy somewhere with a good job. I said, "You've got to come back and work for Rickover." He said, "God, I'm moving along here into the personnel side, and I'm about to be made a warrant officer with commission status." He said, "I don't want to do that." I said, "You've got to do it; you've got to. If you don't do it, I'll hound you. You're going to have a hell of a time in the Navy with me." So he came back, and he was just perfect with Rickover. He would say that Rickover

would yell at him, and Tom would say, “What is it you want, Admiral? I don’t understand what you want; you’re yelling at me. How can I know what you’re saying?” And then Rickover would calm down. (DePue laughs)

What I would do was I would bring young submarine officers up every once in a while, young admirals, brand new admirals, take them over to meet Rickover, talk with Rickover, especially those who I thought were going to be something in the submarine business, and stayed close to his wife, who liked me very much. Then he was dying. That’s why Rickover didn’t come to Pensacola, because he was dead.

I went over to see him just two days before he died. I wrote this down. I’ve got it written down, my last conversation with him. I said, “Well, Admiral, I just want you to know how much we appreciate what you did for us. When you built that nuclear submarine program, you did it for us. You did it with us, and you made us all better than we could ever possibly have been on our own.” His last words to me were—I’ve got this written down upstairs. Maybe I’ll get it and give it to you. But it’s words to the effect of, “I only gave you the opportunity to use your God-given talents to do something useful in your life,” words about like that. Those same words were used at his funeral. He believed that. All of that that he put us through was he just wanted us to use our God-given talents to do something good.

DePue: Were you one of the people who eulogized him at his funeral?

Thunman: No, no. The only one who eulogized him was Jim Watkins, who was then chief of naval operations when I was... He had worked for Rickover too. He was the one who read the eulogy. He’s the only one.

DePue: Did you have any role in the funeral?

Thunman: No. Nobody really did. It was not a Navy thing. It was more of a thing done outside for people who’d been close to him. I was there, of course, and Mrs. Rickover. After he was gone, I thought, Well, that’s probably my last connection. But no, she was also very close to me. Owsley tells the story. Owsley was not around during any of that.

We went back to Washington for the hundredth birthday of Admiral Rickover. This is Owsley’s story. It was a big reception, huge, 300 or 400. He was gone, of course. This was at the Smithsonian. The Smithsonian had supported the opening of a section of the Smithsonian that dealt with nuclear submarines. So, we were there, and Owsley was kind of scared. She didn’t know any people. These were all my old Navy people, and she’d never been part of that community. She’d never really been real comfortable with it, because they’re a different world. They all kind of looked at her askance.

She said she was there talking with some people, and all of a sudden the word came around, people ran up and said, “Mrs. Rickover is here. Mrs.

Rickover is here.” Everybody was kind of looking around, and then somebody said, “Mrs. Rickover wants to see Ron Thunman.” This was her story. She had no idea. Then it was, “Hey, where’s Ron Thunman? She wants to see him.” So, somebody found me. I’m over somewhere else in this big gaggle. “Hey, Mrs. Rickover wants to see you.” I went over, and there she was. She pulls me aside. We go over into a corner, and we talk for an hour. (laughs) Poor Owsley, she watched this, and everybody else is watching this. It was just Mrs. Rickover and I talking about what she’s doing and what’s happening, what I’m doing. I hadn’t seen her since then, since... But I was always very close with her, even after he died, kind of taking care of her and making sure she was treated well. She had somebody to take her through the entire retirement process and all that.

But in the submarine force, I’m still the president of the Advisory Committee of the Naval Submarine League. So I still make connections there. I’ve had fun. I think I told you, when I got called by the two admirals, to go to sea with them on the submarine, *Connecticut*, sister ship of the *Seawolf*... Two guys had been commanders, working for me. They were nice enough to set that up, because I’d been so much involved with the *Seawolf*-class.

DePue: What brought you back to Springfield?

Thunman: Owsley. I met Owsley again, right before I retired. I came back here. I was on the board of the Abraham Lincoln Association. I came back, and she was at a reception. Of course, I knew her family so well. I knew her mother. Her mother was a great favorite of mine. Her sisters. I’d dated her—

DePue: Her older sister?

Thunman: Yeah. She had been my girlfriend in high school. I knew Owsley when she was twelve, when she was ten. So it was not... It was somebody I knew, who in my view is an extraordinary lady. I met her at the reception, when I came back. I came back and spoke at the Lincoln home. Then I called her, before I saw her at that reception.

This is a funny story she tells. Her sister died. I came back and spoke to the Abraham Lincoln Association. They had their meeting at the old state house. I stood up at the bully pulpit. The reason they’d asked the Navy to provide a speaker was the *Abraham Lincoln* aircraft carrier had just been commissioned. It was right after I retired, right after. Carl Trost called me and said, “You’re from Springfield. Why don’t you go do that?” So I did that. At the reception, I saw this friend of mine, [who] used to be a friend of her sister’s. She came up to me. She said, “Did you know that Catherine had died?” I said, “No, God, I did not know that.” So I called Owsley—I thought she was still married—just to say I was sorry to hear about it.

DePue: What was the family’s last name?



Thunman: Brown. It was Catherine Brown and Owsley Brown. Her background is incredible. Her grandfather was C.C. Brown, who was Abraham Lincoln's law clerk, not [her] great grandfather, but grandfather, because her dad was sixty when she was born. So she skipped a— (interruption) Yes?

DePue: She's enticing the dog out of the room.

Thunman: So, I'm telling the story...I called her. She was then Owsley Gillespie. I said to her, "I don't know if you remember me or not, but this is Ron Thunman." She said, "Why, of course, I remember you." (both laugh)

Owsley: I didn't say that. I said, "Remember you! Are you crazy?" Those were my words. (both laugh)

DePue: Well, she slipped into the interview, didn't she Admiral?

Thunman: Yeah, she got in there. But that was right before I retired. So it began right there, kind of.

Well, we can get together again maybe, if things come to mind, and if I come across any of the things I haven't been able to find.

DePue: I usually like to finish off with a few more general questions, and I wanted to ask you about some things that happened in the nineteens and two-thousands, with the military.

Thunman: Sure. Well, let's see. I hate to bother you. Maybe could we have another session?

DePue: That would be fine. I think we probably have another half an hour to an hour at most. That would be great.

Thunman: Good.

DePue: So we'll finish off for today, and pick this up at a later date.

Thunman: Yeah.

(end of session #14)

## Interview with Nils Ronald Thunman

# VRC-A-L-2012-023.15

Interview # 15: January 22, 2013

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Tuesday, January 22, 2013. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm with Admiral Thunman this afternoon. How are you, Admiral?

Thunman: I'm fine, and we're estimating that this may be our last time together. I'm sure that Mark is sick of this, but I've enjoyed participating in it with him.

DePue: Sick of talking about fascinating things? (Thunman laughs) No, not by a long shot. Well, we just about finished up last time. We got into your retirement. But I wanted to ask you about some things that happened about the time you retired or in the years shortly after you retired, since you are right at the heart of the Cold War your entire career.

The first thing I wanted to ask you about is when the Berlin Wall came down, November of 1989, and what that represented, in terms of the war that you had been fighting.

Thunman: Well, it represented victory to me. Now, I'm not sure... Was it '89? I thought it came down in '90, '91. Maybe I'm wrong.

DePue: That's when the Soviet Union came apart, '91.

Thunman: That's right. So the wall came down in '89. Clearly, what it was to all of us was we won. We won the Cold War when that wall came down. If Khrushchev... I guess it was Gorbachev at that time, was no longer going to keep the people from leaving Berlin, then the war was over, because he would never be able to keep control of the country after that.

DePue: Could you have imagined that ten years before that time?

Thunman: No, but I don't think I sat down to think about it. I think I had a problem with me, in that I hadn't thought about how long is this going to last? I was right in the midst of designing the SSN-21, the greatest nuclear attack submarine ever considered anywhere, twice the firepower, quietest, fastest, most capable. We had sold it to the Congress, and our plan was to build twenty of them, a minimum of \$1 billion apiece. It was supposed to be \$1 billion apiece after we build the first three.

So, there was going to be a huge force. And the Soviets knew all about it. This is back in... I was selling that in the timeframe of 1981 through 1985. At the same time, Ronald Reagan, the latter part of that time period, was talking about Star Wars, countering the Soviet missiles. It was a massive, anti-Soviet force that this country was developing. So, I didn't know what effect that would have on the Soviet Union. I thought they would keep going, for some reason.

But, of course, it had the effect that Reagan wanted, was it just overwhelmed them. They were building new submarines and designing new submarines, and they were trying to counter us, but there was no way they could. They just didn't have the capability, and they put themselves out of business by spending all that money they didn't have. That's one of the reasons they shut down.

DePue: That's oftentimes the explanation for what happened in the Soviet Union. We just spent them into oblivion, so to speak. If you believe that statement, how much of that can you point to the nuclear submarine race?

Thunman: Well, of course, me being very parochial, I would say 90 percent. I don't mean to take away from the rest of the military, but the Soviet Union, what did they have? Thirty or forty divisions, sitting off of Germany, sitting in Poland and that whole area? We had forces there, but those forces were just some soldiers who would die if the Soviets came, because we had so few.

The Soviets, I'm sure, many times thought about, Well, why don't we just go right across? I think I said this before—Just go west, and go right through it all. Go through Germany; go through France; go right over to the border. Take it all. Of course, the response would be, Well, then we would counter with nuclear weapons.

You've heard me say before, I'm not sure that we would have fired the first nuclear weapon. That move by the Soviets would not have threatened the United States, [It] wouldn't have threatened England. They're the only two powers at that time that had nuclear weapons. So, we didn't have a conventional force that could counter—

DePue: I think France did as well.

Thunman: France too, but France didn't get their nuclear weapons until later than that. That was always worrisome, I know, in all militaries. And we didn't have an Air Force big enough to go in and really counter them. They had a pretty good air force at the same time, without strategic nuclear bombing. We didn't have a big, conventional bombing capability.

But we could control the sea, as you've heard me say before. Our nuclear submarine force, as it does today, controls the sea. If we don't want anything to move on the sea, it won't move. There's nothing they can do about it, because these submarines are invulnerable in my view and undetectable, with today's systems. That submarine force, from that point of view, I think they knew that. If they wanted to go ahead, all the way across Europe, and give up the sea, that might have been an option for them. That's one of the reasons I say that.

Of course, if you then turn on the switch—we'll use nuclear weapons—then, of course, the invulnerable fleet ballistic missile submarine force, highly capable, tested, accurate, it would have destroyed the Soviet Union. So that was never an option for them, to shoot a nuclear missile at us.

DePue: Shortly after, we won the Cold War. And based on your comments, you strongly believe the submarine force played a huge role in that victory. President Bush—this is George Herbert Walker Bush—started talking about a peace dividend.

Thunman: Yes.

DePue: What did that mean to you, and do you think he was right in terms of phrasing the reduction in our military posture like that?

Thunman: Well, I don't know that I can judge him. Certainly it was going to happen, especially if the Democrats came in power. They did, and it happened. Bill Clinton, all of this wonderful praise of Bill Clinton for balancing the budget... They balanced the budget on the military. Half of the Army, half of the Navy, half of everything went away. When I was commander submarine force Pacific, I had sixty, seventy submarines under my command. This is back in 1980. Today, we've only got forty submarines in the whole submarine force. Our entire submarine force, in those days, was well over 100 in both fleets. So everything was cut in half.

I would link that to the liberal side of our country. They were anxious to cut it. I don't think President Bush was real anxious to do it. I don't think he saw... Some of the cuts started then, but not the cuts that Clinton came in. Half of the Army's combatant force was cut in half as well, everybody.

DePue: And I take it, you think that was a bad thing?

Thunman: Well, I don't say that it was a bad thing. I think it could have been done a little bit better, a little slower and a little bit more organized way, a little bit more understanding of what we were going to have to face.

Apparently—I didn't know it at the time. Of course, I was out of the military—we had a lot of indications in the late '90s that this terrorism problem was going to grow and get bigger. And we weren't spending much time thinking about it. Again, I suggested to you to read the *Looming Tower*. If you read that, you really get angry, because you find that we had all kinds of indications that something like this was going to happen. Then we had indications of what was really going to happen.

If we'd only handled it better from an organizational point of view of our intelligence communities, we would have stopped 9/11, clearly. Read that book. That's just not an estimate. There are facts that line right up, that we would have known they were going to do it and gone in and done something about it. The country never got much of that terrorism threat in the news.

Today, I believe, of course, that a lot of the things that go on are hidden by the media. They don't come in. It's amazing to me, just amazing. Without Fox News, I'm afraid I wouldn't know anything. I think it was last week, where the GAO came out with the pronouncement that we cannot sustain ourselves with the kind of budget that we're operating with right now, I'm talking about sustaining over the next five or ten years. It's a big report, and not a Republican report.

It was a report by the GAO, which really tries to deal with facts. When they get criticized for saying something, you really find that the problem was that the facts they were given is what they used to develop their estimates. If somebody doesn't give them the facts, then they don't come up with the right answer. Well, this was a pretty major report that came out. You didn't see it; you haven't seen it in any major news media or in any major newspaper. The only place you've ever seen it is on Fox. The American people don't know that things like that are coming out, where the GAO is saying, "You're going to collapse, doing what you're doing."

I've got a feeling that that's when... When Clinton came, that started. The media moved over to the liberal side and supported the liberal side. Amazingly, Bush got elected. Many people say he didn't get elected. (laughs)

DePue: Now you're talking about the 2000 election.

Thunman: Yeah.

DePue: I want to back you up a little bit.

Thunman: Well, okay. I'll go back to what you're saying. I'm sorry. I'm getting too—

DePue: We'll definitely get to 9/11 and the implications of the last ten to fifteen years, but I wanted to ask you about Desert Shield and Desert Storm, which was, of course, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, and we stepped in, and the world stepped in. That was late 1990, '91, and really a very conventional war. I think the Iraqis were gracious to have fought the same kind of war we'd been preparing to fight against the Soviet Union. Your thoughts about that?

Thunman: Well, I think we carried it out well. I think the Army did a fine job. I told you about my run-in with Schwarzkopf. That was because, when I tried to use him as a representative graduate of Valley Forge. That was...I think you've heard all about that. But the Army did really a great job.

The big mistakes we made in that war were at the beginning and at the end. The military side of it—of course you would know this better than I—seemed to go pretty well, well done. At the beginning, the weapons of mass destruction argument still was, in my mind, a good argument. We didn't know. I can't believe we didn't know, but we didn't. Our intelligence community had just let Iraq go off into the sunset. We didn't know what they had. We knew they'd used poison on their own people. I'm sure, after 9/11, that Bush was so concerned about that.

But let's go back to '90 again. Let's go back to the war you're talking about, Iraq. I've got the two kind of mixed up here. Let me start over again. In Iraq the move was very well done. Again, the Army did a very fine job. Schwarzkopf was a great announcer for the war. But the Army chief of staff, who I got to be good friends with in that time, when I was at Valley...Well, I got to be good friends with him when he was chief of Army training, and I was chief of Navy training. We got to know each other, Carl Vuono, a graduate of...What is that military college up in the northeast? Not West Point.

DePue: Are you talking about the War College?

Thunman: No.

DePue: Oh, you're talking about Norwich.

Thunman: Yeah. But Carl was a very bright guy and really a good guy. We became friends. It was funny, together when we were in training. We were trying to combine our courses, so we would only have one course to do something that was appropriate in each service. I remember, we tried to combine the music schools. Rather than an Army music school and a Navy music school, we'd have a music school, military, to train the bands. God almighty, the agony we went through. We finally gave up. We had alumni fallout all over the world, trying to kill us, because we were going to do away with the music school.

But Vuono told me...This is after that war, the Iraqi War. I got into it with Schwarzkopf. He wrote me a terrible letter. I told Carl about it, and he

laughed. He said, “Don’t feel like you’re alone. I don’t know of anybody who’s dealt with Schwarzkopf who didn’t get a letter like that.”

DePue: Admiral, I don’t think you told us that story. This was during your Valley Forge years?

Thunman: The story was, Schwarzkopf was over there, was a national hero. We’d won or were winning. Schwarzkopf was a graduate of Valley Forge. Valley Forge had helped him. He’d had a scholarship from Valley Forge. His father, you know, was in the state police, handled the Lindbergh baby case. He was a big football player at Valley Forge, played tackle. I got his records out and looked at them. [He was] a little bit better than average. He was a good student, but apparently a brilliant man—no question about that—not very well liked, as he went along with his career. But that’s something else.

Anyway, Vuono had laughed about it. What happened was, I wrote Schwarzkopf a letter. The war was over; we’d won. I had put together an ad that had Schwarzkopf in it. The ad was, “*Valley Forge, the Right Step to Your Son’s Success.*” I remember, we agonized and came up with that statement. A young Army colonel came up with it, and I thought it was wonderful. It turned out it was really great. We used it for all the while I was there, when we would advertise in the *New York Times*.

So I wrote him a nice letter and said, “We’d like to use this ad in our advertisement.” It was just depicting him and also indicating that he had been a Valley Forge graduate, nothing untoward at all. I was very careful. I realized I didn’t want to do anything here to besmirch him in any way. At the bottom of it, I said, “General, if you’re not comfortable with this, just let me know, and we won’t go forward with it.” I said that to him, because I figured, he may have some other ideas of what he wants to do with his pictures, because that was, at that point, a valuable thing.

I get the biggest blast you have ever heard, ever seen, read. It was a letter, a terrible letter, calling me every name. I’m trying to think. I’ve got the letter somewhere, I know I’ve got the letter. I kept it. I never turned it over to anybody. [It was] kind of depicting me as this money grabbing leader of a school, trying to use illegal or immoral methods to get money and not being honest about what the school really did and how we were really just trying to get money out of him. He used all kinds of words. I’m trying to think of some of the words. I can’t, but they really upset me.

I made a mistake, looking back in my old age now, but I went to see the chairman of the board of trustees. I showed him the letter. Well, he got mad, not at me. He said, “My God,” he said, “You were only trying to do your job,” which was to get money for Valley Forge. He was mad. He wrote Schwarzkopf a letter back. Well done, I mean something that ended up in the paper, but clearly indicating to him, look, we’re just trying to do our job and

help young men get ahead in life. We're not out to take away something that belongs to you, financially or of value.

I wrote him a letter back, apologizing. I remember the chairman of the board of trustees said, "No, don't do that. Why are you doing that? You didn't do anything wrong." I said, "Well, this guy's an Army hero. I don't want him to be criticizing us, and I think he will, because he's already written this letter. He must know that I would have the option to show it, or it may be shown anywhere. So I'm just going to apologize, write him a letter and say, 'General, I'm sorry that we even brought the subject up. I know you're heavily pressed in a lot of areas, and we'll just drop it and not proceed. Very respectfully.'" That was it. Never heard anything more from him, at that point, except the next thing I do, I get a call from Jack Anderson.<sup>110</sup> Remember Jack Anderson, who wrote the article—

DePue: Yes.

Thunman: He calls me, and he says, "I hear you've had this terrible falling out with Norm Schwarzkopf." This is in the time when Schwarzkopf was a big hero. I said to him, "Why no." I said, "General Schwarzkopf and I are great friends, good friends. He's a graduate of Valley Forge. I haven't had any contact with him, but what I've had, we were friends." I just lied to him, because I thought, This would be a great article for Jack Anderson.

DePue: He's one of the great investigative journalists of the day.

Thunman: Yeah. Where he got the dope I don't know. He got it somewhere. He said, "Will you stand on that?" I said, "Yes. That's where we are. That's it." Interestingly, I had been trying to solicit Ambassador Annenberg for money.<sup>111</sup> He was a multi-billionaire, as you may or may not know. A year before, I'd gone to see him, and his words to me were, "Well, congratulations on your job..." and, kind of, "I'll see you around the campus." That was it, I didn't get any money out of him.

So then we had the big event—you've seen the picture in there—of the year. [That] was the presentation of the Bob Hope Award, which is the school's major award each year. It had been established way back in the '30s or '40s. They always invited Bob Hope to come, but he rarely ever came. He hadn't



<sup>110</sup> **Jack Northman Anderson** (1922 – 2005) was an American writer for the United Features Syndicate, considered one of the fathers of the modern newspaper syndicate.

<sup>111</sup> **Walter Annenberg** owned and operated Triangle Publications, which included the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *TV Guide*, the *Daily Racing Form*, and *Playboy*. He was appointed by President Richard Nixon as United States Ambassador to the United Kingdom, where he served from 1969 to 1974.



been there in ten, fifteen years. The Bob Hope Award was coming up. We still maintained it as our number one award.

So I called Bob Hope, with the hope that I could get him to come. Interestingly, somebody took the call, and I thought, Well, that's the end of it. The next day I get a call back, Bob Hope. [He] wants to come and see me. [phone rings] Don't worry about that. He wants to talk me about this Schwarzkopf thing. But he would come to the award ceremonies. I said, "Well, we'd certainly like to have him." He came.

At the reception afterwards, Ambassador Annenberg pulled me aside at the reception. He came. We'd invited him. He'd never come to them before, but he came. He said, "What the hell was this about Schwarzkopf?" Well, I didn't lie to him. I said, "I tried to get some money from him. I wrote him what I thought was a nice letter, and he blasted me for it. That's kind of where it is; it's ended. The newspapers have been interested." He said, "My God," he said the same thing, "You were only doing your job." He said, "That's terrible." He said, "I heard about it from Gerry Ford." (DePue laughs)

DePue: Gerry as in Gerald Ford, the former President of the United States.

Thunman: Yeah, yeah. I heard about it from Gerry Ford. I thought, Well, I don't know how he got that information. A week or so later, I get a call from Annenberg's foundation. He had a huge foundation associated with donating money. I get a call that said, "Ambassador Annenberg wanted me to tell you that he's donating \$1 million to Valley Forge," \$1 million. I said, "Well, God almighty." I said, "You tell the ambassador that we'll use that money. We'll probably be able to name one of the halls after him." A bunch of things ran through my mind, that I thought...scholarships, the Ambassador Annenberg scholarship. She said, "No, he doesn't want that. He just wants you to have the money. Spend it any way you want to," click. (both laugh)

So, I get this check for \$1 million, signed by Annenberg. Boy, then the trustees thought I was a hero, I mean, this big hero. The end of the story is...Of course, we spent the money, and Annenberg subsequently had me to dinner, a private dinner of twelve people, the most elegant dinner I've ever been to. You can't imagine the luxury. A great guy, his wife was a very, very distinguished lady.

At the dinner was the number one back surgeon in the northeast. Ambassador Annenberg noted that I was having difficulty with my back and turned to him and says, "You want to fix that right away." Within a couple weeks, I was in a hospital, with this guy operating on me.

So a lot of things came of that Schwarzkopf thing. But the final end of the story is that I'm leaving Valley Forge, because of the difficulties I'd had with my back, after the operation. I get a very nice letter from Schwarzkopf,

saying what a great job I'd done at Valley Forge and, as a graduate, how much he appreciated the things I'd done for the school. He'd heard that I was having these difficulties, and he wished me the best. So that's the end of the story.

The other part of it, though, is not the Schwarzkopf story. I told the thing to Carl Vuono. That's when Carl said to me, "You're not alone. Everybody has gotten one of those letters from him." He said, "You've got to understand, the guy you want to congratulate, who was involved in Desert Storm, is General... and I don't have his name in my mind, who also was a graduate of Valley Forge, who was Schwarzkopf's number one Army guy, the guy who ran the war, ran the Army, the attacks, when the attack was made.

He was a good guy. I did contact him, got him to agree to us using his name in our advertisements. Carl Vuono said, "He's the one who won the war." He said, "Schwarzkopf didn't. All he did was bellow and brag. But the guy who did all of it was the other guy." I wish I could remember his name.

DePue: It's interesting to note; I think it's just in the last month or two that Schwarzkopf has passed away.

Thunman: Yes, he has. But anyway, I wrote the letter, and what it really led to was \$1 million donation from Ambassador Annenberg and a visit by Bob Hope to the school, which the whole world came, if you've seen the picture of me sitting there with Bob Hope and his wife. So, all kinds of great things came from it. I could have gotten a lot of notoriety if I'd have told Jack Anderson the truth.

DePue: Well, it looks like you got lucky once again, Admiral, that Schwarzkopf almost did you a good turn.

Thunman: Oh, he did. I'll tell you, apparently, Gerry Ford, Annenberg said, was angry about it, and Annenberg was angry about it, and Bob Hope was angry about it.

DePue: Everybody heard about it, even though you didn't tell Jack Anderson.

Thunman: That's right.

DePue: Well, Admiral, we'd better move on here if we're going to get done today. You were alluding to this before. I mentioned it myself, and you've mentioned it also, that the war against Iraq in 1991 was essentially a conventional war. The Army did a brilliant job. It was over in about forty, forty-eight hours or something like that. I assume that submarines didn't play any kind of role in that.

Thunman: They shot the cruise missiles.

DePue: And I think you'd mentioned that before, because you obviously had a big role in designing the cruise missiles.

Thunman: Yes. The Tomahawk cruise missile, I was responsible for the design of the Tomahawk cruise missile. I think I may have told you that we took it over, because I wanted land attack capability that was not nuclear.

DePue: But after it's been designed, aren't there several different platforms that you can use to deliver those?

Thunman: Yes, yes. The surface ships came. But we started... We were first, and the missiles that they used in that war came from submarines.

DePue: Now you said yourself that the military is downsizing throughout the 1990s. And towards the end of the 1990s, you mentioned that there's plenty of evidence that the nature of the threat has changed. It's not a large conventional force out there. But it's an insurgency; it's Islamic terrorism, for lack of a better word. What's the role then, of a substantial nuclear submarine force?

Thunman: Well, the role are the two items that we've always had and we improved upon, that we actually increased. One was land attack with nuclear weapons, which provided mutually assured deterrence. That was the containment they that came up with in the '50s.

DePue: But who are we containing, now that the Soviet Union—

Thunman: No, but it's whoever. You don't know who's going to turn around the corner and be the next Soviet Union. So you maintain that mutually assured deterrent force. You've got other people out there, who are "your friends," who've got nuclear weapons. You've got France; you've got England, India, Pakistan, other people looking to develop nuclear weapons.

DePue: By that time you also have China.

Thunman: Yeah, I guess. So the point is, you have the number one mutually assured deterrent force in the world. I never had any difficulty, in the number of times I briefed the senior congressional representatives. I never had any difficulty making them understand that that was important for the United States to maintain, MAD [mutually assured deterrence], that capability, that if you really messed our hair somehow, we'd turn you into a parking lot.

DePue: I noticed that you changed the acronym from mutually assured destruction to mutually assured deterrence.

Thunman: Well, the real words that we would publish was mutually assured deterrence, because it was deterrence. If we'd ever had to use it, then we'd have, of course, lost. You'd have lost the Cold War, even though you blew everybody up. I mean, we would not have done what we were designed. So that was number one.

The nuclear attack submarine force was to control the sea, to do what Mahan said. In order to be a major power in the world, you had to control your sea lanes. That's what that nuclear submarine force was all about, and it did. As I've said to you, it would destroy anything at sea. Nobody could do anything about it. I added one thing, and that was land attack, outside of the nuclear deterrent, the nuclear strategic fleet ballistic missile weapon system.

That permitted us to get involved in a situation like Iraq. That permitted the submarine force to play in that, because we had the Tomahawk. That's why I stepped forward and said, "I volunteer to design the Tomahawk." Everybody else abandoned it, because it was so badly organized. It was a one-humped camel to begin with, but we took it on.

[We] took a lot of criticism from Congress, of how badly we did in the design process. But as I told you, I was sitting, watching my television when Iraq was attacked. Bernard Shaw, I think it was, said, "Gee, I don't know what it was, but something like a missile just passed me by, turned right at the corner, and hit the Ministry of Defense of Iraq." I sat there, and I said, "Tomahawk."

Also, the other one was, all the lights have gone out in Baghdad, and I said, "Tomahawk," because we had that special weapons system we had designed, highly classified—hardly anybody knew about it—where all of the filings, metal filings, were dropped in a power plant, shorted every generator they had and wiped out their power system.

So, I felt that we had added, in the submarine force, another weapon capability. All three of those things still apply, mutually assured deterrence, control over the sea, and land attack, accurate land attack anywhere, just about, because we had studies. I forget, 80 percent or 90 percent of all of the military capabilities in the world were within the range of Tomahawk, from the sea.

DePue: My next question for you is a little bit different in nature. I'm sure you remember, I believe it was August 12, 2000, when Russia lost a nuclear submarine, the *Kursk*.

Thunman: Yes. That is a very significant point in history. The system didn't take it on as much as I did. I was so interested in it that I prepared a presentation for this little group I'm that I'm involved with in town—the Cracker Barrel—that we meet once a month, old men. The *Kursk* is fascinating, and I could go on for a couple of hours.

The Soviet military, its submarine force was in terrible shape. They had not provided meaningful support to it for several years, but it was still in place. Their ships were operating. This is a little complex. I [want to] make sure I can get it across. The *Kursk* was assigned to be part of a fleet operating

exercise, major exercise, where real weapons were going to be used, not against ships but targets. She was ordered to go to sea and do this.

They had a wonderful captain, been in the Soviet Navy for a long time. The crew loved him. Their families all lived in the same area, a close-knit community, family-like community. He was ordered to load the weapon and to take it to sea and fire it, as part of this exercise. The weapon had never been tested at sea.

They went to sea, not well supported. As a matter of fact, they didn't even have the right stuff to pick it up with a crane and put it on the ship. The loading equipment and all were in such bad state of repair. They dropped the weapon at one point, I think. I'd bet on it, but I could never find an actual statement, although I believe it was said by some of the people there.

They're at sea now, with this weapon aboard, and they're getting ready to shoot it. They're submerged, and the weapon explodes inside the submarine for some reason. A very high powered weapon that had a lot of energy in whatever it was using for a propulsion. It blew a hole in the *Kursk* of about 180 feet long, down the starboard side, forward. The ship sank, of course.

They went through a long, agonizing period—by long, I don't know, a couple of days—where people got sealed in the after part of the ship, and they were trying to figure out how to get them out, using their escape system. I think they got one or two out. The ship sank; it was in fairly shallow water. It was 300 feet or so, so it wasn't thousands of feet. They've got all kinds of ships there to support.

We immediately offered support. They said, "No, we don't need your support. We don't need anybody's support," other nations. Initially, it was reported that yeah, they'd had some trouble, but it's okay. It's on the bottom; the ship's on the bottom; it's okay. Then it was, "Well, we've got good contact with the crew, and we're thinking about what to do with it."

Along with this was, "This was caused by the Americans." An American submarine had collided with the *Kursk*, conducting these special operations that I've told you about, how we'd been nose to nose. We denied it. As a matter of fact, we did have a submarine there. The submarine knew that there'd been some sort of a disaster take place, certainly an explosion. They'd heard it. We had a submarine in the area. We even offered the Soviets to come and look at it. We brought our submarine into Norway, and we offered, "Come in; look at it." Our submarine's okay. It's not hit anybody. My God, we had nothing to do with it.

The senior Navy military of the Soviet Union was reporting to the minister of defense of the Soviet Union things, as it went along. Initially, "It's okay; it's on the bottom." Then, "Well, maybe we can get the crew out."

Then, “We’re having problems with that; we may not be able to. We’re trying, and oh, by the way, the United States caused the problem. It was a collision or something that the United States did.” And all of this...I don’t know if you recall, across the press, that was going on.

Putin had just come into power.<sup>112</sup> I don’t think he’d been in there longer than a couple of months. All these reports were coming to him from the Soviet admirals and also from the Soviet minister of defense. It took him, I don’t know, six months a year—it took him a while—but you have to admire him; he got to the bottom of it, realized that we didn’t have anything to do with it, that they, right off the bat, did the wrong thing. [They] should have accepted help. Could have gotten those people out. Could have handled the thing, but they wouldn’t. They just said, “We can handle it,” when they couldn’t.

DePue: They being the senior Navy staff.

Thunman: Yeah, the Navy, the minister of defense and the Navy. Putin fired all of them, including—and this is a key point that I would make from a historical point of view—including the minister of defense of the Soviet...Russia. At that time now, we’re talking Russia. He puts in a civilian, the first time in Russian history that their minister of defense, their secretary of defense equivalent, was a civilian. Prior to that time they were always military people. He fired the whole lot of them, because they lied to him. That to me was a very interesting part of it. There’s a lot of kind of human interest things in there. There are some of the letters that the guys wrote while they were suffocating in the after part of the ship and things like that.

So, that missile or weapon—it never came out in the press. I would hope our intelligence people knew something about it—was a special weapon. [It] was a special weapon. From what I’ve been able to determine from then—and this is kind of wild—the Iranians designed the weapon, and it was tested in the gulf, the Persian Gulf, at some point, and it went over to Russia for testing. Also, I understand that it may have been given to the North Koreans. It might have been the weapon that was used to blow up that destroyer. It was a modern weapon, the destroyer. It went under the destroyer and blew up underneath it.

DePue: And that happened just early last year, I believe, sometime around there.

Thunman: Yeah, well a couple of years, yeah. Another interesting thing is, when it was designed in Russia, a friend of mine, a Navy captain who had been in intelligence, he’s a submariner...I don’t know if you can believe all this. But by then he’s retired, and he’s out consulting for somebody. He goes over to Russia, dealing with the military industrial complex over there. He’s arrested

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<sup>112</sup> Vladimir Vladimirovich **Putin** is a Russian politician serving as the president of the Russian Federation since May 7, 2012, previously holding the position from 2000 until 2008.

by the Russians for trying to get the dope on this weapon. He had seen the plans for the weapon.

His response was, "Wait a minute; these plans were shown to me by this company, over here in Russia. I didn't go look for anything." They said, "No, you've seen it. You came over here to be a spy." [They] threw him in the jail. [He] was in jail, I think, three to six months, until finally Clinton had to call—this is in the '90s—had to call and say, "Let him go, and I'll give you something." They gave them something; I forget.

That weapon, a very modern torpedo of some sort, is the cause of the whole problem. Plus, the interesting part of the story was, how much the Soviet Union had degraded. They had nuclear submarines that were pulled up on the beach, the reactors in them, unsafe conditions. What was interesting to me was this captain. The crew respected him. He was getting ready to retire. The community respected him. He was trying to keep his ship going. He was given this job to go out and do, without the right support, if they dropped the damn thing. God only knows what happened to it.

To me it was an interesting historical thing, because the complete military hierarchy in the Soviet Union was changed because of it. Somebody ought to—I'm sure they have—but somebody could take and write, probably, a pretty good book about it.

DePue: Well, it's interesting you mentioned that it was caused by this weapon that was carried onboard. It's been a while back—I've got a bad memory—but I don't recall that being part of the explanation for what happened to the ship, in the press.

Thunman: No, they never did come up with an explanation, I don't think. I can tell you that that's what happened. I don't know where I got that information, but I got it. I know one of the things I did was I was dealing with the Pentagon—with the Navy public affairs system—getting information from them. I know that it was caused by that weapon that blew that hole in there. The one thing I remember is 180 feet long. That's a big hole. (laughs)

DePue: Does that mean that you still—or at least at that time—you still had a security clearance and were privy to some of this.

Thunman: Oh, yeah. Well I still do; I still do.

DePue: Well that gets us up to 2001. So let's get to September 11, 2001. Do you remember that day?

Thunman: Oh, yeah, I remember watching it on...sitting in there in that morning room, watching the first one hit on 9/11. I remember watching it. What I watched at that point was a recording. They started playing it over and over again. Then I was listening to the news and thinking, What kind of a fool was flying that

airplane? I was sitting there looking, and they were showing the second one, real time, come in. I think it was real time. Bang, the second one hit. I thought, My God! That's when it hit me. This has got to be something bigger than a piper club flying around in the wrong area. It was quite a shock that that could happen.

Again, it could have been prevented. You know, we did it to ourselves. We had these two organizations, stovepipe over organizations, the CIA and the FBI—never the twain shall meet—written by that fool. I forget her name; she's the one who wrote the rule that the two could not pass information back and forth to each other.

DePue: You're talking about a politician.

Thunman: Yeah, and the secretary of state organization in the Clinton organization. I think she's in the current administration. She may have been in, rather than the secretary of state, she may have been in justice, the Department of Justice. But anyway, that laid down the rule that said these two couldn't work together. Well, the two didn't want to work together anyway. They didn't like each other.

There has always been a feud between those two organizations. It turned out—when you read that book you'll see—that we had the information that there was going to be this meeting, over in the Middle East, that the CIA had it and did not transmit it to the FBI. A guy in the FBI, who was over there, trying to find out what really happened to the ship problem, where the hole was blown into the ship. What's the name of the ship? I've forgotten it.

DePue: The one that was in Yemen<sup>113</sup>.

Thunman: Yeah. Had the CIA been open—you've got to read the book—Had the CIA been very open with the FBI, the FBI would have said, "Wait a minute. We know who those guys are that you're talking about." And they would have got into this meeting somehow that was conducted in the Middle East and, I think, [would have] realized that they were planning something big, like 9/11. When you finish reading that, you just throw it down. You're mad, because we had all the pieces that something big was... all kinds of stuff about guys trying to learn how to fly airplanes and didn't care whether they learned how to land or not, all kinds of stuff that didn't pass...

I still don't like our organization right now. It is too political. It's not a military organization, like you and I are used to, our intelligence organization. Our military organization, your information flows up, smoothly. It's complete, and it's analyzed at each level. There's not a lot of pride in authorship. There's some, of course, but everybody is after the same thing; that is to

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<sup>113</sup> The USS Cole was attacked in the Port of Yemen by suicide bombers, resulting in the deaths of 17 U.S. sailors.



protect America. That's number one. Number two, yeah, we all want to get promoted and that kind of stuff, but number one is protect America. Those two organizations, working side by side, that was not their number one goal, and it's too bad. Nine-eleven did not need to happen.

DePue: How much would you say 9/11 occurred because the military—and maybe the national intelligence agencies also—were still more focused on conventional warfare or more focused on the old enemies of Russia and China, than they were on this new emerging threat?

Thunman: Clearly. To say that we shouldn't have been focused is to criticize ourselves for not understanding what the first Iraq War meant. The first Iraq War was the signal that, hey, your enemy has changed. You had a guy over here who took you on when he moved into Kuwait. Now, he said he did that because you had given him permission; your State Department gave him permission. He said, "That's why we went into Kuwait." But you had somebody take you on. That's quite a thing, when you think of Iraq, facing the United States of America and saying, "I'm going to take you on, because I don't think you'll do anything."

Well, we did. That should have signaled to everybody, hey, wait a minute. These people, they think of us differently now. They're willing to counter us, to threaten us. So we're going to have to change our way of thinking. But it didn't. It just flowed along, through the '90s. Chop up the military. Just keep what you need, [what] you think you'll need. Disregard and disorganize your whole intelligence structure.

Keep the FBI away from talking to the CIA, because you don't want your justice system affected. FBI is criminal justice, and you don't want to get any information in there, which would counter the typical lawyers' complaints about using evidence that really isn't evidence under our standard form of criminal justice. That's just the way it floated along. Even in the late '90s...Of course, you had the senior people in America. You had Clinton; you had Madeleine Albright.

After 9/11 occurred, and we went into Iraq again, people were saying, "Well, we shouldn't have done that. That was a dumb thing to do," and criticizing Bush and everybody. When I used to argue about it, I used to say, "Now, wait a minute. Let me tell you the people who I believed, when all this was gone. I went down the list, Madeleine Albright... You went down every powerful Democrat. Hey, all thought it was absolutely correct.

DePue: By what they thought was absolutely correct, you're talking about the belief that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?

Thunman: Yeah, and that we should go in there and get him. Every one of them gave long speeches about, "Hey, you've got to go in there and kill him." They were

saying that in the '90s. And Clinton did a poor job of...He had a chance to kill him in the late '90s.

DePue: So you thought we were justified, in 2003, to launch that invasion?

Thunman: Yes. I think, on the information and the press of both the Republicans and the Democrats, that we were in a situation of...You've got to say, "Well Bush wanted to do something, even if it's wrong." I mean, he was in that situation after 9/11, "What the hell am I going to do about it?"

DePue: Well, he did launch an attack on Afghanistan within a month.

Thunman: He did, but that's the outskirts of the problem. Where is the real problem? I don't think, at that time, that they were able to imagine that once that had happened, that something else wasn't going to happen, by a stronger power, by a stronger force. Here they had this guy they were scared to death of anyway. They knew he had some kind of weapons of mass destruction.

DePue: You're talking about Saddam Hussein now.

Thunman: Yeah, had him out there, and they were worried...Of course, the one thing you'd have to say to yourself, if you were Bush, My God, this has happened. What's the next thing that [will] happen? Well, probably the next thing that's going to happen is Saddam Hussein is going to do something. What can he do? Well, he can detonate a nuclear weapon.

Having seen nuclear weapons in those thirty some-odd that I observed...and I'm sure Bush was briefed by people who knew about nuclear weapons. Having seen that, I think he said "My God, we can't let that happen. So we'd better go get this guy." He'd look back, and there wasn't anybody arguing against that; there wasn't anybody. You go read these wonderful letters that support—

DePue: Well, certainly there was a very healthy debate in Congress, especially in the U.S. Senate about it. Colin Powell's famous testimony.

Thunman: But they all...Yeah, and I'll say this about Colin Powell's testimony. I watched that carefully, and I said, "I think that's the worst testimony I've ever seen, as justification for going in there." But then, I thought to myself, Well, he can't tell everything. He's not telling it all, because I remember the cockamamie story that he gave of the trucks meeting in the desert. He said, "They've got these trucks that have got these capabilities to build deliverable weapons of antibiotics or exotic gas systems, meeting in the desert."

I looked at that; I thought, What? Come on. Got anything better? He said, "Well, they've got pictures of these two trucks that were down in the desert." So I thought to myself, Well, they must have had a lot more than that that he's not saying. His testimony, it was an interesting thing, and it would be

interesting to go back in C-SPAN and look at that testimony again. [His testimony] was very weak, very, very weak. I did say to myself, Surely he has examined his own testimony very carefully before he went over and gave it. He must have gotten a lot more information that he can't tell. I don't think he did.

I think the CIA came in there and said, "Well, look at this. We've got these two trucks that got together in the desert." Oh, God, that's terrible. (both laugh) I don't think he was prepared or really tried to get himself prepared properly. Not saying I'm any better than Colin Powell, but if you were going to ask me to go testify to the Congress about somebody's capability, I would have had everybody on my staff looking at every element of the problem to find out what do we know and what don't we know?

DePue: Well, we're talking about things now that are beyond the timeframe you're actually in the military. It's one of these issues that everybody in the United States currently has an opinion about, and it will be debated endlessly for—

Thunman: Well, it's no longer. They all said we shouldn't have done it. And they all say "Well, I didn't think we should have done it." But you've got to go back to the time, which I think is interesting, and you find all these... There were some—you're right—some discussions. But then came the time, they all voted for it, told the president, "Do what you think is right. I'm for you." There were a couple, but not very many, people who didn't sign that.

DePue: The question I want to go to then, having all this history behind us now. We're basically out of Iraq, and we're maybe getting close to being out of Afghanistan. But the nature of the threat we're facing, I don't think has changed much in the last ten years.

Thunman: Not at all.

DePue: Who would you say is the greatest threat the United States currently has? I'll give you three options here, Russia; a growing, dynamic China and a Chinese military that includes a naval force, or militant Islam? [phone rings]

Thunman: Well, it's like picking one of your children that you want to kill. Turning that the other way, they're all very, very dangerous. To pick one as the most... I think the terrorism, al-Qaeda, and those who are involved with al-Qaeda, today are the biggest threat.

DePue: But having said that, Admiral—

Thunman: Let me just say this. Having said that though, you've got to look to the future and China. You've got to know that there's going to be a problem with China and that you'll have to go to war with China, if you want to give up on some of your allies, give them away to the Chinese, give in to the Chinese. You're going to have to go to war with them, because China...

There's no question, they're going to take over the entire South China Sea, East China Sea. I've talked about that before. There's no question they're going to do it. They're going to take Taiwan back. They're going to take the islands north of Japan back. They're going to take the Spratlies back. They're going to control that whole area, because of its shallow water, and it's got a lot of energy resources. They say, "It belongs to us anyway, and there isn't anybody out there who can do anything about it."

The Japanese will try, but the Japanese don't have enough power, will not have enough power by the time China builds this navy force that you're talking about. They'll take it all back with conventional weapons. And we're going to either go back and deal with that with conventional weapons, or just give it up. But that's further down the pike than what you've got with the terrorists.

DePue: Is that an argument for retaining a robust nuclear submarine force?

Thunman: Yes. You've got to have the nuclear submarine force for... I go back to the first two. One is MAD; two is Mahan.

DePue: Alfred Thayer Mahan, the great Navy strategist of the late 19th century.

Thunman: Yes. Then the third is, of course, to involve your submarines with land attack. But the first two are absolutely essential for the Navy. You can't do anything with any of those threats I've talked to you about, without dealing with the three areas, because the third area of the land attack puts you into the terrorist wars, where you can counter at sea.

But I go back. I'm going to answer your question, which is, what's more important now? I'd say, for now it's terror, but it's going to, at some point, shift over to China.

DePue: Well, let's transition to a completely different kind of questions. This is to wrap things up. I think I know the answer to this, but I'll ask you anyway. How much have you kept in touch with the submarine community since your retirement?

Thunman: Well, there's a Naval Submarine League that was founded when I was the deputy CNO for submarine warfare, quite a wonderful organization, a very professional organization. Less bullshit involved in that organization than any military that I know of. Not only military... Well, military.

It was founded so that the industrial complex would be included in the operation and development of the submarine force. The members of the league, which were asked, and are asked every year, to donate dollars, real dollars, are from industry. This organization continues, puts out a quarterly bulletin, really nicely done, very professional articles from various sources within the submarine force.

I'm the chairman of the advisory board to the Submarine League. I go back. Twice a year, they have... One is the symposium, very professional symposium. The Navy supports it to its maximum ability. The submarine force commanders come in. The director of nuclear propulsion, commanding officers come in and give really professional briefings, all right to the edge of classification. It probably slops over a little bit.

If you go to those things and listen to what's going on, then you understand what the submarine force is doing and what its capabilities are. Industry goes because they dare not to go, because we'll cut them out of their business. We're supported by General Dynamics, Electric Boat, Newport News, the big corporations across the country. We were very careful when we put the league together, to ensure we had these companies all across the country participate. They knew right away what we'd done. That was, either you come up with the donation and start supporting us, or we'll get you. (both laugh)

So, it was a beautifully done political thing. I didn't do it. Admiral Bob Long, he was a four-star admiral, had retired in CINCPAC, wonderful guy, submariner. He came to see me. I was deputy CNO. He and three or four other guys, admirals, submarine guys. He said, "We want to start the Submarine League." This was in 1982 or so. I said, "Well, let me talk to the CNO about it."

I went in to see Jim Watkins and said, "They want to start this league." He said, "Well, what do you think?" I said, "I'm worried. I'm worried they'll get out in front of us. I'd like the support of the league, but what they need to do is support what we want to do, not to set the standards, not to set the procedures, the planning," which they could easily do, because these are smart guys with a lot of power with industry. So Watkins said, "Well, we can try it, but if it looks like it's going to happen, kill it."

I knew Bob Long; I'd known him for a while. I told him that. Frankly, I said, "Admiral, if you get out in front of us, if it's the last thing I'll do, I'll blow you up. I'll blow this organization up." He said, "Yeah, I understand that." He said he had no argument with that. So, they always were.

Through my five years there is when the league gathered really the strength that it ended up with. They were always behind us. They always came and talked to me and said, "Is it okay if we do this? What do you think of that?" They never, at any time, ever countered. Of course, all of them had clearances. They were still involved with industry. So they knew about the difficulties with classifications. It was really an important thing to do.

So, once a year we had this symposium, where all these people get together. Then a second time a year, we'd get the corporate benefactors, we call them, people who've joined the league [and] give us money every year.

We meet with them and give them a special briefing, a one day briefing. That's in February, and the symposium is in October, very professional organization.

DePue: Where do the meetings normally occur?

Thunman: In Washington. Then the submarine force itself will call the admirals together. They'll have a three-star meeting and brief you. We all maintain secret clearances. I'm not sure this is true now, but I've maintained my special operations, highly top secret clearance for a lot of years. I asked them once, "Why should I have it now?" They said, "That's so that we can keep you quiet."

DePue: (laughs) Instead of out there speculating.

Thunman: Yes. (laughs)

DePue: Like what was really going on with the *Kursk*.

Thunman: I got all of that out of unclassified information. I didn't—

DePue: Well, I'm going to pull you way back and ask you to reflect a little bit. Here's the first question for you. How would your life be different if you hadn't, way back in 1950, I believe, accepted a nomination to go to the Naval Academy?

Thunman: Oh, I don't know. I think I would have... Might have been dead in Korea. I've thought about that, because I entered the Naval Academy on the twenty-second of June, 1950.

DePue: The twenty-fifth is when the North Koreans invaded the south.

Thunman: The twenty-fifth. I was going to say the thirtieth.

DePue: The twenty-fifth.

Thunman: The twenty-fifth is when they came. Although I was in the ROTC at Illinois, I could have stayed at Illinois for the four years. I wasn't in the NROTC. I was in the ROTC. Everybody was in the ROTC. Those were land grant schools. Maybe [ I'd have] stayed the four years. Then, of course, I'd have graduated in '53. So I could have ended up in Korea as an officer, or I could have been drafted, because they were taking some of them. It depends how good you were at school. I was playing football and having a hell of a good time in college. So, I may have ended up in Korea. In fact, I'm sure. In one capacity or another, I would have ended up in the Army.

DePue: In the Army, not the Navy.

Thunman: No. The Navy ROTC, that was a more sophisticated organization. The Army was, everybody's in it at the University of Illinois, land grant schools. We all had to take Army courses. We all had to drill and all that. The Navy, only special people were selected. They were going to go on and be naval officers. The others... You were not guaranteed to be an officer in the Army.

DePue: What you're telling me then, Admiral, is you cannot envision your life not being in the military.

Thunman: I can't. I have to say, I liked marching; I liked marching to military music. Even at the Naval Academy, everybody would be griping about going to the parades. I used to like them, like the parades. So, I don't know that... I may have ended up as an enlisted man in Korea and being part of that 50,000 [killed in that conflict].

DePue: How was your life changed because you got into the nuclear submarine force?

Thunman: Well, I went from being a pretty good submariner, who had a career in the Navy... Maybe [I] hadn't been decided what it was really, in my mind, because I'd been in the surface Navy. Then, late in my career or my early years, [I] moved over to the submarine force. So I really wasn't a member of either one. I'd completed five years in the Navy, and I could have gone in either direction.

But when I went into the nuclear submarine force, when I got that opportunity to be a member of the nuclear submarine force, I had matured by then. I realized that was the most important thing in my life, was to be successful in the nuclear submarine force. I knew, from what I'd already done in the Navy, that the most important weapons system in the Navy, and in many ways the military, was the nuclear submarine business. I wanted to be part of it. I would do anything that I could. I don't care how hard I had to work, what I had to give up, family, whatever. They all came second to being part of that nuclear submarine force.

DePue: Well, that's a great lead-in to my next question. You were involved in so many of the critical issues and programs within the nuclear sub force for the next twenty-some years, what would you consider is your, personally, most significant contribution?

Thunman: Well, I think the most significant contribution was pushing, continuing the Navy's policy, the Navy's strategy of maintaining a submarine force, operating at the edge of potential enemies on a continuing basis, 365 days a year, always there, not only strategic, but conventional. Strategic was never a problem. Everybody understood the importance of deterrence, but the Mahan side, I had to push.

DePue: The Mahan side?

Thunman: Yeah. The side that you're going to maintain control of the seas and that to do that, in my view, you had to position your submarine force 365 days a year, to be able to attack anywhere and take control if you had to.

DePue: What then, would you consider your most important tour of the many that you had?

Thunman: Well, command of the submarine.

DePue: Command of a submarine. Well you had a couple commands; which one?

Thunman: But I only had one submarine command, *Plunger*. Three years, conducted more special operations than any submarine commanding officer; highly decorated; received the Regent of Merit twice, which was the highest you could get, unless you did some very special things; and a couple of DSMs were awarded, but that was a special thing.

In the regular submarine operations, the really good guys got one. I think I was the only one who got two. They were all involved with operations associated with operating at the edge of the Soviet Union. I learned so much there about everyday operations and about what it took to operate an effective submarine and submarine force. Everything else, all my knowledge, was gained there. And I worked very hard at it.

One of the things I did, which I think really prepared me, is I went...At COMSUBPAC, they had all the submarine war patrol reports, all classified, still at that time, back in the '60s, for some reason. But they were classified. And I sat, and I read every one of them. I'd go up there when the submarine was in port, and I'd sit up there in the afternoons, reading those World War II submarine reports, the reports that each commanding officer wrote at the end of his patrol. I read every one of them, fascinated, and learned so much about submarining, not only the specifics of submarining, but what the submarines could do, what their capabilities were, where the mistakes were made in the deployment of submarines. I really prepared myself, and I worked hard.

I stood first at submarine school, in the class of ninety-some odd. Everything that I was involved with, that had an educational side of it, I worked as hard as I possibly could. That included nuclear power school. Although, I wasn't the smartest. There were only six of us who went to nuclear power school together, in the '60s, I guess it was, 1960. And I stood three out of six. I had to break my neck to do that. The others, all of them were so damn smart. (laughs)

So, that became the number one part of my life, too much, no question about it. I look back, and I said, "I shouldn't have been that dedicated to it." I really shouldn't have been, because that destroyed the other part of my life.



I'm sure that's what drove my wife to drinking and all. I was never a bad person. It's just, I didn't pay any attention to anything else but that.

DePue: The next question then. What was your most enjoyable tour?

Thunman: Being commander of Submarine Force Pacific. I went to that job. I remember saying, "I know how to do this job." I'd had a very successful command of a submarine. I'd been in Washington, in the personnel side, and saw the problems that you have in personnel, which are your biggest problem when you get to be in the senior pay grades, you know, what's happening, what...

What we had, as a submarine force type commander, we were different from the rest. There were surface force type commanders, but the submarine force type commander, we had been smart enough where I was responsible for the operations of those submarines. I had operational control of those submarine on their special operations. The guy was up off Petropavlovsk or Vladivostok, under my operational control. I'm sitting in Pearl Harbor, just like World War II.

But I also maintained an organization that controlled the training, all of the training associated with submarines in the Pacific, and an organization which controlled the maintenance of those submarines. So, I had the three legs of the... If a submarine went off and did poorly, because his equipment failed, I could turn around and grab the material guy and say, "How did that happen? What are we going to do to fix that? Those periscopes aren't working. What are you doing about that?" Or if the guy goes over there and fails, because his people aren't capable of doing what we asked them to do, I'd go to the training people and say, "Look, look what happened. What are you doing about that?" I was the only guy...

That submarine force type commander in the Pacific is unique. The one in the Atlantic, he's got other things associated with CINCLANT, or they did in those days. CINCLANT could participate, but as COMSUBPAC, I ran the whole thing. Politically, I had to be very careful that the fleet commander had confidence in me. At any time, he could have said, "Well, I'm going to take that away from you," And he could have. But I maintained a very good relationship with old Admiral Red Dog Davis, an aviator. I used to say to him, "Admiral, this is your submarine force. It's not mine; it's yours. What do you want to do with it? Here's some things I think we can do, but which one would you like, or do you have one you'd like to do instead?"

DePue: Well, Admiral, I'm going to give you a warning here. We've got about ten minutes left before the recorder runs out, but I've got a couple more questions to ask you. Much of your career was spent paralleling, or attached to, Admiral Rickover. So, the question is, what place in American history should Admiral Rickover have? What was his impact?

Thunman: I don't know who will be in the history books today, but in 100 years, he'll be in them, because after all, he was the one who created the peacetime use of nuclear power, as well as the wartime use of nuclear power, all together, all at once.

At one time, I thought, By this time in my life, that the entire world—I really believe this, the entire world—the major source of electric power in the entire world would have been nuclear reactors. It sure could have been, had there been any discipline in the system, the commercial system, at all. The commercial system abandoned Rickover, and they got what they deserved.

But Rickover...It's hard to figure the word. Not more than managed or created or developed, he put together an organization that produced the commercial, or the peacetime, and the wartime use of nuclear power. And I'm not talking about nuclear weapons. I'm talking about nuclear power. That's got to be...I think we'll go so far with the other...

You know, they keep talking about using wind and solar. I just laugh at it, and anybody who's taken high school physics should laugh at it. There's not enough energy in it. You can't create energy. It's not a matter of discovering something inside the wind that's going to create the number of ERGs required to power this world, or enough ERGs from the sun that reaches the power of the world.<sup>114</sup>

You're going to have to go back. As these billions and billions of people grow up and want refrigerators and washing machines, you're going to have to go and say, "Wait a minute. We've got to get more energy." Now maybe you're going to end up with natural gas, but real power is in nuclear power. Boy, that is limitless. The first day, in the '50s, when I got involved with it and I watched, no moving parts, all this incredible power and energy, I thought, This has got to be the number one energy source in the world one day. I don't know; we'll see.

DePue: Besides me coming and asking you, why did you agree to do this interview?

Thunman: To be honest with you, because I'm very proud of what I did in my lifetime and career. Nobody will use it. Maybe some years ahead, somebody will use it to see what it was all about, way back then. I was very proud of it, and I would like for it to stay somewhere, at least in a corner, available to somebody when the day comes, if they think that maybe we ought to look at it.

There are formal systems you can use, whether you have... The Naval Institute, I think, is one organization that asks you to do an interview. They put together a formal report of your lifetime. But those, they pick four-star

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<sup>114</sup> Units of work or energy, each equal to the work done by a force of one dyne when its point of application moves one centimeter in the direction of action of the force.

officers generally, who've been very successful. But I think I had, again, just talking to myself, I think I got involved with a lot more things that were important to America than many of the four-stars ever did, a lot of it just because of just happenstance.

I was involved with a unique program. There were a lot of successful nuclear submarine officers who made four stars. I know most of them. I've followed their careers. I don't think they've had the same experience I've have. I don't believe they have. Now, that may be just typical envy, et cetera, but I don't believe they have. When I add my facts up, at the end of it, I think they amount to more.

DePue: Well, you've been right at the heart of the nuclear submarine story, right from the very beginning. You knew Rickover personally. You were involved with the development of the cruise missile, which we just talked about. You got stuck with having to figure out how to incorporate women into the Navy. (Thunman laughs) There's a whole list of other things that are notable about your career. So, what advice or wisdom would you pass on to anybody who's going to bother to listen to this or read this?

Thunman: Well, I think it's a story about somebody who dedicated himself to a technology and to the defense of this country, and that, hopefully, it will inspire others to do that, because you need those people. You may not like them at the end of it. There were an awful lot of people who hated Rickover, God almighty, who just get violent when you talk about him. If you say something nice about Admiral Rickover, they just...because he's probably chewed them out sometime. But you're going to have to need people who are dedicated like that, using facts, not lying about the facts, staying with the facts and developing them for whatever is needed to support the country. You need those kinds of people, or the country won't go forward. If you look at all the ones who have really pushed the country ahead, [Steven] Jobs, you just go along, [Bill] Gates, the people who have done that—<sup>115,116</sup>

DePue: You're talking about Steve Jobs?

Thunman: Yeah. Henry Ford. You look at those people; they were dedicated to development of programs and systems that moved this country ahead, that actually moved it. Not on a piece of paper, it really moved. So you're going to have to have them, or the country will destroy itself.

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<sup>115</sup> **Steven Paul Jobs** was an American entrepreneur, business magnate, inventor and industrial designer. He was the chairman, chief executive officer and a co-founder of Apple Inc., CEO and majority shareholder of Pixar, a member of The Walt Disney Company's board of directors following its acquisition of Pixar, and the founder, chairman, and CEO of NeXT. Jobs and Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak are widely recognized as pioneers of the microcomputer revolution of the 1970s and 1980s

<sup>116</sup> William Henry Gates III is an American business magnate, investor, author, philanthropist, humanitarian, and principal founder of the Microsoft Corporation. During his career at Microsoft, **Gates** held the positions of chairman, CEO and chief software architect, while also being the largest individual shareholder until May, 2014.

DePue: So is that to say that you're proud that you can say, I was with Rickover when he moved the country forward?

Thunman: Yes, yeah. I was one of Rickover's boys, when we moved it. And we did it. No matter what the barrier was, we either got around it or went over it. It was a unique group of people. Most of them—I have to say this—many of them, maybe not most of them, many of them are a hell of a lot smarter than I am. The only thing that maybe made me better, in some ways, was the fact that I recognized how smart some of those people were, was able to use them properly, and develop[ed] an organization, using the proper personnel policies to keep them on our side.

DePue: Well, Admiral, we've been at this for a long, long time. How would you like to finish? What would you like to say?

Thunman: Well, I don't know that you finish it. I think you finish it if you ever sit down and go through it all, because a lot of it is, I'm afraid—and it's my fault—it's disjointed. It needs to be edited and things put into their proper place, because I bounce around from one tour to another.

DePue: But how would you like to finish your comments?

Thunman: Well, that's what I'm really talking about is to finish. The summary has really got to be thought about after you've read the whole thing. My comments to you though, again, I'm proud of my professional performance. I let it govern my life too much though. So I really can't say I was an entirely successful human being. And that's it.

DePue: Well, it's been a fascinating experience for me to listen to. Thank you very much, Admiral.

(end of interview #15)