

New Orleans Reunion 2003

Vice Admiral Joe Williams, Jr.

Gold Crew Commissioning Commanding Officer (1959-64)

*Speech Given by
Vice Admiral Joe Williams, Jr.
Gold Crew Commissioning Commanding Officer (1959-64)
at the 7th Reunion of the
USS Robert E. Lee (SSBN-601) Association
in New Orleans, LA on Saturday, September 27, 2003*



Vice Admiral and Mrs. Reynolds, President and Mrs. VeArd, Honored Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Mrs. Williams and I are delighted and thrilled to once again be with you. It's been a long time.

How pleasant it is to look out over all you lovely wives and companions of those who once served on the USS Robert E. Lee-SSBN 601.

It also pleases me to see all the handsome, vigorous, sexy "Bobby Lee: Sailors of Yore", who are running so hard to keep up with you ladies. I can't tell whether their tongues are hanging out in anticipation as in "Days of Yore" – or from exhaustion.

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You gents are losing ground, you know. Ground ... hair ... teeth ... eye sight ... memory ... but keep trying, you will live longer, and you will need each other more and more as years go by. Margaret and I know.

I have a question for you. What is it that motivates us to get together like this?

To see old friends to be sure ... and party ... show photos of grandchildren and vacation trips ... and party ... reminisce about our escapades ... and party some more.

But surely there is more to it than that! I think the underlying, unspoken reason is we enjoy getting together in a family environment like this, wherein we feel comfortable talking about our shared experiences.

For instance, in this collective privacy we aren't embarrassed to speak of the thrill we experienced and the perceived aura of glory we associated with the intimate involvement in something very important for the welfare of our families, our country, and mankind in general – something essential to the cause of freedom. Something simple like inventing and giving birth to a high technology nuclear deterrent system “Polaris: Doing it under pressure – “just in the nick of time”.

To refresh your memories – the Soviets, in October 1957 successfully tested their first inter-continental ballistic missile by putting the world's first satellite, Sputnik-1, in orbit. The free world's scientists, military, and politicians were shocked – stunned!

We, who were rather leisurely inventing and developing Polaris, with deployment scheduled for 1964, were all of a sudden in grave danger. The Soviets were in a position to deploy a nuclear tipped inter-continental missile long before 1964. A

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position from which, by nuclear blackmail, they could force the rest of the world to accept communism and function as satellites of the Soviet Union.

A relationship identical to that which they had forced on East Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Austria, Rumania and Yugoslavia after World War II.

In response to the crisis, American industry, the scientific community, labor unions, major universities and government labs dropped their differences. They coalesced under the direction of the US Navy's Special Projects office in an effort to put "Polaris" to sea four years earlier than scheduled.

It would be a larger, more costly effort than the Manhattan Project, which invented, developed, and deployed the atomic bomb in World War II.

Despite the arrogant assertion by the Air Force and some senior admirals that such was impossible, USS George Washington (SSBN-598) was deployed in September 1960, four years ahead of schedule, and only 3 years after Sputnik flashed through American skies. USS Patrick Henry, Robert E. Lee, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt were close behind. "Just in the nick of time" - the Soviets had lost the race.

You were an indispensable part of that accelerated effort which began in November 1957 and continues today at a steady, less intense, level that ensures our continued superiority.

Some of us in this room were there to take the ball on the "kickoff" and advance it to mid-field. You of following generations, each better educated than the preceding one, and provided with ever more sophisticated technology, kept advancing the ball – leaving the Soviets ever further astern.

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We should not be embarrassed to let our children and the public know what we did. Take it out of this room and talk about it. It is more than a family matter.

Another “for instance!” I do not consider it pompous to reflect together on how heady was the realization after a few patrols that our enemy really was afraid of us.

For me, the realization came with Presidents Kennedy’s responses in 1963 to Premier Khrushchev’s installation of Ballistic missiles in Cuba. His most important response was an immediate order for the two Polaris submarines in upkeep alongside the tender in Holy Loch, Scotland to get underway and join the other three on alert patrol.

When Khrushchev awoke the next morning, he was told that we had emptied the Holy Loch and five boomers were at sea with eighty missiles pointed his way.

He promptly commenced withdrawing the missiles and the Soviet ships en-route to Cuba with more missiles, turned for home.

The blockade of Cuba by surface and air units was well done and effective, but in my opinion his retreat was primarily caused by our boomers.

We should share this with the public and our children. Never think for a minute that High School History Teachers or University Professors will ever mention it. Most of them are unaware of it.

Yet “another instance”! Here in our “Bull Sessions” we feel comfortable verbalizing the thrill we experienced when Premier Gorbachev, in early 1988,

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announced the new Soviet Reform Policy called, “Perestroika”. By January 1989 communism had begun to crumble and the captive countries of Eastern Europe were set free. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came down.

In this milieu we can say without fear of contradiction that he gave up primarily because:

Firstly: the continuous nerve racking pressure applied by our invulnerable boomers and Tridents during more than 3,500 patrols spanning more than 29 years. We averaged more than 20 submarines on alert patrol constantly during those years.

Secondly: The humiliating harassment of his forces by our attack boats, which operated with impunity in his home waters year around. They were there to gather intelligence on his weapons, sensors, radiated noise and tactics. They were there to intimidate them and incidentally to receive a quality of training for war that could be obtained no other way. There was just enough visual or acoustic detection of our boats to keep him aware of our “around the clock” presence.

To add insult to injury, our boats often fell in close behind one of his when it departed on patrol. Sometimes we would follow him throughout a 60 – 70 day patrol. Occasionally if the trailing boat needed to come home, another boat would be sent out to take over the tail – a hand off in mid ocean. Pretty sophisticated operations by professionals.

We periodically let him get a sniff of our presence so that the Soviet Commanding Officer would always have to assume an undetectable SSN was behind him. On occasion an unintentional “bumping” reinforced that

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assumption. Just think what it would have done to our morale if the roles had been reversed.

You should let your children and the public know about your impact on the downfall of Soviet Communism. You were the constantly dynamic force. Granted, you did have “static” help from the Army, and a lot of dynamic, rhetorical help from President Reagan always at the right moment. From the Air Force – nothing!

You and I were fortunate to be on the powerful U.S.S. Robert E. Lee the fourth of 41 Polaris Submarines which would, by 1968, comprise the greatest peace preserving – war fighting force the world has ever seen.

From the beginning “Bobby Lee” was the “Best of the Best”. You had many first, among them – Blue and Gold together wrote and proofed the “Procedures for Handling and Operating the Weapons Systems” for all of squadron 14. They would be adopted by all squadrons. Together, we devised the “Four Safes, Safe within a Safe” security system which provided for concurrent validation of the “Firing” message by the Commanding Officer, Exec., and weapons officer plus a secure storage of the firing key.

Our cooks went to New York to work and learn from the finest chefs during the off crew training period. The Gold Crew declined to take civilian technical reps on their first patrol thus severing that umbilical for all following ships. Both crews sent large numbers to NESEP for four years of college and a commission. Many were accepted in the LDO Community. Several attained the rank of commander and Paul Rogers as a Captain, Commanded Sandia Laboratories in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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A larger number of you joined me in 1964 to build Bancroft. It would be a super sub also, because it was custom made by Lee personnel.

When Bancroft deployed in 1966, it and Lee were a duo that could not be beat – Truly the “Crème de la Crème”.

You each played a very important role in this country’s history.

Do you realize how few people in their lifetimes can point to an act by them which positively and significantly affected the freedom of all people and the course of history?

You can do that!

Your wives can do that!

It was a team effort!

Without the sacrifices and support of you ladies we warriors with big egos and swelled heads could never have done it, year ... after year ... after year.

The foregoing recitation of some amazing accomplishments notwithstanding, I have still not addressed your most important, most singular feat. One which the Soviet Communist culture simply could not emulate. I’m going to give you a little background/history so that all of you understand the environment in which it took place.

A LITTLE HISTORY

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In World War II, the crushing defeat of the Japanese at sea was led by the commanding officers of our submarines.

Those daring LCDRs, CDRs, and Junior Captains, lead their courageous crews into battle in Japan's home waters and along the sea lanes over which their essential food stuffs, oil, and strategic materials moved.

On December 31, 1941, 24 days after Pearl Harbor, USS Gudgeon (SS-211), LCDR Elton W. Grenfell, Commanding, arrived off the southern entrance to Japan's Inland Sea. He sank his first ship 5 days later. Thereafter there was a steadily increasing flow of our submarines into and out of the Japan, Philippine and East China Seas.

There they commenced attacking Japanese merchant shipping moving in convoys escorted by Naval Units. They also attacked the escorts when necessary.

It would be 33 long, lonesome months before U.S. surface and air units started arriving in Southern Philippine waters to help out. By that time, 36 of our submarines with about 2,500 men and officers had been lost. Those numbers would grow to 52 submarines and 3,500 personnel lost by war's end. They were not lost in vain. Our submariners had swept the Japanese Merchant Fleet, more than six million tons, from the seas and sank one-fourth of their Navy.

The officers and men of our submarine force, hero's all, had established an historic 'winning tradition'.

By 1954 the surviving officers who remained in the Navy were Rear Admirals and Captains in Command of all submarine organizations afloat and ashore. They were responsible for setting our course for the future.

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Their submarines were few in number with only about 6,000 personnel. Their budgets were meager, and they had no influence in Washington. It was not an atmosphere that generated big thinking – visions.

The Navy as a whole was in the doldrums. Many Senior Officers were resting on their laurels and enjoying peacetime life. The Korean War was primarily an Army, Air Force and Marine Force show, the amphibious landing at Inchon notwithstanding. The carrier fighter planes, for instance, could not compete with the Soviet's migs.

THIS WAS ABOUT TO CHANGE.

In May 1955, a new Chief of Naval Operations burst upon the scene. Young, 54 year old Admiral Arleigh Burke took charge with orders from President Eisenhower to rapidly modernize the Navy.

In 1942, this destroyer man had become world-famous as he raced his "little Beaver" Squadron of destroyers at 31-Knots throughout waters around Guadalcanal and up the slot, sinking Japanese ships and destroying their shore facilities.

Allied victories were non-existent at that time so the press trumpeted Burke's successes worldwide. They dubbed him "31-Knot" Burke, a sobriquet that became a household word overnight.

He would become more famous a Chief of Staff for Admiral Marc Mitscher, the brilliant commander of the fast attack carrier task force of "The Big Blue Fleet".

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Under Mitscher, Burke was the architect, planner, and tactical director of the carrier operations that destroyed the remaining three-fourths of the Japanese fleet and made possible the seven major amphibious assaults from New Guinea to Okinawa.

The Admiral took over as CNO in an unusual situation. President Eisenhower had promoted him from Rear Admiral with two stars to Admiral, four stars, over the heads of 92 other two star ... three star ... and four star admirals who were his seniors.

Not only was he a stellar leader, ship driver, and tactical commander of very large task forces, his technical competence was notable.

He held an advanced degree in Ordnance Engineering from the University of Michigan and had served two tours of shore duty designing guns, ammunition and ammunition storage facilities prior to his escapades in the Pacific. He possessed "Brain-Power".

In 1956, after viewing the damage caused by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the damage to ships used in our tests at Bikini Island, Burke, like many others, concluded that civilization could not survive a world wide nuclear war.

His solution was to build and deploy a survivable sea-based force armed with long range, nuclear tipped ballistic missiles.

Such a survivable force randomly roaming the world's oceans would guarantee any aggressor that if he conducted a first strike against any nation in the free world, his country would be destroyed at a time of our choosing.

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It would be a deterrent to nuclear war, a force for peace.

As a Captain in post World War II Washington, he pursued his objective relentlessly, but the Senior Admirals would not support the concept.

Immediately on becoming CNO he started the concept moving, working hard at getting support from the Secretary's of the Navy and Defense and President Eisenhower.

By the end of his first year, having gone to sea on Nautilus and talking to Admiral Rickover about the future of nuclear powered propulsion plants, he decided the missiles should be place on large nuclear submarines.

No such missiles existed nor did such large submarines. Other technical problems like precise navigation had not ever been addressed.

Burke simply said, "The technical problems can be resolved by the rigorous application of sufficient brain power", and determined to get on with it. First, however, he wanted the unstinted backing of his CNO Advisory Board. Its members, 17 Vice Admirals, all of whom were older than Burke and had been senior to him until recently, listened to him describe his program. Every one of them voted against it.

A red-faced angry Burke pounded his fist on the table shouting, "All right, dammit, we will do it anyway".

Almost none of the submarine Admirals or Senior Captains supported him. One of their many reasons was a grave doubt that enough enlisted men with the requisite brain power to handle such high technology could be recruited for the

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initial five submarines let alone a rapid growth to 41 submarines and the attendant, long term, world wide support systems.

Burke turned away from the submarine community and chose an aviator, Rear Admiral "Red" Raborn to develop and provide the missile system, supporting ships systems, training of personnel, and worldwide facilities and logistic support.

In a letter, later called "Raborn's Hunting License" he gave Raborn the right to select for his staff of 40 personnel, any officer, enlisted man, or civilian from any Naval organization except that of Admiral Rickover. He provided that he report directly to the Secretary of the Navy to eliminate interference from any admiral and in closing said, "If there is anything that slows this project up beyond the capacity of the Navy (to solve), we will immediately take it to the highest level." That meant Secretary of Defense and President Eisenhower.

Admiral Burke turned to Rear Admiral Rickover, who had but recently proven his nuclear propulsions plants in Nautilus, Seawolf, and Skate, to provide the nuclear plants for much larger submarines and the associated training of personnel. Rickover and Raborn were "Off and Running" with Burke riding sidesaddle, whipping the horse and maintaining Congressional and Presidential support.

THEN YOU COME ON STAGE AND INTO THE ACT.

About 1,400 of you were needed for the two crews each of the first 5 Polaris submarines with an additional 15,000 over the next six years.

For the first five Polaris Subs, they swept from the diesel boats, the most talented of every rate, the smartest of the Junior Officers, and ten Commanding

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Officers – nine Naval Academy Graduates and this Ex-Chief with no brain power and no college degree.

In we all went to hastily established schools, officers and enlisted often together. The curriculum included mathematics, physics, electrical engineering, radio-chemistry, thermodynamics, metallurgy, computer design and operations, gyros and accelerometers for initial navigation and missile guidance, practical application of it all at prototypes and in laboratories, and on ... and on ... night and day – Remember?

The performance of that first contingent proved all those with grave doubts about brain-power, to be “dead wrong”. Year after year, you who followed kept proving them “dead wrong” despite the steadily increasing sophistication of equipments and systems, increasing difficulty of curriculum, and raising of standards.

Such was the CROWN JEWEL of all your achievements.

It was the savior of our system. The inability of the communist system to produce such men and women was its Achilles Heel.

It validated my long held, not original with me, conviction that one should “never underestimate the U.S. Navy Blue Jacket and his family”.

With all that we all must acknowledge, that the small percentage of Senior and Junior Officers and ratings who did embrace Burke’s vision were absolutely essential for the vision to become a reality. They carried the staff and shore facility loads for ten years and more, until we nukes, navigators and missile types could be spared from sea duty.

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It came to pass that the Soviet hierarchy could not use their land-based missiles and bombers because we could destroy their country at a time of our choosing with missiles launched from our invulnerable Lee's and Bancroft's – 41 of them.

The Soviets could not count on their blue-water attack submarines to gain control of the seas because our nuclear attack submarines – with or without support of other ASW forces – would surely destroy them and the Soviet boomers.

The coup de grace was putting Tomahawk missiles on our attack submarines, followed by President Reagan's announced intent to build an anti-missile defense force.

With their economy bankrupt and unable to counter our submarines, the Soviets threw in the towel.

You had carried on the tradition of winning everyday for 40+ years. Today our trident submarines are quieter with oceans and oceans of water in which they can patrol.

Their missiles have a very long Range – 6,000 miles with a CEP, miss distance, of less than 120 yards.

Your deterrent system is alive and well. You still own a part of the system because it has evolved from Polaris to Trident, based in great part on the lessons you learned and recommendations you made for improvements.

You are not ... has beens. Your contributions are still in use, and you are entitled to bask in the system's present reflected glory.

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For those of you who served on SSN's, your Tomahawks are generating a great winning tradition as a strike force.

In Iraq, there were 207 strikes with 202 hits. You should all be proud of your accomplishments, proud of your submarine force, and proud of the flag under which we serve.

God Bless

Mrs. Williams and I thank you for inviting us.