

My Chance Encounter with “God”

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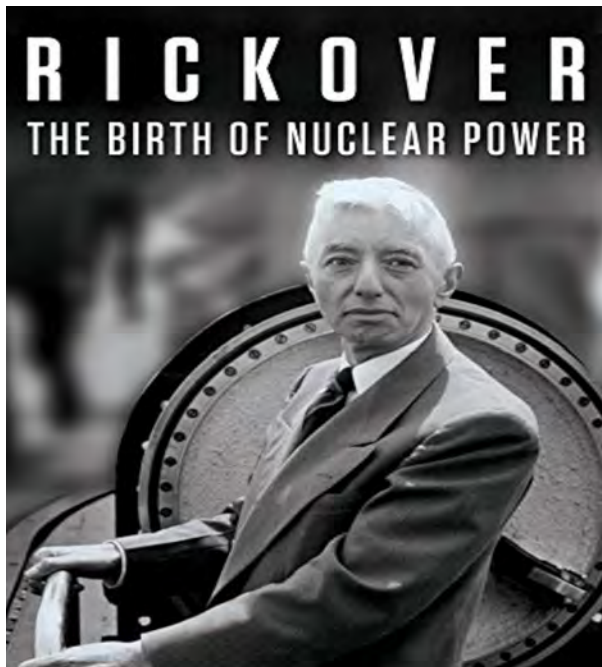


I received orders to report to the USS San Francisco SSN 711 in August 1980. These orders had me going to a ‘PreComUnit’ or duty on a ship under construction. My new ship was being built at the Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company in Hampton Roads Virginia, and it

was going to be the 23rd ship in its class. The lucky 711 was a “Los Angeles Class” or “688 Class Submarine.” Los Angeles was the name of the first in the class and 688 was the hull number. However, it was the first ship in “Flight 2” design, which meant it was coming with a host of major upgrades and alterations learned from the older ships in the same class. The “fast attack” submarine's main mission is to locate enemy submarines as part of a rapidly mobilizing battle group. Once the ship completed sea trials and commissioning, it was to leave the east coast and headed to the west coast eventually being home ported in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

The ship had a scheduled departure date in February for alpha trials. This was going to be the ship’s initial period underway, which among numerous other events included a flank bell run and the infamous “crash back.” Commander Marshall was the CO, but the focus of the story will be on two individuals, our Executive Officer (XO) and a larger-than-life person who, when he comes into the story, I will often refer to as God. The XO was Mark Keef, who was a built like a linebacker. In the days before the first cruise got underway, he would spend a lot of time walking around the ship doing what XOs do, talking to the crew, telling sea stories, and trying hard to bring out the best in us. He was brash, loud, intelligent, and radiated confidence, and to us the crew, it was all we could hope for.

Working in a shipyard was a unique and interesting experience for me, but something that was disliked by most of the crew. I learned quickly that working in a shipyard was fraught with danger. New construction is loud and dirty, and we cohabited with yard workers who had little patience with the Navy. The ship had a temporary office that was on the second deck of Building 1, located at the intersection of 35th street and West Avenue. It had been built in 1944 and used to be the corporate office of the shipyard until it was vacated when a modern office was constructed. After going up a grand marble staircase that had been battered over the years, you reached the ship's very modest and uncomfortable crew space. There we would muster for quarters, hold training, and try to stay out of the way of the yard employees. The shipyard used most of the second deck for storage. It had no temperature control and was often uncomfortable. Always present everywhere was choking white dust that was kicked up every time a forklift roared past you. There was an effort to control the dust by hanging thick translucent plastic with cut open vertical strips in the more trafficked passageways. This was a barricade that a small truck could run through that could also contain the dust. But the plastic could only do so much and so it became a daily occurrence of wiping down the dust that was everywhere. I noticed there was friction between the Navy and the shipyard on the day I arrived, and it did not get any better over time.



History tells us that there were indeed individuals who lived long enough to change the world and Admiral Hyman Rickover was certainly one of them. However, today I doubt fewer than one in a thousand Americans would know anything about him. Soon after the end of the Second World War, he was considered one of the foremost experts in both mechanical and electrical engineering and was one of the first to suggest the use of atomic energy instead of fossil fuel to generate propulsion on naval ships. In 1946, there was nobody that had any idea of how to do that and many thought it a fool's errand to put the deadly nuclear reactor on a warship already

fraught with danger. So, the Navy gave the job of figuring out the feasibility of producing steam using nuclear power to “then” Captain Rickover.

However, not done with that, he next conceptualized a plan to put such fledgling technology on a submarine. Until then a submarine’s Achilles heel was having to surface to charge batteries, which meant they had to run noisy diesel engines that required a lot of oxygen. A submarine running its engines on the surface just loses all of its stealth and thus makes them vulnerable. Nuclear power would eliminate the need to go anywhere near the surface and give submarines untold advantage over any surface ship. In a little more than five years Admiral Rickover made the concept of nuclear power on a submarine a very safe reality when the USS Nautilus went to sea in 1952.

The Navy had originated the “Men in Black” (MIB’s) long before the Hollywood movie came out. The Navy’s version was in the bureau of Naval Reactors (NR) established by Admiral Rickover in 1949. In a general sense, they dressed the same and were without personalities or humor. They were like NASA engineers long before there was a space program. The captain of a nuclear-powered submarine’s highest priority is the safe operation of his reactor plant, it is paramount, and all other concerns of his command are dwarfed by it. Any single incident exposing reactor safety is reported immediately to the ship’s squadron commander. If he suspects issues, he could report this to NR which might result in a visit which in turn be extremely bad for the ship. NR is an entity vaguely like the IRS, if they come knocking it’s a guarantee that you are about to have the worst day in your life. We should all respect them; their mission is to prevent naval reactor accidents, and as of now there has never been one. Hymen Rickover started out as a plebe at the Naval Academy during President Woodrow Wilson’s administration. By 1981, he was now a -four star admiral and the only director that NR ever had.

For over 30 years, Rickover was one of the most powerful men in the department of defense. He ran the bureau of Naval Reactors with complete unhindered authority. Because he had ultimate power over anything that was nuclear in the Navy and having cultivated powerful friends in congress, he was allowed to remain on active duty long past the normal retirement age. He had built himself a kingdom of sorts that most his peers avoided at all costs. In other words, if you were in the world of naval nuclear power, he was God.

Rickover had relationship issues with everyone during his career. He despised most of his fellow admirals, the school he was a graduate of, and some politicians who often grilled him over his policies. Anyone who got in his way was to expect his temper as well as his wrath. He and the MIB's had designed the reactor plant as well as the entire engineering space on the 688-class submarine. This infuriated a lot of powerful folks over at the office of the Supervisor of Shipbuilding or SUPSHIP, who now only had cognizance over the design of the forward part of the submarine. Rickover had the personality of a rattlesnake and fought with every Chief of Naval Operations that came and went for 36 years. In early 1961 he relocated his command from the Washington Naval Shipyard to rented spaces in Crystal City Virginia, just to get away from Naval Bureaucracy.

The men who he hired, these "Men in Black," had wonderful minds that could perform calculus in their heads and they could quote verbatim any section of the manuals that they wrote which directed how the reactor plant was to be operated. Rickover had groomed his disciples and, like him, they were resolute in ensuring nuclear power safety and perfection.

In the build-up to alpha trials the word was put out that Rickover and his boys were going with us so they could see firsthand how safely the reactor was being operated. Up to this point I had never heard of the bureau of Naval Reactors and how important they were. At quarters one day the non-engineering members of the ship's company were reminded that if at any time NR were around, we were to avoid having any contact with them, always referring them to the duty officer. We were warned that they would come onboard unexpectedly at any time to inspect the engineering spaces, always looking for discrepancies. Anyways, I was sure I would have nothing to do with them and that the command was doing everything to elevate the stress level that was already barely tolerable.

About a month before the alpha trials, the crew moved onboard the ship and started standing normal in port watches. The pace doubled as we practiced every evolution that a submarine needed proficiency in, no matter how basic it was. Being a junior member of the duty section, I started standing topside watch, ensuring only authorized personnel were allowed access to the ship; that watch stood near the brow and

close to the forward escape trunk hatch, just aft of the sail, which was the main access to and from the ship. Then, one very chilly night, around three bells, I was topside waiting to be relieved after a four-hour watch.

The shipyard was deserted, and all yard birds had long gone home, when I noticed two spooky dudes walking down the wharf heading my way. As they got closer, I was quite sure who they were and called the below decks watch and asked him to wake the duty officer and report “they’re here.” I kept the phone to my ear trying to look busy as they started up the brow. My plan was to delay them until an officer came topside. I was flummoxed by what to do next: let the Bureau onboard or make them wait for the duty officer. Standing in front of me now there was no doubt who they were, and I now had eyes on these “Men in Black.” Mr. Smith and Jones presented their identification to me and, as I fumbled through the various pages, I took longer than usual to locate the access list, mumbling incoherently all the while. I was flummoxed by what to do next, let the Bureau onboard or make them wait during a soft rain. Finally with their patience with me gone, I realized I could delay them no longer, so I cheerfully welcomed them on board without any similar retort. Curiously, they proceeded down the engine room hatch which is not the normal entrance point on any submarine. A few minutes later the duty officer finally made it topside looking very agitated and all I had to do was point aft and off he went trying desperately to get in front of the “Bureau” and prevent potential damage control. All the stories I had heard about them now seemed true, they were creepy, and their presence normally affected rational submariners in strange ways.

During the weeks that followed and before the initial reactor plant startup the Bureau was all over the engineering spaces sniffing out any discrepancies that were occurring or about to happen and then correcting them accordingly. Any violation of reactor plant safety during startup would require a complete shutdown and cause a serious delay in the schedule. If this happened, it would have significant consequences for the ship. Likely it would mean a two-week delay in alpha trials while the ships engineering department went through remedial training, more drills, lectures, and procedural walk throughs. Thankfully, our ‘nukes’ did an excellent job in starting the plant up with zero glitches and Rickover gave the San Francisco his blessing to proceed with alpha trials.

Then 10 February 1981 came and at 0800 all departments had reported ready to get under way for the very first time. Already, in total there were an additional forty riders from the shipyard and squadron

stuffed onboard, loitering everywhere; Rickover's "team" of six would make 160 souls onboard a submarine designed for 120. We had no weapons onboard, so the torpedo room became a makeshift berthing compartment with portable racks lined up neatly, athwartship. I had no idea why they even bothered with this because nobody was going to get the chance to use them. Of course, we were late getting underway, standing by smartly, waiting for our celebrity rider and his inner circle to arrive. Once onboard they were all shuffled down to the wardroom, and we singled up all lines. We were finally underway on nuclear power, followed ominously by a rescue ship.

Mister Keef had the hardest job of all during alpha trials, not only was he the ships XO, but he was also the trials director as well as being Rickover's personal bodyguard. As trials director he would coordinate every test that the ship would conduct that was directed by a rather lengthy list of events that were to be performed in the next 24 hours. Keef was constantly heard over the ships 1MC announcing system coordinating events in no particular order, some events were all hands, but others were local and required only select individuals. Event 01 might be open then close torpedo tubes on the surface or raise and lower the periscopes at 150 feet, all these events were recorded properly with discrepancies noted. The crew had practiced for several days where they had to be for each event. My assignment was simple enough and required me to be in various places, manning a sound-powered circuit JA phone reporting the status of each event when directed.

A major concern to the command and entrusted to the executive officer was ensuring that Rickover was always separated from the crew. Rickover had ousted the XO from his state room (adjacent to the COs) for his personal use for the cruise, which was normal for alpha trials. It had been reported from past sea trials that he liked to mosey around unscripted, and unescorted, looking for some very unlucky member of the crew. If he found a victim, he would next rattle him by asking improbable questions and then tripping off the line when he did not get the answer he wanted. Young sailors are always a challenge to control, they can be an unpredictable source of sarcasm when faced with unknown etiquette. The ship posted a young member of the culinary division outside the XO's stateroom, when he was in it hoping to prevent such incursions. The XO was fully aware of this, and shadowed Rickover wherever he went, always making sure he arrived wherever he wanted to go without issues.

Alpha trials was a short cruise to quickly evaluate the ships' ability to operate submerged, run as much of the ships' major equipment at maximum loads. It then ends with an attempt to break the ships' drive train by running at a flank bell while stressing the propulsion system to its design limit. I say break because at this point the Navy did not own this ship, and the builder still had contractual obligation to fix all discrepancies that were discovered. God had a dim view of ship builders cultivated over 30 years of disputes over quality of their building practices. The thought process was that if the ship was going to break down it was better if it happened on alpha trials close to home with a rescue ship standing by. If propulsion was lost due to malfunction this would result in a very embarrassing tow back to the shipyard where the builder would incur all costs of repair and not the taxpayers.

In reality fast attack submarines very rarely operate at a flank bell. Every submarine that accelerates to a flank bell just significantly increased their sound output, often needlessly, thus compromising its warfare advantage and contradicting its mantra of the "Silent Service." Going flank requires additional maintenance during the next upkeep that would not be necessary if the ship kept it at or below a full bell. However, the Navy needed to know that this submarine could, if the time came, achieve its maximum designed speed.

Alpha trials started immediately after getting underway. Some events did not require all hands involvement and if you were lucky, you might be able to relax somewhere out of sight. Soon we arrived at our assigned operations area about fifty miles east of Norfolk and submerged for the first time to periscope depth, and the fun was just getting started. I was correct in assuming that I would be on my feet the entire time we were underway. So, coming from the mess decks, as always there was the usual cynicism with the catch phrase, "Don't worry. If we make it back, you can sleep then." And so, the next 24 hours went by hectically. You either participated in an event or were getting ready for the next one. If that was not fun enough, because of all the extra riders onboard, there were always long lines waiting to eat, to use the head or just standing in the way as you tried to get from one space to the other.

I was soon back on watch in the control room enjoying a peaceful break in the action. It was now four o'clock in the morning and 20 hours into the trial. There was a quiet lull in the control room, too good to be

true. Next the crew was told to take station for the main event that some were calling “showtime.” It was time for the infamous “crash back.” After going to periscope depth and releasing a “situation report” and conducting a comms check with our escort, the order was given to proceed to 500 feet and all ahead full. In the meantime, Admiral Rickover had started to head aft chaperoned as always by the XO. Going aft from the wardroom required passing through the mess decks where normally there will be a gaggle of mess cooks cleaning the deck and supervised by a large cook in the passageway blocking traffic. This is the reason that the XO spearheads the way by making sure that everyone was out of sight before Rickover and his posse passes by.

Everyone up forward felt the two main coolant pumps being placed in high-speed mode that is necessary in achieving flank speed. Once settled in the maneuvering space, standing directly behind the ships enlisted throttleman, Rickover would order up a flank bell. It takes about thirty seconds to go from ahead full (25 knots) to ahead flank (34 knots). In the control room all eyes were on the inertial navigation system digital readout, of speed over ground. We were all hoping that because we were the first of Flight 2s that the modification in the engine room would result in a speed record. I was not there, but I’m sure that everyone in the engine room was bracing themselves, waiting for the speed report that was soon to come from the control room. I was on one side of the control room and the techs monitoring speed on the other; next came loud congratulations and shouting when the ship reached and sustained 36 knots, a full two knots faster than all other ships in the same class.

This occurrence was reported by the CO to the entire crew by using the 1MC, the shipboard public address system. Next came the order for all back two thirds; a rarity that only happens during alpha trials. It is strange to say not really knowing, but I am sure God was expecting an engineering casualty to happen to his beloved propulsion plant just so he could say “I told ya so!” His constant accusations of inferior workmanship would then be justified. What happened next is a once in a lifetime experience for most of us. What was occurring was the equivalent of jamming an automobile into reverse at 70 miles an hour. The absolutely astounding power of the reactor plant was now in full display. A submarine going at a flank bell is a sublime experience that is impossible to forget. Only at a flank bell will you feel as well as hear the power of the propeller, pushing millions of tons of sea water out of the way. The noise caused by the rushing of the sea across the hull is quite distinct, as is feeling the gentle sway that is called yaw

instability. This circular motion that only happens during a flank bell is unforgettable. When all back two-thirds is ordered, the ship starts to quickly slow down all the while shaking violently as the propeller works against the flow of the sea. If the ship's drive train was going to crap itself, it was now.

Then suddenly forward progress comes to zero and the ship starts moving backwards. The Los Angeles class was not designed to go backwards, back two-thirds' was intended only to slow the ship down or back out of a pier. Depth control is impossible when moving astern at six knots, a submarine cannot go backwards for long, and danger awaits those who try. Then when he has seen enough, Rickover mercifully orders "All stop!" and the crash back as the last event was over. For those of us crammed in together tightly in the control room we could breathe again.

The engine room did not break off and sink to the bottom. There were no casualties, no alarms, just a combined sense of relief, a hushed silence that seemed longer than it was. Alpha trial was history. We had a propulsion system that worked properly. Next came surfacing and a transit home. The sun was about 30 minutes away from rising and the ship was on the surface heading due west to Newport News. At night on the surface a submarine usually has the Officer of the Deck stationed on the bridge (on top of the conning tower) and the control room rigged for black or all lighting off. I was still on watch with three hours left before making port.

There were way too many crew members bounding about performing their assigned duties coming and going and it was hard to make out their faces due to the darkness. I was standing mostly out of the way on the back starboard side of the control room standing next to a chart table keeping my log up and trying to stay awake. I'm afraid to say this, but I found a way to stay upright by wedging snugly my left arm through a cable run and a stanchion, sometimes cat napping all the while remaining unnoticed in the darkness. Up till now I had not laid eyes on Admiral Rickover like some of my shipmates who got a very brief glance at him walking through the mess decks. I heard while entering the wardroom Rickover went berserk on a friend of mine who was in the wardroom cleaning up and thus demonstrating his well-known temper;

I thoughtlessly was glad that it was not me. Next and very suddenly without any warning, the forward door leading in and out of the control room opened and at the same time all the fluorescent overhead lights

came on, bringing shouts and groans from all that were present. Making a blunder by turning white lights on when rigged for red is usually a big no-no but today was not a normal day. It was as if a sunrise service were about to start, and heaven had opened up. All eyes were now straining to adjust to the lights and we were wondering if we were about to witness something divine. It became clear that our XO was the cause of the sudden illumination as he barged in pushing watch standers out of his way.

My blurry eyes now told me that he was coming in my direction as I instinctively pulled my left arm free. But then a mysterious shape moved away from behind Keef and became annoyed waiting for our stunned Senior Chief Fire controlman to vacate a bench locker so he could sit down. Of course, this had to be God, and my first impression was that he really was smaller than everyone had said. He was wearing a set of starched khakis that was too big and without any epaulets that displayed his rank, he looked like a rattlesnake about to bite.

Immediately there was complete silence in the control room as everyone became aware of his presence as well as wondering what the hell was going on. It soon became evident that God was about to hold court for some reason, and he wanted to do it dangerously close to where I was standing. I tried to give him some space by backing away, but at the same time more riders started packing into the control room from the aft door and now I had someone pushing me forward and peering over my shoulder, vying for a spot to witness what was soon to come. Once all of his disciples had taken station, God's presence was now revealed and that he soon would speak to us, a bible quote perhaps, or a sermon, seeing that it was indeed Sunday.

The Captain had the honor to present Rickover to the crew over the ship's 1MC, his introduction was brief, but then came a long, rambling unscripted speech that was difficult for me at the time to comprehend.

I was almost sitting in his lap when he started to talk, he had no notes and had to use both hands to steady the microphone that was presented to him. It was an unforgettable moment for me; I was staring at God. Keef was staring at me and Rickover was staring out at his legacy, maybe he could see where our country was going, perhaps a warning to us that he describes so hauntingly at the end of his speech,

about an America that he would likely never live to see.

The XO was thinking the worst of me because up till now no crewmember that I knew of had been allowed to be in such close proximity to Rickover and for that long of a time, I was close enough to touch him. My boss must have been thinking that I had it in me to wreck the sea trial by punking a 4-star admiral. This would have caused an uproar that would have brought tears of amusement at the Pentagon, but would not have gone well for me. I now understand his concern because in the days that followed, I received several suggestions coming from the mess decks as usual, on what I should have done. Any one of these would have put me into the Infamous Hall of fame and now will be better if left unmentioned. Keef was staring at me and with his eyes he was saying "Don't do it, and if you do it you will pay!" The man did not know that I did not have it in me to be so low and soon the "sermon from a bench" was over without interruption from anyone.

As Rickover got up to leave, he glanced for a split second at me and then headed out the door from which he had entered. So, there I was, frozen in the moment, trying to recount and understand what he was talking about. Luckily, his speech was recorded and later made available. After reading it repeatedly, I now know what he meant. It is a timeless meaning, so relevant in the America of today:

"We have just completed alpha trials on the San Francisco and the propulsion plant operated satisfactory. I want to once again congratulate the engineers and craftsman of the Newport News Shipbuilding and drydock company for their excellent work as evidenced by this successful trial. The men and women of Newport News continue the tradition of shipbuilding competence that the Navy counts on. I especially want to congratulate the officers and men of the USS San Francisco. Anyone witnessing these trials would find it hard to believe that over half of the crew had never been to sea before except for short training periods. The men and officers have demonstrated they are capable of doing an outstanding job. I know that you will continue to do your duties in the same outstanding manner. Our country should be proud of Commander Marshall, the officers, and his men. On behalf of the Navy, I thank all of you for a job well done.

Since no church service could be held on board the San Francisco this Sunday, I am taking advantage of the occasion to deliver a little homily. I was born in the first year of this century and experienced a childhood

which had not changed much since that of the time of the Civil War. I now live in the age of nuclear weapons, space travel, and silicon chips. These diverse experiences make me feel as though I have been a participant in two separate lives. But I am much the same person I was in the early days. There were no automobiles on the road; horses were still man's most important companion and friend from the animal world. At night with no electricity there was total darkness, only lit by the moon and stars. Except for the barking of a dog or the hoofbeats of a horse, it was quiet. In the present age there is no unifying faith to bind us together; in its place there is only half-hearted adherence to many conflicting and diverse forms of ideological or emotional nonsense.

Another attribute for the vanished age which distinguished it from that of the was the reliance on reason; on the cumulative knowledge of the past; of common sense, instead of pop, fashion, or craze. Despite the vast improvement in living and social conditions and great technological and scientific advances that I have witnessed in my lifetime, there is one thing that I should like to be reborn which is missing in the materially guided United States of today. This is the belief in the importance of honorable conduct and dealings' confidence in men and women of all classes and callings in their own capacity for reasons of good sense, and a pride in our country and its achievement, past present and future.

This was shared by aristocrat, bourgeois and working man alike. These, despite all the differences in individual circumstances and ways of life, made us united as one nation. And these ideals which cannot be served by money alone are what make people great. And what our people are is what our country is."

Then it was all over, and alpha trial was complete. The San Francisco was back tied up at the shipyard and Admiral Rickover was gone as well as the Men in Black. Next up for us was Bravo trials or sound trials, where technicians got to listen to how much noise the ship made at various speeds. They later reported back that the ship with the new Flight 2 silencing improvements was now the quietest submarine in the fleet. On the 24 of April 1981 the San Francisco was commissioned at Pier 4 Naval Base Norfolk attended by none other than the Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger who told about 2,000 dignitaries in attendance that my ship was now the fastest, quietist and most deadly submarine in the world. We proudly left Norfolk for good in June 1981 and headed for the

Panama Canal. Once in the Pacific Ocean we turned north to our namesake city and participated in Fleet Week, a City of San Francisco tradition. It was a four-day party where Mayor Feinstein presented us the ceremonial key to the city. Once the party was over, my ship sailed west to Pearl Harbor and had a long-storied career.

I transferred from the San Francisco two years later to continue my journey elsewhere. About eight years later while stationed in Holy Loch Scotland, I was tracked down by the Navy's Bureau of Medicine because of their concern about my time working on shore. I was directed by the Submarine Squadron 14 doctor to get an X-ray and take various lung function tests for mesothelioma. It turned out that all that nasty dust back in "Building 1" might have been spiked with deadly asbestos. Thankfully, my test was negative, however, years later through the wonder of social media I found out that several of my shipmates had developed serious lung issues that were related to the time in the shipyard.

As for Admiral Rickover he went back to Crystal City but not for long. He participated in one more alpha trial on the USS La Jolla that did not go as anticipated. During the infamous crash-back the Admiral froze and his inaction by not ordering "all stop" while backing at two-thirds caused a horrific loss of ships depth due to a 40 degree aft leaning down bubble; this caused a panic in the control room resulting in their captain ordering an emergency main ballast tank blow to the surface, that likely saved his ship.

Several days later, once back in Washington, Rickover was ordered to the White House to answer for it in person to the President. On 31 January 1982, the then 83-year-old Admiral was told while sitting in the Oval Office that his service to the Navy was no longer desired and he was now retired. It took President Regan to break the news to Rickover in person, and after 67 years in the Navy he was unceremoniously let out to pasture.

Now, at this point the astute reader might say that I never really met Admiral Rickover. Then, I would have to consider the word "meeting." Does meeting someone require a hardy handshake and a lengthy conversation? If so, then I never did meet God, but then no one met him on that day. I would explain that at this point in Rickover's earthly existence "meeting" someone was not what God did. It was germane to

Rickover that by the time a ship started builders' trials everyone on it was competent, superbly trained and had the complete confidence of the local commanders to proceed to sea and then safely operate the ship. Rickover was not there to get to know anyone, let alone a simple control room watch stander that for a moment had a chance encounter with him. So, without any preconceived meaning of the word "meet" I still say that I met God.

I now live in the DC area and a frequent visitor to Arlington National Cemetery, and every time I'm there I always stroll past where Rickover is buried. Near president Kennedy's grave and under a Japanese cheery tree you will find where the Admiral is buried. As always, I stop there for a moment and remember that time so long ago that I, a mere mortal, had the fortune to stand, for just for a moment, next to God.

