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SPENT
BILLION

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Mechanical engineering helped **Tom Olson '73** understand a submarine's technical specs. His MBA taught him how to balance the cost.

CONVERGENCE

BY **S. L. GUTHRIE**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BOB HANDELMAN**

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Ask **Tom Olson '73** how he got into the Navy, and he'll tell you a tale so convoluted that you'd swear you were hearing the synopsis of a spy story, minus the violence.

The summer before his December graduation, Olson responded to an ad to join the nuclear division of the Navy. Several weeks later, the Libertyville, Ill., native got a call to stop by the recruiter's office in downtown Chicago on his way back to Bradley. At the office, after having what Olson called, the full "Alice's Restaurant" physical and a written exam, the recruiter said he'd be in touch.

Two months later on a Wednesday, the recruiter called with the offer of a plane ticket leaving that day for another interview in Washington, D.C. Olson agreed, but made him promise he would be back at Bradley in time for an exam Friday.

This is when things got really interesting.

All morning the following day, Olson shuttled back and forth between various locked rooms, answering questions on STEM topics. Afterward, right before the group underwent more of the same, a man came in and said, "This is the greatest program you've ever had the opportunity to interview for. I'm sure you guys are going to do great, but have a positive attitude toward this thing. The Navy is a really outstanding program. This is an opportunity that you do not want to pass up. Look what it did for me."

The man speaking was then-Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter.

Olson's next interview was a brief encounter with Admiral Hyman Rickover, "the father of the nuclear Navy."

"What's your name?"

"Tom Olson."

"Where are you from?"

"Libertyville, Illinois."

"Where in Libertyville?"

"412 Meadow Lane."

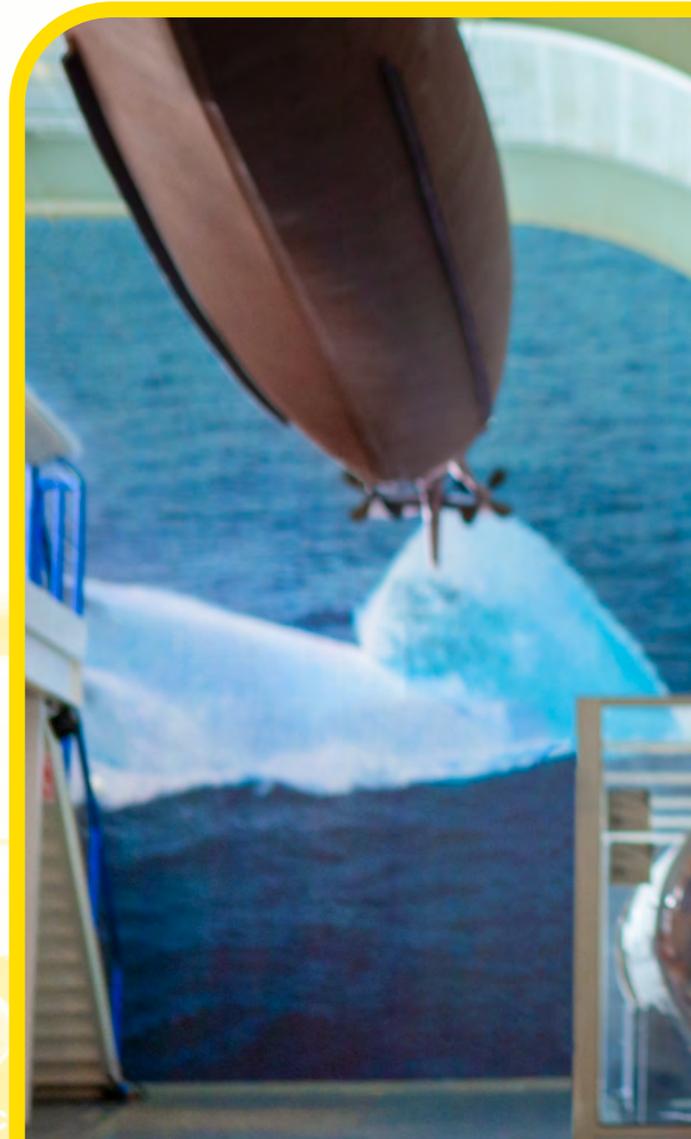
"Why do they call it Meadow Lane?"

"Well I assume that there were some cows and stuff."

"That's bulls---."

Afterward, Olson waited all afternoon in a room the size of a broom closet. Finally, at 6 p.m., they told him he was selected for the program and to sign a piece of paper so that he could join the Navy right then.

"Whoa, wait a second," Olson responded. "I gave up an



interview with (General Electric Co.) today to come to Washington. I'd like to make a conscious decision on how I'm going to spend the next five years of my life."

By coincidence, all this took place Oct. 10, 1973, the day former Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned from office.

"OK, here's what we'll do for you," said the Navy recruiter. "Here's your ticket to fly back to Peoria. We'll give you the weekend to think about this. But you've got to make a decision by Monday morning, and if the answer is yes, go to the recruiter in East Peoria and sign this paper because we're going to send it to them."

"That sounds fair," said Olson. "I can do that." Looking at the ticket he added, "Wait a second. I was supposed to get back there tonight. Not tomorrow because I've got exams and stuff on Friday morning.

"Well that's your problem."

By chance, Olson's flight would land in Chicago at 10 p.m. Thursday night so he did what any other self-respecting college student would do: call Mom and Dad.

"Mom, you're up in Libertyville and I'm stuck at O'Hare. Can you guys do me a really big favor and drive me back to Peoria right now?"

"And oh, by the way, happy birthday."

Over the next 3 1/2 hours, Olson and his parents spent quality time discussing the "crazy idea of their son joining the Navy."

EARLY YEARS

On Jan. 1, 1974, Olson flew to Newport, R.I., to attend five months of Officer Candidate School, followed by six months at the Nuclear Power School in Bainbridge, Md. He called the experience "a really intensive graduate school."

Following that assignment was six months at the Naval Nuclear Power Training Unit in Ballston Spa, N.Y., where Olson learned how to operate a nuclear reactor. This prepared him for his first duty on the USS William H. Bates (SSN-680), a Sturgeon-class attack submarine based in New London, Conn. Olson spent the next three years traveling the world, landing in locales in Tunisia, Italy, Germany, Scotland, Bermuda and the U.S.

BELOWDECKS:

Before he retired from active duty, Olson attained the rank of captain. Although he no longer has access to the submarines, he is able to access the people. "I think that's really the key part of it," he said.



EXT
NO. 2

STARBOARD:

As a docent for the Submarine Force Library and Museum, Olson explains the intricacies of nuclear submarine technology and its history inside the control room of the USS Nautilus (SSN-571).

INTERCOMM
CONTROL

As exciting as it sounds, he admitted the reception naval personnel received in those days wasn't always positive. For example, while docked outside the port of Bizerte, Tunisia, the crew took a small boat to and from shore to go out on their own.

"I oversaw the technical specifications the Navy demanded for its submarine shipbuilding ... But the flip side (was) how are we going to pay for this?"

"We were just walking on the streets, and the locals would start throwing stones at us," Olson said. "We weren't even in uniform, but they could tell we were Americans ... When we went to the governor's palace, it was completely different: he wined and dined us like we were the best thing since sliced bread."

Conditions on board were hardly glamorous, either. The crew stood watch in six-hours-on/six-hours-off shifts. And if a VIP or an inspection team came aboard, Olson sometimes had to share his rack, a practice known as "hot bunking." With all the work he did, however, falling asleep in a tiny space wasn't difficult.

"You learn how to sleep for either three, four hours or five hours at the most."

Olson's next assignment was on the USS Robert E. Lee (SSBN-601), a George Washington-class fleet ballistic missile submarine, homeported in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. His year on board included launching a test missile from Cape Kennedy, Fla., loading out 16 new missiles in Bangor, Wash., and a deterrent patrol in the western Pacific out of Guam. It was at this point Olson decided to take a break from active duty and go into reserve status. He spent the next two years outside of Chicago working for Johnson & Johnson and working on his MBA at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

CKT MC

The business degree would have to wait, however. In 1981, with then-President Reagan's push for a 600-ship Navy, Olson answered a request to return to active duty. Assigned to the James Madison-class ballistic missile submarine USS Casimir Pulaski (SSBN-633) at Newport News, Va., it was there that he met his wife, Marie. After two years at Charleston, S.C., he attended the mechanical engineering program at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif. Olson finished in 1986 and transferred to the nation's capital where he was able to finish the MBA at Marymount University.

Combining engineering and business was a perfect fit. "As a submarine engineering duty officer, I had responsibilities for the technical specifications the Navy demanded for its submarine shipbuilding program," he said. "What capabilities do we want? What are the technical requirements it has to meet and what are the noise considerations, weapons considerations, speed considerations, etc.

"But the flip side is how are we going to pay for this? How is the money to be allocated? This is where the MBA helped me a lot as far as being able to balance those two sides ... Managing the money aspect is just as important as being able to manage the technical aspect of the job."

CONTRACT WORK

Promotions continued and soon Olson had responsibility for maintaining eight submarines and more than 700 people as the repair officer on the submarine tender USS Fulton (AS-11). He followed that with an assignment as the SSN-688 class program manager representative at the Supervisor of Shipbuilding (SUPSHIP) responsible for overseeing construction of seven Los Angeles-class submarines at General Dynamics Electric Boat's shipyard in Groton, Conn.

Then, as the acting deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for ship programs at the Pentagon, one of Olson's major responsibilities included processing the approvals for

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MAIN

numerous contracts that resulted in the latest in undersea vessels. During this time he had the opportunity to meet the then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General **John Shalikashvili '58 HON '94**.

“Obviously, he was much more senior to me,” said Olson. “I was a lowly captain in the Navy, but I did meet him a couple of times, and we remembered our days at Bradley.”

In 1997, Olson left active duty and spent his last 17 years with the Navy as a civilian back at SUPSHIP before his retirement last year. As the senior civilian, he had multiple responsibilities. For example, a Virginia-class submarine — one of the Navy’s newest models — costs \$2.7 billion and takes five to six years to build. Since more than one ship would be under construction at a time, Olson would process invoices totaling over \$100 million every two weeks.

He continues to serve SUPSHIP about 25-30 hours per month as acquisition emeritus, a volunteer position. What he enjoys most about the work is providing guidance, counseling and mentoring to the nearly 350 active-duty military as well as the civilians at the command.

EXTERNAL

“When you’re in the senior civilian job, even though it sounds cool, you’re also the guy that has to hire and fire people, and that starts wearing on you after a while.”

Olson still uses the engineering and business knowledge he developed over nearly 50 years. A recent special project found Olson developing independent cost estimates for designing the Block V Virginia-class submarine — the newest in this class — including installation of the payload modules. It’s what he called “doing hardcore Navy work.”

The initiative Olson showed as an officer extends to his retirement. When not volunteering for the Navy, he serves as a docent for the Submarine Force Museum, on the board of the Naval Submarine League and on Groton’s Conservation Commission. In many ways, it’s like he’s never left the service.

“I don’t have oversight roles of Electric Boat’s construction anymore,” he said. “I no longer have access to the submarines. But I’m able to access the people, and I think that’s really the key part of it, that I’m able to do things that I enjoy and not have any of the worries.” **B**