

FRANK NULTON ¹

Historical events that I think might be of interest to others (continued): The Navy, the Air Force, and Ballistic Missiles



The third agenda item that I have here is while I was When I got finished with the tour as Air Intelligence Officer on the attack carrier (USS Intrepid [CVA-11]), I was assigned to the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff out in Omaha, Nebraska. And I followed a very capable lieutenant commander who had been out there and done a wonderful job. It was very difficult to get into his shoes, and I found out that they didn't fit me anyway . . . and it's just as well that I do the thing that I do best, and while I was doing that I was . . . the Strategic Air Command, while you're on the JSTPS job in Omaha, Nebraska, also used you as a SAC officer . . . and why they did that was quite understandable, SAC needed all the help they could get, but in performing in one of those roles, preparing an agenda for the World-Wide Intelligence Conference for all the unified specified commanders, I found that the Air Force, the previous year, had made an attempt . . . correction: not the Air Force . . . the Strategic Air Command had made an attempt to take over the ballistic missiles that the Navy had in its submarines, and while that had been unsuccessful in 1963, here in 1964, the Chief of Staff of SAC, a lieutenant general, had been put in charge of the program to take control of the strategic missiles in the Naval submarine force, and the reason for that was, (1) they wanted total control of all strategic delivery methods, and number (2), it would give them a larger piece of the pie of the national defense budget. So, understanding what was going on, I went down to see one of the two skippers of the first nuclear submarine in the United States Navy and he was the Navy representative to the JSTPS and I said to him, I said, "I betcha if these people really knew what they are talking about, they wouldn't be in such a hurry to pick up this responsibility." He agreed. So I asked him, "If I could get the general to take a tour of the Navy submarine facilities at New London and such, and then maybe get down to Cape Canaveral, for a, you know, an exercise with a ballistic missile submarine," I said, "he would understand, you know, that we are comparing apples and pears, and nobody buys papples." And this might be a way of sort of aborting their effort. And he thought it was a good idea, so he got a schedule of the Navy's events, in fact, we had going out in a matter of about five weeks, we had the first launch of a Polaris A3, which was an increased range missile and increased accuracy. So, I went up to the general, while I was discussing this world-wide conference that they were going to be a participant in, and SAC had about five agenda items on the broad agenda, and I mentioned to him that, wouldn't it be great if he could very quietly make a trip to the Navy, get all the information he needed, and in that way, any argument the Navy could come up with against SAC taking over the ballistic missile program, he would be ready to defend. He said, "Wonderful idea! How can I do it?" And I said, "Let me see what I can do." Well, in the meantime, we had gotten a schedule of everything, and ah . . . I was one of the SAC T-29 pilots, so I got their VIP, their pushed-up T-29, their Convair 404; and ah . . . and flew him up to New London, and there they put him through everything. And it might be interesting to note that the general, being a lieutenant

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general and all that stuff, never admitted he was in SAC, so he had cover as far as he was concerned. . . . He was at the top of the training tower for the kids coming out of the torpedo room and coming up with their [Nike?] hoods on, and so on, and this old warrant officer was picking up the kids out of the pool by the straps of their [Nike?] hoods, and he would put them at attention, and a couple minutes later put them at parade rest. So after this process was over, the general looks at this old warrant officer that's doing this, and he said, "Don't you feel that you're abusing these men by treating them so harshly after so difficult an experience?" This old warrant looks at him and he says, . . . he says, "You're a pilot, right?" And the general says, "Yes." "Do I tell you how to fly airplanes?" The general says, "Noo" He says, "Well, don't tell me how to train these kids, I've been doing it for thirty-five years."

Well, needless to say, the general was very upset. But the warrant was very kind, he came over a few minutes later and he said, "General, I want to apologize to you, I got a bit rough with you," he said, "but these kids coming up," he said, "if they're are going to have the bends or anything," he said, "but I've got to see them and I've got to know what's going on. When I call them to attention," he said, "I look into their eyes because their eyes tell me what's going on in their bodies," and he said, "and if anything's going to happen, it's going to be within three to five minutes. I hold them there for about three minutes then I let them go to parade rest for about four or five minutes, that's the critical time, then put them at ease and release them. You notice what they do, they go over and they lie down and they go to sleep. If they did that right out of the tank, they'd die if they had a problem." So the general said, "Thank you very much for explaining it, and such."

But afterwards, that night, as I was flying him down to . . . a . . . Patrick [AFB], he said, . . . he was . . . a . . . pretty abrupt with me. And I said, "General, you were trying to eat off his plate." I said, "In the Navy, everybody does his job, and if they do it wrong, they get fired, but you don't tell them how to their job." And he said, "Oh, well, in the Air Force they listen to you." And I said, "He did listen to you, and he told you what he thought."

So, anyway, the next morning, very early, we're up, we're out, we're on the ballistic submarine, and going out for the trials, the dry run, getting ready for the next day for the firing. And it was an excellent day and the general, needless to say, - he stood about six feet one or two - and he was constantly bruising his shins and constantly banging his head and he didn't want to go up a vertical ladder in order to go up in the conning tower as we left port - Cape Canaveral, there - so the day went rather uneventfully. And the next day, for the shoot, we were running parallel on the monitor vessel - it was an instrument ship, and so on - and we were paralleling the course of the submarine. And, ah, the general was complaining to me as we were coming aft on the port side, "have you noticed how horribly the sailors salute on this ship?" and I said to him, "General, I'm an aviator, and blackshoe Navy is not my cup of tea." And I said, "But I have learned this, when I'm on a carrier, I watch what the carrier sailors do, and I do what the carrier sailors do, when I'm on . . . a . . . destroyers, I do what the destroyers do, when I'm on minesweepers, I do what the minesweepers do, because they're there, and that's the way they live, and they do it very well." And he said, "The salute should be done at 45° and so on." And I said, "Well, that's great general, I'm sure that works at the Air Force Academy and the Naval Academy, and the Military Academy, but on here, I recommend that you follow the lead of the guys that live here and work here." Just at this time there was a first class [petty officer] coming up, dressed smartly, just a good-lookin' first class

sailor, he was an electronics technician, and he salutes, and he has his elbow tucked in, almost in front of him, so he's sort of peeking out from under his salute, and the general snaps in a big 45° with his elbow out, and just then we hit a stanchion, his finger nail . . . his index finger nail . . . digs into his scalp . . . it opened him up for 14 stitches, his hat flies off, the sailor never dropped his salute, grabbed his hat with his left hand and handed it back to the general and says, "Your hat, sir." And the general saluted without – you know – holding his hat in his one hand and his salute was still being held, with blood running down his forehead, and he saluted back this sailor, thanked him for his hat, and we were walking down, and I said, "General, you've got to go to sick bay, that's not a scratch, you've got blood all over." And, so I had him put it . . . the palm of his hand up to stop the blood a little bit, we went to sick bay, and they put some stitches in for him. And we were about then . . . hmm . . . five minutes from the actual launch, so we went up onto one of the weather decks, and I said to him, "The only thing you will see – because they're only going to fire one missile – is they're going to open the hatch and you're going to see some light water, in other words, the air coming out of the tube is going to give us a patch of light water. He said, "How the hell do I know where the submarine is?" I said, "it's just been announced on the 1MC [speaker], it's approximately 400 yards off our port bow and we're abeam of it, and we're going the same speed the submarine is." And, he said, "I can't see anything!" And I said, "Try to estimate 400 yards." He said, "I have nothing to reference by!" And I said, "That's one of the advantages of the submarine."

Now, suddenly the submarine has launched the missile. It pops out of the water. It spins around slightly and starts heading down. It was an absolutely beautiful launch. And the general looked at me and said, "That came out of nowhere." And I said, "No, it came out of the submarine – it's down around anywhere between . . . ah . . . 40 to 60 feet, and I said, "Ah . . . that is the beauty of the submarine." So he was absolutely astounded. We went into the briefing as to what was happening downrange, and headed back to port.

That evening there was a very quiet get-together by just the commanding officer of the ship, the commanding officer of the submarine, and a few other people for dinner.

The next morning we were heading back to Omaha. After we had leveled off heading back to Offut Air Force Base, in Omaha Nebraska, I asked the general back up to the right seat, and he was sitting up there and going over some of the things that happened during the day . . . and during the launch . . . and on the submarine the previous day . . . and he also referenced some of the material up at . . . New London at the submarine training facility and he said, "You know, when I think about the infrastructure required for the submarines and the training," he said, "I really don't think it's a good idea that we pick up this program. He said, "there's just too much there to get the few missiles that you have (garbled) in the Navy." And I said, "General, that's a good observation, but what is CinSAC going to think, your boss has been working on this now for a couple of years. And he said, "He doesn't understand the problem."

So we're going over some things and I explained to him in my insight, that because we have other submarines as well as the missile submarines, and we have a reserve of people we could draw down upon, we never really get hurting too badly on having the right man in the right place, but if you don't have that depth of being able to draw from a large manpower pool it could be a very real problem. And then the general said, "Well, something that just blew my mind was," he said, "The skipper of the submarine, when

we were coming back in, I was talking to him, and he said that he doesn't let anybody know where he is." And I explained to him that SAC has to know where every airplane is, and every thirty minutes they check in with us and we . . . we . . . sort of micromanage the system to make sure we get exactly what we want to do in a general war environment. And he said, "And your captain said, 'They don't talk to anybody. They just go and do their thing, and . . . and . . . ah . . . they listen to their traffic.'" He said, "I don't know how they get it, because they're under water all the time, but . . ." And I said, "Well, we have a communications system that's designed to be of assistance to them and, yes, they do get their traffic and they don't answer us because if they answer us, that gives away their location and a submariner just does not do that, because our own aircraft and our own ships can be as much a problem to a submarine as the enemy." So he said, "I . . . I . . . I don't think that we are equipped to handle this program in a number of ways," and he said "I'm just getting a bad feeling about what we're trying to do." Needless to say, I tried to add a few more details to help him understand that that in fact was the case."

And by the time we were approaching Offutt, he sort of (garbled) to a conclusion. He said, "What we're trying to do is just plain dumb." He said, "We're asking for more problems than we're solving." And he said, "And we're getting into something that we're ill-equipped to get into." And he said, "I'm going to tell the boss that this is not the thing to do."

And with that, um . . . I was overjoyed. We landed the aircraft and as soon as I dropped the general off at ops, I parked it, went into the hangar, and I called our Navy captain who was the Navy representative there at JSTPS, and I said, "Ken, were back from the trip, and I'd like to come over and talk with you for a few minutes, in fact, I'd like to take a walk with you so that what we discuss is for us and us only." I said, "Not that I don't trust the people here, but . . . ah . . . we'll go for a walk." And he – on the phone – laughed and said, "Ok." So when I briefed him on the results of the trip, he was overjoyed – he was absolutely ecstatic – and . . . so . . . ended the saga of SAC vying to take over the ballistic missile system of the United States Navy.

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