

OPERATION THUNDERHEAD

"WE'VE GOT TO GET BACK TO GRAYBACK"

After embarking SEAL Team One, Alfa Platoon at Subic Bay in April 1972, the submarine GRAYBACK deployed to coastal waters in the Gulf of Tonkin off North Vietnam's Red River for its highly classified mission to rescue escaping POWs. The submarine was outfitted for clandestine warfare with four new SEAL Deliver Vehicles (SDVs)—their first use during a combat mission. North Vietnamese patrol craft were operating in the area on 3 June when GRAYBACK began submerged operations.

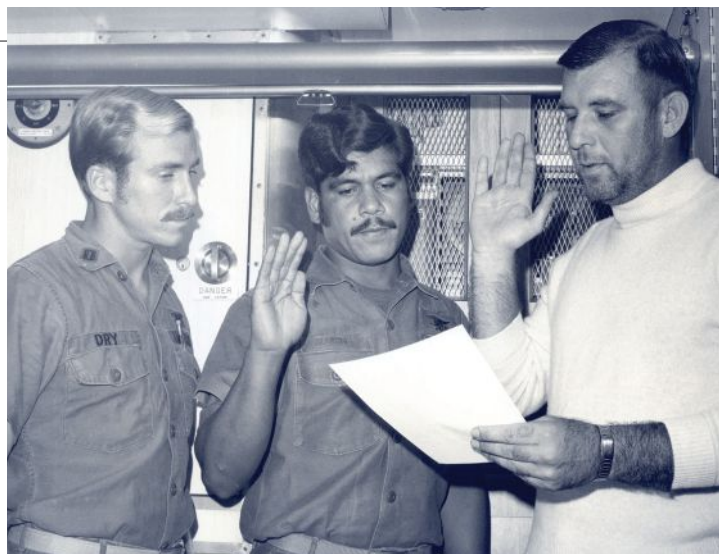
Lieutenant Spence Dry '68, USN, and then-Chief Warrant Officer Philip Martin were launched that night close to the coastline in an SDV manned by two UDT crewmen to reconnoiter the area. They experienced misfortune and technical difficulties with the SDV.

Strong currents took them far off course and soon exhausted the underpowered SDV's batteries. They were unable to return to the submarine. A helicopter from the guided-missile cruiser LONG BEACH rescued the four men the next day and returned them to the ship. The heavy SDV was sunk by the helicopter's door gun to prevent its retrieval by the North Vietnamese.

Armed now with unique tactical information, Dry was determined to return to GRAYBACK to lead operations. Late on the night of 5 June, the four men boarded the cruiser's helicopter for the flight to the submarine. A "cast" (jump) to GRAYBACK's position was planned. However, the helicopter crew had great difficulty sighting the submerged submarine's infrared beacon on its periscope. Multiple approaches for the cast were unsuccessful and erratic. The helicopter's fuel was running low. Time was running out. Despite the pilot's difficulties making a safe approach, Dry remained determined to return that night.

The pilot finally signaled the four men to jump when he thought, incorrectly, he had sighted the submarine's signal. Despite concerns that the helicopter's approach was dangerously flawed, Dry did not hesitate to jump first when the signal was given. His last words to Martin were, "We've got to get back to GRAYBACK." He was killed instantly when he hit the water owing to the helicopter's excessive height (later estimated at 35-40 feet) and speed.

Although shaken after he hit the water, Martin immediately assisted the two UDT crewmen who were injured during the jump, one critically with a broken rib. He located the critically injured, semiconscious crewman, inflated his life preserver and supported him in the water overnight. He also found Dry's body and tethered it to the group. A helicopter rescued the three survivors and recovered Dry's body the next morning and returned them to LONG BEACH. Martin and the less seriously injured UDT crewman were returned to GRAYBACK.



CDR John D. Chamberlain (right), GRAYBACK's commanding officer, promotes Chief Petty Officer Philip Martin to chief warrant officer while Lieutenant Spence Dry '68, USN, looks on—just four days before he was killed.

The submarine continued its surveillance mission until Operation Thunderhead was terminated in late June. Earlier, the POWs' senior leadership had determined an escape plan was far too risky and would result in serious retaliation for the prisoners.

Owing to Operation Thunderhead's high secrecy, the Navy informed Dry's parents that their son died accidentally during a training operation. His name was not added to Memorial Hall's listing of alumni killed in action. Full details of his death were not known publicly until reported in a co-authored article initiated by Captain Michael G. Slattery '68, USN (Ret.). Slattery published the article in the Naval Institute's *Proceedings* magazine in 2005.

The commanding officer of GRAYBACK and the acting on-scene commander during Operation Thunderhead, then-Commander John D. Chamberlain, was unaware that neither Dry nor Martin had been recognized for their performance during Operation Thunderhead after Alfa Platoon returned to Coronado. When informed of this, Chamberlain promptly submitted retroactive award recommendations in 2005 to the Secretary of the Navy via the Naval Special Warfare Command and Chief of Naval Operations.

In February 2008, during a ceremony in Memorial Hall, then-Rear Admiral Joseph D. Kernan '77, the commander of the Naval Special Operations Command, presented Dry's family with the posthumous Bronze Star Medal with Combat Distinguishing Device awarded to Lieutenant Dry for his "heroic achievement" during Operation Thunderhead. He was cited for his inspired leadership, courageous actions and loyal devotion to duty.

The following month, at NSW Command headquarters, retired Lieutenant Philip Martin was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with Combat Distinguishing Device for his heroic achievement saving the life of his seriously injured teammate, recovering Dry's body and rallying the other survivors until their rescue.

Lieutenant Dry's name was soon added to Memorial Hall's listing of those alumni killed in action. He and his father, Captain Melvin H. Dry '34, USN (Ret.), are both buried at Arlington National Cemetery. ⚓

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