



# WOMPATUCK NEWS

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LTJG George Neat pictured in 1960.



LTJG George Neat poses in front of former Quarters A in 2011.



Quarters A as it looks today.



Quarters A as it appeared in 1961.

## Life in Wompatuck State Park when it was a U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot

By George Neat, LTJG, USNR

*The following story was written by a former Navy officer assigned to the Annex from 1960 to 1962.*

After completion of my studies at the University of Washington in Seattle, I received orders for my assignment to the U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot (USNAD) in Hingham, Massachusetts. The Navy credited my time in graduate school and consequently I entered the service as a LTJG (lieutenant junior grade).

After discovering the high population density in the Boston area, my wife, Marilyn, and I were shocked to find that we would be sharing 4,000 plus acres with the number of neighbors that could be counted on one hand.

When I arrived at the ammunition depot in January, 1960, I found that I was assigned to the Guided Missile Service Unit. LTJG Jim Kelley and I oversaw about 30 sailors who processed Terrier and Tarter surface-to-air missiles and delivered them on barges to ships anchored in Boston Harbor. However, that would not last because, to my surprise, I found

out that the base was scheduled to be closed in 1962.

USNAD originally consisted of the property on Back River, where the South Shore Conservatory, Bare Cove Park, and Conservatory Park now exist. This part of USNAD was called Mainside. The USNAD Annex, which was added to support World War II, is now Wompatuck State Park. GMSU and my quarters were located on the Annex.

### Duties Associated with my Assignment

The Terrier missile, the Navy's first operational shipborne medium-range surface-to-air missile, became operational in 1956. The early version was approximately 27 feet long, 13.5 inches in diameter and weighed 1,290 pounds. It could reach 40,000 feet and attain a speed of Mach 1.8. The range of 10 nautical miles was doubled to 20 nautical miles in a subsequent upgrade.

The booster and the second stage sustainer were propelled by solid-fueled rockets. The missiles were equipped with a 218-pound controlled-fragmentation warhead. The beam-riding guidance sys-

tem was replaced by a semi-active radar homing device in a subsequent upgrade.

The Guided Missile Service Unit (GMSU) received missile components from General Dynamics (Convair) and tested them and packaged them for transfer to a ship in Boston harbor. Because the ammunition depot did not have a deep water port, it was necessary to load the missiles onto barges, and Navy tugboats delivered them to the ship anchored in Boston harbor.

In addition to delivering new missiles to the fleet, ships that were headed to the Boston Naval Shipyard for maintenance and repairs would be required to offload all ammunition before entering the shipyard. This ammunition was then stored on barges at the ammunition depot docks at the Back River.

The Terrier missiles were offloaded and delivered to the GMSU facility and tested before returning them to the fleet.

For the barge trips between Back River and the anchorage in Boston harbor, I would either ride on one of the tugboats or one of the base's crafts. We used either

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*Quarters C as it appeared in 1960.*



*Quarters C pictured across Boundary Pond.*



*Quarters C foundation remnants as of today.*

an LCM (Landing Craft Man) or an old cruiser, which we called the President's Gig. The name resulted from the fact that the boat had been provided to President Kennedy for his use, but he turned down the offer. Somehow it ended up at USNAD, Hingham. The tugboat was the desirable choice for the trip to the harbor because the small crew included a chef and the breakfasts were spectacular.

On one occasion, we were returning from a loadout on the LCM on a very foggy dark night. Visibility was near zero. As a result we went aground on one of the islands. The Chief Petty Officer who had been running the boat turned to me and reminded me that I was the senior officer on board and therefore responsible for the grounding. After his joke, he put the boat in reverse and backed off of the shore. The LCM, of course, was designed for landing on the beach to unload the occupants.

A later upgraded version of the Terrier missile had similar dimensions, but the weight was increased from 1,290 pounds to 1,820 pounds, the speed was increased from Mach 1.8 to Mach 3.0 and the ceiling was doubled to 80 nautical miles. A later version had the capability to function as a surface-to-surface missile. The latest version included the capability to deliver a one kT nuclear warhead.

Production of Terrier missiles ended in 1966 after approximately 8,000 missiles had been built. The last Terriers were retired at the end of the 1980s.

The Tartar missile was a more light weight system for smaller ships, and it could be utilized to engage targets at very close range. Tartars were single-stage missiles with a range of 8.7 nm in the early version and 17.5 nm in the latest version. The Tartar was 15 feet long, had a speed of Mach 1.8 and carried a 130-pound continuous-rod warhead. The

Terrier, the Tartar, and the Talos missiles were eventually replaced by the Standard Missile.

As one of five junior officers on the base, I was Officer of the Day every five days. That role required my presence on base (mainside and the Annex) for 24 hours. The responsibilities included being in charge should the other officers be away from the base for some reason. Duties also required driving through every road on both the mainside and the Annex in the morning and again in the evening to make a visual check of the bunkers and buildings.

The missile unit was phased out before the base was closed. When that occurred, I became the Ordnance Officer of the depot, replacing Lieutenant Commander (LCDR) Ken Moll in that role. An additional assignment was to have the Underwater Ordnance Disposal Team (UODT) report to me. The team covered New England and was on call whenever needed. My role was more of a figurehead, because the team members were all experts at their trade, and I wasn't. I did benefit from the relationship, because in the winter, the team would go to Boston and practice in a YMCA pool. I would join them and had an opportunity to learn to scuba dive.

During the last months before closing the base, the scuba divers on the UODT got a real workout diving for a 50-year accumulation of weapons that had accidentally been dropped from the dock during the loading and unloading of ammunition for the fleet.

As Ordnance Officer, my major role was to oversee the emptying of the ammunition bunkers and warehouses and demilitarizing of the ammunition remaining on the base. The salvageable materials, in particular copper, was recovered and sold. The powder was removed from warheads

and burned at the burning site between Holly Pond and the current camping area.

Fortunately, our safety rules included remote ignition from behind a barrier a safe distance away. There were occasional explosions resulting from improper packaging of the material being burned. On more than one occasion, burning material was distributed hundreds of yards in multiple directions.

On one occasion, I had a resulting fire near my residence at Quarters C. I believe that was one of the times the fire engines from neighboring towns were brought in to augment the efforts of the base fire department. There were never any injuries or any incidents resulting in significant damage.

I had only two occasions to wear my dress white uniform while on duty. The base commander, Captain Freund, moved on and Commander Smiley, the executive officer, took over in a change-of-command ceremony.

The other occasion was when I led the base sailors in the Hingham Fourth of July parade.

### **Social and Entertainment Activities and Anecdotes**

Having studied the Naval Officer's Guide and coercing my wife to read the Naval Officer's Wife's Guide as we drove across the country to begin our USNAD tour of duty, we were prepared to join in the Navy traditions. Within the first three days of our arrival, my wife and I called on the captain and his wife at their home, which is now the very active South Shore Conservatory. I placed my card on the silver plate presented to me when we entered. We each had one martini, and our visit fit the prescribed at least 20 minutes, but not more than 45.

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*Tartar missile takes off.*



*Terrier missile seeks target.*



*LTJG Neat leads Hingham parade in 1960.*

At least those were the guidelines as I remember them now. Captain Freund and his wife were wonderful people, and we were immediately at ease. It was the beginning of a great adventure for both my wife and me.

The officers on base became good friends, and they had many stories to tell. Lieutenant Commander Fortin had arrived from a tour in Vietnam before the war started. After hearing his stories about watching fighting from the roof of a building, our country's future involvement came as no surprise.

The base Public Works Officer was from Texas. His most important job was to get the base swimming pool open every spring in a timely manner. He was successful, but he never swam in it. He considered New England too cold for swimming outdoors. The Bachelor Officer Quarters, a stately brick building near the current sport fields on mainside, housed LT Jim Wright, the only bachelor among the officers on base. The base Ordnance Officer, LCDR Ken Moll, resided in Hingham for many years after the base closed. He was the driving force for the Hingham Farmer's Market during that time.

LCDR Bill Brown claimed to be the oldest LCDR in the Navy. He had been a PT boat commander in World War II, and needless to say his stories were endless. Bill is quoted frequently in "The Last Epic Naval Battle, Voices from Leyte Gulf," published in 2005. He had been forced to retire when the war ended, but he elected to switch from a line officer to a supply officer in order to stay in the Navy. The young John F. Kennedy served on his boat until he was assigned his own command on PT 109. Bill and his wife had eight children, and at least one of them, Donald, still lives in Hingham today.

LTJG Kelley and I reported to Lt. Bob Lane. He was a mustang, having worked his way through the enlisted ranks to become an officer. He believed that Jim and I had the misfortune of not experiencing boot camp. I guess our training cruises didn't qualify. He was tough and he felt obligated to treat us like raw recruits. When his office door was closed, I knew that Jim was behind the "brown door" getting chewed out for something, and he could draw similar conclusions when he saw the brown door closed. The good news is that I learned that I could stand up to criticism, whether or not it was warranted. I learned that I could work with anyone, and I was never intimidated by any manager or anyone else. This capability was severely tested during my subsequent career. Incidentally, my relationship with Lt. Lane was very cordial outside of office hours.

Quarters C, the house that was provided for my family when we arrived, was located on Boundary Pond, on the Hingham-Norwell town line and near where Hingham, Norwell, and Scituate meet. It was a wonderful home with some unique characteristics.

The front door opened into a comfortable entryway with a stairway to the second floor. The main floor had a living/dining room with a huge stone fireplace, a kitchen and walk-in pantry. There were three bedrooms and a bath on the second floor. There was a full basement with a stone foundation. The interior finish of the house was knotty pine. The kitchen floor and counters were Navy maroon linoleum. A well provided excellent water, but we chose to carry our drinking water from Mount Blue Spring, which was nearby. A two-car garage with a roughed in in-law apartment was nearby. Not bad living conditions for my first assignment.

Wildlife was abundant. Muskrats, water snakes, and numerous species of ducks were visible in the pond, which was 30 feet from the house. The wife of a chief petty officer in Quarters G reported spotting what she believed to be a bobcat numerous times. Since no one else had witnessed this animal, some thought she had been alone too long in their remote quarters while her husband, one of the frogmen on UODT, was traveling throughout New England to do his job. While she could have been seeing a feral cat, I believed that she had seen a bobcat. Her home was so far from civilization that it is not surprising that she had wildlife that the rest of us never saw.

Our source of milk and eggs was Hornstra's Farm, which was right outside the Annex gate. Mr. Hornstra complained that the foxes would come out of the base and get into his chicken coup and escape back into the base, where he could not chase them.

My wife worked in the laboratory at South Shore Hospital. We both loved animals, but she took it one step further. The frogs used for pregnancy testing were routinely destroyed after the test. She didn't think that was a good idea, so she would bring them home and put them in the pond. There were already noisy bullfrogs in the pond, but there was plenty of room for more. The story took an interesting turn when we observed lights on the pond one night. Some of the members of the base's Underwater Ordnance Disposal Team (UODT), e.g., scuba divers, were diving for frogs. Little did they know that they would be eating hospital survivors.

When Marilyn became pregnant during our first year at the depot, our dream house lost some of its appeal to her. She was due to deliver at the end of 1960. Her



*Marine Major Eugene Libbin lived next door to Quarters A in Quarters B during the 1950s. His heroic duty in the Pacific during World War II was featured in the movie "Band of Brothers."*



*Major Libbin's Quarters B house in 1951. His two children, Robert and Barbara, are looking out the bottom left window.*



*Major Libbin's Quarters B house stands today to the right of LTJG Neat's Quarters A.*

doctor was overly conservative and ordered her to quit work and confined her to the house for the last three months of her pregnancy. For her, the house became a prison. One day when she had been in solitary confinement in our home for a while, she announced that there had been ducks sitting in the tree in front of our house. I was sure she was losing it. Who ever heard of a duck in a tree? When I discovered that wood ducks land in trees, I was relieved.

It was a winter with heavy snow and we were occasionally snowed in waiting for the depot plows to clear the roads. As the delivery date approached and passed, I did everything in my power to be the first to get plowed out. I was not enthused about the possibility of delivering our first child by myself. Our son wasn't born until January 12th, but I was so nervous that on the first sign of labor, I rushed her to the hospital. It was 36 hours later before she delivered.

In early 1961, when some of the officers on base were transferred, my life changed again. We moved from Quarters C to Quarters A, also on the Annex. Quarters A is the third house in, by the front gate of Wompatuck State Park. This was a four bedroom colonial with all of the amenities including a screened porch. This provided a new paradise for my wife, our son, and me. We had a wonderful summer and ate outside every weekend with our good friends, the Kelleys, who lived next door in Quarters B.

When there were parties, the Officer of the Day was not allowed to partake of alcohol. Speaking of parties, the officers had a Bingo night almost every Friday at

the BOQ. It was a social function including the Navy wives. For \$1.50 per person, the wives prepared a dinner. Alcohol was included in the price. I still haven't figured out how it was possible, but the meals were good. Drinking was obviously not excessive, but the Officer of the Day was required to abstain.

Chief Warrant Officer Bob Hancock and his family lived in the quarters closest to the annex guard station. They brought their close friends, Chet and Betty Patterson, who they had met through their children, to Bingo parties. I was pleased to walk into a church service at the Wompatuck Community Center, when my family returned to New England in 1967, to be greeted by our friends, the Pattersons.

Jim Kelley and I often went over to the mainside and used a rowboat to cross the Back River into Weymouth to dig clams. We had to do it a day ahead of time so that we could hang a sack in the water overnight with the clams and some cornmeal. This flushed the Back River mud out of the clams, and we were able to thoroughly enjoy them.

One of my projects that summer was to overhaul the engine in my 1955 Mercury that we had driven from Seattle. Jim Kelley helped me all the way. There were a few parts left over when we finished and, the engine was so tight with the new bearings that the starter couldn't turn it over. Lt. Lane, to whom we reported, wouldn't have approved, but we were desperate. Using a Navy pickup, Jim pushed my car, with the automatic transmission engaged, until the engine started. We got up to 35 miles per hour before the

engine started. I needed the push for the next few starts, but eventually, the engine loosened up.

### Departure

My contract with the Navy was the last of the two-year commitments of active duty. The Vietnam conflict was looming in early 1962, when I had completed my commitment. My departure was on hold until two days before I was released in January 1962. Our family proceeded to drive back to Seattle in our 1955 Mercury. I continued to drive it until 1967.

The base was closed for good, six months after I left. Closing the base foretold the eventual closing of the Boston Naval Shipyard. Ships must be able to offload ammunition in the vicinity of the shipyard before entering the yard. It is not acceptable for an unarmed ship to sail from New York, for example, to get to the Boston shipyard.

Sadly, our home on the pond burned down sometime after I left the Navy, but the wonderful memories remain. My wife and I had many wonderful years together, but our two years in the Navy were among the best. Having just been promoted to lieutenant, staying in the Navy was very tempting. In the end, however, I felt that I could contribute more to our country by working on flight control research for advanced missile systems at the Boeing Company. In addition, we were told, no matter how long we stayed in the Navy, we would not likely have a better assignment. As a matter of fact, we liked the area so much that in 1967 we moved back to New England (Scituate and more recently Hingham) for good. ■