

Rear Admiral Thomas William McNamara, U.S. Navy (Retired) passed on 28 January 2020 at age 93. Thomas McNamara entered the U.S. Merchant Marine during World War II and served in the U.S. Navy as a Surface Line Officer in the Korean War, Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam War until his retirement in 1977 as the Commandant of the NINTH Naval District. His major command tour in USS CHICAGO (CG-11) was one of the most extraordinary in modern U.S. Navy history as CHICAGO shot down a North Vietnamese MiG fighter with a Talos missile, and her air intercept controllers guided U.S. aircraft to shoot-down 14 more (after she had been recalled from her return transit home, in response to the 1972 North Vietnamese “Easter Offensive.”)

Thomas McNamara began college at Lehigh University but entered the U.S. Merchant Marine Reserve as a midshipman in February 1945, attending the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (Kings Point, NY,) graduating in June 1948. As a midshipman, he served aboard transport ships bringing troops back from Europe. Commissioned an ensign in the U.S. Naval Reserve, he immediately reported for active duty and then in September 1948 as a Division Officer aboard attack transport USS HENRICO (APA-45 – a veteran of D-Day and Okinawa, where she was hit in the bridge by a kamikaze that killed 49 including the commanding officer.) HENRICO operated in the vicinity of Tsingtao, China in 1948-49, the primary operating base of U.S. naval forces in Chinese waters until it fell to the Chinese Communists in 1949 during the Chinese Civil War. Ensign McNamara was honorably released from active duty in October 1949 during the major U.S. Navy drawdown (a period known as “The Revolt of the Admirals.”) While working for Prudential Insurance, in April 1951 he was promoted to lieutenant (junior grade) in the Reserve.

On 6 August 1952, LTJG McNamara reported for active duty during the Korean War, reporting to U.S. Naval Amphibious Training Unit, San Diego and then in October 1952 as a division officer and Navigator aboard attack transport USS MONTROSE (APA-212,) joining the ship as she was supporting combat operations in Korea, before returning to the States and then back to the Far East after the Korean Armistice. In Jul 1954, he was promoted to lieutenant and honorably released from active duty, again.

In October 1955, LT McNamara augmented in the U.S. Navy, and reported to U.S. Naval Schools, Mine Warfare , Yorktown, VA, under instruction, before reporting as Executive Officer aboard minesweeper USS ENERGY (MSO-436,) deploying to the Far East and conducting training with Nationalist Chinese Navy forces off Taiwan and South Korean Navy forces off Korea. In May 1958, LT McNamara reported as Operations Officer aboard destroyer USS FLOYD B. PARKS (DD-884) operating in Far East Waters. Promoted to lieutenant commander in June 1959, he detached in September 1959 to the Bureau of Naval Personnel as Administrative Assistant to the Assistant Chief for Personnel Control. LCDR McNamara then attended the U.S. Naval War College, graduating in June 1962.

LCDR McNamara then served as Executive Officer aboard destroyer USS JOHN PAUL JONES (DD-932,) participating in recovery operations for the Mercury 8 space capsule (Walter Schirra, USN,) before operating off the coast of Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis and

Quarantine in October 1962 in response to the Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles to Cuba and subsequent withdrawal of those missiles; a seminal event in the Cold War that brought the U.S. and Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war. Promoted to commander in December 1963, he detached from JOHN PAUL JONES in August 1964 to assume duty on the staff at the U.S. Naval War College as Head, Operations, Evaluation and Research Division of the War Gaming Department, followed by duty as Aide to the President of the U.S. Naval War College.

In April 1966, CDR McNamara assumed command of guided missile destroyer USS ROBISON (DDG-12) deploying to Vietnam in the screen of USS CORAL SEA (CVA-43) and also participating in naval gunfire support operations and Operation Sea Dragon, during which ROBISON came under fire from North Vietnamese shore batteries while being credited with the destruction of 78 North Vietnamese waterborne logistics craft, which earned her a Meritorious Unit Citation. In April 1968, he reported to the staff of Commander Cruiser Destroyer Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet as Training and Readiness Officer, and where he was promoted to captain in August 1968. In August 1970, CAPT McNamara assumed duty as Executive Assistant and Senior Aide to the Chief of Naval Material, Naval Material Command, Washington DC.

In June 1971, CAPT McNamara assumed command of guided missile cruiser USS CHICAGO (CG-11) for her fifth Vietnam deployment, serving as PIRAZ (Positive Identification Radar Advisory Zone) in the Gulf of Tonkin. In January 1972, CHICAGO fired four RIM-8H Talos ARM anti-radar homing missiles against North Vietnamese shore radar sites with indeterminate results. As CHICAGO was returning to the U.S. at the conclusion of the deployment, she was recalled to the Gulf of Tonkin in response to the North Vietnamese "Easter Offensive" into South Vietnam. CHICAGO monitored all aircraft over the Gulf despite intense North Vietnamese jamming efforts, directed combat air patrol, coordinated fighter escort, directed damaged B-52 bombers around enemy missile sites, set up tanker rendezvous for low fuel state aircraft and directed rescue helicopters. In April and May 1972, CHICAGO's Air Intercept Controllers directed Navy and Air Force aircraft on 14 successful shoot-downs of North Vietnamese MiG fighters, including the second MiG downed by Navy aces Randy Cunningham and William P. Driscoll. On 9 May 1972, CHICAGO's forward Talos launcher shot down a North Vietnamese MiG during Operation Pocket Money, the aerial mining of Haiphong Harbor, where her missiles, along with those of USS LONG BEACH (CGN-9,) provided crucial coverage to U.S. aircraft on low altitude mining missions. CHICAGO was fired on by North Vietnamese coastal artillery batteries, but was not damaged. CHICAGO was awarded the Navy Unit Commendation, the Arleigh Burke Fleet Trophy, and her seventh consecutive "E" for excellence in missile operations.

In July 1973, CAPT McNamara reported to the Commander THIRD Fleet as Chief of Staff and Aide. In May 1975, he reported to the staff of Commander in Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet as Deputy Chief of Staff for Management/Fleet Inspector General, during which he was promoted to Rear Admiral on 1 July 1975. In August 1977, RADM McNamara assumed duty as Commandant, NINTH Naval District (headquarters at Great Lakes IL.) until his retirement in 1979 upon the disestablishment of the NINTH Naval District.

RADM McNamara's award include; the Legion of Merit (at least 2,) Bronze Star with Combat "V," Meritorious Service Medal, Combat Action Ribbon, Navy Unit Commendation (2) for USS CHICAGO (CG-11,) Meritorious Unit Commendation for USS ROBISON (DDG-12,) Navy Expeditionary Medal (Cuba,) China Service Medal, American Campaign Medal, European-African Middle East Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal, National Defense Service Medal (2,) Korean Service Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal (2. Cuba, Korea,) Vietnam Service Medal with one silver star and two bronze stars, Korean Presidential Unit Citation, Republic of Vietnam Meritorious Unit Citation Gallantry Cross Color, United Nations Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal with Device.

Following his retirement from active duty, RADM McNamara worked for Cubic Corporation until his second retirement in 1990. He remained involved in various volunteer groups, including serving on the San Diego Juvenile Justice Commission along with serving a one year term as San Diego Grand Jury as Foreman. He also remained active in the John Paul Jones Association. I don't have much information about his retirement, but presumably his wife, seven children and 21 grandchildren kept him occupied.

Visitation will be held Wednesday, 19 February 1600-2000 at St. Therese Catholic Church (6016 Camino Rico, CA 9210.) Mass will be at the same location at 1030 20 February with burial later that day at 1430 at Miramar National Cemetery.

If ever there was anyone who adhered to the adage, "march toward the sound of the guns," it was Rear Admiral Thomas McNamara. Entering the Merchant Marines as a way to begin a Naval career, he survived drawdowns and unglamorous duty on transports and minesweepers (i.e., not a typical starting path to flag rank) during the fall of China and the Korean war. I suspect detailers would love his career as an example of "bloom where planted," as he went on to forge an extraordinary record of accomplishment wherever he went in the U.S. Navy, including some of the toughest leadership and command positions in the Cuban Missile Crises and the Vietnam War. He is remembered with great respect and even fondness by those who served under his command, exemplified by the superb performance of his ships, ROBISON and CHICAGO during intense combat operations in Vietnam. He spent an exceptional amount of time at sea, at great sacrifice by his family, and for that, he and his family deserve the thanks of our nation and the gratitude of the U.S. Navy. His legacy will live on.