

Operation Thunderhead June 1972

Operation Thunderhead was a highly classified combat mission conducted by U.S. Navy SEAL Team One and Underwater Demolition Team 11 (UDT-11) in 1972. The mission was conducted off the coast of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War to rescue two U.S. airmen said to be escaping from a prisoner of war prison in Hanoi. The prisoners, including Air Force Colonel [John A. Dramesi](#) were planning to steal a boat and travel down the Red River to the Gulf of Tonkin.^[1]

Lieutenant Melvin Spence Dry was killed on the mission. He was the last SEAL lost during the Vietnam War. His father, retired Navy Captain Melvin H. Dry, spent the rest of his life trying to learn the circumstances surrounding his son's death. The details, however, were long shrouded in secrecy.

Mission

In April 1972, SEAL Team One left Subic Bay in the amphibious-transport submarine USS *Grayback*. The plan was to launch the team at night from the submerged submarine in a Swimmer Delivery Vehicle (SDV) piloted by two UDT-11 operators and head for a small island off the mouth of the Red River.

On 3 June 1972, Lieutenant Dry decided to conduct a clandestine reconnaissance mission that night. Shortly after midnight the team launched from *Grayback* but a combination of navigation errors and strong current took them off course. After an hour, the crew was compelled to abort the mission. They were unable to locate *Grayback* and they were forced to scuttle their underpowered SDV after its battery power was exhausted.

The next morning, the team was rescued a few miles off the coast. The four men were flown to the USS *Long Beach*, Operation Thunderhead's command ship.

At 2300 hours on 5 June, the men were to be transported back to *Grayback* by helicopter. The team would perform a night water drop next to the submarine. During briefings with the pilots, Lt. Dry and Chief Warrant Officer (CWO) Martin emphasized the maximum limits for the drop were 20/20-- 20 feet of altitude at an airspeed of 20 knots, or an equivalent combination.

When the helicopter arrived near *Grayback's* expected position, they could not locate the submarine. As they desperately searched for the submarine's beacon, Lt. Dry and his men prepared to enter the water and lock into the submerged submarine.

According to a post-mission assessment, Lt. Dry informed the helicopter crew that they were too high, too fast, and downwind. Specifically, they were approaching the drop point with the winds, estimated at 15 to 20 knots, on the helicopter's tail. The velocity of the tail wind, added to the helicopter's forward speed, was well beyond the 20-knot

ground speed needed for a safe jump. "They wanted us out, and we felt the altitude was too high and the speed too fast," recalled CWO Martin, an experienced parachute jumpmaster." As drop-master, I was looking for the tell-tale signs of spray from the helo—either coming in the door or when I looked toward the rear and below the helo."^[2]

According to CWO Martin, the drop was conducted downwind, adding another 15 to 20 knots of forward velocity when the jumpers hit the water. Lt. Dry died immediately of "severe trauma to the neck" caused by impact with the water, according to the Navy's death report. Two other team members were badly shaken, and one was seriously injured.

Several hours earlier, *Grayback* launched its second SDV but the team abandoned their mission when their air ran out; subsequently, they made an emergency free ascent to the surface. After seeing a strobe light and hearing voices, the two teams rendezvoused.

At about 0100, they found Lt. Dry's lifeless body, inflated his life vest, and held him in tow as they swam seaward to be rescued. An HC-7 helicopter rescued the men at dawn and returned them to the *Long Beach*.

On 12 June, the remaining team members were transferred back to *Grayback*. With the likelihood of a successful prisoner escape by sea lessened by the recent U.S. mining of North Vietnam's ports and rivers, Operation Thunderhead was soon terminated.

Because the mission was classified, the Navy did not acknowledge Dry's death as a combat loss until February 2008, when he was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star for Valor.^[1]

References

1.

□ Eisman, Dale, [Navy honors SEAL killed in secret mission in Vietnam](#), The Virginian-Pilot, 26 February 2008.

2. □ Captain Michael G. Slattery, U.S. Navy (Retired) and Captain Gordon I. Peterson, U.S. Navy (Retired) (2005), *Spence Dry: A SEAL's Story*, Copyright 2005, U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings.

External links

- [U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command Website](#) official site.
- [USS Grayback 574](#)

Navy honors SEAL killed in secret mission in Vietnam

By [Dale Eisman](#)

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Dry ceremony - The Bronze Star is presented to Lt. Melvin Dry's brother by Admiral Mike Mullen, from left, and Rear Admiral Joseph Kernon. (Colleen Dugan | The Capital)

ANNAPOLIS, MD. - They easily could have been forgotten, a handful of stealthy warriors on a secret mission gone bad.

And for more than three decades, the men of Operation Thunderhead, a daring plan to rescue American prisoners of war in North Vietnam, essentially were lost to history. Their bravery and devotion to duty were recorded as a mere "training operation," the truth hidden from all but a handful of shipmates and relatives.

In a solemn ceremony Monday, the Navy and nation tried to make amends, posthumously presenting the Bronze Star with valor to the operation's leader, Lt. Spence Dry, a SEAL commando who leaped out of a helicopter to his death in the Gulf of Tonkin on June 5, 1972.

Chief Warrant Officer Philip "Moki" Martin, who followed Dry into the water but survived, will get the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation medal at a ceremony in California next month.

Dry was "a hero, a warrior, a leader," said Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Mullen knew Dry only slightly, as a fellow member of the Naval Academy's Class of 1968, but the bond of those days brought him and dozens more of their classmates to Monday's ceremony.

"The Dry family is honored, deeply grateful, and frankly overwhelmed," Robert Dry, the youngest of three brothers, told them.

"The one glue in the U.S. military is loyalty - loyalty up and loyalty down," observed U.S. Sen. Jim Webb, another member of Annapolis' Class of '68 and a man who counts Dry as among his close friends from those days.

It's a strong bond.

Loyalty to his shipmates arguably cost Spence Dry his life. His fatal jump came in a quest to reach SEAL teammates aboard a submarine, the Grayback, patrolling off the Vietnamese coast.

Loyalty to a fallen son drove Capt. Melvin Dry, Spence's dad, through a lonely, quarter-century quest to secure recognition for the men of Operation Thunderhead.

Loyalty to a lost comrade led a pair of Dry's Naval Academy classmates to piece together the story of their friend's death and nudge the Navy into giving him his due.

And loyalty brought John Dramesi, one of the POWs whom Dry had set out to rescue, to Annapolis for Monday's ceremony.

Dry's story "is a demonstration of the kind of dedication to purpose... that binds us together in terms of being true military men," Dramesi said.

Spence Dry was the last Navy SEAL to die in Vietnam. His death was the worst in a series of mishaps that marked Operation Thunderhead.

After Dramesi and other prisoners signaled their escape plan to American planes flying over the Hanoi Hilton, the Pentagon hatched Thunderhead to help them. Dry was chosen to lead the effort.

Then starting his fourth tour in Vietnam, Dry, 26, was a quiet leader, a man who could relax over a beer with his shipmates and loved the Moody Blues, according to several who knew him. But "if you messed up, he was in your face."

The product of a Navy family - father Melvin Dry was a decorated World War II submarine skipper - Spence thought he was indestructible, said James Dry, a younger brother born when the family was stationed in Norfolk in the 1950s.

James recalled Spence coming home after SEAL training and showing off the remnants of a thumbnail obliterated when an instructor stepped on it to teach the trainees a lesson on enduring pain. "They teach you to like pain," Spence told him.

His brother "was going to get those Viet Cong. He was going to win that war," James Dry said.

Operation Thunderhead "was everything he wanted to do," Martin said. "This was going to be big, and he wanted to be part of it."

It was an audacious plan. As the escaped prisoners floated down the Red River in a stolen boat, four men were to be launched from the Grayback, meet them on an island in the Red River delta and lead them to safety.

The rescue party was to travel initially in one of several midget submarines carried by the Grayback. The "SEAL Delivery Vehicle" - SDV in Navy parlance - never had been used in combat.

Two of the men were to drive the SDV as close to shore as possible, dropping the others to swim the rest of the way. The SEALs were under orders to wait for no more than 48 hours; after that the escapees would be on their own.

By June 3, the Grayback was in position. Dry and his SEAL teammate Martin, along with a pair of underwater demolitions experts, Lt. j.g. John Lutz and Fireman Thomas Edwards, took an SDV on what was supposed to be a midnight reconnaissance run.

The current quickly overpowered their battery-powered craft, however, and in the darkness, the men could neither locate the island nor return to the Grayback. A helicopter found them treading water several miles offshore the next morning and flew them to a nearby cruiser; the SDV had to be scuttled.

Determined to make another attempt and to warn teammates of problems with the SDV, Dry arranged for a helicopter ride back to the Grayback. He and his team were to be dropped into the water from the helicopter and picked up by the Grayback's crew.

But again, the Grayback proved elusive. The helicopter crew struggled to find a light that was supposed to guide them to the ship. On one approach, the aircraft was so low that its tail dipped into the water; on another, the crew mistook a light ashore for the sub's beacon and flew briefly over North Vietnamese territory.

When they finally found what they thought was the ship, the helicopter was dangerously low on fuel. Dry had cautioned the pilot that they must be no more than 20 feet above the water and moving forward at no more than 20 knots for a safe jump.

When the jump order came, Dry was the first out, disappearing in the darkness. There was no hesitation.

His last words to Martin were, "We've got to get back to Grayback."

Martin, the third to go, counted as he fell - one thousand, two thousand, three thousand - then muttered an expletive just before hitting the water. They were much too high and with a 20 knot tailwind, probably going too fast.

The impact snapped Dry's neck, killing him. Edwards broke a rib and probably would have drowned had Martin not found him in the water and inflated his life vest.

Martin, Edwards and Lutz bobbed around for a while, then swam toward voices and found the crew of a second abandoned SDV, launched earlier from the Grayback. The entire group was rescued the next morning and Operation Thunderhead canceled soon after. The planned escape at the Hanoi Hilton also was called off.

POW Dramesi, who had been beaten nearly to death after a pair of earlier escape attempts, counts cancellation of the third escape as the worst horror he endured. "It was the Hell of Hanoi," Dramesi recalled Monday.

Melvin Dry recorded a single word in his diary the day he heard of his son's death: "Desolation."

He soon launched an effort to have Spence awarded a posthumous Purple Heart.

But with the mission classified - Dramesi still won't discuss how the prisoners were able to send and receive signals from American warplanes - the Navy refused to acknowledge the death as a combat loss. The senior Dry died, frustrated, in 1997.

Two years later, Spence Dry's contemporaries from the Class of 1968 were stirred when Webb, then a novelist, penned an alumni magazine article suggesting that Dry's name be added to a list of fallen graduates in the Academy's Memorial Hall, site of Monday's ceremony.

It took five more years for the Academy to follow Webb's advice. Even after Dry was added to the memorial, the mission remained mostly shrouded until 2005, when two other classmates, retired Navy Capt. Michael Slattery and Gordon Peterson, published a detailed account drawn from records in the Library of Congress, other documents collected by Melvin Dry, and interviews with survivors.

Spurred by Slattery and Peterson, Capt. John Chamberlain, who had been skipper of the Grayback, submitted paperwork in November 2005 recommending Dry and Martin for awards.

Virginia Sen. John Warner - like Webb, a former Navy secretary - supplied a letter endorsing Chamberlain's recommendation. Congressional intercession was required because the usual deadline for award nominations was long passed.

Dry and Martin were "integral members of this operation," Warner wrote, "displaying leadership, heroism and valor on this dangerous and then highly classified mission."

Martin said he is honored to be recognized, even 35 years after the fact, but "it's more of a relief." It somehow didn't seem right that the Navy had never paid its respects, he said. The awards bestowed on him and Dry are really for their whole platoon, he said. He is certain Dry would agree.

"Everything he believed in doing was for the cause, for the team," Martin said. "He knew the importance of the operation, the impact of the operation, and he sure as hell wanted to be ready for it."

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