

marine salvage

Remembering a Marine Salvage Giant

CAPT Willard F. Searle, USN (Ret.)

By Jim Shirley

Former U.S. Navy Supervisor of Salvage, Captain Bill Searle, passed away at the age of 86 on March 31, 2009, following many years fighting Parkinson's disease. At a Memorial Service for Captain Searle, which was attended by his protégés, colleagues and family members, many fine words were spoken. One of the many statements that stood out at the service was that, "Parkinson's Disease did not beat Bill Searle. Rather he beat it, not only by surviving far longer than most after diagnosis, but also by remaining a major contributor and teacher of others in the fields of marine salvage and ocean engineering to the very end." Many outside of the marine salvage industry may not be aware of what the Supervisor of Salvage actually does. The Office of the Director of Ocean Engineering, Supervisor of Salvage and Diving (SUPSALV) is responsible for all aspects of ocean engineering, including salvage, in-water ship repair, contracting, towing, diving safety, and equipment maintenance and procurement. Its official missions are listed as:

- Marine Salvage, Towing, and Search and Recovery
- Oil and Hazardous Substance Response
- Diving Policy
- Diving Systems Certification
- Underwater Ship Husbandry

SUPSALV maintains worldwide commercial contracts to fulfill its missions, and is in charge of the largest inventory of pollution response equipment in the United States Navy. The Salvage Facilities Act, 10 U.S.C. Sec. 7361-7364, requires the U.S. Navy to "provide necessary salvage facilities for public and private vessels as determined to be in the best interest of the United States." SUPSALV has been given responsibility to see that the requirements inherent in that mandate are met. In addition, SUPSALV sponsors National Research Council studies through the Marine Board of the Transportation Research Board evaluating our national capabilities for response to maritime emergencies that arise as a result of commercial operations, natural phenomena, and belligerent acts, including terrorism. The responsibilities and capabilities of SUPSALV are far greater and more inclusive than its listed missions might suggest. These have grown over the years to meet the changing needs of the U. S. Navy, commercial maritime operations, and world politics. SUPSALV works as necessary to meet those needs, and is often called upon by other military organizations such as the U.S. Coast

Guard, the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, the U.S. Air Force and the National Aeronautical and Space Administration to supplement their own capabilities and expertise.

SUPSALV is, from time to time, called upon by the U.S. Department of State when it is in the interest of the United States to provide its expertise and capabilities, including those of its contractors, to meet specific needs of foreign nations. The growth of the Office of the Supervisor of Salvage and Diving to meet many of these special needs of our nation was particularly robust from 1964 to 1969 when the office was under the leadership of Captain Searle. Captain Searle, a Naval Academy graduate in the Class of 1946, was active in the fields of marine salvage, diving, and ocean engineering from the start of his career as a Naval Officer. He was designated an Engineering Duty Officer in 1952 after completing graduate studies in Naval Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, following which he attended the U.S. Navy Salvage and Diving School in Bayonne, New Jersey. He did shipyard tours in Charleston, S.C. and Subic Bay, Philippines. During the latter, he also ran the shipyard's diving school and participated in and managed the clearance of several hundred wrecks from World War II, as well as serving as technical advisor for salvage operations in Manila Bay performed by the Japanese as part of their war reparations. In 1956, Captain Searle was sent to the U.S. Navy's Experimental Diving Unit to serve as an Engineering Research Officer. While there, he undertook further diver training at the United States Naval School, Deep Sea Divers to qualify as a Deep Sea Helium-Oxygen Diving Officer. He also received additional training in the Navy's Explosive Ordinance Demolition and Disposal programs. As if that was not enough, during this tour he was also assigned to a number of salvage, harbor clearance, wreck removal, and towing operations worldwide. After service as Chief Engineer on a guided missile cruiser and study at the Naval War College, Captain Searle returned to the salvage world (which he never really left) as Pacific Fleet Salvage Officer, Pearl Harbor. Then, in 1964, he returned to Washington as Supervisor of Salvage. In this billet, he was determined to update and supplement the capabilities of that command. He did so in part by completely revamping and expanding the office, establishing the Directorate of Ocean Engineering, and planning the build up for the salvage and harbor clearance forces that



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were used in Vietnam. As Supervisor of Salvage, Captain Searle and his office also engaged in major deep ocean search and recovery operations, including locating the submarine *Scorpion*, and locating and recovering the H-bomb that the Air Force had lost in 2,300 feet of water off Palomares, Spain as the result of a mid-air collision. He also had oversight of major oil pollution incidents, including the Santa Barbara oil spill in California, and the Ocean Eagle oil spill and salvage/wreck removal in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Captain Searle's last assignment before retiring from the Navy in 1970 was to follow up on his earlier participation as Supervisor of Salvage in the design and engineering of a new class of salvage vessel. He retired only after the first vessel of that class was launched. Captain Searle's career in salvage, however, did not end with that launch. Indeed, he quickly followed that with his own launch of the Searle Consortium, from which Captain Searle and others from what he sometimes referred to as his "stable of experts" took on special assignments worldwide. In this capacity, he became a particular favorite of the United Nations when they had need for salvage or ocean engineering services. The United Nations in fact granted him status with

the rank of Ambassador while he served as special consultant, taking technical charge of the U.N. Relief Operation Bangladesh, clearing hundreds of wrecks from the Pussur River and other waterways of that newly formed country following its revolution. Captain Searle also continued as an academic in this specialized field of salvage and ocean engineering. He served as visiting lecturer on the staff of the Department of Ocean Engineering at M.I.T., and he lectured on salvage and ocean engineering subjects at the Webb Institute of Naval Architecture, as well as other distinguished colleges and universities.

Captain Searle also served two terms as a member of the Marine Board of the National Research Council, and has been honored by many of the other organizations of which he was a member, teacher, and leader. Captain Searle recently co-authored a work entitled "Undersea Valor" on the subject of submarine salvage and rescue. Those who knew him will miss Captain Searle, and those who didn't can still appreciate his many contributions in the fields of marine salvage and ocean engineering. Our nation and many persons benefitted from his service and tutelage.