CAPT. JAMES' OBITUARY

U.S. Veteran

Captain James K. ("Otto") Orzech, PhD., USNR (ret.) had a long history in military and scientific diving and research. His career was focused in ocean sciences and deep saturation diving. Orzech had the operational experience of being part of the most sophisticated deep saturation diving systems and marine archaeology, plus very impressive academic credentials in oceanography.

James K. Orzech was born on June 28, 1946, in Cleveland, OH. He became an Eagle Scout that provided the basis for his leadership skills that led to his amazing command presence in the US Navy. He did not see the ocean until he became a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, MD. He began diving by completing Naval Underwater Swimmer School in Key West, FL during his first summer leave. At that time, he realized that diving would be his lifetime career. He graduated from Annapolis with a BS in Naval Science and a minor in Oceanography.

From 1968-1970, he served as Electronics and Communications Officer on the USS Turner Joy (DD-9511) Long Beach, CA that served off the Coast of Viet Nam. He subsequently served as the Executive Officer of USS Hitchiti (ATF-103), Pearl Harbor, HI where he gained experience with the Salvage Navy. The ship deployed to the Aleutian Islands and twice to the western Pacific to include service in Viet Nam.

He was then sent to the Naval School of Diving and Salvage in Washington, DC, qualifying as a a Diving and Salvage Officer. Afterward, he attended Naval School of Deep Diving Systems and became a Deep Saturation Diving Instructor.

Captain Orzech was assigned to Submarine Development Group One in San Diego from 1973-1974. He was assigned as Officer-in-Charge of saturation diving operations with the Mark 2 Deep Diving System aboard Diving Training Vessel (DTV) Elk River. This was the most complex deep diving system in the US Navy. He subsequently completed US Naval School of Deep Submergence Diving. He resigned from active duty in 1974 because he could not discern a subsequent course of career advancement, however, he remained in the Naval Reserve where he continued his association with Submarine Development Group ONE and saturation diving for many more years.

From 1974-1975 he was an Assistant Engineer at the Visibility Laboratory and entered the graduate program at Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, CA. He was a participant in the Scientific Diving Program and a founding member of the American Association of Underwater Sciences (AAUS). His dissertation was on the underwater phenomenon known as marine snow. During the period of 1981 -1984, he established a joint Scripps/US Navy program in pelagic research using Navy ships and deep-diving systems to complete his research. He earned his doctorate in oceanography from Scripps in1988.

During the time of his research, he served in the following assignments:

From 1974 - 1977 he was the Executive Officer for the Naval Reserve Harbor Clearance ONE, Detachment 1419, Long Beach, CA.

He was involved with the Capistello Ship Expedition in 1977 with the Institute of Nautical Archaeology at Lipari, Italy. The project included the first use of saturation diving techniques in nautical archaeology.

In 1978, he participated in IndoMed Cruise aboard the research ship R/lV Melville, owned and operated by Scripps.

In 1979, he was part of the OceanLab Study Group; Ocean Science Board of the National Academy of Sciences.

From 1980-1982 and again 1984-1988, he was Commanding officer of Naval Reserve Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit ONE (MDSU Detachment 319 of Long Beach , CA.)

In 1980, he worked with the Underwater Archaeology Field School at the Catalina Marine Science Center of University of Southern California and from 1980 through 1989, he was a team leader for the underwater archaeological survey of the Palos Verdes “Stone Anchor” Site.

From 1982 - 1984, he was Assistant Program Manager of Naval Reserve Readiness command Region Nineteen, San Diego, CA.

In 1986, He was an invited participant in a Congressional Office of Technology Assessment panel on “Technologies For Underwater Archaeology and Maritime Preservation”.

One of the diving operations that Captain Orzech was instrumental in establishing was Project Seamark, a joint effort of the US Navy and the National Park Service. This project performs studies on World War II shipwrecks in the Pacific. In 1986, Project Seamark mapped and documented the USS Arizona and USS Utah in Pearl Harbor, HI. In 1987, Project Seamark explored shipwrecks in Apra Harbor, Guam and 1988 in the Republic of Palau.

From 1987 through 1995, Captain Orzech served as co-founder and Associate Director of the Ocean Sciences Research Institute (OSRI) based in San Diego., CA. This non-profit organization was established to study a broad spectrum of oceanic work. From 1989 through 1994, he served as a consultant to the Republic of Colombia for the proposed deep-water archaeological excavation of the galleon, San Jose.

After completing his research at Scripps and completion of his service with MDSU-1 in Long Beach, he served with Naval Facility, Subic Bay Detachment 119 , San Diego, CA from 1988-1990.

From 1990 -1993 he was assigned to the national staff of the US Navy Supervisor of Salvage, Washington, DC with a mobilization assignment as Supervisor of Salvage, Pacific.

Captain Orzech served with the Naval Historical Center Washington, DC where he qualified as a Naval Combat Historian. His assignments included the salvage of TWA 800 off the coast of Long Island, NY and Naval Operations off the coast of the former Republic of Yugoslavia in early 1996 just after the Dayton Peace Agreement. He also wrote a report on the status of USS San Diego, one of the most popular wreck diving sites on the East Coast for the Director of Naval History.

In 1990, he was part of a multi-national research project sponsored by the National Geographic Society on Lake Baikal located in Siberia, Russia. It is the deepest, oldest and largest body of water in the world.

In 1996, he worked as a Program Manager for the US Antarctic Program and made two cruises on the research vessel, Nathaniel B. Palmer.

From 1996-1998, he was assigned to the Office of Naval Research Headquarters in Washington, DC where he evaluated new technologies related to anti-mine and special warfare. During this tour, he was recalled to active duty to serve as the Historian for the NATO-led Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

After thirty years of service, he retired from the Navy Reserves in 1998 with the rank of Captain. He immediately returned to Bosnia-Herzegovina to resume his duties as SFOR Historian in a civilian capacity. This mission ended in 2005. He then built a home in Little River, SC, and enjoyed many boat trips along the Intracoastal Waterway as well as more international travels.

A true pioneer in diving, he made his final ascent on February 5, 2022 after a vigorous battle against cancer due to agent orange exposure while on duty in Viet Nam.

He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth ("Liz") Crotty, a sister, Gail Fry, and a niece Mary Fry, of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Burial at Sea is being arranged on a US Navy ship off California. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the World Wildlife Fund or The Nature Conservancy.