

**GMTC JOHN N CUMMINGS
USN (RET)**

**THE NAVY NUCLEAR WEAPONS
ASSOCIATION
GRAY DRAGON**



22 September 2012

**PRESENTED AT FREDERICKA MANOR,
CHULA VISTA, CA**

26 JANUARY 2013

**LCDR MIKE SNYDER USN (RET)
PRESIDENT & HISTORIAN**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Navy Nuclear Weapons Association:

Following a 2012 in-depth record search, e-mail inquiries and a number of telephone interviews, The Navy Nuclear Weapons Association identified GMTC John N. Cummings USN (RET) as the active member who entered the Navy nuclear weapons program the earliest, that being 31 December, 1948. Though absent from the 2012 reunion in Rapid City, SD, Chief Cummings was recognized by President Jim Hambley and the NNWA Board of Directors as our second Gray Dragon.

I travelled to Chula Vista, CA near San Diego on 25, 26, and 27 January 2013 from my home in San Rafael, CA to make the presentation on behalf of the NNWA. GMTC Cummings lives at Fredericka Manor, Chula Vista, CA, a senior citizens residence.

In cooperation with Chief Cummings and his son Ian, who resides in San Diego, I developed a biography of our Gray Dragon. That document was presented to the NNWA in our website and to the local community via the administrators of Fredericka Manor in early January, 2012.

On Saturday, 26 January 2012 at 1000 I made a formal presentation of the Gray Dragon Certificate to GMTC Cummings in a concert hall at Fredericka Manor. There were approximately 65 people in attendance.

Using Chief Cummings biography as a starting point I interjected key elements of the history of the nuclear weapons program as they related to our Gray Dragon and to place events in perspective for the audience. Many of the attendees were Navy veterans or wives of Navy veterans. Altogether, it was a very rewarding experience.

GMTC Cummings biography is printed below in full text. My spoken words and the photographs I used during the presentation are shown indented and in italics.

LCDR Mike Snyder USN (RET)
NNWA President and Historian

Good morning, I'm LCDR Mike Snyder, US Navy Retired.

I am the president and historian of the Navy Nuclear Weapons Association. It is a nationwide organization of sailors and civilians who participated in the Navy nuclear weapons program over the 50 years of its existence. Could I have a show of hands of those who are Navy veterans or Navy wives or otherwise associated with the Navy? (About half raised their hands) Oh good! A nice Navy community here, so I can speak Navy-ese a little bit. (One identified himself as Army) Well that works too because we were in the Army at the beginning of this whole program.

The reason we are here is to recognize Chief Gunners Mate Technician John N. Cummings, who in our organization is not the oldest person, but rather, the individual who entered the Navy Nuclear Weapons Program earliest. John entered the special weapons program in the latter part of 1948 and early 1949.

But before I talk about John and why we are here, let me tell you about the Navy Nuclear Weapons Program and how it came into being. In 1948 a bunch of sailors were ordered into the Navy Nuclear Weapons Program and they were home-ported in Albuquerque, NM, believe it or not. Albuquerque, therefore, is our home, if you will. These men worked in secrecy for a number of years. These men are what I call the first generation. When I went aboard my first ship in 1960 I worked for a group of people in the special weapons program who were World War II veterans who came from all walks of Navy life. There were Aviation Ordnancemen, Gunners Mates, Electronic Technicians, and like John, Electricians Mates. We even had a cook at one point, but they were all in the special weapons business. That started in 1948. So what I plan to do today is begin with John's biography, the information for which came from John and his son, Ian, who is with us here today. I will go through his history and interject into the talk the things that were going on in the world and how they interface with John and the special weapons program.

To begin, let me tell you a little bit about the Navy Nuclear Weapons Association. The organization was started by members of that first generation group of sailors that settled in Albuquerque. They would get together at the Fleet Reserve Association over a few beers. They decided to put together, what at the time was called, the Navy Special Weapons Association (NSWUA). That began in the early to mid 1970's. Eventually there was a nationwide organization that first met in 1983. At that time there were about 500 members. We're now down to about 350 active members. And because of the nature of our business, we are really a "Last Man's Club". We are now attempting to recruit the younger men who are becoming interested in and have the time for social activities and are willing to join the Navy Nuclear Weapons Association. We meet around the country each year for a reunion. This past year it was held in Rapid City, SD. Next year it will be in Pigeon Forge, TN. In previous years we've had reunions in San Diego, Las Vegas, New Orleans, and other interesting places. If you are the least bit interested in the Navy Nuclear Weapons Association, we have a website at NAVYNUCWEPS.COM where you will find a great deal of information about the association, the weapons program, and the people in it. There are pictures of weapons and history that makes for very interesting reading.

So, now let me get to John Cummings.

John N. Cummings was born in Weston, WV on August 27, 1925. On August 27, 1942, at age 17, he raised his right hand, swore to defend the nation against all aggressors, and went off to Navy boot camp at Great Lakes, IL. Upon graduation he boarded a troop train heading east. Following many stops enroute he debarked at Casco Bay in Portland ME where he met his first ship, the brand new USS Indiana (BB-58) then in the midst of a shakedown cruise in preparation for deployment. Indiana steamed to Norfolk for stores, soon getting underway to transit the Panama Canal for Pacific duties which included joining in the assault on Guadalcanal. The Indiana went on to participate in major naval engagements of the Pacific including Solomon Islands, Gilbert Islands, Tarawa, Kwajalein, the Marianas, Saipan and the Battle of the Philippine Sea. Fireman 2nd Class Cummings was assigned to the electricians' gang where he advanced to EM3 before departing USS Indiana in late 1944.



1. John N. Cummings circa 1950

While John was getting his sea legs, the United States initiated the Manhattan Project to develop special weapons to combat the Germans and Japanese in World War II. The project was based in New Mexico at Los Alamos under the direction of Army General Leslie Groves. During those years from 1942 to 1945 they worked in absolute secrecy. It was an Army operation that worked in Albuquerque, Los Alamos and other parts of New Mexico.

Electrician Mate 3rd Class Cummings attended Gyro School at NTC San Diego and then worked in the gyro shop at the San Diego Naval Base awaiting construction of USS Belle Isle (AG-73) then in-building on the east coast. At the end of WWII Belle Isle, an electrical and electronic repair ship, departed the US for Yokosuka, Japan where Cummings worked on gyros for ships homeward bound. Cummings advanced to 2nd class in 1946 and was transferred to the USS Alcor (AD-34) to bring it back for decommissioning. Upon arrival in San Diego he was transferred to The USS Prairie (AD-15) where he served as E division acting chief and stood the engineering chiefs' watches. In 1947 2nd Class Cummings was transferred to the USS Lofberg (DD-759), which made summer reserve cruises between San Diego and Alaska. It was on one of these cruises that Cummings met student nurse Flo Nixon, a Canadian citizen. Petty Officer Cummings accepted a discharge in 1948 and travelled to Tacoma, WA where, after speaking to the Commanding Officer of the Naval Reserve training ship USS Charles E. Brannon (DE-446), he elected to reenlist. EM-2 Cummings served aboard Brannon for a short time until he was advised to apply for well-deserved shore duty. Certified by the Bureau of Naval Personnel as "shore duty eligible", Cummings received orders to a mine sweeper, U.S.S. Merganser (AMS-26), stationed in Pearl Harbor, HI. In late 1948 John was called to the CO's cabin and handed an envelope of **TOP SECRET** orders directing him to report to the Commanding General, Sandia Base, Albuquerque, NM. EM-2 Cummings was escorted by a Navy Officer through the entirety of his check-out process, right up to the time he boarded one of the big double-deck Pan American China Clippers bound for San Francisco. The overnight flight provided formal meals, open galley and individual bunks. John met ET-1 Chuck Schoen at the Pearl Harbor receiving station and they travelled together to New Mexico. Chuck Schoen is an active NNWA member

and second on our NW seniority list. In fact it was Chuck who told the NNWA Board of Directors about John and in so doing gave up his position as first among us and his recognition as our Gray Dragon. Both men now live in southern California and maintain a casual relationship, somewhat inhibited by their age.

Now let me tell you a little about the Gray Dragon recognition and how that name came about. About 15 years ago we had a very active and dynamic Board of Directors and they came up with the descriptive name, "Keepers of the Dragon", referring, of course to the nuclear weapons as the dragon. We maintained, from 1948 to 1996, the Navy nuclear weapons stockpile aboard all ships and shore stations without an accident or incident attributable to the Navy personnel. We think we've earned the title "Keepers of the Dragon". More recently, the NNWA Board of Directors decided to honor the person among us who had entered the nuclear weapons program earliest. The name "Gray Dragon" was settled on to single out that individual.

In 1947 as the Manhattan Project was being disbanded, the government stood up the Atomic Energy Commission. One of their first duties was to tour the country to inventory the stockpile of nuclear weapons where they discovered that there were enough pieces and parts to make seven weapons but none were assembled, and the security wasn't very good. They thought it was inappropriate to allow all the investment in energy, time, money, technology and people's lives to be discarded. Along with impetus from President Harry Truman and the armed forces, it was decided to put the military into the special weapons program. Thus the armed forces got into the special weapons business in 1948 under the auspices of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project (AFSWP), a joint operation of Army, Navy and Air Force. In 1948 as the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project was coming into being John Cummings and his buddy Chuck Schoen were landing in San Francisco.

Petty Officer Cummings retrieved his car from storage and the two set off for Albuquerque, only to be immobilized by a snowstorm in Flagstaff, AZ. Turning south they drove to Phoenix, then on to Sandia Base to arrive on New Year's Eve, 1948. John was assigned to the Navy Special Weapons Unit 471. Chuck Schoen went to the 802.

Let me tell you a little bit about the earliest organization of the Special Weapons Units. This is a letter I received from a historian who now works as a contractor at Sandia Base in Albuquerque.

My name is Dave Fontana; I am a consultant to DTRA and a retired USAF weapons maintenance officer. In researching the early histories of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project, I found some information that adds to your history of early Navy SWUs.

The Naval Administrative Unit, Sandia Base, was established on 14 Jul 47, to provide administrative and logistical support to Navy personnel assigned to Sandia Base. (Sandia Base was under the control of the Army at the time)

Unit "D" (Provisional) of the 38th Engineer Battalion, Special, was activated on 1 Sep 48. The unit consisted of the first Navy assembly team to graduate from the AFSWP Technical Training Division (on 19 Jul 48). There were 13 officers, 9 warrant officers, and 16 enlisted men. On 13 Oct 48, in accordance with a letter from the Secretary of the Navy, Unit "D" was designated "US Navy Special Weapons Unit No. 471". [First History of AFSWP, Vol. I - 1947-1948, Chapter 5 - Sandia Base]

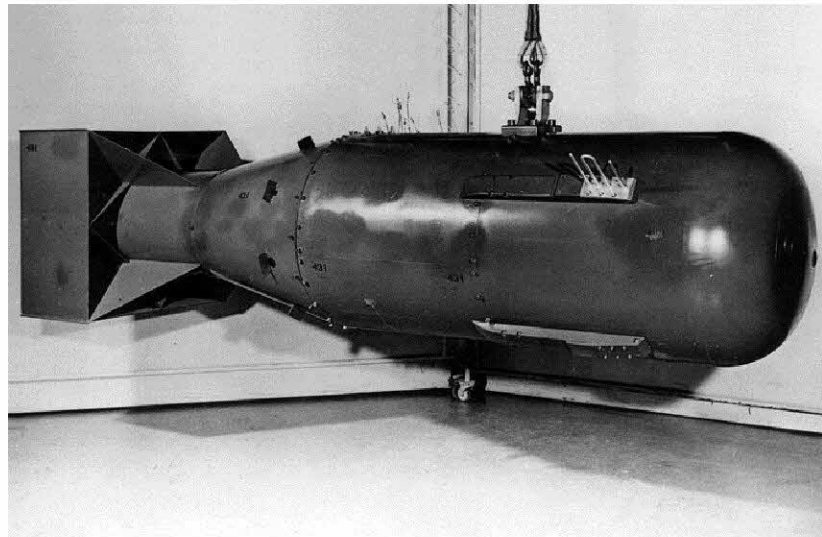
And that is how the Navy got into the nuclear weapons business. All these men were taken into the program, with no forewarning or knowledge. Many men all around the country received strange sets of orders as John did.

I will tell you one other story about how strange some of this could be. I received a note from a man who was a second class petty officer at the time. About the same time John Cummings received his

orders, this man was on a destroyer in San Diego. He had returned from liberty, went below and turned into his bunk for the night. Sometime later he was awakened and told to dress, there were men on the quarter deck who wanted to talk to him. When he got to the quarterdeck two FBI agents showed him their ID cards and directed him to go below and pack his sea bag. He said, "What about my stuff"? They responded, "Don't worry, just take what you need." So he packed his sea bag, was taken to a train and sent off to Albuquerque. When he arrived, all his personal effects and his car were there. But he still did not know where he was going or what he would be doing. And that story is not an isolated incident. There are many more like that. And the truly strange part about it is we do not know by whom or how these men were selected. Obviously they had great integrity, they had good technical skills, probably good mathematics skills, they had proven themselves in battle, they had proven themselves on their ships, and somehow they were culled from the resources of the Navy and directed to show up in Albuquerque to do something they knew nothing about.

EM-1 Cummings served with the 471 until February 1952. During that time John made one extended deployment aboard USS Franklin D. Roosevelt (CV-42) with a 15 to 20 man SWU. In 1950, Roosevelt became the first carrier to take nuclear weapons to sea.

Now let me show you what they worked on. I'm sure you have heard the names before. The weapons John worked on were this one. This one was called the "Little Boy" was introduced in 1945 when it was dropped on Hiroshima. It was a "gun type" weapon. What that means is there are two chunks of enriched uranium that were slammed together with explosives to create a super-critical mass. That weapon weighed approximately ten thousand pounds, was about 10 feet long



and 28 inches in diameter. As it turned out, it was extremely inefficient in its use of fissionable material, but they knew this one would work. That's why it was dropped first. All you had to do was push the pieces together and it went off.



The other weapon that John worked on was this one, the "Fat Man", also introduced in 1945 and dropped during the attack on Nagasaki. This is an implosion weapon. It weighs approximately ten thousand pounds. It is about ten and a half feet long and, five feet in diameter. The science behind this one is that you put a mass of sub-critical material in the center of a bunch of explosives. When you set off the explosives the material is crushed into super-criticality and the weapon goes off. So these are the weapons that were in the force in 1945 and the same ones that John worked on for a number of

years when he first entered the program.

Here's a bit more about the people that went into the program. These are the rating badges worn by the men in the program after about 1958. When John came into the program in 1948, there were all these men working in the service that the Navy, in its infinite wisdom, culled out of the fleet. They were Aviation Ordnancemen, Gunners Mates, Electronics Technicians, electricians; all the different rates that might be needed. There were even equipment operators who were drivers, crane operators, fork lift operators, and builders who were pulled into the program.

In 1958 they were combined into the Nuclear Weaponsman rating. That insignia is a bomb with two nuclear rings around it. It's fairly obvious what it is intended to be. When I joined the fleet this is the rating I went into, Nuclear Weaponsman. In 1961 I was aboard my first ship on my first WESTPAC cruise and about to go into Japan. All of us had these nuclear weapons rating badges hanging on our shoulders. Again, someone in their infinite wisdom said, "Wait a minute! We can't allow these guys go into Japan and advertise we have nuclear weapons on the ship. So they turned us all into Gunners Mate Technician, the middle one. We looked like all the other Gunners Mates in the fleet except they called us GMTs.



Here's a little story about that. In the early days of the Navy, the deck rates, the Boatswain Mates, Gunners Mates, and Quartermasters, wore their rating badges on their right arms and the eagle faced forward. Later, the uniforms were standardized and all petty officers wore their rating badges on the left arm with their eagle facing forward. When all the converted GMTs began looking for Gunners Mate crowns throughout the fleet, the supply department dug down through the piles of rating badges and, lo and behold, they came up with some of these old right arm gunners mate crowns. They were issued and some of the men sewed them on only to discover the eagle was facing backwards. That's how old they were.

In 1986 the Gunners Mate Technician, Missile Technician, Aviation Ordnancemen and all those people who worked bombs, bullets, torpedoes, and the like were combined into what was called Weapons Technician rating. The insignia for that is a trident, the symbol for ordnance; a flaming pot, and a lightning bolt. That rating existed until 1995 when the Navy got out of the nuclear weapons business. That was when President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev shook hands and agreed to get rid of tactical nuclear weapons. They took all the tactical nuclear weapons off the ships. They took all the nuclear weaponsmen or Weapons Technicians off the ships and the rate was disestablished.

And this is how that went. I will read from the Navy News Service of October 1994. Entitled "**Weapons Technician Rating Disestablished**"

The Secretary of the Navy has approved the disestablishment of the Weapons Technician (WT) rating. This is the first rating change proposed for FY95 and FY96 to be approved.

With the removal of all tactical nuclear weapons from Navy commands, the need for a dedicated rating to handle such weapons has diminished. Today there are approximately 230 WT's in the Navy, down from about 1,000 in 1992. More than 300 have already converted ratings. The others have retired or have voluntarily left the Navy.

The memo goes on to explain what each Weapons Technicians options were and what they were allowed to do

Essentially, this document said, "All you guys who, years ago, were Aviation Ordnancemen, and Gunners Mates, who had transformed yourselves into Nuclear Weaponsmen and Weapons Technicians can now go back to being Aviation Ordnancemen and Gunners Mates in 1996. That's when the rating was officially disestablished.

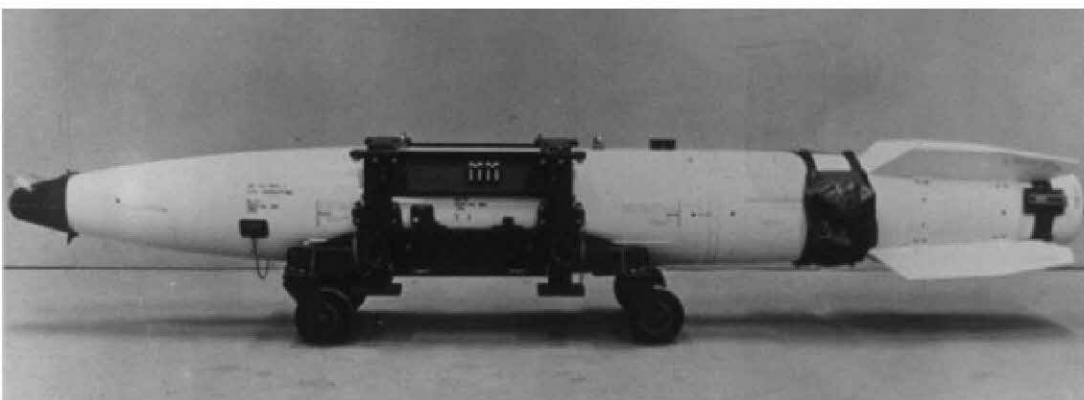
So, back to where John Cummings was in 1952, aboard USS Franklin D. Roosevelt with his 20 man Special Weapons Unit.

His team also visited a number of other carriers for short periods to accomplish tests and certification. It was during one of these tests aboard USS Midway (CV-41) that Petty Officer John Cummings was awarded a Navy Letter of Commendation. In 1952 John was transferred to the Special Weapons Supply Depot (SWSD) in Norfolk, VA where he made EM1. He remained there until 1955 when he was ordered to Special Weapons Unit Pacific (SWUPAC) and re-associated with a Special Weapons Deployment Team.

What had happened in the interim was that so many ships that had been given nuclear capability on both the east and west coasts that the original special weapons organization in New Mexico had to be split into two and sent to Norfolk and San Diego to better support the fleet. There, they were divided up into smaller teams and deployed aboard all those carriers that were now nuclear capable.

His team deployed to West Pac aboard USS Lexington (CVA 16) from November 1955 until December 1956. His next tour took him back to Hawaii, this time to NAD Oahu, Waikale Branch, until 1959, the year John was advanced to EMC and Hawaii became a state. Returning to NWTCPAC, San Diego, EMC Cummings performed duties as an instructor and in the technical repair department. When he applied for retirement in 1962, BUPERS response was to issue him a letter offering three years additional shore duty at either Sandia base, Albuquerque or NWTC, San Diego. With his wife and four children already settled in Imperial Beach, he chose to remain at NWTC until 1965 when he retired as GMTC in charge of technical repair.

By that time the weapons had advanced to a point that they looked like this. There were many, many versions and variants between the two I showed



you earlier and this one. This one came into the fleet in 1961. It is called the B43 gravity, thermonuclear weapon. It was a retarded weapon with an air burst or surface burst capability. It also had a big spike in the nose so when it came down it stuck in the ground like an arrow. That was called

a laydown capability. That weapon would remain in place until a timer set it off some time later. It was a multiple yield weapon with a number of different warheads aboard each carrier. The B43 was used by the Navy and the Air Force.

During his twenty three year Navy career John Cummings had been attached to Navy Nuclear Weapon Facilities for 16 years and saw two rather crude weapons, the “Little Boy” and “Fat Man”, evolve into complicated, multi-role weapons systems.

To make the point; when I retired from the Navy in 1983, the weapons looked something like this. This photo was taken last year at the Sandia Base museum in Albuquerque. This is a B61 gravity, thermonuclear weapon, introduced in 1968. It has a variable yield, with air and surface burst capability. It too has a parachute, a time delay firing system and a hardened case variant for bunker penetration. This was flown by the Navy and Air Force. I recently read in the newspapers sent to me by friends in New Mexico that the AEC is very concerned about this weapon beginning to age out. They have components in them that get old and must be periodically replaced and they are wondering where the money is going to come from to keep this stockpile up to date.



They have components in them that get old and must be periodically replaced and they are wondering where the money is going to come from to keep this stockpile up to date.

Mr. Cummings worked as an electrician for a year after retirement at Solar Aircraft, San Diego manufacturing large turbines. John was then employed at NAS North Island in its aviation instrument clean room for the remainder of his working years. He retired at age 55 in 1980.

John married his bride, Florence, (Flo) in Victoria, B.C., Canada on Sep 7, 1950. They spent 62 happy and productive years together until she passed in May 2012. John and Flo had four children; twins Neal and Nancy followed by Susan and Ian. Nancy, a registered nurse, joined the Air Force and is now a retired reserve officer. Neal, a graduate of the University of New Mexico and Navy Flight School, Pensacola was lost in a boating accident soon after receiving his wings. Susan lives in Arizona, Ian in San Diego, Nancy in Virginia. John proudly reports he has seven grandchildren and five great grandchildren.

The Navy Nuclear Weapons Association, its Board of Directors and all the members look to these elderly gentlemen who were first in the program as our “sea daddies”, a complementary term. There was one gentleman who was aboard my first ship, USS Kitty Hawk, who was in that class of people who took me under his wing and taught me the ropes. He was a first class Gunners Mate and I will never forget him. I’m sure there are people who feel the same way about John Cummings.

Coincidentally, John was teaching at Naval Weapons Training Center Pacific, San Diego in 1960 when I went through as an eighteen year old third class petty officer. I may have sat in some of his classes but we, at least, passed through the same doors at the same time.

We have a few things to give to John to recognize his status as our Gray Dragon. John, would you come up here please. The first is his recognition plaque which reads:

*The Navy Nuclear Weapons Association, Order of the Gray Dragon
Avast ye sailors, dwellers of the deep, lovers of the seas and Keepers of the Dragon;
Be advised that
Gunners Mate Technician Chief John N. Cummings
has earned the honor of being the Gray Dragon of the Navy Nuclear Weapons Association,
and from this day of Our Lord, the twenty second of September, 2012
Shall reign as the Gray Dragon until relieved upon orders to the Staff of the Supreme Commander*

Signed James Hambley, my predecessor as president of the NNWA

Congratulations John.

And there are a few other things to commemorate the occasion.



First, are two patches. One is the logo of the original Navy Special Weapons Association. It contains a globe with aircraft carrier, aircraft, submarine, cruise missile and a bomb burst. It reads Navy Nuclear Weapons Association, Keepers of the Dragon. But since the mid to late 1990's we also have this one that we call our dragon logo. It contains a Chinese dragon with two nuclear rings and also reads Navy Nuclear Weapons Association; Keepers of the Dragon.

The next item we have is a Navy Nuclear Weapons Association lapel pin similar to the one I am wearing

And we have a challenge coin that is a recent introduction to our ships store. It has the original logo on one side and the dragon logo on the other. This is for you to carry in your pocket.

And a Navy Nuclear Weapons Association decal for your window. (To the audience) If you want to find out more about the Navy Nuclear Weapons Association, all you need do is look at Johns' decal and read navynucweps.com for our website.

2 John N. Cummings, January 2013

with insignia.

Finally, the last thing we have to offer is an NNWA ball cap

Along with all this loot, we have determined that our Gray Dragon is welcome at all our reunions where dinner for himself and a guest at our Saturday Evening dance will be at no cost. He is also relieved of all dues from this point forward. Dues are the astounding sum of \$10.00 per year.

Congratulations John, I'm very pleased to be here.

Last evening at dinner one of the ladies asked if she would be able to ask questions. So if there are any questions I'd be happy to answer them. None! If not, then this ends the proceedings.

Thank you very much for being here. It was nice to have everyone here and I'm sure John enjoyed having all his friends present.

Mike Snyder, President NNWA

