

**1956 Nuclear Weapons Movement Conducted by Capt. Harold Barr
Palmer, USN
LCDR Tom Perkins, USN, Ret
Told to LCDR Mike Snyder, Past NNWA Historian**

Vancouver, WA 10 June 2016

Hi Mike,

As you may recall our telcon last winter we discussed the NucWeps duties of my XO while serving in Ozbourn DD (846). As usual I managed to put my notes aside and didn't locate them until recently (its a hazard of old age) and decided I should complete the task. Will start with some background info regarding how this tale got started. In 1950/53 I served in USS Ozbourn (DD 846). At a ship reunion some 40 years later, several shipmates attended from that same time period, one of whom was CAPT Harold Barr Palmer, USNR who had been our XO. We had a great time discussing "old times" and I learned that after duty in Ozbourn he had been assigned to Sandia Base in Albuquerque, New Mexico in the early days of nuclear weapons testing at Albuquerque and Nevada test sites and sometime later had become the Special Weapons Logistics Officer for COMSERVPAC. Several years after he passed away the Ozbourn Reunion Association received from the family a copy of his memoirs from which the following information is taken..

H. Barr Palmer was commissioned into the Naval Reserve in 1942 and served throughout WWII mostly on a variety of vessels in the South Pacific. In 1946 he returned to civilian life and was recalled to active duty in late 1950, joining Ozbourn in Feb. 1951. At this time the ship was heavily engaged in fleet operations throughout the Japan-Korea-Formosa area. Returning stateside in April 1951 the ship went through training and overhaul at the Naval Shipyard in San Francisco. In early January 1952, Palmer was ordered to Sandia Base and was assigned to the Test Command of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project (AFSWP). In 1955 after 3 years observing some 30 nuclear detonations he was ordered to Commander Service Force, Pacific Fleet (COMSERVPAC) in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii as Special Weapons Logistic Officer. Following is a synopsis extracted from his memoirs from that period. It is mostly in his own words and describes his introduction to the world of nuclear weapons in the Pacific Fleet in the mid-50's.

"Reviewing my tour at Kirtland/Sandia Base made me aware that while I did not have special technical knowledge, I did seem to have the ability to work with all the people and get them together when required. I was adaptable enough that I could do many things of a general nature and solve whatever problem that arose. I participated in many briefings with many senators and representatives, some good and some bad...bad in the sense that they really didn't give a damn about the testing program as long as they got their picture in the hometown papers with an atomic cloud in the background. As the family travelled to Hawaii in the USNS Hugh Gaffey I spent many hours wondering about my new assignment at COMSERVPAC and decided that it would be just fine to be back with the blue water Navy. Checking in, I found that I was to be responsible for the movement for all complete nuclear weapons and their major components within the Pacific Fleet area. My office consisted of one officer, a Lieutenant, and two yeomen which was really all that was necessary at the time. As specified in the Atomic Energy Act of 1947 all weapons and their major components were under the direct management of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and were allocated to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to fulfill the mission requirements of the Armed Forces. This required a great deal of meticulous attention to detail in the coordination of movement and reporting, all of which were undertaken under a strict veil of secrecy with all shipments in the custody of couriers. One has to understand the political climate that we were living in at the time. There was a cold war underway and China was kicking up the dust, not unlike today and things were tense to say the least. CINCPACFLT wanted more weapons to cover its targeting responsibilities but so did the PacAirForce. Anyway, our office treated every weapon or component shipment as our very own ward and I never slept easy until a weapons shipment was completed. Now comes the greatest experience of my life. In early 1956 I received a telephone call from my counterpart at CINCPACFLT staff and he told me to get to his office immediately for a meeting with representatives from the staff of CINCPAC (these were the big boys in the area). Upon arrival in his office I met the CINCPAC staff officer who handed me a Top Secret message and told me to read it. The message was from Admiral Radford who was the Chairman of the JCS, it was very brief and directed CINCPAC to place one or more nuclear weapons in the Bonin/ Volcano Island chain south of Japan. The priority of the message was Operational Immediate which in Navy parlance means "do it yesterday." The message was to be passed to PACFLT and PACAF for action and the details were left to those two commands to figure out how to do it. Upon return to my office charts were broken out in the

area of question and it immediately became apparent that the Air Force had Iwo Jima so it was an easy task to get a weapon there. The only Naval Facility was Chichi Jima and the harbor was too small for the flying boat (a Martin Mars) to land and there was no suitable airfield on the island. I suggested that we could fly a nuclear capsule to Guam and have one of our ammunition ships deliver our smallest bomb, a Mark 12, to Chichi Jima. We had no one in Guam or the Bonin Islands to assemble the two major components but at least we had met the requirements of the orders. There were several aircraft carriers not too far away who could drop weapons in anger if required. Our Service Force ammo ships had been modified to transport bombs but the crews were not trained to do any assembly. Getting the capsule from Hawaii to Guam was easy as NAD Guam was PACFLT's main storage facility and we had Fleet Logistics transport aircraft on standby status for moving the materials in any direction required. With the basics of a plan in place the meeting broke up and I returned to SERVPAC to brief the Admiral. He asked if the operation was feasible and when I answered in the affirmative he ordered me to accompany the capsule and smooth the way. By this time the messages were flying back and forth as all the commands involved were notified of the part they would carry out in the operation. My itinerary called for joining the Fleet Logistics aircraft at NAS Barbers Point for the first leg to NAS Agana Guam. The aircraft was already loaded with the capsule when I arrived, the pilots had taken custody and we took off immediately on the long overnight flight to Guam. Upon arrival Agana I could see security and emergency vehicles scattered around the area and numerous armed guards on patrol. The pilot shut down the engines and the next thing I saw was a forklift heading for the aircraft with a Navy captain on the lift. The crew chief opened the door and the captain entered the aircraft with the words, "What the hell is going on?" I calmly told what we had and that I wanted it stored and secured for a couple of days. His eyes widened and he asked, "Where's the bomb?" With that I knew he didn't know anything about bombs, capsules, and weapons. I pointed to the small container and his response was something like "all this for that little thing?" After turning over custody of the capsule to the CO of NAD Guam we went to see the Commandant of the Naval District COMNAVMAR. The Admiral was a fine, quiet person and it was easy to see that he was not unduly concerned over the situation. He had received the JCS message and he knew that we had to expedite the movement. He pointed out that Chichi Jima was the preferred location but using a ship was out of the question and it was decided to use an Air Sea Rescue aircraft which would have no problems getting into the harbor. We discussed security arrangements and decided that a Marine Guard contingent

would accompany the movement and then remain at Chichi Jima in order to provide security for both the capsule and the Mk 12 bomb that was due to arrive by ship 2 in a few days time. I met with the CO of the Air Rescue Squadron and we discussed the trip and he decided to lead the mission himself which was rather comforting to know. After agreeing to takeoff time of 0500 I had lunch with the Admiral and then retired to the VIP Quonset hut and turned in. By this time it had started to rain and overnight turned into a heavy gale by take-off time. The flight was made up of two amphibious aircraft, known as Ugly Ducklings, the lead aircraft carrying the capsule and the follow-up plane carrying the Marine security detachment. We taxied across the field where the capsule was loaded aboard and lashed down near my seat so I could use it as a footrest. We were then underway with the second aircraft behind us. The flight plan called for a stop at Iwo Jima for fuel so that no refueling would have to be conducted at Chichi Jima and I told the pilot that we should make the stop at Iwo as routine as possible because I didn't want the Air Force troops to know what our cargo was. After four hours flight time we landed at Iwo, refueled, picked up box lunches and then resumed the one hour flight to Chichi. The weather now became a factor in the landing at Futami Bay as the sea was up and the wind swirling around the peaks surrounding the bay through which we had to make the landing approach. Our pilot wisely decided that the other aircraft should return to Iwo until conditions improved and then he set us down safely in the bay. It was a rough landing but the capsule had been delivered on schedule. After landing the aircraft taxied to the ramp and was pulled up to a cleared area on the beach. Upon deplaning we were surrounded by a group of rather strange looking indigenous people, obviously of many mixed races. Most were curious youngsters and some of the elders hung back and it was easy to note concern on their faces. No other seaplane had landed under these conditions so they felt something was going on and they were right. Immediately on arrival at Chichi Jima and for the next three days the experience was about as unusual as one could imagine. I was met by a rather weather beaten submariner, the C.O. of the U.S. Naval Facility. After introductions his first words to me were, "for Christ's sake, what in hell is going on?" I told him the reason that I was there and could explain the details as soon as we could get a little privacy. A security area was set up around the aircraft and with the C.O. and pilot we headed to headquarters, and I got my first chance to look over the facility. Chichi Jima had been a Japanese stronghold during WWII and was a haven for their submarines. After the war we occupied the facility, and the entire area became a United Nations Trust Territory under CINCPAC jurisdiction and the current C.O. was designated the U. N. Trust

Officer for the area. Once in his office the C.O. vented his wrath at the Commander Naval Marianas (COMNAVMAR) and his staff for not keeping him apprised of the nature of the weapons transfer to the island. Apparently, there was no capability for him to receive and decode classified message traffic, so all correspondence of that nature was brought in by courier on the supply aircraft and he had not been informed of my visit. I briefed him on the whole situation and told him I had no idea why there was such urgency attached to the operation. The C.O. remarked that he had an idea that it was somehow connected with the Japanese Ambassador who had been reported to have made protestations to our State Department that his government wanted the Bonin-Volcano island chain returned to Japanese jurisdiction. I felt that might be the reason, but I certainly had no idea why there was such a hurry to put nuclear weapons on the island. We then got around to the problem at hand which was to securely store the component that I had brought in and to find suitable storage location for the bomb in its roadable container which would shortly be arriving by ship. The safe in the CO's office was chosen as the storage location for the capsule and it was brought up from the aircraft and secured. We established a security watch in the area with the Marines that had accompanied us and arranged temporary quarters for them in the headquarters building. All the Marines were outstanding young men and were willing to help in any way they could. The rest of the Marine Detachment would be arriving the following day so we would have to find additional space for messing and berthing. There were very few Naval personnel stationed on the island so there was an acute shortage of adequate facilities for the new arrivals. The CO now gave me a tour of a former Japanese ammunition magazine nearby that could be an adequate storage space for the bomb and capsule. The magazine was about 50 feet back from the shoreline with ready access from the ramp. It was really a big cave dug into the rather steep terrain and its protective door was back in the cave about 25 feet with steel security fencing in front of the entrance. It was dry and there was no doubt that it would serve well and be easy to guard, at least from any curious local people. As far as I was concerned it suited our needs and we would have met the weapon requirement as directed by CINCPAC. After meeting and dinner with the CO's family I turned in and was awakened a short time later and informed that the USS Virgo, a COMSERVPAC ammo ship would arrive at first light the following day and that the remainder of the Marine detachment was also scheduled to arrive from Iwo Jima the same day. Right on schedule the USS Virgo arrived and was maneuvered into anchorage and the station CO and I boarded to meet with the Commanding Officer. He had been kept informed of

the operations in progress and the MK 12 bomb was raised out of the hold and loaded into the landing craft, the Chichi CO took custody of the bomb and Virgo headed back to sea. At the landing a small truck was backed into the landing craft and the bomb in its container was towed to the bunker. Everything went smoothly, the bomb was secured in the bunker and we had a complete weapon in the Bonin/Volcano island chain.

Immediately I prepared an unclassified message to COMNAVMAR that simply reported, "Mission accomplished-please pass to interested commands. Palmer sends." I told the Chichi facility CO that I would recommend that NAD Guam take over responsibility for the capsule and bomb with custody to be held by Navy Facility at Chichi Jima. NAD Guam would make all required maintenance service and reporting. The following morning the Ugly Duckling left Chichi Jima and we headed for Guam via Iwo Jima where I briefed the Admiral on arrival. He seemed satisfied that they could handle things from there on and I caught the next logistics aircraft headed for Oahu. Upon arrival the following day I immediately briefed COMSERVPAC and CINCPACFLT. They had passed my mission accomplished message to CINCPAC who in turn had passed it on to the JCS. Later, I learned that Admiral Radford at JCS had told the Secretary of State that as far as he was concerned the Japanese should be kept out of the Bonin Islands because we had nuclear weapons stored there. My simple little message had arrived just in time to make him honest. I also learned that the Air Force still had not moved anything to Iwo Jima. It was a MISSION ACCOMPLISHED by the U.S. Navy." As a matter of interest, the Bonin/Volcano Islands became nuclear bases due to the action of the Eisenhower Administration in late 1955. A declassified document for the chairman of the JCS, Admiral Arthur Radford states that, "On 6 February 1956, the CNO [Admiral Arleigh Burke] reported that one weapon with core was placed in storage on Chichi Jima ." This was undoubtedly the Mk 12 weapon delivered by CDR. Palmer as related in the account above. Later in his career CAPT. Palmer returned to nuclear weapons operations at Sandia Base assigned to the Directorate of Weapons Effects Testing which took him, on occasion to Johnston Atoll in the South Pacific and Hickam AFB in Hawaii. This was followed by assignment to duty with Field Command DASA with the Inspector General Office from which he retired from the Navy in 1966. Surely, a long and close association with the nuclear weapons arsenal.

In closing, I found some interesting information in formerly super secret documents now made public that support the operation related above to the placing of nukes on Chichi Jima. Japan had adapted a non-nuclear policy after WWII but in the early 1950's it became obvious that in the event of nuclear war

in Asia all U.S. bases in Japan and Okinawa would quickly be destroyed and that is why the planners wanted hide-outs in Iwo Jima and Chichi Jima. Therefore, the islands would serve as secret recovery and reload bases for submarines and bombers. It is not known how many bombs were deployed to Chichi Jima but in March 1956 W5 nuclear warheads for the Regulus missiles were deployed there and for the next eight years were stored in the island caves.

This ends my Ozbourn/Barr Palmer/Chichi Jima saga so will sign off for this time. I'm working up another tale concerning my old ship Ozbourn (DD 846) which covers a Broken Arrow situation in waters off Vietnam in 1967. I was not on board at that time but it is an interesting account of shore batteries and ASROC. Interested??

Sorry for the delay and all the best to you,

Tom Perkins