

HE'S STILL ON WATCH

By E. Barclay Poling

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Admiral Elmo Russell Zumwalt Jr. (November 29, 1920 – January 2, 2000) was remembered this past Monday, January 10, 2000, at the United States Naval Academy Chapel as the “Reformer.” Your history teacher, Mrs. Lindy Poling, and my wife of 23 ½ years, is a great “Recruiter”. Not surprisingly, she asked that I provide your class and the *Bridges*’ Readership with some of my recollections of what it was like “being there” to celebrate the life of Admiral Zumwalt. I scarcely know where to begin or end this piece. And, even five days after the funeral, I find myself still struggling to understand the extraordinary power of this event.

Our journey to Annapolis began with some difficulty. Last Sunday morning, your teacher came down with a flu bug (still not sure which one it was)! Luckily, it ran its course in about 24 hours, so by the time we arrived in the town of Annapolis on Monday morning, I cannot say your teacher was entirely “ship-shape”, but the worst was over. Our dear personal friend, and frequent LOV class “guest teacher”, Vice Admiral Emmett H. Tidd, USN (Retired), urged us to be at the Naval Academy Officers Club by mid-morning to set up the superb poster created by students Alicia Cole and Jason Cournoyer, representing the contributions of another favorite guest speaker, Admiral Zumwalt, to the Millbrook High School LOV class.

Unfortunately, when we came through Gate 3 and then finally reached the Officers’ and Faculty Club at the Naval Academy, a light morning shower suddenly became a torrential flood. Mrs. Poling, *never the nervous one*, was worried about the LOV class exhibit. I brought our jeep as close as I could to the entrance of the Club; and, luckily, in the very next moment, two men came dashing out in the rain to rescue Mrs. Poling and help bring the poster to drier ground. It turned out that these two helpful gentlemen were Dave Shelly, and Les Cullen, of the Vietnam Center (based in Lubbock, Texas). Parking near the Club was non-existent. I finally left our vehicle on a sidewalk next to an athletic field about a ¼ mile away. I was dressed for a funeral, not a walk through a rice paddy. As I slogged my way from the soccer field to the Officers’ and Faculty Club, I caught myself muttering, “Its going to be one of those days”. But, it wasn’t...

It was a day of tears, smiles, memorable words of Scripture read by the Zumwalt grandchildren, famous people, great naval pageantry, cannon fire; and, amazingly, half way through the funeral service, the whole chapel brightened as the sun broke through the clouds outside. The Admiral’s sole surviving son, James, later said to Mrs. Poling and I as we departed the reception, “Wasn’t it great how Dad orchestrated that, too.”

The greatest surprise for Mrs. Poling and I occurred at ten minutes after two o’clock as the Zumwalt family entered the chapel in the company of the President of the United States! Admiral Zumwalt’s wife, Mouza, was being pushed in a wheelchair from the side entry of the chapel by President Bill Clinton right towards us! At the exact point where the President stopped the wheel chair, there was a secret serviceman and your teacher. Our pew was only 10 feet from the President. The secret serviceman sat in the pew immediately to Mrs. Poling’s left, and I was to her right. Mr. Clinton leaned over to assist Mrs. Zumwalt out of the wheelchair. She was determined to walk down that center aisle arm-in-arm with the President.

I hung on every word of the service, and even found myself trying to record the power of the event on my notepad as Admiral Jay Johnson, The Honorable Richard Schifter, the Honorable Philip Lader, and the President gave us such wonderful words of remembrance about the life of Admiral Zumwalt. At one point during Admiral Johnson's eulogy, Mrs. Poling reached over to borrow my pen and pad to write, "He was the epitome of humility, dignity and respect." I know that Mrs. Poling was thrilled to share the actual text of Admiral Johnson's speech with the LOV class upon her return to Raleigh.

The biography of Admiral "Bud" Zumwalt, which is being written by Dr. Cullen (who helped Mrs. Poling into the the Officers' and Faculty Club) will surely recognize this man's many remarkable achievements, both at sea and ashore. He was appointed by President Nixon to become, at age 49, the youngest Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) in history. His service as CNO took the Navy through extraordinarily challenging times; and as a lady in our pew (daughter of recently deceased Admiral Stillwell) pointed out to us, morale in the Navy was at an "all-time low when Bud took over." President Clinton said, "Bud took on more than 200 years of Naval history to make the Navy color blind". The President continued, "You could always count on (him) to do the right thing". He also commented that another famed admiral, Arleigh Burke, was remembered as the "spirit of the Navy and Bud was its *conscience*." "Admiral Zumwalt saw only two days of the new century," observed our Chief Executive, "but the changes he brought about will shape our Navy for a long time."

In 1998, President Clinton awarded Admiral Zumwalt the Medal of Freedom, our Nation's highest civilian honor. He was the founder of the Marrow Foundation, director of the Vietnam Assistance to the Handicapped Foundation; and he actively supported the Vietnam Center at Texas Tech University, a center dedicated to helping future generations learn from the past. It was through her participation at the Vietnam Center's Conference for High School Teachers in June 1998 that Mrs. Poling first met Admiral Zumwalt. She often reminds me that she learned more about American foreign policy in a two hour dinner discussion with "Admiral Z" than she did in five years of college!

The Ambassador to the Court of St. James, Philip Lader, said during the funeral, "It was the man, not the Admiral; the story, not his achievements, that most touched us." What most touched your teacher was the special interest Admiral Zumwalt took in her *Lessons of Vietnam* course in Raleigh, North Carolina. The Admiral personally came to speak to her LOV students on September 29, 1998, and was planning a return visit in the fall of 1999.

It is really marvelous to think that one of Admiral Zumwalt's "final watches" was related to the education of our youth. Last spring, Vice Admiral Tidd and Admiral Zumwalt bestowed on Mrs. Poling a wonderful gift of two lithographs signed by artist Tom Nielsen, entitled the *Colors of Courage* and *The Last Patrol*. An inscription on the *Colors of Courage* reads, "To Lindy Poling, teacher of the century, with respect, E.R. Zumwalt Jr., Admiral, U.S. Navy, Retired."

Something tells me that "Admiral Z" is still on watch. I think that there is a part of Admiral Zumwalt's life that is "still coming". It is coming in Mrs. Poling and her LOV classes. You can feel it coming in the greater understanding, respect, and appreciation she and her students have for our military men and women and the incomparable sacrifices they have made for our country.