

Selected information from Six of the Boorda-related articles in the 14-page Bibliography

S-701 Washington Post

(k) May 20, 1996, p. A-1 & A-6 (by Dan Morgan and George Lardner) [The Boorda suicide is seen as an enigma by a number of observers]

The title and subtitle of this article provide an accurate summary of its contents: “The Enigma of an Admiral’s Death; To Many Colleagues, Neither Medal Controversy Nor Grueling Pace Explains Suicide.” The article reviews various explanations. In the context of possibly unauthorized wearing of certain medals, observers find unsatisfying the explanation that Boorda was acting in a noble if misguided attempt to protect the honor of the Navy. **Senator William Cohen rejected medals as the cause: “It had to be an accumulation of many other things.”** Boorda’s family and biographical information are provided. He joined the Navy in 1956 as an enlisted man and was commissioned as an officer in 1962. Nine years later he completed requirements for a bachelor’s degree at University of Rhode Island.

Retired RADM William Houley said that **sailors and officers admired Boorda as a flag officer because he knew just how far to go in bending rules to get things done.**

The article finds perplexing the emotional trauma which the suicide inflicted on Boorda’s family, to whom he had apparently been exceptionally devoted over the years. “One friend, retired RADM Philip Dur, recalled how **Boorda would interrupt Pentagon meetings to take a call from his wife Bettie.** ‘They were a team,’ said Dur’s wife, Kathleen. ‘He included her in everything.’”

In conclusion: **“Boorda’s death remains a conundrum. Several spoke of their belief that there were still ‘missing pieces’ yet to be uncovered.”**

S-714 Atlanta Journal/Atlanta Constitution

(a) (Constitution) May 30, 1996, p. A16 (editorial) [Boorda suicide editorial: Navy has a proud history but a troubled present. Denial is no way to shape up.]

“Traditionalists in the Navy resented Boorda’s rise from the enlisted ranks to his high station.” The editorial recited the list of stresses plaguing Boorda: the anonymous letter in the Navy Times, the critical Annapolis speech by former Navy Secretary James Webb, a humorous caricature of Navy political correctness [see S-763 (b)], Tailhook, and troubles at the Naval Academy. **“The U.S. Navy may have a proud history, but it also has a deeply troubled present.... Denial and defensiveness are no way for the Navy to shape up. Commitment to high standards and close scrutiny are.”**

S-723 Philadelphia Inquirer

(b) December 10, 1995, p. 4A (by Dana Priest of the Washington Post) [Describes a gender-related controversy within the Navy resulting in the firing of a Rear Admiral for an affair with an enlisted woman. 5 months before Boorda Suicide]

A married two-star Navy admiral, RADM Ralph Tindal, who had a yearlong affair with a junior enlisted woman has been found guilty of adultery, which is a crime under military law. He was also found guilty of fraternization, conduct unbecoming an officer, and sexual harassment. “The woman, whose age and rank were not released, faced no disciplinary action

and was given counseling instead. Defense sources said the sexual harassment charge resulted because the woman had tried unsuccessfully to break off the relationship.” RADM Tindal was reduced in rank, forced to retire, lost \$7686 in pay, and forfeited \$650 per month in pension because of lower retirement rank. The disposition of the case was announced December 8, the day after the Navy ended a “stand down” called by CNO Boorda following public disclosure of a series of sex-related cases. [Editorial note: this was five months before Boorda’s suicide] In an unrelated case, a Navy captain selected for promotion to rear admiral was later denied that promotion because of what might be considered the adverse aura of a sex-related dispute---one wherein he was acquitted of the specific charges preferred.

S-734 Gosport [private publication, “serving (primarily NAS in) the cradle of Naval Aviation,” Pensacola, Florida]

(h) May 24, 1996, p. 2 (staff) [Personal anecdotes about the late CNO; story credits his wife for inspiring his career advancement]

The caption reads “Adm. Mike Boorda remembered through anecdotes, quotes.” The story recites a variety of vignettes: The story about the banana split transferred at sea from ship to ship. The admiral’s fondness for taking the steering wheel of his Navy automobile, relegating his assigned driver to the back seat. The CNO’s nerf ball, for end-of-day relaxation. The fun of sea duty. ... “In talking about his career and marriage, Adm. Boorda often said he made it to E-3 on his own, but his later promotions, all the way to O-10 [four-stars] were due to his wife Bettie.” His best introduction before groups was: “...He made it to E-3 on his own, but Bettie Boorda made him the CNO.” Her influence in Boorda’s life was exceptionally strong. She picked him up when he was nobody and walked him step by step to the very top of the Navy.

S-735 People Weekly

(a) June 3, 1996, pp. 48-51 (by Thomas Fields-Meyer) [In the context of the unexplained Boorda suicide, numerous stresses impacting the Navy are described. His friends are quoted.]

Article points out that “causes of suicide often remain shrouded in mystery [and] in Boorda’s case they seemed particularly inexplicable.” ... He was 5’ 4,” and often joked about his height. Boorda was known for hard work. He would sometimes bring home four briefcases of self-assigned evening labor. Various recent troubles of the Navy weighed on his mind, although he personally did not appear to have been implicated in any of them. Those troubles included, “a Naval academy cheating scandal, aircraft crashes, and new allegations of sexual harassment.” The Newsweek inquiry into the medals controversy is cited. More recent and personalized Navy-related pressures on Boorda are identified: An April 1996 speech of former Navy Secretary James Webb criticized harshly a perceived lack of Navy leadership and principle at the highest levels. The anonymous letter to the Navy Times demeaning Boorda and calling for the CNO’s resignation was described [See S-733 (m) and S-761 (b), pp. 107, 111]. The article concluded with this quote from Boorda’s friend Harlan Ullman: “I have a Ph.D. But if I had 27 advanced degrees and if you gave me a zillion dollars I still couldn’t write a paper as to why this happened.”

S-760 *New Yorker Magazine*

- (a) September 16, 1996, pp. 68-86 (“Admiral Boorda’s War” by Peter J. Boyer) [A lengthy analysis of the Boorda suicide, with extensive treatment of certain stresses impacting Boorda and the Navy.]

[If the reader studies the full text of only a few items from the entire bibliography, this excellent article should be one of them. Others should include S-701 (k), S-714 (a), S-723 (b), S-734 (h), S-735 (a) and Nick Kotz’s lengthy article at S-761(b).] Boyer’s *New Yorker* article provides considerable background on the pre-enlistment and post-enlistment life of Boorda, and on significant matters of controversy impacting the Navy. Those matters include Tailhook, Kara Hultgreen, Stan Arthur, Rebecca Hansen, the “flagging” of promotions, and Robert Stumpf. The article assesses the political climate resulting from these controversies. Boorda’s parentage, childhood, and troubled youth in Indiana, Wisconsin, and Momence, Illinois are discussed. He dropped out of high school in 1956 in his junior year, lied about his age, and joined the Navy at 16. Despite an unpromising Navy start (AWOL; near discharge), Boorda soon found himself comforted by the Navy’s order and discipline. After basic training he was posted to Norman, Oklahoma, where he met and married Bettie Moran when both were teenagers.

After becoming an officer Boorda eventually drew an assignment in Washington. Admiral Stan Arthur marveled at the way Boorda took to the political aspects of his Washington work, and “at Boorda’s fascination with the town. ‘It was like a flame to him—he loved it...Mike loved to get right to the flame just as fast as he could.’” [p.71] In his three-star job and later as the (four-star) CNO, “Boorda relished the idea of beneficent intervention.... If he bent a rule or interrupted the usual chain of command, so be it...the sailors loved him. The press and the politicians loved him...” [p.74]

“He did not serve in one of the Navy’s glamour arenas: aviation or submarines, and he had never been fired upon in combat...he was not an Annapolis man (as all his predecessors had been); he was a former seaman (as none of his predecessors had been)...Even his physical aspect—he stood only five feet four—helped convey an image of the quintessential bureaucrat.” [p. 69]

The Tailhook scandal is taken as the chronological point of departure in the series of Navy controversies discussed. The Tailhook Association had met annually as a government-funded, official gathering for Naval aviators. Over the years the after-hours partying had become progressively more raunchy. In the wake of the Gulf War the September 1991 Tailhook convocation at the Las Vegas Hilton saw rampant intoxication and public debauchery perpetrated by mid-level officers of the U.S. Navy---in full view of muted senior Navy brass. After a political outcry, the excesses of Tailhook ’91 were examined over months, then years, by a succession of investigators: by the Navy, and (at two levels) by the Defense Department... “The Navy’s top leaders had initially responded with a coverup...” As an aside, note that previous Navy controversies involving the explosion aboard the Battleship Iowa (April ’89) and the U.S.S. Vincennes’ shooting down of a civilian airliner (July ’88) likewise were greatly exacerbated by Navy attempts at coverup. Neither incident is mentioned by this article.

The Navy’s political and military heads, Secretary Larry Garrett and then-CNO Frank Kelso, had both attended Tailhook ’91. Both were replaced as a consequence of mismanaging the Navy’s response to that hyper-raunchy convention.

The article describes in considerable and well-justified detail the case of Admiral Stan Arthur. “Arthur was one of the Navy’s prized officers, and in April of 1994 he was rewarded when President Clinton selected him to be commander in chief of all American forces in the Pacific [CINCPAC].” [p. 75] But Arthur’s nomination as CINCPAC, pending before the Senate Armed Services Committee, was sidetracked by a senator’s intervention on behalf of one of the senator’s constituents, Navy Lieutenant Rebecca Hansen, who complained that she had been unfairly washed out of flight school because she had filed a sexual harassment complaint. The article describes at length the youthful development and brief Navy career of Ms. Hansen. In summary, it appears that her harassment complaint was well supported. However the Navy’s decision to wash her out of flight school was also probably justified, according to the after-the-fact views of certain observers on both sides.

Arthur concluded that Hansen was misled by not being discharged even earlier, after she (initially) flunked two of the most important courses in Pensacola: navigation and engineering. Her unsuitability as a pilot seems clear from these and other indices on the record.

At this point the article gives us a glimpse of one manifestation of the culture clash between the Navy and the civilian world: “Arthur figured that he [a four star admiral] could bring authority to the review of the Hansen case, and that his decision would stand. ...Arthur, an old-Navy man of honor, thought it was enough that he, the Navy’s top aviator and the Vice-Chief of Naval Operations, had personally reviewed her flight records and found the attrition warranted... but this wasn’t a moment for taking the Navy’s word for anything.” [pp.78-79] Senator “Durenberger said that he would lift his hold on Arthur’s nomination... only when his questions were satisfactorily answered.” [Concerning Durenberger’s perspective, see S-713 (g).] Chairman “Sam Nunn assured Boorda that he could get Arthur confirmed, but that doing it might take time. Boorda played up the delay to Arthur,” and maneuvered Stan Arthur out of the picture. “Boorda gave [Secretary Dalton] the impression that Arthur might not have the stomach for a political fight—an impression that Dalton has come to suspect was the product of some Boorda spin.” [p. 80]

Exactly two months into Boorda’s term as CNO [and in large measure as a result of Boorda’s intervention into the matter] the Navy announced the withdrawal of the Stan Arthur nomination as Commander in Chief, Pacific. The Navy caved, and Boorda [---apparently with considerable justification] took the rap. Relations between Boorda and the old-Guard Navy were dealt an unforgettable blow. “And what Boorda did next may have put the damage he had suffered in the Arthur episode beyond repair.... [He] offered Hansen a job: he told her that he wanted her to come to Washington and work for him at the Pentagon.... In the eyes of the institution Boorda had just traded Stan Arthur for Rebecca Hansen, sacrificing the Navy ideal for the perfect symbol of the Navy’s post-Tailhook torment. ‘That curdled the milk, particularly with the retired guys,’ John Lehman says. ‘I don’t think Mike ever got over that.’” [p. 82] Boorda admitted it was wrong. He “apologized to Arthur personally, and acknowledged his mistake publicly, but the Arthur furor had a lasting effect...on the way Boorda was perceived through the rest of his tenure....” As for Arthur himself, he “decided not to make an issue of it. ‘I chalked it up to another one of those Boorda things,’ he says. [Arthur continued:] ‘I thought, Ah, well, this is vintage Boorda, you know? There’s never a problem I can’t fix, just let me. He just fell into that damned trap again.’” [p. 82]

The article subsequently directs attention to the controversy over the abortive promotion to Captain of **Robert E. Stumpf**. As a pilot with a most distinguished record over Baghdad (and later, as Commander of the Blue Angels), **Stumpf was “something close to the Navy’s poster boy ideal.”** The Stumpf promotion is presented as an opportunity for Boorda to redeem himself after the Stan Arthur debacle. [Editorial note: The Stumpf controversy began in May of 1994. It evolved over 22 months in a way that generated considerably more heat than light.

Supporters of Stumpf’s promotion focused on his overall career performance, and on the desirability of having the Navy be the *defacto* sole arbiters of who is promoted within the Navy, and on the general emotional appeal of Stumpf’s record. That appeal was inspired in part by what finally developed as a most ill-conceived publicity campaign directed against the Senate Armed Services Committee and its procedures. See other descriptions elsewhere, including S-780 (e) through (k).] It had all started off smoothly enough. **“Stumpf’s promotion was routinely approved by the Senate that May [1994], along with the promotions of more than a hundred others. But before it took effect”** a problem was discovered: **Stumpf’s file had not been flagged before it was sent over to the Senate for advice and consent, even though he *had* attended Tailhook in 1991, and even though it had been agreed that the files of all attendees were to be flagged before they were sent to the Senate for review.** “The Navy Court of Inquiry...had determined in September of 1993 that Stumpf was not in the room at the time the sex act occurred, and had given him full acquittal. But several senators on the Armed Services Committee were angry when, in June of 1994, the matter was belatedly brought to their attention” well after this personnel file had slipped past them. **“The committee requested that no action be taken on Stumpf’s promotion until Dalton provided details of the aviator’s Tailhook involvement.”** [pp. 83-84] [Ultimately Stumpf was not promoted to Captain until six years after his resignation. At that point (August 2002) he was promoted retroactively, but by that time his chance for making admiral was non-existent.]

More broadly, the article discusses contempt openly expressed within the Navy (both active and retired) for Boorda’s leadership:

The often-mentioned **anonymous letter** [published in the Navy Times within two weeks prior to Boorda’s suicide] is discussed briefly. [It is more fully identified at S-733 (m):] “Eventually the widespread criticism became naked ridicule.” The letter to the Navy Times called on Boorda to resign, saying he has lost the respect of Navy personnel from midshipman to admiral.

This New Yorker article likewise discussed **the Annapolis speech of former Navy Secretary James Webb**, a speech sharply critical of Boorda, even though Webb did not identify the CNO by name.

Boyer described **the medals controversy**, suggesting that **the author gives considerable credence to that issue as a contributing cause of the Boorda suicide.** However, Commander Stumpf’s attorney, Charles Gittins is quoted as saying: **“I can’t prove it, but he didn’t shoot himself over the combat V’s.”**