

Independence Day Celebration
at the
Colebrook Meeting House
July 4, 2009

Address given by Michael F. Hurd, with introduction
by master of ceremonies, Gloria M. Wilbur, Director, Colebrook Associates, Inc.

About Mike:

- Mike has longtime family connections in Colebrook. He attended the old, 2-room Colebrook Center School in the 1940s.
- In 1945 his family moved to California where he remained through high school.
- Following high school and wanting a break from his studies, Mike joined the U.S. Navy in 1954.
- After 4 years of submarine duty he returned to school obtaining his degree and a Navy commission.
- With his wife Judy he headed for Long Beach, California, and duty aboard a destroyer.
- Mike has served aboard various ships during the Vietnam War; had a teaching assignment in Key West; served a year in-country Vietnam with the 7th Marines where he was awarded the Bronze Star with Combat “V” followed by a two-year NATO tour with his family in Europe.
- After retiring from the Navy, Mike worked 20 years with an engineering firm in Newport, RI. Then in 1998 he and Judy returned to their Connecticut roots settling in Colebrook.
- He holds a master’s degree in Education and is a graduate of the Armed Forces Staff College in Virginia.

**“Reflections on Equal Rights Deferred
and a Shipboard Tragedy”
by Michael F. Hurd**

Good morning friends, fellow citizens, Rev. Bengston, and Rev. Alice, whom I must commend for her bravery in allowing this old sailor to stand here this morning. I can assure you I just might be more comfortable standing out on deck in the middle of a typhoon with green water breaking over the bow than here at this historic church.

For the past few years Jan Rathbun has asked me whether I might speak at this Independence Day celebration. Wait a minute; did I say, “Ask”? I think the more proper word would be “badger!” Well, no turning back now. But Jan, where’s that tele-prompter you promised?

My initial dilemma of course was to find a proper subject. I certainly can’t talk about Colebrook history, not when our eminent Town Historian, Robert Grigg, has researched and documented every conceivable aspect of Colebrook imaginable back to Charlemagne, who he claims rode through the Center around 800 AD! Just kidding Bob. And, as many of you know, two of the most distinguished living historians in America reside right here in Colebrook---Dr. Bill MacNeil of the University of Chicago, and Dr. Eric Foner of Columbia. So now I can’t even talk about the world! Well I guess there is always outer space, of which I know very little except for a bit of celestial navigation.

So I have decided to lean on my Navy experience and tell you about a tragic event that happened aboard my ship in the early 1960s. But what I hope to show is that it is more than just a “sea story.” It is a consequence of what happens when a certain segment of our society, either systematically or subtly, is left behind--left out-- denied the American dream!

233 years ago a young Virginian was tasked with hammering out the first draft of a document that would lead this country on the road to independence. Thomas Jefferson accepted that honor. He walked down Market Street in Philadelphia to his modest apartment and, sitting in his Windsor chair and writing on his small, portable laptop desk (both of which he designed), he put in writing that historic first draft, which he delivered to John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Philip Livingston of New York. The editing process was painful for Mr. Jefferson as he sat quietly in the background while words were changed, ideas

reconstructed, and whole sentences reduced or eliminated. The end result was that over a quarter of Jefferson's draft was eliminated (over 600 words), but, about 150 words were also added.

In the second paragraph, which most agree is the most eloquent; it states that all men are created equal (that's a simplistic statement I know, but we understand the meaning) and that we are endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights. When those rights are denied, deferred, there will be consequences, and that is what I hope to show this morning.

In the early 1960s I was serving aboard a destroyer in the Western Pacific as Anti-Submarine Warfare Officer. We were operating with Carrier Task Force 77, a part of the 7th Fleet. The cold war was in full bloom with both the Soviets and Chinese saber rattling at a higher than normal level. We were often operating at Condition III, which is a high state of readiness just below general quarters.

After about 50 days of at-sea operations my ship and three others (consisting of a Division) were ordered into port for a much needed two-week stand-down for upkeep and repair, and of course R&R for the crew. So we set a course for Japan entering the naval port of Sasebo, mooring alongside a repair ship (destroyer tender)— four ships in a nest with my ship being outboard.

Now a little reflection. The late 1950s and early 1960s were turbulent years from a civil rights perspective. Although President Truman had ordered the end of racial segregation within the military in 1948, the progress was slow and certainly incomplete. If I had to grade the overall progress in the military during the early 1960s, and this is my own personal opinion, I would assign, probably, a "C" minus overall. Without question, the Army had made the most advances with the Marine Corps and Air Force to a lesser degree. The Navy, sadly, was woefully deficient, and again, in my judgment, although I can't bring myself to flunk my fellow service, I would assign the Navy a "D" or "D" minus. There are many reasons for this, but they are outside the scope of this talk. I will say, however, that shipboard life is unique and could be a hard sell for many.

But in all fairness, we must look at our Nation during this time. It is often stated, and I agree, the military is in great part a reflection of our Nation as a whole. I think if you were to examine fire departments, corporate America, police departments, government agencies, and even athletics, you could sum up the results with one word—EXCLUSION!

Let's remember ladies and gentlemen, it took the President of the United States, backed by Federal troops, to admit the first African American undergraduate to the University of Mississippi! That person— James Meredith—a courageous man. How about Rosa Parks? She had no idea she was destined for immortality and would forever be a part of our nation's history. She merely wanted to take a bus to go home after a hard day at work only to have the bus driver walk back, order her out of her seat and to give it to a white person. Hard to believe isn't it?

How about the freedom riders? Thirteen citizens, male and female, white and black, boarding a bus in Washington, DC, with a destination of reaching New Orleans, who were demonstrating against segregation within interstate travel. Did you know that it was illegal for a black person to sit next to a white in some southern states? The freedom riders never reached their destination! In Alabama they were firebombed and took refuge in a local church. More joined the crusade but got no further than Mississippi where they were stopped, many beaten and jailed.

Lastly, the great march on Washington where over 250,000 men and women, white and black, young and old, marched on our Nation's capital essentially for one reason—equal rights under the law, and to persuade Congress to pass the President's Civil Rights Bill.

Okay, I'm sure you're wondering— where are we going with all this? Mike, I thought we were going to hear a "sea story"! Well, you are, but it was important to first briefly refresh our memories of the racial climate that existed in the early 1960s.

At this time I'd like to introduce to you a man by the name of Demetrius Watson. I considered not using his real name but I just couldn't bring myself to do that given the strength of his name and his presence. Watson was a Seaman Steward's Mate aboard my ship. Physically, he was a powerful man. At the time I equated him in size to Sonny Liston, the heavyweight boxer. For those of you who may not know of, or, remember him— in today's world I'd say he was about the size of David Ortiz, Big Pappi, of the Red Sox. A big man, black, who hailed from Boston, he was also good sailor, hard working, well respected, and as I recall, was an ammunition handler during General Quarters.

For those of you who may not be all that familiar with the running of the wardroom aboard a destroyer and many other classes of ships in the Navy, let me briefly explain. Stewards in the Navy at that time were—almost exclusively— either African Americans or Filipinos. Stewards are tasked with ordering the food and supplies, preparing the food, serving the food to the officers in

the wardroom, besides maintaining the officers' living quarters—called “Officer’s Country.” The officers sit at a long table covered (always) with a white linen table cloth, silverware, and are seated in order of seniority with the captain at the head of the table and so on down by rank. I was somewhere in the middle. Some captains choose not to eat with their officers and will take their meals in either their sea cabin or in-port cabin. During mealtime each officer is individually served by stewards in crisp, white jackets. You get the picture.

Now I'd like to back up about 4 months. We were in transit from our home port in California to the Western Pacific and had just departed Hawaii en route to Midway Island where we would briefly stop for fueling, take on needed supplies, and pick up crew members who would be joining the ship. One day while transiting this long expanse of Pacific Ocean, Watson approached me stating, “Mr. Hurd, can I have a few words with you?” I said, “Of course Watson, what’s on your mind?” “Well,” he said, “I’d like to change my rate to Torpedoman’s Mate.” I asked him if he had discussed this with his Division Officer, as this would be the proper chain of command for him to follow. He said no and that he would prefer to work through me. I mentioned that that’s fine but I would let his Division Officer know and would inform the XO (Executive Officer) of our plan. The first thing I mentioned to him was that we must check his service record in the ship’s office to be sure he meets all the test score requirements—which he did by the way. I assured him that I would help him with the application process and that I felt we could get a good recommendation from the Captain, and that the application should be ready for mailing to the Bureau of Naval Personnel in Washington by the time we reached Midway Island.

BUT, I also advised him that the likelihood of success in obtaining approval from Washington was very slim and I gave him an example. If, for example, I wanted to change my designator from line officer to supply officer, I would most likely be denied. The Navy has spent a lot of money and time training me in engineering, seamanship, navigation, gunnery, surface warfare, etc., and they would not be in favor of starting all over in supply, which would be over a year of training. The same applies when requesting a rating change within the enlisted ranks. Watson understood the odds but we agreed to go forward with the application, which left the ship for Washington.

Now back to Sasebo, Japan, where as I mentioned we are in a nest of 4 destroyers, moored alongside a destroyer tender, and I have the duty. I am second in seniority within the duty section, just under the Command Duty Officer. About 1630 (4:30 pm) liberty call was piped down and as the liberty party assembled on the quarterdeck it was my task to make a casual inspection of uniforms and remind those going ashore that they are all ambassadors of their country and should act accordingly. Remember the “buddy system” and always obey the shore patrol, who are there to protect you. What I didn’t know at that time was that Watson’s request for a rate change had arrived from Washington that day and it had been denied. He went ashore a very, very angry man! Had he come to me maybe we could have discussed the issue and the appeal process—and— just maybe, maybe—the tragic events that were about to unfold could have been averted.

About 9:30 that evening I made my required rounds of the ship ensuring various spaces were secure. From after steering to the fo’c’sle, to the birthing compartments and engineering spaces, all was ship-shape. I made my report to the quarterdeck and went up to the wardroom to inform Lt. Hall, the Command Duty Officer, that all was secure and that I was going below and would soon be turning in for the night.

As I settled at my desk in my stateroom I had just picked up a pen to get a quick note off to Judy when the silence was broken by the 1MC (general announcing system), “Lt. Hall, Lt. (jg) Hurd, lay to the quarterdeck immediately, lay to the quarterdeck on the double.” Well, I can assure you that in all my years in the Navy, never have I heard such a command. I knew something was very wrong. I put on my foul weather jacket and cap, shot up the ladder to the main deck and dashed down the starboard side to the quarterdeck with Lt. Hall just behind me. As I approached the quarterdeck my brain almost didn’t accept what I was seeing. On the deck was the Officer of the Deck (actually a first class petty officer, but assigned Officer of the Deck). He was flat on his back, semi-conscious, moaning, and bleeding from the mouth. “Alright, what’s happened,” I asked the petty officer of the watch. He said that Watson has come aboard, very drunk, got into an argument with the watch members and hit the Officer of the Deck. What later came out in the investigation that followed was that the Officer of the Deck ignited the spark that sent Watson into a rage. When Watson was being unruly on the quarterdeck, the Officer of the Deck used the most improper words imaginable by saying, “Hey boy, go below!” With that the violence erupted.

Just about then we heard loud scuffling and shouting below in the area of the after birthing compartment and suddenly a sailor raced up stating that Watson had a gun and was about to shoot someone. With that, to my complete amazement, Lt. Hall said he was going for assistance and will try to locate the captain and he left the ship. Well, I'm sure there isn't a person here today that doesn't know that the senior in command does not leave the ship. He sends a messenger—not himself. Now it's me—I'm in-charge by default! At that time in the 1960s we were in a relative high state of readiness and the bow and stern sentries each carried an M-1 rifle with ammunition on their belt. I ordered the messenger of the watch to inform the two sentries to load their rifles, and informed them that Watson had a gun and that they have my permission to shoot Watson if he threatens them or anyone else.

Seconds later there was a loud shot just above me on the 01 level, the deck just above the main deck. As I looked up a body tumbled over the lifeline right above me falling virtually at my feet. I could see that the man had been shot in the center of his face right below his nose. He wasn't moving and was either unconscious or, worse yet, dead. We heard Watson scramble forward moving stealthily in the dark. I then ordered the petty officer of the watch, a crusty second class gunner's mate with about 18 years in the Navy with almost every inch of exposed skin covered with weathered tattoos, to load his .45 caliber pistol and put a round in the chamber. Which he did. Then I asked him point blank, "Do you have any reservations about using your weapon?" "No sir," was his answer. "No sir, none at all." Then I told him that if he did have reservations that was not a problem and for him to give me the weapon. He affirmed he would use it if necessary. No reservations!

I informed him and the members of the watch that we (the petty officer and I) would move forward and search out Watson and attempt to have him disarm and stop the blood shed. Moving forward up the starboard side of the main deck with him slightly behind me and off to my right, out of the darkness there was this scramble, tumble, wham, bang and Watson had me from behind with his arm around my neck. Jamming his pistol into the back of my neck, he stated those 7 words that I shall never forget! "Mr. Hurd, you are a dead man!"

I wish I could relate to you exactly what I said to Watson during those tense moments but I don't remember exactly. Surly I was attempting to convince him to drop his weapon, stop the bloodshed, and don't make a bad situation worse. He continued to rough me up a bit and jammed

the pistol into the back of my neck. The thought occurred to me to attempt the one judo move that I had practiced in the past, but he had the gun and I didn't. Almost assuredly that would have forced him to shoot and I'd be out of action to say the least. Then all of a sudden as I contemplated that move the situation changed. Watson left me! For whatever reason, he started moving forward up the starboard side of the ship toward the fo'c'sle.

Now, before I continue with this saga, you might be wondering, hey, how about that petty officer with the loaded pistol who was alongside me for support and protection? Well, my friends, you'll never guess what happened. He fainted! That's right, when Watson jumped down off the ladder from the 01 level slamming into the petty officer, he fainted straight away. This I didn't learn until the follow-on investigation. Although you can be certain I was less than happy with his performance, I learned later that fainting is really an unconditioned response of which he had no control.

As Watson moved forward and stepped through the weather break on the main deck, I darted to the bridge several decks up. From the bridge I could see Watson slowly stalking forward in the dark and I called down to the bow sentry, Seaman Electronics Technician Wall, informing him of Watson's movements. I again issued the order that he had permission to shoot Watson if Watson attempted to shoot him or attempted to go below. Seaman Wall, a cool, intelligent young lad had Watson squarely in the cross hairs of his M-1 rifle ordering him to drop his weapon. Watson continued to slowly inch forward toward the open hatch holding his pistol in the air above his head and peeking over his left shoulder at Seaman Wall. Kind of a cat and mouse act. Ignoring Wall's command to drop his weapon, Watson placed his right foot on the top wrung of the ladder, swung around to his left to shoot Wall when Wall fired his M-1 hitting Watson in the hip area driving him down the ladder where he lay unconscious. (Later during the investigation, we learned that Wall had aimed for Watson's chest area but at the last second chose to lower his rifle, probably saving Watson's life.)

Just as Watson was being carried off the ship over to the fully-equipped hospital room on the destroyer tender, the captain came aboard with a forlorn look, and putting his hand on my shoulder asked, "Mike what in the world has happened?" Shortly afterwards the Naval Investigative Service (NIS) came aboard, separated all the principal participants, and had us all write up our accounts of the episode. With our two-week upkeep completed, the other 3 ships of

the division got underway to resume operations with the 7th Fleet, and my ship remained in port to answer to a Board of Investigation.

As is the procedure within the military, whenever there is an accident, man lost overboard, someone injured or killed, or a collision at sea, etc., it is cause for a Board of Investigation to look into the facts surrounding the incident, analyze the soundness of the procedures, and to determine if the correct procedures were in fact followed, etc. Just as you all have probably seen in the various naval movies, the board was convened ashore at the Administrative Headquarters in Sasebo around a long table covered with a green felt cloth, pad and pencil in front of each board member along with water glasses...and lots of brass, JAG officers, stenographer, and other participating members. There was no chair for me. I was waiting outside in the passageway ready to be called, to stand at attention, and to testify and explain my actions as the principal participant. Although I disregarded his recommendation, my direct boss, the Weapon's Officer, a rather hard-nosed, cigar smoking Texan, suggested that I get legal representation...just in case. Since I felt that I had done nothing legally wrong, I felt secure in defending my actions without any JAG assistance.

As I was waiting to be called, I glanced down the passageway and to my surprise; I saw a Marine Corps guard and a Navy corpsman wheeling Watson toward the room where the hearing was about to start. Just as they approached me, Watson, who was covered with a traditional white U.S. Navy blanket, leaned slightly toward me and in a soft and remorseful voice said, "Oh, Mr. Hurd, I am so sorry I let you down." I'm normally not lost for words but at that moment all I could muster up was, "Don't worry about me Watson, take care of yourself."

Shortly thereafter I was called in to testify and answer questions from the board. Strange as it may sound, if there was a comical moment during this whole ordeal, it was about to happen. You see, Watson was very interested to hear my testimony as he remembered very little, if anything at all, of what had happened that fatal night due to the amount of alcohol he had consumed and, of course, the trauma of being shot. So, as I was describing the incident at the point where Watson had just left me on the main deck and he was inching his way forward in the dark, I guess my voice must have trailed off and he couldn't hear my testimony. In his attempt to hear me, he leaned too far over and the entire gurney overturned with the loudest slam causing all the board members to leap out of their seats thinking a bomb went off. Once they realized what had

happened, and with a bit of embarrassment, they sat back down resuming their stern faces and the investigation resumed. Watson survived the fall but was in considerable discomfort.

Charged with several violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Watson, who was sent to the Great Lakes Naval Hospital, was later tried before a General Court-Martial and sent to prison. As for my actions, although I was grilled pretty thoroughly during the inquiry, nothing came of it, good or bad, and I continued on with my naval career without any consequences.

In closing ladies and gentlemen, during the last election we heard a lot about “change,” and then witnessed one of the most remarkable political events with the election of a new Commander-in-Chief, an African American President! Something one couldn’t even begin to dream of happening in the 1960s.

As we look back to those dark, troubled times of the 1960s, I am pleased to say that impressive improvements have taken place in the U.S. Navy. To begin with, the steward rating has been restructured, all ratings are now open to qualified enlisted men and women (black and white), and minority population has been steadily increasing within the officer corps through entry points such as the Naval Academy, NROTC participating colleges and universities, Naval Flight School, and Officer Candidate School. Just think---minorities have flown our finest aircraft, commanded just about every class of ship in the Navy’s inventory, and have flown into space and reached flag rank. That’s progress!

Within the submarine service, in which I served and try to stay somewhat informed, seven African Americans have commanded nuclear submarines, three of whom have reached flag rank—one going from the enlisted ranks to vice admiral! Today, as I speak, two nuclear powered submarines prowl the oceans under the command of black skippers. We have indeed made progress.

Lastly--- probably you all have either seen on television or read in the newspapers, the recent dramatic rescue8/30/2009 of Captain Philips, skipper of the merchant ship Maersk Alabama in the Gulf of Aden. What you might not have learned from the media is that the operation to rescue Capt. Philips from the Somali pirates was under Counter-Piracy Task Force (CTF) 151, which is comprised of multi-national ships from several participating nations including Russia. Command of CTF 151 is periodically rotated among the participating nations and is headed by a rear admiral. During the rescue operation of Capt. Philips, CTF 151 was under the command of

an American Rear Admiral, an African American Rear Admiral.... and..... HER name is Michelle Howard, the first woman graduate at Annapolis (white or black) to reach flag rank! A star of the first magnitude from whom we shall likely hear more from in the future.

Thank you, and we thank those who gave us our freedom and those who do so today.