JOHN B. MOONEY JR.

1931–2014

Elected in 1988

“For pioneering development of effective systems and techniques for manned operations to the full depth of the oceans.”

BY DON WALSH

JOHN BRADFORD MOONEY JR., whose leadership made the US Navy a global leader in undersea technology and deep ocean operations, died in Austin, Texas, on May 30, 2014, at the age of 83.

Brad was born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on March 26, 1931. From his New England heritage he developed a love of the sea at an early age. As a young man, he became involved with scouting, eventually achieving the rank of Eagle Scout.

After graduating from high school in 1949 he won an appointment to the US Naval Academy. While at Annapolis he was active in sailing and cross-country track competitions. Graduating with the class of 1953, he served two years in surface ships.


In 1964 Brad’s undersea career took a new and unusual direction. He was ordered to duty as the officer in charge of the Navy’s bathyscaph Trieste II. This would be his first command in his 34-year-long naval career.

The two-person Trieste II was capable of diving to 20,000 feet (6,000 m) to access 98 percent of the seafloor in the world
ocean. At the time it was one of two deepest-diving manned vehicles in the world. The French Navy had the other.

The deep submersible program was based at the Navy Electronics Laboratory (NEL) in San Diego from 1958 to 1964. Its mission was to support oceanographic research for the NEL scientists and those from other institutions.

However, the Submarine Force decided that Trieste II could be best used for highly classified recovery missions and related work tasks. Lieutenant Commander Mooney was assigned the very delicate task of moving the Trieste II program from the research and development community to the Submarine Force command in San Diego.

Ultimately he played a major role in the establishment of a new Navy command at San Diego. Submarine Development Group One would be the first organization that consolidated all of the Navy’s deep diving programs. Its assets included several submersibles, the Man in the Sea (e.g., Sea Lab) program, and the Baya (SS-318), a specially configured diesel submarine used for acoustics research.

As the O-in-C of Trieste II, Brad’s first major mission was investigating the nuclear submarine Thresher (SSN-593) wreck site. In late April 1963 Thresher was lost with all hands in the North Atlantic 220 miles (354 km) east of Boston. The wreckage was found in 8,200 feet (2,500 m) of water in 1963 by the first Trieste. In the summer of 1964 Trieste II did a second series of forensic dives there. Brad piloted several of the dives.

In recognition of his pioneering work with Trieste II, Brad was designated US Navy Deep Submersible Pilot #5 in 1964.

In January 1966, a hydrogen bomb was lost in the sea near Palomares, Spain, at a depth of 2,550 feet (880 m). Commander Mooney was temporarily ordered to assist the Navy task group that searched for 80 days before recovering it.

In 1966, after two years as commander of the Trieste II, he was ordered to the submarine Menhaden (SS-377) as commanding officer. During his time as captain, the ship operated in the Eastern Pacific and made two six-month deployments to the Far East including the Vietnam war zone.
After his command tour, Brad was ordered to the Pentagon to organize a new office within the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (OPNAV) that would have oversight of all the Navy’s deep submergence activities. His title was deep submergence programs coordinator. He served in this capacity from 1968 to 1971.

His skills were put to the test in May 1969 when the nuclear submarine *Scorpion* (SSN-589) was lost with all hands near the Azores Islands. The water depth was about 12,000 feet (3,700 m). *Trieste II* was deployed from San Diego on board a floating drydock for the long tow to the Azores. While Commander Submarine Development Group One was mission commander, Brad provided the coordination link between Navy headquarters in Washington and the afloat task group.

In 1971 Brad was ordered back to San Diego as the chief staff officer (#2 position) at Submarine Development Group One. While Submarine Development Group One was now a fairly mature organization, it benefited greatly from Commander Mooney’s years of operational experience with deep submergence systems at sea as well as headquarters expertise gained while in OPNAV.

In 1972 Captain Mooney received orders to become the commanding officer of the Naval Station in Charleston, South Carolina, a major shore command. He returned to the Navy’s deep submergence community in 1975 when he was ordered back to Washington, DC, as the deputy director of the Deep Submergence Systems Division in OPNAV.

In 1977 he was given another major shore command, the Naval Training Center in Orlando, Florida. His time there was less than a year as he was selected for promotion to rear admiral later that year.

His first flag officer posting was director of the Total Force Planning in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. He finally got back into ocean science and technology work when he was appointed oceanographer of the Navy in 1981 with additional duty as naval deputy at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in the Department of Commerce.
After two years as oceanographer he was appointed the 15th chief in charge of the Office of Naval Research. He served from 1983 to 1987. From 1982 to 1987 he was also chairman of the board and the editorial committee at the 135-year-old US Naval Institute, an educational forum for the naval professions.

Rear Admiral Mooney retired from the Navy in 1987 having served for 34 years. About half of his career was associated with Navy-related science and technology programs ranging from the bottom of the sea to the edge of space.

During his long naval career, Brad’s outstanding contributions were recognized by two awards of the Legion of Merit medal, three Meritorious Service Medals, and two Navy Unit Commendations.

In civilian life he did not slow down. He became a consultant on ocean-related issues to many organizations. Among others, he advised marine programs at universities such as Texas A&M, the University of New Hampshire, and Florida Atlantic University.

Brad was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1988 and was a member of Section 12 (Special Fields and Interdisciplinary Engineering). He also served in several capacities with the National Research Council and was a member of the Marine Board from 1991 to 1994.

In January 1989 he was appointed president and managing director of the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution (HBOI) at Fort Pierce, Florida. He left HBOI in March 1992.

From 1991 to 1992 he was the elected president of the Marine Technology Society (MTS) for a two-year term. In 1999 MTS recognized his contributions to ocean engineering with its highest honor, the Compass Distinguished Achievement Award.

In 1995, the prestigious Explorers Club elected Brad Mooney as a fellow in recognition of his early deep ocean explorations.

Through the mid-2000s Brad continued advisory committee work with the NRC and the Naval Research Advisory Committee. By the end of the decade he had mostly retired to his home in Austin, Texas.

Brad Mooney is survived by his wife of 24 years, Jennie Marie “Jay” Mooney; daughters and sons-in-law, Melinda
Jean and Timothy Thomas of Mansfield, TX, Pamela and George Greenleaf of Wilmington, North Carolina, and Jennifer Joan and Dave Mattingly of Ashburn, VA; stepsons and wives Devitt and Corine Adams of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and Darryl and Katie Adams of Austin, TX; and 12 grandchildren.