

Capt. James Vorosmarti, Jr.

October 18, 1935 – February 11, 2019

Sealab Aquanaut, HDS USA Founding Benefactor, *Journal of Diving History* columnist



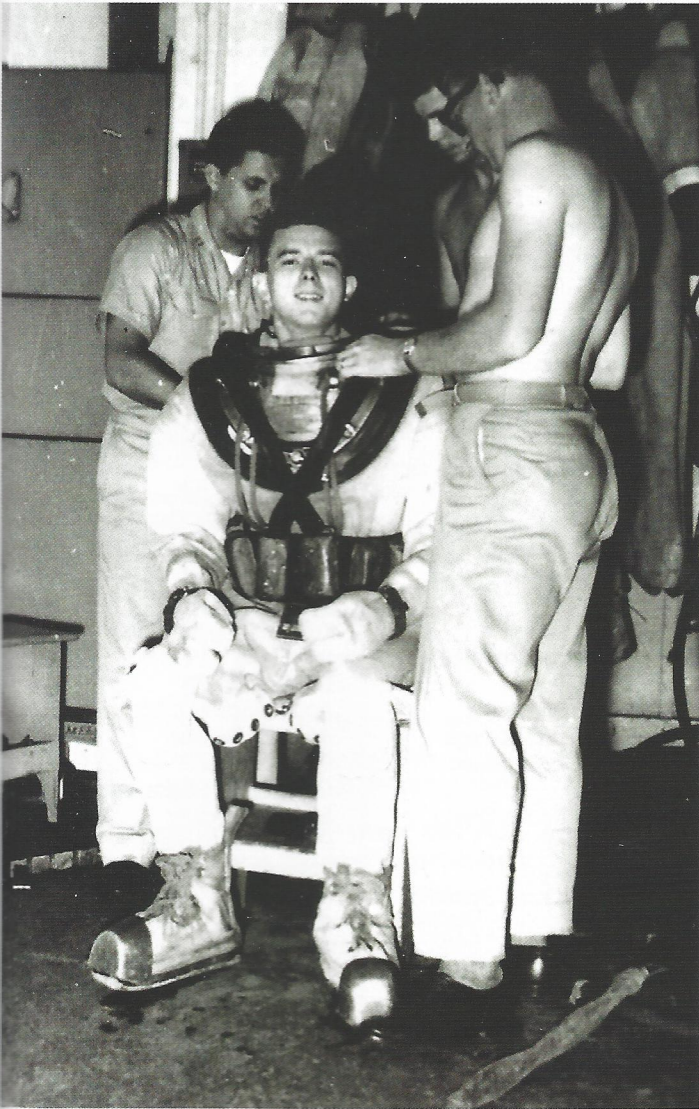
Capt. James Vorosmarti, Jr., whose quarter-century career as a U.S. Navy submarine medical officer began with the rigors of diving school and led to varied assignments around the world, including the deep-diving-oriented Sealab program in the late 1960s and ultimately leadership roles at the Naval Medical Research Institute and the Pentagon, died at his longtime home in Rockville, MD, on February 11, 2019.

Dr. Vorosmarti was 83; the cause of death was the spread of prostate cancer, which he had battled for several years, according to Carol, his wife of nearly 60 years.

Along Vorosmarti's varied personal and professional road – often traveled in the 1952 MG TD sports car he bought for \$700 in Hawaii while stationed at Pearl Harbor in the mid-1960s – the boyish, bespectacled doctor cultivated a veritable A-to-Z of interests.

He was arguably an Anglophile, a likely byproduct of the three years he spent in England in the early 1970s as an exchange officer with the Royal Navy. Soon after his official Navy retirement, in 1986, he took up the zither, in part to keep his quick-witted mind in tune. He was an avid bird-watcher and solver of crossword puzzles – the tricky Sunday *New York Times* crossword long figured into his weekend rituals. The suburban Rockville home where he settled with his family in the mid-1970s after the peripatetic first 15 years of his career became filled with books, including about a hundred works by the British humorist P.G. Wodehouse, a Vorosmarti favorite.

Vorosmarti, who had no middle name, was born on October 18, 1935, in Palmerton, PA, where his father was a foreman at the small town's zinc factory and his mother was a homemaker who had previously worked as a nurse. Vorosmarti was the older sibling – his sister, Jean Hankee, now lives in nearby



After medical school and a year-long internship at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, VA, Vorosmarti went through the dive school at the Washington Navy Yard, on the notoriously murky Anacostia River. That program included the kind of “hardhat” diver training seen in movies like *Men of Honor*. Also during the years of 1962 and 1963, he attended the submarine school at the Navy base at New London, CT, and received nuclear reactor prototype training. Vorosmarti was then assigned for a year as the medical officer on the USS *John Adams*, based in Charleston, SC.

He next made the leap to the Navy base at Pearl Harbor, where his duties as senior medical officer that year included monitoring the health of the submariners at the escape training tank, a water-filled tower that looked like a grain silo topped with a large, octagonal cupola. About 10 stories tall, the tank was designed for practicing emergency techniques that could get a sailor from a disabled submarine to the surface and safety. (The only other such tank was at the New London base.)

Vorosmarti was hurriedly called in 1966 to San Diego, the West Coast base for the Deep Submergence Systems Project, the Navy agency overseeing the growing Sealab program. The young doctor was selected to be one of the “aquanauts” to live for two weeks in Sealab III, at a daunting depth of 600 feet, off the coast of Los Angeles. But just as the mission finally got started in mid-February 1969, a fatal accident led to its cancellation. Vorosmarti can be spotted around that time in the recent PBS documentary, *Sealab*. He’s the one in the glasses.

Following Sealab, Vorosmarti was a postdoctoral fellow in physiology at SUNY Buffalo, from 1970 to 1972, and then began his three-year stint as an exchange officer at the Royal Navy’s Institute of Naval Medicine, from 1972 to 1975. While based at Alverstoke, he acquired a taste for such things as marmalades from Fortnum & Mason and an afternoon cup of tea.

Over the next decade, until his Navy retirement in 1986, Vorosmarti spent about three years in each of three successive posts: as executive officer at the Naval Medical Research Institute in Bethesda, MD; as the commanding officer at NMRI; and finally at the Pentagon, where he was special assistant for medical and life sciences in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Over the course of his career, Vorosmarti served on many national and international committees dealing not only with diving and submarines but also areas such as biotechnology and organ transplantation.

After retiring from the Navy, Vorosmarti worked as a consultant in the field of environmental and occupational medicine with a number of public and private entities, including the Office of Naval Research, the University of Alabama School of Medicine, and several diving and oil companies. He was active in the Historical Diving Society of the UK and of the USA.

He is survived by his wife, Carol, and three children: James III (Beth), of Peachtree City, GA; Richard (Alice), of Silver Spring, MD; and Erika, of Norfolk, VA; and six grandchildren: Jamie, Grace, Henry, William, Katie, and Matthew; and sister Jean Hankee.

— Ben Helwarth, author of *Sealab: America’s Forgotten Quest to Live and Work on the Ocean Floor* (Simon & Schuster, 2012)

Walnutport. Vorosmarti graduated from Palmerton High School and eventually found his way into the Navy while at Jefferson Medical College, in Philadelphia, where he earned his M.D. in 1961. He had completed his bachelor’s degree in biology in 1957 at Lafayette College. As a freshman he started out on an engineering scholarship but soon decided to switch to pre-med studies.

It was on a blind date while in medical school that he met Carol, née Schoch. Vorosmarti and a buddy were to meet Carol and her friend at nearby Beaver College (now Arcadia University). Just beforehand, the girls secretly sent a scout to their dorm’s foyer and she memorably reported back about the two waiting boys: “One is cute; the other wears glasses.” Vorosmarti was the bespectacled one, but no matter. He and Carol married on June 21, 1959 – and Vorosmarti’s ubiquitous black-framed, Navy-issue glasses contributed to the origins of the nickname endearingly bestowed by his many Navy friends: “Dr. Groovy.”