



Written by [John White](#) on March 12, 2014

## The Gulf of Tonkin Events: 50 Years Later

*“Old men lie and young men die.”*

— A saying among soldiers

The U.S. war in Vietnam essentially began on August 4, 1964 when North Vietnam made an unprovoked torpedo boat attack upon two Navy ships, the destroyers *USS Maddox* and *USS Turner Joy*, while they were steaming peacefully on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin. At least, that is what President Lyndon Johnson reported to Congress the next day.



Although there was a U.S. military presence in Vietnam before then, the soldiers were called military advisors. The August 4 attack reported by Johnson led to congressional action that allowed him (and, later, President Richard Nixon) to escalate our military presence enormously and to wage full-scale war not only in Vietnam but also covertly across Southeast Asia. That action was the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed on August 7, 1964. It stated:

Whereas naval units of the Communist regime in Vietnam, in violation of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law, have deliberately and repeatedly attacked United States naval vessels ... and Whereas these attacks are part of a deliberate and systematic campaign of aggression ... and Whereas the United States is assisting the peoples of southeast Asia to protect their freedom and has no territorial, military or political ambitions in that area ... Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.

It is important to note that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was predicated on the August 4 attack, not an earlier attack that took place. There had been an attack on the *Maddox* on August 2, which North Vietnam acknowledged. But on that date, the *Maddox* was conducting spying electronic countermeasure studies on North Vietnam's radar system for coastal defense, and its tactics involved going close to shore — several miles inside the territorial limit claimed by North Vietnam — to provoke and capture the electronic signals. Simply put, the North Vietnamese repelled an act of aggression on the part of the United States. In response to American incursions, several North Vietnamese torpedo boats launched several torpedoes, which the *Maddox* dodged. The torpedo boats were repelled by the *Maddox's* gunfire and by fighters from the aircraft carrier *Ticonderoga*.

However, accusations leveled against North Vietnam stating that it attacked U.S. Navy ships in international waters two days later were strongly denied by North Vietnam, which claimed that the United States was using that claim as a pretext to go to war. What really happened on August 4, 1964? Did President Johnson report the truth to Congress?

The answer: No, it was a lie. There was no August 4 attack, and in fact, Defense Department planning for war had begun weeks, even months, earlier.



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I know it was a false-flag operation from personal experience.

### **My Place in the Puzzle**

Among the many books written about the Vietnam War, half a dozen note a 1967 letter to the editor, published by a Connecticut newspaper, that was instrumental in pressing the Johnson administration to tell the truth about how the war was started. The letter was mine. On the 50th anniversary of the Tonkin events, this is an account of my role and its aftermath.

Though I was not on either of the ships that were supposedly attacked by the North Vietnamese on August 4, giving me firsthand knowledge of events, as a Navy officer, I was privy to classified Navy communications, and I happened to be in the right place at the right time to find out what happened.

I was the nuclear weapons officer on the *USS Pine Island*. The *Pine Island*, which had been in Japan at the time of the claimed August 4 attack, was the first ship to enter the war zone from outside, although several other U.S. naval ships besides *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* were already there. My ship anchored in Danang Harbor in mid-August 1964, and stayed there for about two weeks. I had responsibility for 20-plus atomic depth bombs (technically known as Mark 101 Lulus) in the ship's nuclear weapons storage area. Our mission was to provide naval operations support and, if ordered, to load those atomic depth bombs onto seaplanes whose targets would be enemy submarines.

En route to Vietnam, I had occasion to read the classified messages sent from the *Maddox* to higher command on the night of the claimed August 4 attack. At first they said the ships were maneuvering at high speed to avoid numerous torpedoes. Then about two hours after the start of the incident, a message said, in effect, "Oops! Looks like our sonar was malfunctioning and the torpedoes were really false images on the scope."

Some months later, while in the Long Beach Naval Shipyard, I happened to meet the chief sonarman of what I later recalled as the *Maddox*, although I did not remember his name. As we walked together toward the main gate to catch a bus, we "talked shop." I asked him what happened during the August 4 incident, and he said the torpedoes were actually large underwater swirls of water created by the ship's rudder being moved at high speed, creating an underwater effect which produces a sonar image appearing to be a solid object.

While I was in Vietnam, I'd felt the United States was right to be there, defending "democracy" against communism. But after leaving naval service in June 1965, I began to have doubts as I learned disturbing things about the design and aim of U.S. foreign policy (see, for instance, Laurence H. Shoup and William Minter's 1977 *Imperial Brain Trust: The Council on Foreign Relations and United States Foreign Policy*).

In time I came to feel that I'd been conned by America's leaders and that America had no moral right to be in Vietnam. Moreover, the war itself looked to me to be more and more unwinnable by America. As the body count mounted, I became active in the anti-war movement as a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. I didn't march in the streets carrying a placard, but I did sign an ad by VVAW that was published in *The New Republic* with the names of several hundred Vietnam vets, including mine.

Although I felt the ad wouldn't bring the war to a conclusion, I was unsure of what else I might do. Then in November 1967, I heard Senator Wayne Morse (D-Ore.) say on the evening news that President Johnson was replacing the Constitution with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Morse's remark dissolved my perplexity and crystallized something deep within me. Because of his comment, I thought I could help the anti-war effort and my country by undercutting the basis on which the war was conducted —



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namely, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

I knew the resolution was based on false information. So after several weeks' anxious reflection on the situation — wondering “Will I get fired from my teaching job?” and “Will I hear a knock on the door from the FBI?” — I wrote my letter to the editor.

In late November 1967, I sent it to my local newspaper, the *New Haven* [Connecticut] *Register*, accusing President Johnson, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff of giving false information to Congress in their report about American destroyers being attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 4, 1964. My letter appeared on December 6, 1967. I identified myself as a former naval officer aboard the seaplane tender USS *Pine Island*, and said I based my charge upon classified radio messages and a conversation with the sonarman on the *Maddox* on the night of the claimed attack.

Those two sources were in agreement that the ships had not been attacked on August 4. I wrote about the incident:

I recall clearly the confusing radio messages sent at that time by the destroyers — confusing because the destroyers themselves were not certain they were being attacked. Granted that some North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats were in the area and used harassing maneuvers, the question is this: Did they actually fire shells or torpedoes at U.S. warships? The answer is no.

I learned this by speaking with the chief sonarman of the *Maddox* who was in the sonar room during the “attack.” He told me that his evaluation of the sonar scope picture was negative, meaning that no torpedoes were fired through the water, at the ship or otherwise. And he also said that he consistently reported this to the commanding officer during the “attack.” My naval experience as an antisubmarine warfare officer makes it clear that a chief sonarman's judgment in such a situation is more reliable than that of anyone else on the ship, including the commanding officer. No one is in a better position to know than the chief, and in this case his judgment was that there was no attack.

Yet the Pentagon reported to the President that North Vietnam had attacked us.

My letter got worldwide attention. I was covered by wire services, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CBS Evening News, and TV crews from Japan and the Netherlands. I was also covered by local media and interviewed by radio shows across the country and for a documentary film, *In the Year of the Pig*. Even the *Soviet Military Review* got into the act, saying I had “confessed” to a frame-up in Vietnam. The letter became, in the words of one book about the Tonkin Gulf events, “a national sensation.” Make that “international.”

Though my letter helped Senator J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) launch the Senate Foreign Relations Committee into a full-scale investigation of the Tonkin events, my veracity was questioned repeatedly, as were my sanity and patriotism.

My problem lay in the fact that the radio messages sent by the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* were classified and therefore not publicly disclosed in full, and the fact that neither the U.S. military nor the executive branch wanted the truth to come out.

Evidence of government's reticence to disclose the truth was made apparent during the Senate hearings when the government did not produce the chief sonarman from the *Turner Joy*. A thorough investigation would have produced every sonarman on both ships — a mere handful of people — for an



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official inquiry. As well, there was no reason, other than coverup, to not make available to the Senate investigation all of the radio transmissions made by the ships about the incident.

In the aftermath of writing the letter, I was personally vilified. As the political scene heated up owing to the Senate investigation, an editorial entitled “Is John White’s Sonarman Listening?” appeared in the *Register*. It said, “If this mysterious chief sonarman does indeed exist, surely he would have come forward or had been produced by now. We’re certain that even if the Navy wanted to, it couldn’t keep such a key witness concealed.... We wonder whether White even wants to believe the destroyers were attacked when he remarks, ‘I think that an admission by North Vietnam would be the most conclusive evidence [that an attack took place].’ The title for ‘most naive man’ has another strong contender.”

The matter — and my public shaming — rested there for two decades. Then validation happened.

### **Unraveling the Mystery**

In 1987, I located the missing chief sonarman. He is Joseph E. Schaperjahn, then retired and living in Richmond, Virginia.

I found Chief Schaperjahn thanks to Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale, coauthor with his wife, Sybil, of a 1984 book, *In Love and War*, which was dramatized on television in 1987. At the time of the Tonkin events, Stockdale was a fighter pilot on the aircraft carrier *Oriskany*; he flew air defense for the destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* on the night of August 4, 1964. He was later shot down, held as a POW for nearly eight years, and served as commanding officer of the POWs at Hoa-Lo Prison in Hanoi. (The prison, now destroyed, is better known as the infamous Hanoi Hilton.) For his heroic action there, Stockdale was awarded the Medal of Honor. As I watched Stockdale’s story unfold on television, I was struck by his statement about not seeing any torpedo boats that night. Here is how he put it in his book as he described his debriefing after returning to the carrier:

“Did you see any boats?”

“Not a one. No boats, no boat wakes, no ricochets off boats, no boat gunfire, no torpedo wakes — nothing but black sea and American firepower. But for goodness’ sake, I must be going crazy. How could all of that commotion have built up out there without *something* being behind it?”

“Have a look at this. This is what Herrick, the commodore on the *Maddox*, has been putting out, flash precedence, plain language to Washington and the world in general tonight.”

I was handed a few sheets of a rough communications log — on which were transcribed all the messages from the *Maddox* since I had left the ship.... The document as a whole read like a monologue of a man turning himself inside out. For the first hour or so, it was all assertive.... Then every so often a message of doubt, a message expressing reservations, would pop up — about sonars not operating properly, about radars not locking on targets, about probable false targets, about false perceptions due to lack of visibility. But still, it mainly reflected the tone of victimized vessels being attacked — that is, until I got to the last page and a half; then, as I read down them, everything seemed to flip around. There was denial of the correctness of immediately preceding messages, doubt about the validity of whole blocks of messages, ever more skeptical appraisal of detection equipment’s performance, the mention of overeager sonar operators, the lack of any visual sightings of boats by the destroyers, and finally there were lines expressing doubt that there had been *any boats out there that night at all*. The commodore urged a complete evaluation of the mixup before any further action be taken.



Written by [John White](#) on March 12, 2014

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After watching the program, I wrote to Stockdale. A few weeks later, to my surprise, he called me. “I think I know where you can find your sonarman,” he said, and pointed to a passage in Eugene Windchy’s 1971 book, *Tonkin Gulf*. In fact, there were several references to Schaperjahn, identifying him as chief sonarman of the *Turner Joy* — not the *Maddox*, as I had incorrectly recalled — and noting his evaluation of the situation that night.

I called Schaperjahn, with the gratifying result of confirming, after 20 years, that I hadn’t been substantially wrong and that those who thought I was lying would finally face the full truth. Schaperjahn had not spoken publicly about any of that night’s happenings, except for his comments to Windchy, who had sleuthed him out in 1970.

It became clear why “John White’s sonarman” was never found. It hinged on the fact that I made a simple mistake by saying he was on the *Maddox* when he was actually on the *Turner Joy*. That error was owing to faulty memory, nearly three years after my brief chance encounter with him in the Long Beach Naval Shipyard in March 1965, after we’d returned from WestPac duty. Although the complete list of crew members on the two ships was requested by the Senate investigators, after the hearings reporter Joseph C. Goulden discovered that eight sonarmen were missing from the “complete” list. In his 1969 book *Truth Is the First Casualty*, Goulden commented that this incident “is indicative of the enthusiasm the Pentagon has for inquiries into the Tonkin episode.” Put simply, the Navy Department kept off its “complete” list the sonarman I had spoken to, and never pointed out the fact — clearly known to it — that I’d misidentified Schaperjahn’s ship.

In a telephone conversation, Schaperjahn confirmed that he was the man with whom I had spoken. He also reiterated that he informed his commanding officer during the Tonkin events that there were no torpedoes being fired at the ships, and that the images on the sonar scope were “knuckles” in the water, large subsurface swirls formed by the violent motion of a ship’s rudder at high speed that give a sonar return that appears as a solid object. And, most important, he said he was told during the event that the ship’s commander didn’t want to hear his negative reports; the same thing was said to him in a debriefing afterward in the Philippines. That left him, he said, with the uneasy feeling there may have been a type of script from higher authority played out that night in the Gulf of Tonkin to give the semblance of unprovoked attack. (Making the night’s incident even more suspicious is the fact that the United States retaliated almost instantly for the alleged attack by flying sorties against North Vietnamese vessels and military sites. Johnson reported those attacks to America on television on August 5. The operation would have taken weeks of planning.)

### **Coverup and Conspiracy?**

In our recorded conversation, Schaperjahn told me that when the Senate investigation got under way, he was in the Portsmouth, Virginia, Naval Hospital. An admiral called him from the Pentagon to ask whether he knew me. Schaperjahn’s recollection of my name was not clear at the time, so he answered “no.” That closed the conversation, but he was left with the distinct feeling that if he’d said yes, there would have been a lot of flak coming at him. Later on, he realized he did indeed know me because of our brief meeting, but by then the investigation was over. The Defense Department had used a cloak of silence about my error in naming Schaperjahn’s ship to stonewall the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and, apparently, the admiral wanted to be sure there would be no corroboration by Schaperjahn in exposing the coverup.

To reinforce that cloak of silence, Schaperjahn was immediately transferred to a ship in the Black Sea and was virtually incommunicado during the Gulf of Tonkin hearings. At the time, he was just two



Written by [John White](#) on March 12, 2014

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months short of retirement. It is customary for such a senior person with so little time left in service to be stationed ashore prior to discharge. Schaperjahn's urgent reassignment was totally out of the ordinary and later led him to think that it was directly connected to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's search for John White's missing sonarman.

The testimonies of Stockdale and Schaperjahn should be sufficient to show that the August 1964 "attack" was a hoax intended to plunge the United States into the Vietnam War, but there is additional evidence.

The now-declassified radio messages by the destroyers were made public in 1987. Captain John Herrick, commodore of the two-ship patrol, radioed this message to the commander in chief of the Pacific at 12:30 a.m. on August 5, 1964: "Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful." He also stated, "It was the echo of our outgoing sonar beam hitting the rudders, which were then full over, and reflected back into the receiver. Most of the *Maddox's*, if not all of the *Maddox's*, reports were probably false."

And North Vietnam, even after winning the war, has always strongly denied ever firing torpedoes at the destroyers. When former Vietnam-era Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara met Vietnam's retired military strategist and war hero, 85-year-old General Vo Nguyen Giap in 1995, he asked him what really happened in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 4, 1964. Giap replied, "Absolutely nothing." In a follow-up interview with the *Washington Post*, McNamara said he was now absolutely sure the August 4 attack never happened. But it was precisely that non-event that McNamara reported as fact to President Johnson, who in turn reported it to Congress, deceiving it into passing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

Twenty years after I'd come forward, with more than a bit of apprehension about being charged with treason for revealing secret information, I was pleased to have my story completed and to feel "cleared" of the "crime" of speaking out against what I saw as governmental deception. That deception was real and, as we now know, ultimately led to the tragic loss of more than 58,000 Americans, spending billions of dollars on materiel, and national disunity at home.

It was far worse for Vietnam and southeast Asia, of course, where the destruction was enormous and the death toll ran into the millions — many of those deaths were committed by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong against their own people.

It is the duty of soldiers to follow orders, not to question the mission they're sent on by their government. But in a self-governing republic such as ours, it is the duty of citizens to inspect, question, and, if need be, challenge the missions on which government sends soldiers into action, especially where the commitment of American lives is involved.

Americans have learned the hard way that the U.S. government sometimes sacrifices American GIs for worthless causes such as "nation building" in Haiti and Serbia, and "pacification" in Mogadishu and Kosovo, where there is no threat to our national security but a lot of power and wealth to be gained by what President Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex. (Today it is the military-industrial-intelligence-financial complex.)

We the people are the owners of the country and the masters of the government, and if one has to take some heat for unclocking scoundrels who wrap themselves in the flag to justify their illegal, immoral actions, so be it.

*Photo of USS Maddox: AP Images*



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*John White has published 17 books and numerous articles. This article is drawn from his new book The Gulf of Tonkin Events — Fifty Years Later. (To order this book, [click here](#).)*

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