

Destroyer buzzed by Russians named for St. Mike's grad

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In this handout photo provided by the U.S. Navy, Two Russian Sukhoi Su-24 attack aircraft fly over the USS Donald Cook (DDG 75) on April 12, 2016 in the Baltic Sea. Donald Cook, an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer forward deployed to Rota, Spain, is conducting a routine patrol in the U.S. 6th Fleet area of operations in support of U.S. national security interests in Europe. (Photo by U.S. Navy via Getty Images)(Photo: Handout, Getty Images)



U.S. defense officials say two Russian SU-24 jets made "aggressive" and "unsafe flight maneuvers" as they buzzed the USS Donald Cook in the Baltic Sea.

While watching the news, Sen. Patrick Leahy was startled by a recent report about Russian helicopters and fighter jets harassing an American Navy destroyer in the Baltic Sea on two different occasions.

"I said, 'The Donald Cook?' It was a shock," the Vermont Democrat recalled, referring to mock attacks earlier this month aimed at the USS Donald Cook.

Leahy's familiarity with the vessel can be traced back to his presence at its 1998 commissioning ceremony in Maine. Moreover, the guided-missile destroyer was named in honor of a fellow St. Michael's College alumnus.

Leahy, class of 1961, acknowledged his sense of kinship despite never actually crossing paths with the Brooklyn-born Cook. After his 1956 graduation from the Colchester school founded by a Catholic order, he had enlisted in the Marines and died a decade later at age 33 as a prisoner of war in Vietnam.

Ogden Dodge knew Cook well. They met at a morning mass and were dormitory roommates during their senior year, bonding over a shared interest in athletics. "Don was a great football player," he pointed out, in a phone interview from his Rhode Island home.

They had something else in common, too. In 1954, Dodge arrived at St. Mike's immediately following a stint with the Army in Korea. Cook, planning a career in the military, wanted to know what the combat zone had been like.

"He was a part of our gang, four or five pals," Dodge said. "Don and I had a two-room suite, where we ran the college's ski franchise, renting out skis, boots and poles for \$3. We also had the Coke concession at dances. That was our pocket money."

Dodge even witnessed Cook meeting his wife-to-be, a young native of Burlington named Laurette Giroux. After they married at the end of 1956, the newlywed joined the Marines.

"Don and Laurette went to Quantico, in Virginia, for his basic training, then to Camp Lejeune and later to the Presidio's language school to study Chinese," Dodge recounted. "Along the way, they had four children."

In late 1964, Cook was sent to Vietnam among the early advisers in what had not yet become America's war. Within weeks, he was ambushed, wounded and captured by the Viet Cong in an area east of Saigon.



Donald Cook served in the Marine Corps after his 1956 graduation from St. Michael's College in Colchester." and "In 1964, DONALD COOK was a U.S. Marine captured in Vietnam who died there three years later as a prisoner of war." (Photo: COURTESY OF ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE)

Until 1973, nobody in the United States was aware of Cook's three-year captivity in a series of jungle POW camps and subsequent death from malaria.

"We'd send each other Christmas cards with notes and occasionally call to catch up on things, but lost touch after a while," Dodge said.

He was busy as an advertising copywriter in New York City and helping his wife raise their four kids. Cook was busy with soldierly pursuits.

While still unsure of her husband's whereabouts in the 1960s, Laurette Cook spoke about the war at rallies and demonstrations, according to her 2013 obituary in the Burlington Free Press.



St. Michael's College student Donald Cook, right, standing next to his future wife, Laurette Giroux of Burlington, in the 1950s. (Photo: COURTESY OF ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE)

Before her death at age 80, the widow had accepted his posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor in 1980 and attended the 1998 commissioning of the USS Donald Cook.

Ogden Dodge didn't realize Cook had been in Vietnam before spotting a 1980s magazine article about an American POW — promoted from captain to colonel while still held by the Viet Cong — receiving the Medal of Honor.

"I always think about him when I'm praying," he said.

"When St. Mike's invited Don's classmates to the commissioning of the ship in Maine, I thought, 'I can't miss this.'"

That's where Dodge met two men who had been prisoners with Cook. The event featured a display of artifacts from their confinement. Among the memorabilia was a small rosary his old friend had fashioned from stalks of rice.

Both of the former POWs at the commissioning explained they "would not be alive if not for Don's self-sacrifice," Dodge recalled in a remembrance he mailed to the St. Michael's alumni magazine this spring.

About a half-dozen survivors held captive with Cook were able to ultimately reveal details about his years of captivity, some of it recorded on the citation that accompanies his medal: "Colonel Cook willingly and unselfishly put the interests of his comrades before that of his own well-being and, eventually, his life. Giving more needy men his medicine and drug allowance while constantly nursing them, he risked infection from contagious diseases while in a rapidly deteriorating state of health."

The fellow prisoners praised his calm resourcefulness. During an intimidation session, a guard put a pistol to Cook's head to demonstrate the extent to which they would go to extract a propaganda statement. He defused the situation by reciting the nomenclature of the gun.

Conditions frequently meant being held in small bamboo enclosures, commonly known as tiger cages. Food and water were rarely sufficient. In some instances, they ate rats. The Americans, often moved from one makeshift camp to another, suffered illnesses in addition to their injuries.

On a 1967 monthlong forced march heading toward the border with Cambodia, Cook apparently succumbed to malaria. His captors probably buried him where he fell.

The 1998 ship commissioning display included a poignant note that Cook had scrawled for his family on the inside of a cigarette package, later smuggled out by another prisoner who had been released. Dodge is still astonished by the message: "Don expressed his love for them and wrote, 'Do not worry about me. I am in a state of grace.'"

Laurette Cook's ashes were interred at the New Mount Calvary Cemetery in Burlington. Although there's a site set aside for her husband at Arlington National Cemetery, his remains never returned home. Donald Cook is presumably in an unmarked grave somewhere in Vietnam.

Leahy said he has hope, however. Other missing-in-action and prisoner-of-war fatalities have been located over the years since the controversial war ended in 1975. There are search teams devoted that task.

Olivia Spaulding, Cook's granddaughter who is a 2011 St. Michael's graduate, spoke at the 2007 dedication ceremony for a statue of the grandfather she never knew. It was being installed in Overlook Park, near the college where they were students half a century apart. She read aloud from a recently-discovered letter he had written to his offspring in case something ever happened to him.

Seemingly a patriot who cherished peace, Cook apologized that his choice to be a Marine would not bring them wealth but, because of that choice, perhaps "you and your children to come may never know the burden of bearing arms."

Cook's legacy

- St. Michael's College bestows the Colonel Donald G. Cook '56 Award to alumni for unselfish service to others.
- Since 2014, Cook Hall at the Presidio's Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, California, has been named after Donald Cook, who graduated from the school's Chinese Mandarin course in May 1961.
- Colonel Donald G. Cook is recognized with a "Freedom Tree" on the Vermont State House lawn.
- Colonel Donald G. Cook Chapter 5 Disabled American Veterans (DAV) of Burlington is named in his honor.
- The Colonel Donald G. Cook annual award is presented to U.S. Marine Corps active duty officer or enlisted person or Government Civilian intelligence professional to recognize professional excellence and exceptional dedication to duty in Intelligence operations.

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