

Wallet Lost in Antarctica Returned to Midway Docent after Half Century

Courtesy of Mr. David Koontz
USS Midway Museum



“Sorry sir, but we’re afraid your driver’s license has expired...um, 53 years ago...”

In 1968, after serving 13 months as a Navy meteorologist at the bottom of the Earth, Lt. Paul Grisham packed his frost-bitten bags and returned to his family in California. Not everything, however, made it home from Operation Deep Freeze in Antarctica.

His wallet stayed behind.

The U.S. Navy supported Antarctic research operations on “The Ice” for nearly 50 years. Navy personnel rotated through the southernmost continent providing virtually every type of operational and logistical services imaginable. Paul’s orders to the land of snow and penguins came out of the blue.

“Receipt of the orders came as a bit of a shock,” said Paul, a Midway volunteer docent since 2007. “I had never considered even volunteering for Operation Deep Freeze. But, orders are orders.”

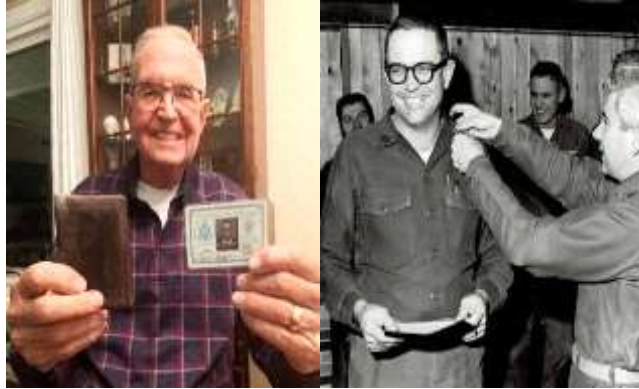
Predicting the weather in Antarctica is a far cry from meteorological prognostication in a place like San Diego. A daily forecast of “sunny and 75” wouldn’t cut it on The Ice where the average summertime temperature tops out at only around 25 degrees and winter lows can drop below -65 degrees.

“The ability to forecast in such a place with an area that is about equal in size to South America with so very few reporting stations took all of my 15 years of experience to be able to accomplish,” recalled Paul, now 91 years old. “In a word, tough, but doable.”

Paul retired from the Navy in 1977 after nearly 30 years of service that took him around the world from Hawaii, Guam and Japan to two tours on the aircraft carriers USS Bennington and USS Hancock. His naval service was long behind him when he got an out-of-left-field call that rekindled decades-old memories.

He was contacted in January about the wallet and to verify his existence and address. Three days later, and for the first time in 53 years, Paul had the Lord Buxton wallet back in his hands.

“The receipt was akin to a bolt out of the blue, albeit a more than welcome one,” said Paul, who didn’t remember even losing the wallet. “Viewing the wallet and the various cards brought a flood of memories long since forgotten. My old ID card showed me with dark brown hair.”



A three-person team of amateur sleuths located Paul after contacting the Naval Weather Service Association of which he is still a member. The wallet was actually found in 2014 when the hut that Paul had lived in was being demolished. It sat in a drawer for years until someone decided to track down the owner.

Seeing his old driver's license, a scribbled recipe for homemade Kahlua, a beer ration punch card, and other items for the first time in more than half a century, Paul couldn't help but reflect on his year-long stint to Antarctica. It was a lesson in patience, especially during the grueling winter.

"The long winter of seven months while we were 'locked in' took some dealing with," said Paul, who received his promotion to lieutenant while on The Ice. "The sun went down and we were in the long, black night for five of those months. We were also allowed but one Navy shower per week."

There were also plenty of memorable moments as well as a strong esprit de corps that developed amongst the group.

"We all became quite close," said Paul of the 180 staff members who remained in Antarctica during the winter. "They were the most likable, congenial group of men that I ever had the pleasure of working with."

Paul specifically remembers his friendly Cold-War competition with a Soviet citizen on the staff.

"Stationed with us was a Russian scientist by the name of Boris Lopatin, who was the only person that I couldn't beat in chess," Paul recalls fondly. "He eventually told me that in 10 or 15 years I might be as good as he was."

A long-time volunteer for the USS Midway Museum, Paul continues to share his love of the Navy and his experiences with guests. "The Midway is one-of-a-kind as is evidenced by its worldwide reputation, its popularity amongst local folks and its educational experience for students," said Paul who has more than 5,000 volunteer hours. "Meeting and talking to our guests is the highlight of my day. I truly believe in giving back."

The unique story of Paul's lost-and-found wallet actually gained national as well as international attention including articles in the New York Times, the Washington Post and on CNN.

"It has weathered the years all considered," said Paul of his now famous wallet. "The viral nature of this story has put me in touch with past shipmates both from The Ice and the USS Hancock. That might be the real treasure."

A smiling Paul Grisham being promoted to Lieutenant while on The Ice, and 53 years later after being reunited with his ID card and wallet. In the immortal words of legendary entertainer Jackie Gleason, "**How sweet it is!**"