

We're Breaking Jack out of Arlington

*Several close friends asked us if this had really happened.
We have managed to never answer that question!*

By Daniel J. Basta

It was a bright but chilly day in the spring that year as we walked slowly behind the horse drawn caisson carrying the remains of our buddy and brother. The United States Marine Corps was interring the remains of one of their own, 1st Lieutenant John “Jack” Kaminski with full military honors. Jack had been a Marine Corps Officer in Vietnam and once a Marine always a Marine. He was 72 years old when life suddenly left him while training on a trail he had run on forever. We had run that trail together a hundred times. We mourned him terribly that day and still do. He had been one of us on every adventure, dive, and extreme athletic event since our first expedition to the South Pacific in 1993. Four years later we would return again to Arlington National Cemetery to see Jack, but things would be different – very different!

It all began when our buddy Tony announced he was having a birthday party to celebrate his 80th. My buddies Larry, Dave and I had been shocked that our adventuring buddy, “Tony the Tornado” and companion for more than a decade of diving shipwrecks and adventuring in the South Pacific was that old. Where had the time gone? Tony had retired and moved away to South Carolina. We three resolved to make a road trip to visit him for his birthday, we had all been through so much together. None of us had seen Tony in the four years since our buddy Jack’s internment at Arlington National Cemetery.

Then it somehow just hit us, “Let’s just pick-up our old buddy Tony and keep on going to the Florida Keys and re-visit some ship wrecks.” We had dived and explored together many exciting and dangerous shipwrecks throughout the South Pacific. When we called Tony to tell him we were making a road trip to see him and picking him up to go on to Key West he was

genuinely excited and said: “Hey, we’ll be getting the band back together.” It was a chance to take another grab at the ring to dive together once again like old times and to tell lies. He also had said, “As soon we get to the Keys we’ll have a drink and lite up a cigar and it will be just as if Jack was with us.” Jack had been with us on every one of those dives and had participated in all the adventures that surrounded them. Tony and Jack had been very close buddies on some of those expeditions. We always traveled in two man buddy teams.

Although that was all that Tony had said, our devious minds just began churning on their own accord. Soon we were remembering all the “jams” we had gotten out of back in the South Pacific and Jack’s antics. Like the time in the airport on Fiji when Jack convinced the crew of Fijians working in the café he was a health or building inspector. He decided we needed to be entertained and walked around the café and the kitchen with a tape measure measuring things and making faces. I never knew which he was nor where he had gotten the tape measure. The Fijians didn’t know what to think. In those days we had become masters of the “slide of hand” and “calculated bluff,” plus a little touch of boldness to get through. The crazy thought had just formed, “Why couldn’t we bring Jack along?” All we had to do was to temporarily steal him and his Urn out of Arlington National Cemetery. How hard could that be? We had pulled off almost as challenging schemes getting things out of the South Pacific and even through China. Admittedly, we had scared ourselves pretty good once or twice. However, if we went through with breaking Jack out and got caught, we couldn’t plea the “ignorance defense” that we used in the past. Getting caught would probably go pretty bad for us. Of course, Tony would be in the clear in South Carolina. But what were we to do ? It was like an homage to Jack, we had to break him out. Besides this was a little crazy and that would be right up Jack’s alley.

We decided we simply not to get caught. All we had to have was an “airtight plan” and a little “hutzpah.” Besides whoever heard of stealing remains from Arlington National Cemetery? They wouldn’t be looking for it and that would work to our advantage. The die was cast – we were going to break Jack out of Arlington! We went to work just like planning an expedition in the South Pacific.

Our first step was to closely survey the Columbarium where Jack's ashes were interned. We already knew the Columbarium pretty well and had been there many times. My parents are interned in the same Columbarium section and so is another Vietnam era Marine buddy of Jack's. Consequently, we had walked every foot of this section of the Columbarium a number of times. Even on holidays there isn't very much traffic in the Columbarium and the way it's divided up by walls it is easy to hide or not to be seen. I have heard this particular Columbarium described as a little like a maze. I remember thinking that would be all for the good and our plan.

It also helped our plan that Dave's parents are also interned in Arlington and so are Larry's wife's parents. Therefore, we three each have the prized car-pass to get into Arlington and drive to a grave site at any time. We hadn't been sure, however, about surveillance cameras at the Columbarium. Neither of us had remembered seeing any but we had to check to be sure – there were none we had to worry about. We also needed to know the exact types of bolts which held the stone name plates to each small crypt or compartment in which an Urn is interned. There are only four bolts which secure the stone name plate and these bolts are supposed to be tamper proof. A special tool is needed. All we had to do was to acquire the special tool, remove the four bolts, lift off the stone name plate, remove the Urn, and then put the name plate back and secure the four bolts. Of course we could not leave finger prints nor a trail of where we had gotten the tool. Who would even know or suspect Jack was not in the crypt? A perfect plan we thought.

After struggling over the plan, the actual caper of breaking Jack out of Arlington had turned out to be pretty easy. But even so, it was the high point of "getting the band back together." The final plan seemed pretty simple and the whole caper should take less than 45 minutes or an hour at most. It had been just like planning a multi-level deep shipwreck dive with way-points and decompression stops. Timing is everything when diving and it was also vital for a successful caper. We chose a very hot day in the middle of August, a day in the middle of the

week and the hottest part of the day to break into the crypt and steal Jack and his Urn. We figured few visitors would be around.

On the appointed day, each of us entered the Cemetery through the main gate just past the visitors center, at slightly different times, flashed our passes and proceeded to the grave site our permits authorized and waited for the signal. The plan was for me to arrive first at the Columbarium. I reconnoiter the Columbarium and no one was anywhere to be seen, even on the surrounding grassy areas. It was noon and hot as blazes as planned. The ground crews were at lunch and likely to linger there for a while even after lunch, given the heat. After I cleared the area I immediately called Dave and Larry and started things in motion. The plan was for Dave to arrive at the Columbarium next and then Larry almost a full 20 minutes later. Dave was driving a pick-up truck which could easily be mistaken for a work vehicle. He was also dressed like one of the workers we would often see around the Cemetery. He parked across the road and down from where I had parked in front of the entrance to the Columbarium. It really did look like the entrance to a maze. There were no other vehicles in sight. The plan was working so far!

Dave had then come directly into "Maze" carrying a large tool bag to the corridor Jack was on. We exchanged only a few words. "Let's get this thing done," he said. I then said, using diver speak, "I'm running low on air, don't leave me hanging." We both knew exactly what that meant. He certainly looked the part of a workman and went to work immediately, the tool to remove the bolts was working easily. The bolts didn't even appear to have been tighten. It was a good thing we had all practiced using the tool. In order to see Dave at the crypt, a visitor would have to be walking in that specific short corridor. The walls and other corridors screened him from view just as we planned.

I walked out of the entrance to check if all was still clear and wandered around the Columbarium making sure no one had entered or was nearby. I walk by Dave a time or two when he was working and gave him the okay sign. At one point I had to stop to help him remove the

stone name plate. Fortunately I had remembered to bring the pair of rubber gloves. Dave had his on from the beginning. He put them on before he left his truck. Yikes, all we would have to do was to drop or damage the stone name plate and we would have to abort. In what seemed like a few seconds, Dave had removed Jack's Urn and placed it in the tool bag and zippered it shut. We put the stone name plate up and in place and Dave began replacing the bolts when we heard voices in the adjacent corridor. "Oh shit, hurry it up" I said while holding the name plate in place. When Dave had two bolts started and a firm grip on the stone plate, I pulled off my rubber gloves and immediately went to check out the voices in an adjacent corridor.

I quickly came upon three people strolling along reading nameplates, one man and two women. All three were in shorts and looked hot. They were seemed to be looking for someone. They had probably come into the Columbarium from the other side which I simply hadn't check – nobody comes in from that side. There is no parking and they must have walked a long distance in the sun. In the shade of the Maze, they seemed to be taking their time and enjoying being out of the sun. It's always compelling when visiting Arlington to read the name plates, or head stones, of others than your loved one.. That is exactly what they were doing and I had no idea how long they had been in the Maze. However, they were now coming our way and would soon be around the corner into Jack's corridor!

The only thing to do was to engage them in a conversation to slow them down even more. It is always easy to talk to visitors to Arlington because everyone is there for the same reason and shares in the experience – except for us that day. I pointed out to them my parents crypt to them. They were practically standing in front of it. I probably bought Dave maybe three or four minutes and was already making up a cover story in my mind, but when we came around the corner he was gone. My new friends and I continued down the corridor right past Jack's nameplate, which was perfectly in place, to the end of the corridor where they found their loved one. After a brief chat, I left through the main entrance and went to my car. Dave's truck was already gone and Larry was nowhere to be seen.

Larry arrived as planned when both Dave and I were in the Columbarium. He parked just in front of Dave's truck and opened his trunk, pretending he was looking for something. The timing had been great. Dave walked out of the Columbarium, crossed the street and walked between the vehicles setting the equipment bag on the ground between them. He then got into his truck and drove back to his parents grave site to wait for both Larry and me to pass and leave the Cemetery. Larry picked up the tool bag put it in his trunk and then drove directly past where Dave was waiting and out the Main Gate to home where we would rendezvous later.

Seeing both Dave and Larry were gone from the Columbarium, I knew we had pulled it off. We really had broken Jack out of Arlington. It was a good feeling, but I was still feeling edgy and a little nervous. We still had to stick to the plan and not get too cocky. I waited for maybe ten minutes and then also made my way out through the main gate, driving past Dave so he could see me leave. Ten minutes later Dave did the same. About a half hour later we three were in Larry's garage with Jack in the Urn! Wow, it was like one of those extreme highs similar to a few we had experienced in the past with Jack, when making it back from a very deep dive. It was high fives all around, a cold beer and a toast to all of us including Jack and Tony. We got Tony on the phone and all he kept saying was unbelievable, over and over again. The Band was getting back together for one last "mission" and Jack was coming along with us – it was unbelievable.

About a week or so later Dave, Larry and I were on the road to pick up Tony in South Carolina on our way to the Florida Keys. We had removed the plastic bag containing Jack's ashes from the Urn and placed it into a cigar box, but not just any cigar box. The box was a "Montecristo Churchills" box, Jack's favorite cigars! We left the Urn on a shelf in Larry's garage. When we arrived in South Carolina and showed Tony the cigar box all he could still say again was, "unbelievable." We did have a drink and cigar that night in South Carolina with the cigar box and Jack. The next day we were off early to Florida Keys. It was like old times crammed together bumping around the Philippines, except this time Jack was in his cigar box and couldn't tease Tony about his Harley.

We brought the cigar box and Jack everywhere we went. On our dives we put the cigar box in a dry bag with our lunches and brought Jack along with us. A few times a couple of people on the dive boat gave us weird looks when we would talk to the dry bag. Larry's reaction was like old times – "Frig them." Although he hadn't come out and said it very loud. On our last night in Key West we put the cigar box on the bar in "Sloppy Joe's." The bartender commented that a Montecristo was a damn fine cigar. He might have been hinting we give him one. After all the box was on his bar. I think it was Dave who had said, "Yeah it was our buddies favorite cigar and he's in the box." The bartender looked at us and seemed annoyed and said, "Are you guys Frigging with me?" So we opened the box and showed him the bag of ashes and a picture of Jack we had in the box. "God Damn" he had said and then immediately said, "drinks on the house." And he put five shot classes on the bar, one for Jack, and we all then had a toast and drink on Jack, including the bartender. You just got to love certain bartenders.

It had been good fun having Jack along and I am sure his spirit was with us every step of the way and on every dive. However, we had stayed at Sloppy Joe's a little too long and had a little too much to drink, as our bartender and new friend kept buying us drinks. He just could not get over that we had broken Jack out of Arlington National Cemetery – it just tickled him. He seemed to tell anybody in Sloppy Joe's that got up to the bar. He would point at us and the cigar box saying, "yeah I absolutely believe they those guys broke into Arlington Nation Cemetery." I guess we had said too much, but it was Key West and stranger things have been revealed in that bar. The next morning we got up and were loading the car when I asked who had Jack and his cigar box. There were blank stares all around! And then: "I thought you had it, No I thought you had it. It was on the bar at Sloppy Joe's remember!!"

We quickly got into the car and were blasting down the road back to Key West. This was an emergency ! We were staying about 30 miles away up toward Marathon. If we don't find the box who is going to tell Karen, Jack's widow, we lost Jack. For Larry and me it was a déjà vu moment. Over 25 years go we had thought we lost Jack on a shipwreck and agonized over who would tell Karen. It was a bad feeling, just has it had been so long ago, when we pulled up at

Sloppy Joe's. All four of us rushed up to the door. Sloppy Joe's was closed, it as only nine o'clock in the morning.

Two hours later, at about eleven a woman showed up, unlocked the door and went in and of course we followed close behind her. I think she thought we were going to rob the place or kidnap her! Her name was Diane. After convincing her we had no evil intentions she looked all over the bar for the cigar box but found nothing. She knew the bartender who had bought us all drinks the night before. However, today was his day off. Yikes were we ever going to find Jack and his box? We just had to get him back into his crypt in Arlington. Finally after rummaging around in a drawer behind the bar Diane found a slip of paper with the bartender's, Mike, phone number on it. At least we now had a lead.

We called the number Diane had given us for Mike, but his girlfriend answered and told us he had went out earlier fishing with some buddies. Well that was just great ! However, after we tell her we had met Mike last night at Sloppy Joe's, she stops us cold. "Oh you must be the guys with the cigar box!" "Yes, Yes, that's us." She goes on to say that Mike had told her all about it and she was looking at it on the kitchen table as she was talking. She says, "I don't mind the cigar box on my table, but the ashes inside are creepy. When can you guys get here to take it away." "Give us your address and we are on our way!"

We roll-up to their place in only a few minutes, it is only several blocks from Sloppy Joe's. The house is one of those one story "shot gun" bungalows. All the rooms line-up one after the other and the kitchen is in the rear. Mike's girlfriend invites us into the house and all the way into the kitchen to get the cigar box. She doesn't even want to touch it. "You all are welcome to it, like I said it's creepy." There it is the "Montecristo Churchills" box! Tony says, "Dave look in the box to make sure Jack's in it." Day opens the box and looks in, "Well that looks like the bag they put Jack in, but how would I know if it's really Jack." Larry, now very relieved, utters to Dave, "Ask him to sing the French National anthem." We four all start laughing with tears forming in our eyes as we time travel back to the South Pacific – Jack loved to sing that tune in the weirdest

places. Just then we hear from behind us, “Don’t worry that’s your buddy.” It’s Mike the bartender he had just walked in.

Mike is one of those bartenders you just have to admire. He has a PHD in Bio-Chemistry and had lived in the UK and Italy. He is about 35 and living the dream with his twenty something girlfriend in a bungalow in Key West. Working nights in one the best known watering holes in the Keys – Ernst Hemingway and much later Jimmy Buffet use to hang out there. And now Jack and the Montecristo Churchill cigar box are now part of the “lore” of Sloppy Joe’s. Mike will make it so and tells us that we asked him to put Jack and his cigar box under the bar for safe keeping when it got a little rowdy, crowded, and loud. We had gotten so involved in the commotion, living our own little dream, and plain forgot Jack under the bar. Mike thought Jack and the cigar box were safer in his hands anyway because we had consumed a very “respectable” load of Vodka. The fishing had been good that morning and Mike grilled us a tasty lunch of grouper and red snapper. It really did feel a little like the old times and we were just passing through. Because when we left with Jack in hand, we knew we would never see Mike again. We all agreed Jack loved every minute of it.

After returning home we put Jack’s ashes back in the Urn on the shelf in Larry’s garage. We knew we would have to break back into Arlington to put Jack into his resting place. Rolling over the risks in our minds, the thought had occurred not to risk it, since no one knew he was even missing. But we decided that it wouldn’t be fair to our buddy. He had earned the honor in Vietnam to be interned in Arlington and we just had to put him back. We had to make things right. But could we be so lucky again to break into Arlington and not get caught? Then again who breaks into Arlington to put someone’s remains back after they had stolen them? This time it wasn’t so much about us, but rather about Jack.

We laid out our plans accordingly and waited almost six months until we thought the time was right. It was the middle of January and the coldest day of the year. Just as before the Cemetery was empty, especially at midday during the week. We had reversed the caper with a

little twist. Dave would still carry the work bag with the Urn, but he had driven a different truck to the Columbarium - Larry's truck. This time, Larry and I had gone together to the Columbarium in Dave's car. These vehicles had not been in Arlington before. We did this just in case we had been found out earlier and didn't know it. The other vehicles could have been seen on other security cameras, especially at the main gate. Larry and I arrived early, checked that no one was in the Columbarium "maze" or nearby.

It was as before and no one was around, but on this freezing gray day everything had just seemed so desolate. There was hardly a grounds crew person seen anywhere. There was far less work to do at Arlington in midwinter. Larry assisted Dave removing the name plate and it all went so quickly. But there was a little something that we had also placed in the crypt to keep Jack company. Larry had brought it in his coat pocket. It was a small ceremonial Sake bottle and cup that been Jack's favorite artifact. He had them found on a sunken Japanese ship in the South Pacific. They are now in the crypt with Jack for all time. We got away with no one even seeing us at the Columbarium. All is now well among us and Arlington National Cemetery is as always a fabulous national shrine and fascinating place to visit. No one is the wiser as to what we had done and Jack had made the "bands" last mission.

Looking back, everything had been a little anti-climactic to breaking Jack out, except for when we thought we had lost him and his box. The adrenalin rush of breaking him out had been hard to beat. It had been a crazy notion of the first order to break Jack out of Arlington National Cemetery. We had done it. But doing something like this once was more than enough. Several close friends asked us if this had really happened. We have managed to never answer that question.

About the Author. Daniel J. Basta was the Director of the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), within the U.S. Department of Commerce from 1999 to 2016 when he retired after 37 years of government

service as an engineer, scientist, and administrator. He was a member of the Senior Executive Service (SES) for more than two decades and had an extraordinary career both inside and outside of government. He is well known as an explorer, adventurer and master diver who has traveled the world. He has dived more than 160 shipwrecks. Since retirement he has become an accomplished writer and author, writing short stories and tales of his adventures, sometimes to the wildest of places, and of the colorful people in them.