

02-26-2013 – Norfolk VA – **James Reyher and Ryan Harris** Navy Divers



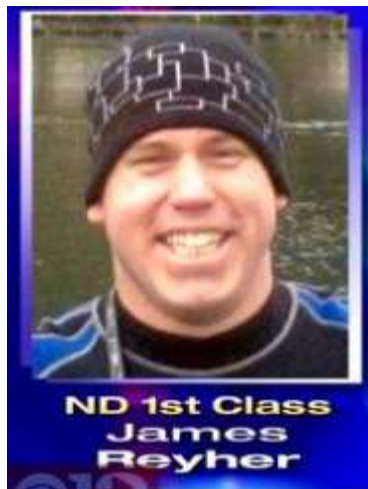
UPDATE: Diving Accident Claims Two Navy Divers

http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=72398

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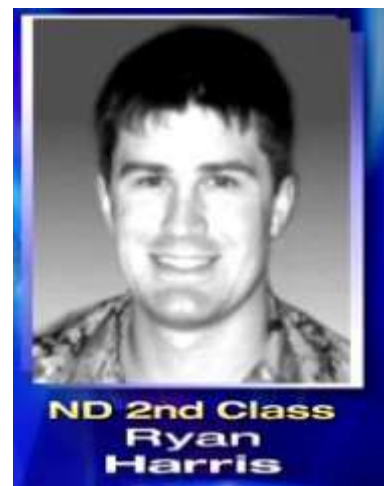
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VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. (NNS) -- Navy Diver 1st Class James Reyher, 28, of Caldwell, Ohio, and Navy Diver 2nd Class Ryan Harris, 23, of Gladstone, Mo., died while conducting dive operations at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Aberdeen, Md., Feb. 26.



Harris and Reyher were assigned to Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit (MDSU) 2, located at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Ft. Story.

"We are deeply saddened by the loss of our teammates," said Capt. John Coffey, Deputy Commander, Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Group 2. "Petty Officer Harris and Petty Officer Reyher were



exceptional Sailors. Our thoughts and prayers are with their families, friends and shipmates during this difficult time."

Harris enlisted in the Navy June 13, 2007 and graduated from Recruit Training Command Great Lakes, Ill. in August 2007. Harris successfully completed dive training at the Navy Diving and Salvage Training Center in Panama City, Fla. and was designated a Navy diver in April 2008. He served at Navy Submarine Support Facility in New London, Conn. from May 2008-June 2011, before reporting to MDSU-2 in June 2011.

Reyher enlisted in the Navy May 28, 2008 and graduated from Recruit Training Command Great Lakes, Ill. in July 2008. Reyher successfully completed dive training at the Navy Diving and Salvage Training Center in Panama City, Fla. and was designated a Navy diver in February 2009. He served at Naval Intermediate Maintenance Facility Pacific Northwest from March 2009-April 2012 before reporting to MDSU-2 in April 2012.

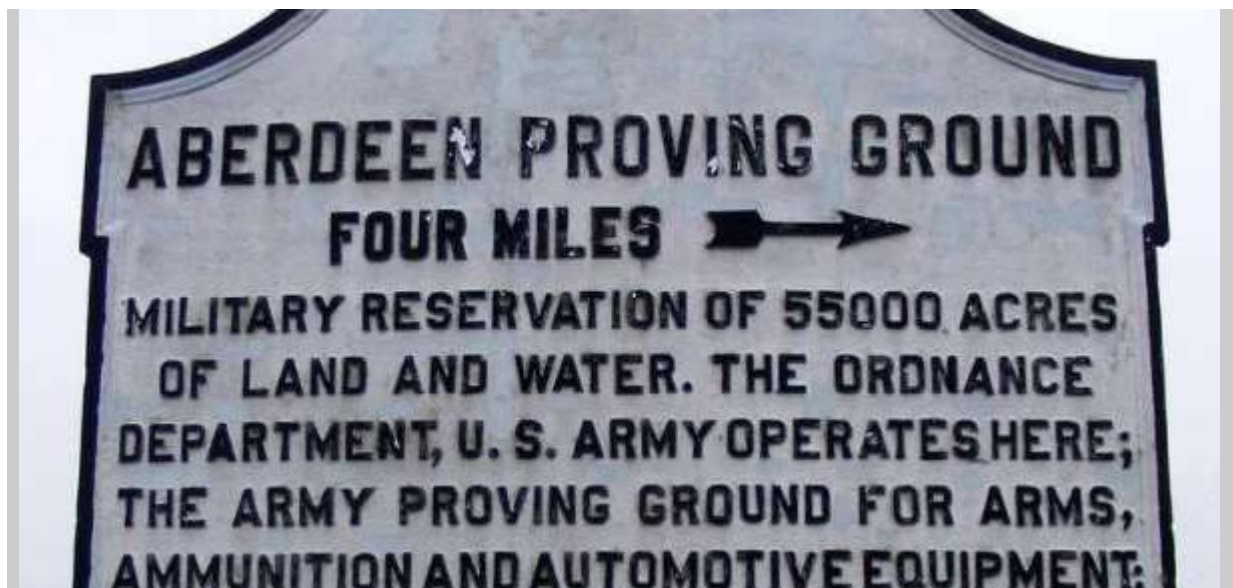
"Ryan and James epitomized the unsung hero persona of the Navy diver. We are fortunate to have had the opportunity to serve with them," said Cmdr. Michael Runkle, commanding officer, MDSU-2. "We are all deeply saddened by their loss and are focusing on supporting their families during this time of need."

EODGRU-2 is conducting an investigation into the deaths of the Sailors.

2 Navy divers drowned in test pond

<http://www.upi.com/blog/2013/04/09/2-Navy-divers-drowned-in-test-pond/8491365520343/>

April 9, 2013 By GABRIELLE LEVY, UPI.com



(crazysanman on Flickr)

The autopsies of two sailors from the Navy Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit who died in an underwater testing pond at a Maryland Army facility in February determined that they died of accidental drowning.

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner said Monday that Diver 1st Class James Reyher, 28, of Caldwell, Ohio and Diver 2nd Class Ryan Harris, 23, of Gladstone, Mo., accidentally drowned during diving operations in the "Super Pond" at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds on February 26.

Further details from the autopsies will not be released for several months until the final report is prepared.

According to the Baltimore Sun, Harris and Reyher's deaths came on the heels of another incident that killed engineering technician George Lazzaro Jr. in January. Details on the cause and manner of Lazzaro's death have yet to be released to the public as the investigation is ongoing.

The Army closed the facility indefinitely in early March in response to the three deaths.

The Underwater Test Facility at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds, a 1,070-foot long and 150-foot deep artificial pond on the Bush River where Army experts conduct shock tests on ships and submarines for the military, private interests and research.

Navy: Two senior leaders face charges in February diver deaths

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/navy-2-senior-leaders-face-charges-diver-deaths-article-1.1332553#ixzz2UnIEZZo5>

Wednesday, May 1, 2013 THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HAGERSTOWN, Md. — Two members of a Virginia-based Navy dive unit face military criminal charges of involuntary manslaughter and dereliction of duty in the February drowning deaths of two divers at an Army facility in northeastern Maryland, a Navy spokeswoman said Wednesday.

The unidentified defendants are "senior leaders" in Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2, which Diver 1st Class James Reyher, 28, of Caldwell, Ohio, and Diver 2nd Class Ryan Harris, 23, of Gladstone, Mo., belonged to, said Lt. Cdr. Charity Hardison of the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command in Virginia Beach, Va.

The sailors drowned Feb. 26 during routine diving operations at the Super Pond underwater weapons-testing facility at Aberdeen Proving Ground, an Army installation about 20 miles northeast of Baltimore.

Their deaths followed the Jan. 30 death of civilian technician George Lazzaro at the same pond. Lazzaro was doing underwater maintenance of the facility. His cause of his death hasn't been released.

Hardison said the Navy will hold an Article 32 investigation, the military equivalent of a preliminary hearing or grand jury investigation, on May 21 at Naval Station Norfolk in Virginia to determine whether the charges will be referred to a court-martial, dealt with administratively or dismissed.

"The command is saying, 'We think there's enough evidence for these charges,'" Hardison said. "An investigating officer will look at the information and decide whether the charges are substantiated."

Hardison said the command won't disclose the defendants' names until the May 21 hearings. She said neither defendant is the unit's commanding officer, executive officer or command master chief, the most senior enlisted sailor in a Navy unit. Hardison said "senior leader" could refer to an enlisted sailor.

The Navy diver deaths were investigated by Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal Group 2 and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. A spokesman for the explosive ordnance unit referred calls to Hardison. An NCIS spokesman didn't immediately reply to an email from The Associated Press for information about the investigation.

The death of Lazzaro, 41, of Nottingham, is being investigated by the Army's Criminal Investigation Division, the Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center at Fort Rucker, Ala., and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The Army units didn't immediately respond to AP queries. An OSHA spokeswoman said that agency's investigation isn't complete.

The test facility, dubbed the "Super Pond," is used to conduct shock testing of vessels, submarine systems and munitions. With a bottom measuring 300 feet in diameter and a maximum depth of 150 feet, the facility also has been used in testing torpedoes, missiles, warheads, amphibious and remotely controlled vehicles, underwater gun firing and acoustics.

The sailors belonged to a unit whose salvage operations have included TWA Flight 800, Swiss Air Flight 111, the space shuttles Challenger and Columbia, and the Civil War ironclad USS Monitor.

The unit also provided damage assessments and repairs on the USS Cole and participated in humanitarian missions following Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 earthquake that struck Haiti.

'Everything ... went wrong' as two Navy divers died

http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2013-06-19/news/bs-md-super-pond-hearing-20130619_1_second-and-third-divers-elite-mobile-diving-super-pond

June 19, 2013|By Matthew Hay Brown, The Baltimore Sun

Two senior leaders face charges in deaths of two elite Navy divers

NAVAL STATION NORFOLK, Va. — — The dive that claimed the lives of two members of an elite Navy team wasn't the only thing that went wrong that February day at Aberdeen Proving Ground's Super Pond, witnesses testified during a military hearing Wednesday.

First, the underwater breathing units that the team took to Aberdeen failed, forcing the divers to change equipment. Then, the first two men into the water had to cut their dive short when the line that tethered them to their boat tangled

That was when **Diver 1st Class James Reyher and Diver 2nd Class Ryan Harris** took their fatal plunge.

The standby diver who was sent down to check on the pair had his scuba regulator freeze solid — he was out of breath when he resurfaced. Two more rescue divers came back after one became disoriented in the cold, murky depths.

"Everything that could possibly go wrong went wrong for us," Petty Officer 1st Class Fernando Almazan, the dive supervisor, testified.

The hearing at this Navy base on the Chesapeake Bay provided a first public glimpse into the events that surrounded the deaths of Reyher, 29, and Harris, 22. The men drowned Feb. 26 during a training exercise at Aberdeen's Underwater Explosive Test Facility, known as the Super Pond.

The Navy is considering whether to file charges against two senior leaders in their company. Chief Warrant Officer 3rd Class Mark Smith, the officer in charge, and Dive Senior Chief James Burger, the dive master, could be charged with involuntary manslaughter and dereliction of duty.

Like Reyher and Harris, they were members of the elite Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2. The unit is based in Virginia Beach, but has made frequent use of the Super Pond.

The commander of their unit has been relieved of his duties. The Navy said last month that Cmdr. Michael Runkle had been relieved because of a "loss of confidence in his ability to command."

Smith and Burger are accused of ordering the divers to train "outside of normal working limits" and without "requisite operational necessity" or adequate safeguards.

Rear Adm. Mike Tillotson, commander of the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command, ordered the two-day Article 32 hearing to determine whether they will be formally charged.

Capt. Holiday Hanna, the investigating officer presiding over the preliminary hearing, will weigh evidence and produce a report for Tillotson, who then may refer the case to court-martial, order administrative sanctions or dismiss the case.

Reyher and Harris were the second and third divers to die at the Super Pond in less than a month. **George H. Lazzaro Jr.**, a 41-year-old former Marine working as a contractor to the Army, died Jan. 30 while performing routine maintenance.

Almazan said Lazzaro's death was on the Navy divers' minds when they arrived at Aberdeen Proving Ground for five days of training. He said they were also concerned about what might be at the bottom of the Super Pond — "20 years of junk," he guessed.

The divers were to be evaluated in advance of a deployment that had been scheduled for April, Almazan said. The exercise on Feb. 26 was to swim 150 feet down from a small boat to a helicopter on the bottom of the Super Pond and resurface.

The water temperature was 41 degrees. Visibility, with flashlights, was one to two feet.

As the first pair prepared to dive, Almazan said, they found that two of their four Mark 16 rebreathers were not working.

Almazan recommended that they switch to surface-supplied air — air from the boat, forced down through hoses into the divers' helmets. But Smith and Burger told him the divers would use scuba tanks.

Navy Diver 1st Class Peter Kozminsky, one of the first two divers, testified that he had never dived to 150 feet. But he said he and his partner told Smith that they were comfortable with the exercise and jumped into the water.

They had descended to 105 feet when Almazan called them back to the surface, Kozminsky and Almazan testified. The divers' line had tangled.

Then Reyher and Harris jumped into the water, Almazan testified. They were connected to each other with a 6- to 10-foot "buddy line" and tethered to the boat with another.

They were in the water for about 31/2 minutes, Almazan said, when he directed the sailor holding their tether to pull the line four times — the signal to return to the surface. After 30 seconds with no response, he ordered another four pulls.

Now, Almazan said, the divers responded with four pulls and began to ascend. But after they had risen about 20 feet, he said, the line pulled taut, and drew back into the water. Then there were a series of pulls, Almazan said, and the line grew heavy.

Almazan ordered the standby diver into the water, but he returned to the surface, his regulator frozen. After he recovered his breath, he said "something was spinning him around," Almazan said.

Diver deaths result in changes to Navy Dive Manual, equipment

<http://wtkr.com/2013/06/20/senior-leaders-decision-making-questioned-during-day-2-of-hearing-on-navy-diver-deaths/>

JUNE 20, 2013, BY LAURIE SIMMONS

Norfolk, Va. -Navy divers James Reyher and Ryan Harris both went down together, to a rare scuba diving depth of 150 feet, to finish a training mission needed for a deployment--but they didn't return to the surface alive.

The dive that killed the two sailors was unprecedented according to the Command Master Diver of EOD Group 2, more than 31,000 dives have been performed by their command . Never before had there been a training dive done at that depth in the last five years.

The question now is whether the decision to take the risk and do the deep dive is enough to charge the 2 senior leaders of Company 2-3, Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2 with involuntary manslaughter.

The unit's master diver, Senior Chief James Burger, and the officer-in-charge, Chief Warrant Officer Mark Smith, are facing a possible court-martial for their role in the decision-making process that led to the deaths.

After two days of testimony, the Article 32 hearing for both men was formally closed Thursday afternoon.

New details emerged during questioning from Navy investigators, who say there are two possible theories for why Reyher and Harris died.

Their connecting rope to the boat above could have gotten tangled around something inside the Superpond at Aberdeen Proving Ground. A survey of the bottom by NCIS agents found metal beams, copper wire, and other hazardous obstacles that divers could get stuck on.

Investigators also think both of Reyher's breathing regulators weren't working when they got to the deeper depths. That regulator is the Apeks TX-50.

During the hearing, it came to light that several of Reyher and Harris's rescuers also had problems using the same type of regulator, either not giving enough air or freezing over while trying to get down to save them.

The Navy has since barred the use of that regulator in cold water diving.

According to witness testimony, though, the equipment failures still came after "deficiencies in decision-making" by Smith and Burger.

When the preferred method of using the MK-16 diving system was no longer an option due to electronic failure, Navy evaluators say they had other options to finish the mission besides scuba.

The Navy's normal diving limits for scuba are 130 feet, unless a commander can prove operational necessity--but Smith and Burger still went ahead with what many witnesses called "a dangerous dive."

After the February deaths, the Navy diving manual was actually changed, to specifically state that "there is no such thing as an operational necessity in training," to make sure this never happens again.

The investigating officer of the Article 32 hearing will take about two weeks to make his recommendation on whether the involuntary manslaughter or dereliction of duty charges are proper in this case.

Then, it will be up to the commanding officer of Naval Expeditionary Combat Command at Little Creek whether to actually convene a court-martial.

Four Sailors Arraigned in Maryland Navy Diver Deaths

<http://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/4-Sailors-Arraigned-in-Md-Navy-Diver-Deaths-227100091.html>

Oct 9, 2013 By [Brock Vergakis](#) Associated Press



Shutterstock

The Navy arraigned four sailors on Wednesday for dereliction of duty in connection with the [training accident deaths of two divers in Maryland](#). Separate trials for each of the four sailors are set for January. If convicted, Chief Navy Diver Gary Ladd, Senior Chief Navy Diver James Burger and Senior Chief Navy Diver David Jones each face a maximum sentence of three months confinement and a reduction in pay.

Chief Warrant Officer Jason Bennett faces a maximum possible sentence of six months' confinement and reduction in pay because he was charged with two counts of dereliction of duty.

None of the sailors has entered a plea in the case, although Burger's military attorneys issued a written statement declaring his innocence after his appearance at a Naval Station Norfolk courtroom.

The four were arraigned after refusing to accept administrative punishment for their roles in connection with the deaths of Navy Diver 1st Class James Reyher and Navy Diver 2nd Class Ryan Harris earlier this year.

A fifth sailor, Chief Warrant Officer Mark Smith, accepted the "non-judicial" punishment and was not arraigned on the criminal charge.

Reyher and Harris drowned on Feb. 26 while working at the Aberdeen Proving Ground. Members of their Virginia Beach-based unit have said the men died after a line tethered to them became tangled with an unspecified object at the bottom of the Super Pond underwater weapons-testing facility.

By the time they were pulled to the surface, the men were out of air and unresponsive. Reyher was from Caldwell, Ohio; Harris was from Gladstone, Mo. Bennett was the Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit Two command diving officer and readiness and training officer.

The charge sheets say he negligently failed to inform the unit's commanding officer of a request to deviate from an approved training exercise and conduct a scuba dive exceeding normal working limits.

Diving deeper than 130 feet requires the approval of a commanding officer. Reyher and Harris reached about 150 feet, according to testimony at a June hearing. At that preliminary hearing, discussion delved into whether proper protocol for allowing such a deep dive was followed. The training Reyher and Harris were undergoing at the time involved diving to the bottom of the pond, seeing if they could locate a helicopter and then returning to the surface.

Bennett's charge sheet also says he failed to ensure established diving procedures and safety requirements were adhered to.

Burger is a master diver who was one of two sailors the Navy originally focused on for potential charges related to the deaths. He and Smith were the subject of a preliminary hearing on possible dereliction of duty and involuntary manslaughter charges.

"This was a tragic accident, but it was not a crime," a statement by Burger's attorneys reads. "Senior Chief Burger steadfastly maintains his innocence and looks forward to his day in court and to clearing his good name."

In June, defense attorneys suggested during witness questioning that the divers' equipment may not have been working properly. One of the divers sent in to fetch the men after they ran into trouble had ice covering his regulator. Defense attorneys noted that the manufacturer of the equipment the divers were using has said it may not properly work at temperatures below 45 degrees. At the time of the drownings, the water temperature was about 40 degrees.

A team of divers that preceded Reyher and Harris got their tethering line tangled up in something unspecified. There are numerous metal objects on the pond floor. The sailors belonged to an expeditionary mobile unit whose salvage operations have included TWA Flight 800, Swiss Air Flight 111, the space shuttles Challenger and Columbia, and the Civil War ironclad USS Monitor.

The unit also provided damage assessments and repairs on the USS Cole and participated in humanitarian missions following Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 earthquake that struck Haiti.

Court-martial begins for Navy supervisor following 2 divers' deaths

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/bs-md-apg-super-pond-drownings-court-martial-20140113-story.html>

January 13, 2014 Michael E. Ruane, The Washington Post

The Navy divers knew it was a risky operation. The Aberdeen "super pond" was deep enough to hold a 14-story building. Its water was black and cold. And the bottom was a tangle of muck and debris.

An Army diver had died there a month earlier. And now, with some crucial equipment broken, James E. Reyher said Ryan Harris had to make the dive with scuba gear, and little margin for error.



An aerial view supplied by the Army of Aberdeen Proving Ground's UNDEX Testing Facility, commonly known as the "Super Pond," where two divers died Tuesday, the Army said. Another diver died on Jan. 30. (U.S. Army Test and Evaluation Command, Homestead Publishing)

Even for a quick “bounce” dive, scuba tanks would give them only about 11 minutes of air to go down 150 feet and get back up. It was only a training evaluation, but no Navy scuba dive had gone below 130 feet in years.

The two men were asked if they wanted to make the dive. They could say no. But they thought that might affect their standing and their coming deployment. So Reyher and Harris entered the frigid water that day last winter and began their descent.

On Monday, a court-martial was to begin for a Navy supervisor in connection with the deaths of Reyher, 28, and Harris, 23, on Feb. 26 in the man-made pond at the Army’s test center, in Aberdeen, Md.

The two divers, tethered to each other and to a surface line, apparently got caught on something below. By the time they could be hauled up by frantic comrades, they had run out of air and drowned, according to a Navy investigative report.

The incident unfolded in minutes, as colleagues on the surface realized the two might be stuck, then watched as the bubbles floating up increased dramatically and then stopped. Someone asked if this was part of the evaluation. It wasn’t.

“In hindsight the dive . . . should not have been undertaken,” Capt. Holiday Hanna, a Navy investigating officer, concluded. “The plan . . . did not allow the divers sufficient air or time in the event of unforeseen problems.”

But Navy divers are said to live by a “hooyah” code — a stubborn, can-do attitude in which nothing is deemed impossible.

“Navy divers can accomplish anything,” Cmdr. Michael Runkle, who headed the unit to which Reyher and Harris belonged, wrote in an essay 10 months before the accident.

“When handed a roll of duct tape and a snorkel and tasked to repair an aircraft and recover a downed plane, the Navy diver says ‘Hooyah’ and gets it done,” Runkle wrote. “Divers never say ‘can’t.’”

The defendant, Senior Chief Diver James C. Burger, who is charged with dereliction of duty, is accused of failing “to ensure established diving procedures and safety requirements were adhered to, as it was his duty to do so,” according to his charge sheet.

Burger denies the charge.

“This was a tragic accident, not a crime,” his lead defense counsel, Navy Lt. Cmdr. John F. Butler, wrote in an e-mail. “Senior Chief Burger steadfastly maintains his innocence and looks forward to clearing his good name.”

The court-martial of a second supervisor in the case is tentatively scheduled for next week, and several other senior divers who were at Aberdeen have received administrative punishments.

Military diving, by its nature, can be hazardous, and the smallest miscue can lead to disaster.

Reyher, a diver first class, from Caldwell, Ohio, and Harris, a diver second class, from Gladstone, Mo., were among five divers for the military who perished on duty over a 17-month period between January 2012 and last June.

One of them, former Marine George H. Lazzaro Jr., 41, was diving for the Army in the super pond when he died last Jan. 30.

"I'm losing air!" he yelled over a communication link. He surfaced too fast, passed out and sank to the bottom. It took rescue divers 21 / 2 hours to find his body. Two other Navy divers died during that period.

Robert N. Dotzler, 24, died while free diving during an operation at the Navy base in Guam. He had apparently hyperventilated before the dive, lost consciousness underwater and drowned.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Taylor Gallant, 22, died Jan. 26, 2012, during another training operation while diving from a Canadian warship off the coast of North Carolina.

Reyher and Harris belonged to an underwater salvage unit. Gallant was an underwater bomb technician, the Navy said. Dotzler, a diver third class, was in the repair department of a submarine tender.

Such diving often is done in harsh conditions, in which divers are asked to find and work on things such as sunken ships and downed aircraft.

Perhaps the most famous such effort came in the salvage operations after the [attack on Pearl Harbor](#) during [World War II](#). There, divers had to work in befouled waters, inside sunken battleships, amid dead bodies and unexploded bombs.

The Virginia Beach outfit that Reyher and Harris belonged to — Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2 (MDSU2) — in modern times has worked on the wreck of the [space shuttle Challenger](#) and has helped raise the massive turret of the sunken [Civil War](#) ironclad [USS Monitor](#).

It used the super pond to train and evaluate its divers.

The unit's commander, Runkle, was fired following the accident.

The Navy said that even before the tragedy it had been looking into the command climate at MDSU2, where it found poor morale, a lack of leadership and, later, safety issues.

In his essay, Runkle had been urging divers to be a little less can-do and a little more assertive in asking for more and better equipment.

The Army, for its part, closed the super pond indefinitely.

The body of water, which is 1,070 feet long and shaped like a frying pan, had been carved out of the east bank of Harford County's Bush River in the early 1990s at the site of an old bomb-testing range.

Among many things, it was used to test the impact of underwater explosions on ship components.

The Army says the pond can handle a blast equal to 4,100 pounds of TNT — about the size of the truck bomb used to wreck the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995.

In December 2012, the pond was used to test a new device that was deployed from a helicopter to find and blow up underwater mines. The test had gone well. The tragedies came in the aftermath. The following account of the deaths comes from military reports.

A foot of visibility

The water temperature was a frigid 39 degrees with visibility less than a foot on Feb. 26 as Reyher and fellow diver Haamid Abdul-Mutakallim watched the scuba gear being set up.

The dive was supposed to have been done with Mark 16 re-breather units, which recycle air and allow more time underwater. But two of the four Mark 16s were broken, and three had to be working for a dive to be made.

The drill called for a dive to locate the carcass of an old helicopter. The water was pitch black at the bottom, where there was more than a foot of muck and a tangle of debris.

The divers would need flashlights and wire cutters. Abdul-Mutakallim, who had never descended below 90 feet in scuba gear, testified later that he and Reyher realized the dangers of making the dive — hazardous conditions and not much air.

It was high risk for low reward, he said at a Navy investigative hearing convened before Hanna.

A dozen or so divers from the salvage unit had arrived at Aberdeen the day before, Feb. 25, to undergo final evaluation after several months of training. If all went well, they could be deployed in April.

But the Army had closed the pond after the death of its diver the previous month. And Army officials did not know why the Navy divers had come to Aberdeen, according to Hanna's investigate report.

After discussions, the Army granted permission for the evaluation to proceed the next day.

According to the Navy report, on Feb. 26, the Navy divers were briefed about Lazzaro's death.

He had been one of four scuba divers who had descended in two-man teams to 127 feet to help retrieve a weight that had been used in the December anti-mine test, the Army said in a recent report on his death.

That dive was supposed to be brief, about 10 minutes, to prevent the need for a decompression stop on the way back up. The divers had a wireless communications link to the surface and to each other.

They had worked on the weight and were headed back when, at about 60 feet, Lazzaro shouted that he was losing air. Another diver told him to "blow and go," meaning surface immediately, despite the risk of decompression sickness caused by rapid ascent.

Seconds later, Lazzaro popped to the surface and tore off his diving mask.

Someone yelled, asking if he was okay. "No!" he replied, then sank again.

It was hours before they found his body in 53 feet of dark water and hauled it to the surface with a rope.

The Army report, which blacked out the cause of the accident for public release, said Lazzaro had fatal air bubbles in his lungs, heart, brain and blood vessels from his abrupt ascent. He was pronounced dead at a hospital.

No more bubbles

In February, the air and water were colder, the Navy dive was to be deeper, but the outcome would be the same.

At first, the idea of using scuba gear was rejected because, as the divers knew, it left little margin for error. Plus, the Navy's normal scuba working limit was 130 feet.

"Not a good idea," one diving supervisor said. "Do the math."

A third option was to make the dive with air supplied from the surface through hoses.

But Runkle, the unit's commander, had urged his men to "train like we fight," be aggressive and make more deep scuba dives, the Navy report said.

One of the evaluators suggested that the divers reconsider scuba. The dive was short. There was a recompression chamber on hand. And the divers would be tethered to each other and to the surface.

It seemed like a safe exercise.

Although Navy rules said scuba dives below 130 feet could be conducted only in cases of "operational necessity," none of the divers seem to have realized that did not include training, the report said.

The men were asked if they wanted to make the dive. Abdul-Mutakallim testified that he and Reyher knew of a diver who declined to make a dive during training and suffered unspecified "backlash."

Plus, most of the divers thought they had to pass the super pond evaluation to be deployed.

Everybody said yes, they wanted to make the dive.

The first two divers to go down from the tending boat reached only 100 feet before the line linking them to the surface became "rats nested," or tangled.

Their surface tender, Chief Navy Diver John O'Donnell, yanked the line four times to abort the dive, and the two men surfaced.

Reyher and Harris were next.

Their dive supervisor, Fernando Almazan, a 14-year Navy veteran and a diver first class, had calculated that the men would have 11 minutes of air, not enough time to survey the sunken helicopter.

But it should be enough to see if they could spot the wreck and come back. Almazan instructed them to start back up four minutes after they submerged. Ascending would require five minutes. He told them to stay on schedule and not touch the bottom.

Reyher and Harris, each wearing a wet suit and a single air tank, began their descent.

At the 3:30 mark, O'Donnell gave them four pulls to abort the dive and got what appeared to be four pulls in reply. But he was confused. He told Almazan he wasn't sure "what they just gave me."

O'Donnell hauled in about 20 feet of the tending line. Bubbles rising to the surface suggested the divers were coming up.

Suddenly, the tending line went tight. The more O'Donnell pulled, the tighter it got. He realized that if the divers were snagged, pulling would make it worse. Or maybe they were swimming down to free themselves. So he fed out some line.

Almazan told him to stop. The bubbles coming to the surface began to increase alarmingly. Almazan asked an evaluator in the boat if this was part of the drill. The answer was no.

The Navy report suggested that the increased bubbles could have been air rushing from the scuba tank regulators malfunctioning in the cold water or the divers breathing heavily because they were running out of air.

Almazan directed Navy Diver Third Class Austin Noone, who was standing by with O'Donnell in the boat for emergencies, to go down and help.

Noone, who had never done a 150-foot dive in scuba gear, made it to 100 feet, but he, too, got tangled in the tending lines and was pulled up.

Reyher and Harris had now been underwater 12 to 15 minutes. No more bubbles were coming to the surface.

The Navy report is silent on the emotion of the moment, which must have been extreme among the tight-knit group of divers.

Almazan was in contact with Senior Chief Diver Burger, who was Reyher's and Harris's supervisor and was observing with alarm from shore. Burger, too, was being evaluated, according to someone with knowledge of the case.

Almazan said that there had been "an incident" and that he needed more rescue divers.

He told Burger to call 911. Burger rushed to the scene in a second boat, according to the person with knowledge of the case.

As the anguished seconds ticked by, two more divers were sent down. But they reached only 120 feet before they had breathing problems and ran out of allotted time.

Finally, by pulling the tending line in a different direction, Reyher and Harris were brought to the surface. Harris came up first. He had the tending line wrapped around one arm.

Fellow sailors got them out of their gear — Reyher’s was covered in mud — and started CPR. Both men were rushed to the recompression chamber. Harris was later taken by helicopter to a local hospital where he was pronounced dead. Reyher was already deceased.

The super pond today

Last week, an Army spokeswoman said the super pond is still closed and may remain so until spring.

But early last month, four unarmed ordnance items were removed from the bottom as part of a cleanup. The Army did much of the work but needed the Navy’s help. A diver was required to go down and see that some connections were sound, a Navy spokesman said.

Some Closure Possible for Family of Drowned Navy Diver

<http://journal-leader.com/newsx/breaking-news/524-some-closure-possible-for-family-of-drowned-navy-diver>

Written by Anne Chlovechok



Four Men Charged in Drowning Deaths of Reyher and Harris

Ever since Caldwell native Navy Diver 1st Class James Reyher and Navy Diver 2nd Class Ryan Harris of Gladstone, Mo., drowned during what was reportedly supposed to be a routine training exercise at the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland last February 26, the question in everyone’s mind has been, “Why?”

Navy officials have reportedly said the incident shouldn’t have happened. And last week the U.S. Navy issued a press release saying that four Navy divers, arraigned last Wednesday and charged with dereliction of duty in the incident, are accused of failing to ensure that “diving procedures and safety requirements were adhered to.”

The four are Master Chief Navy Diver David C. Jones, Senior Chief Navy Diver James Burger, Chief Navy Diver Gary G. Ladd, Jr. and Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jason M. Bennett. The Navy said that all four men were involved, “. . . at various levels with the training exercise that resulted in the divers’ deaths.”

According to the Navy, Reyher and Harris were instructed to conduct a dive deeper than normal working limits and to use surface-supplied oxygen rather than scuba equipment.

An autopsy concluded that the two died of accidental drowning.

Jones, Burger, Ladd and Bennet are most likely going to be tried separately at Court Martials beginning early in 2014.

Navy diver drowned refusing to leave his fellow sailor

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/08/04/navy-diver-drowned-refusing-to-leave-his-fellow-sailor/?utm_term=.e0e3f9a23842

By Dan Lamothe August 4, 2014

When Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Ryan Harris and Petty Officer 1st Class James Reyher descended to the murky depths of a pond at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md., last year, [virtually everything went wrong](#). Their equipment didn't work right, the communication with sailors on the surface wasn't clear, and debris trapped Reyher some 150 feet underwater in scuba gear.

But there's more to the story. According to [a report in the Virginian-Pilot newspaper](#) on Sunday, Harris, 23, had the option to cut the line connecting him to Reyher underwater and survive. He refused to do it, though, doing everything in his power to free Reyher, 28, until both men died on Feb. 26, 2013.

"Harris exhausted himself in an attempt to save Reyher," said a military investigator in documents obtained by the Virginian-Pilot. "Both divers resisted the natural instincts of self-preservation, in order to expel his last breaths in an effort to save each other."

The men were with the Navy's Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2. Rescue divers tried twice to save them, but their bodies were

lifeless when they were brought to the surface 31 minutes after they started their dive, the newspaper reported. The investigating officer determined that Harris, in



The late Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Ryan Harris, shown here in 2011 inspecting an oxygen mask, died last year along with Petty Officer 1st Class James Reyher in a diving accident at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md.

(U.S. Navy photo by Seaman Jah'mai C.J. Stokes)

particular, could have done a number of things to save himself, including using a backup breathing regulator to get to his reserve air, cutting the line between him and Reyher or trying to inflate their vests.

Navy officials say that Harris will posthumously receive the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for his actions. The award is sometimes called the "[non-combat Medal of Honor](#)," and is typically awarded to service members in the Navy and Marine Corps who demonstrate heroism not involving an armed conflict.

Harris was married with two young daughters, [according to his obituary](#). Reyher also was married, and "loved to spoil and aggravate his wife," according to [his obituary](#).

The incident resulted in discipline for at least five personnel, [Navy officials said](#). Four of them were [charged with dereliction of duty](#) in October after refusing to accept administrative punishment. One of them, Chief Petty Officer Gary Ladd Jr., ultimately changed his mind, the Virginian-Pilot [reported in January](#).

The commanding officer of their unit, Cmdr. Michael Runkle, was [removed from his job](#) in May 2013 after an investigation determined that there were a variety of problems in his unit.

Senior Chief Navy Diver James Burger was found guilty in January of dereliction of duty for conducting the dive without proper safeguards, according to [a Navy Times report](#). He was reduced one rank, to E-7. The parents of both fallen sailors offered emotionally wrenching testimony during the hearing, saying they struggle with what happened.

"To my dying day, I will not understand not putting safeguards in place," said Deborah Harris, Ryan's mother, according to Navy Times. "I'd say my heart is broken, there's a piece of my heart that's gone."

Super Pond diver, heroic to the last breath, to get Navy and Marine Corps Medal

<http://www.stripes.com/news/navy/super-pond-diver-heroic-to-the-last-breath-to-get-navy-and-marine-corps-medal-1.296717/ryan-harris-1.296736>

August 4, 2014 By Dianna Cahn | The Virginian-Pilot (MCT)

As they slowly asphyxiated at the bottom of a pond last year, two Navy divers shared something extraordinary: the choice to die together rather than abandon a fellow sailor.

That selflessness went with Petty Officer 2nd Class Ryan Harris and Petty Officer 1st Class James Reyher to their deaths on Feb. 26, 2013 — undiscovered until a Navy investigator reconstructed the events.

The investigation, conducted more than 16 months ago, was released last week to The Virginian-Pilot under the Freedom of Information Act. It pinpointed a series of failures that contributed to the training accident that day at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland: bad leadership, poor decision-making and faulty equipment.

But none of that could blunt the heroism that the investigator discovered between the two drowning men: With Reyher trapped by debris at the bottom of the pond, Harris remained at his side, struggling to free his buddy until both men died. "Harris exhausted himself in an attempt to save Reyher," the investigator concluded. "Both divers resisted the natural instincts of self-preservation, in order to expel his last breaths in an effort to save each other."

That heroism will be honored in coming months, when the Navy posthumously awards Harris the Navy and Marine Corps Medal.

In a report detailing the unfolding events, the investigator painted a scene in which a hitch in planned exercises on the day of the accident unleashed one problem after another. Lines got tangled, equipment failed and, ultimately, catastrophe struck. The Virginia Beach-based Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit Two was conducting a series of pre-deployment training exercises at the pond. It was a gray day, just 40 degrees, and visibility in the pond was poor.

The men were supposed to locate a sunken helicopter 150 feet below the surface, using a breathing apparatus known as the Mark 16. But some of the equipment wasn't working so the officers in charge of the dive considered other options.

They had surface-supplied air on a barge that would have allowed divers a limitless air supply and audio communications while submerged. But the barge was blocked by a barrier set up for a later exercise, and the leaders at the pond were reluctant to call the commanding officer -- who was subsequently fired for being unapproachable and disengaged -- and seek permission to change the entire day's training plan.

So the leaders -- in what the investigation described as "multiple points of failure and decision making" -- decided to modify the dive and use scuba gear. They calculated that a single canister of air for each diver would be adequate for a quick dive down to the helicopter and directly back up again.

The decision left the divers with "insufficient air capacity" to respond to unforeseen problems.

Reyher and Harris were the second team to try the dive. The first team's ropes got tangled, and the divers aborted their attempt.

In a scenario based on what took place on the surface and the conditions of the men's bodies and equipment after they were recovered, the investigator reconstructed the events under the water.

Harris and Reyher were among the most experienced divers in the unit. But even before they submerged, things started going wrong. They were unable to connect to the descent line and started their dive connected only to each other and to the boat.

Harris was directly connected to the boat with a tending line and was responsible for sending line pull signals up to the surface. Reyher was connected to Harris with 7 feet of line between them.

The two descended without incident, and Harris sent up a series of line pulls indicating that they'd reached their target.

The bottom was dark, strewn with debris from prior exercises and ordnance training, allowing them just a foot or two of visibility. Silt lined the pond floor and would further limit visibility if disturbed.

The men were going through their air faster than the calculations had estimated. Moments after they reached bottom, a signal from sailors on the surface indicated it was time to start their ascent.

That's probably when Harris and Reyher realized they had problems, the investigator concluded. Reyher's breathing apparatus had started leaking air, causing it to freeze, so he switched over to his backup regulator, hoping to stem the leak.

Meanwhile, he'd somehow gotten tangled at the bottom of the pond.

Harris tried to help. He wrapped some of the line connecting him to Reyher around his arm, straining to try and pull his buddy free. Soon their air was running low.

Up above, attempts to reach the divers were failing. A rescue diver made it to 100 feet before his apparatus malfunctioned. Harris and Reyher had run out of air by the time the next pair of divers jumped in. They didn't make it to the bottom, either.

As he watched his air supply disappear, Harris could have cut the line connecting him to Reyher. That would have freed him. But neither man ever pulled out their knives, the investigator concluded.

After the second failed rescue, divers on the surface started pulling at the line in a last-ditch attempt to bring them to the surface. The rope was stuck. By shifting the line to another boat, they managed to free it and pull them up.

Harris and Reyher were both lifeless when they were brought to the surface 31 minutes after they started their dive. Reyher's equipment was caked in mud; the condition of his body indicated he likely ran out of air first.

After the deaths, both breathing rigs were sent to the Navy Experimental Diving Unit and tested in conditions mimicking those at the pond that day. Both failed in repeated tests, prompting the Navy to remove the breathing gear - the Apeks TX50 -- from the list of equipment authorized for Navy divers' use in cold water.

The investigation found that poor leadership and bad decision-making plagued events that day -- everything from the choice to switch to scuba, to how leaders assessed the risks, to a lack of good emergency plans.

But no single factor directly caused the deaths. Instead, bad luck conspired to turn faulty leadership into tragedy.

In February, the unit's master diver was found guilty in a court-martial of dereliction of duty for not ensuring there were adequate safety procedures. Of five men the unit held accountable, he was the only one to choose a court-martial.

In his conclusion, the investigating officer -- whose name was redacted from the report -- determined that Harris could have done a number of things to save his own life: He could have used his backup breathing regulator to get to his reserve air; he or Reyher could have pulled out their knives to cut the line connecting them.

They could have tried to inflate their vests or release the weights that held them below the surface.

They did none of those things, and Harris died alongside Reyher at the bottom of the pond.



Cmdr. Michael Runkle, commanding officer of Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2, delivers remarks during a memorial service March 14, 2013, at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek Fort Story for Navy Diver 1st Class James Reyher and Navy Diver 2nd Class Ryan Harris, from MDSU2, who died Feb. 26, Steven C. Hoskins/U.S. Navy