

Vice Admiral Eugene P. Wilkinson



Early on the morning of 11 July, Vice Admiral Eugene P. Wilkinson, first commanding officer of USS NAUTILUS (SSN-571), passed away at his home in Del Mar, California. He would have celebrated his 95th birthday next month. In his honor, the national ensigns that fly over both the Museum and NAUTILUS were brought to half-mast.

Although he was C.O. of the world's first nuclear-powered submarine for three years, Wilkinson is perhaps best known for the message he sent at the very beginning of his tenure. He described what led up to those famous words in a speech 50 years later:

“Our detailed schedule called for us to get NAUTILUS underway at 1100 on January 17, 1955.

“To prepare to do that safely, we insisted on having the ship to ourselves for four days. We called it a fast cruise—tied fast to the dock, to check out ourselves, and the ship, and the systems.

“...I was a Commander. During that fast cruise period, two Navy Captains from CHINFO [U.S. Navy Chief of Information] arrived...to talk to me.

“They said, ‘you’re about to get underway. This is a historic event. You should send a historic message.’

“ ‘Listen,’ I replied, ‘we’re doing our part getting ourselves, the ship and its systems checked out and ready. You gentlemen are public relations experts. Write a historic message and we’ll send it.’

“That took care of them for a day and a half. Then they gave me a message that was one-and-a-quarter typewritten pages long with some elegant sounding words. But my Quartermaster Rayl was going to send it by flashing light to the tender FULTON at state pier. I wrote a briefer message, ‘Underway on Nuclear Power,’ which my Communications Officer, Ned Dietrich, released and Rayl sent.” It remains one of the most momentous messages in navy history.

Over the course of his 34-year career, Wilkinson commanded three submarines in addition to NAUTILUS: USS VOLADOR (SS-490), USS SEA ROBIN (SS-407), and USS WAHOO (SS-565). He served aboard a fourth, USS DARTER (SS-227), during World War II. After leaving NAUTILUS he transferred to the surface fleet to captain the Navy's first nuclear-powered surface ship, USS LONG BEACH (CGN-9). His time at sea at an end, Wilkinson filled a series of important posts on shore: Director, Submarine Warfare Division (1963-1966); Chief of Staff, U.S. Forces Japan (1966-1969); Commander, Submarine Flotilla Two (1969-1970); Commander, Submarine Force U.S. Atlantic Fleet (1970-1972); and Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Submarine Warfare (1972-1974).