VETERANS OF THE VANDENBERG BID FAREWELL TO THEIR SHIP

KEY WEST, Florida Keys – Four veterans who served on a former missile-tracking ship recently trekked to Key West to gather alongside the Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg and bid the ship a final farewell as it is prepared to be scuttled as an artificial reef seven miles off of Key West.

Patrick "Pat" Utecht, his son Paul Utecht, Mac Monroe and Chuck Garrison each served in varying capacities as civilian contracted project engineers and analysts during the ship's service as a data collection, missile reentry and radar-tracking vessel between 1962 and 1983, before Vandenberg was officially retired from active military duty. The Utechts live in Satellite Beach, Fla., Monroe resides in Melbourne, Fla., while Garrison is an Ocala, Fla., resident.

Reminiscing about their time spent on board, Pat Utecht described it as "periods of boredom interrupted by panic" while keeping all tracking systems aligned and working together, especially at one point in 1969, at the height of the Cold War.

"We tracked a number of missiles – SS-6, SS-2, SSN-8 – there were a bunch of various Russian missiles that were launched, and they were eavesdropping on ours, so turnabout was fair play," Patrick Utecht recalled. "A crew member was in a local (Space Coast, Fla.) bar talking about being somewhere off the coast of Russia, which was territorial waters — we could not go in that area."

A Space Coast weekly newspaper editor reportedly overheard the conversation.

"He published it (May 15, 1969), it was accepted as being fact and trouble was amongst us," Utecht said. "The CIA, FBI, every security agency was coming around looking for who had the loose lips. It almost was an international incident. The summary of what he said of what the ship's objectives was true, but we were not in Russian territorial waters."

Patrick Utecht, whose nearly 30 years of service with radar and communications systems on the Vandenberg continued until 1990, was assigned as acting manager of the shipboard electronic complex; ongoing programs led the Air Force to decide to keep the ship semi-alive in the event an emergency situation arose, and they could restore her to life within 90 days. For 10 years, every three to four months "with no heat and darn little light," he and a small team would turn on and check what systems worked, with the intention of providing a starting point should the ship ever need to be reactivated. That need eventually disappeared and the ship's only subsequent active duty was starring as a Russian war ship in the 1996 movie, "Virus."

When hearing about Artificial Reefs of the Keys and intentions to sink the ship whose tracking capabilities and intelligence missions were key to monitoring the Cold War, the veterans were quite pleased.

"My feeling was one of elation," Utecht remembered. "I can say that many of us (crew) were thrilled that where she was going she would keep her name and place in history."

"I think it's a far better use of her than being cut up," he added.

 "But to see her as a rusting hulk is dismaying because we'd see her when she came out of a shipyard bright white, shiny and sparkling, everything working well," he said. "Looking up here

alongside, with holes cut in one side (to prepare for scuttling) and seeing clear through to the other side, I knew her seaworthiness was gone."

A former mission controller onboard, Mac Monroe echoed the sentiment, remarking the sister ship, USNS Arnold, met her fate in Taiwan as being broken up and turned into razor blades and small toys.

"It's nice to see the old rust bucket again, and it's a positive outcome for it to be sunk and become something useful again," said Monroe. "Turning it into a reef for diving and snorkeling is a much better fate."

Ashes of at least three fellow crewmen who have died since the Vandenberg was retired are expected to get placed on the ship after its sunk, including former instrumentation manager, Jack Steele, for whom the visiting veterans arranged to affix a plaque to the ship's interior as a memorial.