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Walk the Prank: Secret Story of Mysterious Portrait at Pentagon

Navy Man, Lost at Sea in 1908, Surfaces at Parties; 'The Project'

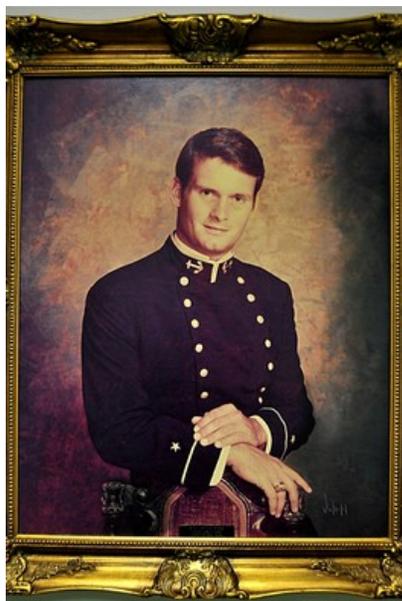
By Adam Entous

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WASHINGTON—In a Pentagon hallway hung an austere portrait of a Navy man lost at sea in 1908, with his brass buttons, blue-knit uniform and what looks like meticulously blow-dried hair.

Wait. Blow-dried hair?

The portrait of "Ensign Chuck Hord," framed in the heavy gilt typical of government offices, may be the greatest—or perhaps only—prank in Pentagon art history. "Chuck Hord" can't be found in Navy records of the day. It isn't even a real painting. The textured, 30-year-old photo is actually of Capt. Eldridge Hord III, 53 years old, known to friends as "Tuck," a military retiree with a beer belly and graying hair who lives in Burke, Va.



'Ensign Chuck Hord, lost at sea.'

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Most military officers who climb the ranks or command daring battles only dream of having a portrait hang in a corridor of power at the Pentagon alongside the likes of Patton, Nimitz and Eisenhower. Capt. Hord's made its way to the Pentagon's C-ring hallway via several parties, an alliance of British and Canadian military officers and a clandestine, predawn operation later dubbed "THE PROJECT."

The picture came into existence after Capt. Hord graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1982. During a visit to then-Ensign Hord's hometown of Kingsport, Tenn., his proud parents suggested he sit for a formal portrait. Wearing midshipman's garb and an Annapolis class ring, he posed for the town's best-known photographer in front of a cloth screen with his arms resting on an antique-looking chair.

The photographer liked the photo so much he

framed several copies and hung them in stores around Kingsport to advertise his business, Capt. Hord says. Some were textured and signed to resemble oil paintings.

Colleagues say Capt. Hord has always been something of a prankster. His 1982 Naval Academy yearbook says he "never let academic problems interfere with his two favorite pastimes, drinking beer in dives and playing the ponies."

After his graduation, he went to sea, captained a guided-missile frigate in the Pacific hunting for drug runners and studied at the National War College.

In his first stint at the Pentagon starting in 1997, his slapstick sense of humor earned him the title of the "George Costanza" of the Joint Staff, a reference to a character from the sitcom "Seinfeld."

Over the next 20 years, some of the portraits found their way back to the Hord family. In 2004, Capt. Hord says his sister surprised him by bringing the largest one—3 feet tall—to a party at his Virginia house. She left it by the front door.

Capt. Hord at the time was director of the Multinational Interagency division, a new Pentagon office designed to coordinate military logistics between the U.S. and its closest allies.

Office colleagues say Capt. Hord developed close bonds with his British, Canadian and Australian counterparts. Their office boasted its own beer fridge.

Several of Capt. Hord's work colleagues attended the 2004 party, including a British captain who smuggled the portrait into his car and put it on display at the office. Capt. Hord, amused, called it an act of "buffoonery."



Tuck Hord

The portrait then started making surprise appearances at events when Capt. Hord was in attendance. It attended his 2005 farewell party when he left the Pentagon office to take a new post in Diego Garcia, an Indian Ocean atoll where the Navy has a base.

He left the portrait with his officemates, who placed it on the wall above his old desk.

In 2009, British Naval Capt. Mike Bullock, now a commodore, lugged the heavy portrait past armed Pentagon security guards, onto a subway train and to Capt. Hord's retirement party at Washington's Navy Memorial.

"I was expecting to be questioned by the Pentagon police why I was taking the picture out of the building and instead was helped through the barrier!" Commodore Bullock recalled.

After the party, Capt. Hord refused to take ownership of the portrait, Commodore Bullock said. "I think the contrast between the Ens. Hord and the retiring Capt. Hord was too much for him!" he added.

Back on the wall in the office, visitors often asked who it depicted. "They all looked at it and said, 'Man, what year was that? It looks like the 1800s,'" said Canadian Lt. Col. Brook Bangsboll.

That was the light-bulb moment. On one of his last days at the Pentagon, Lt. Col. Bangsboll went to a jewelry shop to have a brass plaque engraved, egged on by colleagues and co-conspirators. "We didn't know what to do so we said, 'Let's just lose him at sea,'" Lt. Col. Bangsboll said. "It makes it interesting and kind of mysterious."

He kept the circumstances of the ensign's death vague because he thought some nosy Navy historian would spot the ruse if the plaque cited a specific battle.

The jeweler made a typo, engraving "Chuck" instead of "Tuck." Lt. Col. Bangsboll felt that was fitting, given the surreptitious nature of his endeavor. It read:

ENS CHUCK HORD

USNA, CIRCA 1898

LOST AT SEA 1908

Lt. Col. Bangsboll scouted the halls for the right spot. He planned to put the portrait in a foyer dedicated to logistics—the office's specialty—but feared those responsible for displays in the area would catch on.

He settled on a previously unadorned hallway which gets less foot traffic. At 6:15 a.m. on July 29, 2011, Lt. Col. Bangsboll spirited the portrait to the hallway and drove a large screw into the wall.

"The place was quiet," he recalls. "No one noticed."

For the next seven months, the portrait attracted little attention. One Pentagon official, as he walked by the photo, said it had never crossed his mind to look twice.

Unfortunately for Capt. Hord, the gag is up.

After The Wall Street Journal asked Pentagon officials about the long-lost sailor's suspiciously modern hairstyle, Lt. Col. Bangsboll, who has returned to Ottawa, received what he described as a "fairly frantic email" from an American major still in the liaison office.

"They're onto you, sir," U.S. Army Maj. Brooke Stull told Lt. Col. Bangsboll. "We've had to take the picture down."

A Pentagon official explained by email why Capt. Hord's picture was removed from the public hallway. "There's an approval process for Pentagon portraits and this beautiful picture has not been approved for display :)"

Capt. Hord makes no apologies.

"A little bit of alcohol and a whole big dose of irreverence plays into it," he said. "Plus you feel like you're getting one over on somebody."

But he also seems a bit sad. "I started that office and this was going to put me in perpetuity in the Pentagon," he said with a sigh.

The portrait, whose frame was badly damaged after its removal from the wall, now sits on the floor of the office where Capt. Hord once worked, leaning against a cubicle wall.

—*Julian E. Barnes*
contributed to this article.

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