



Brown Paindiris & Scott, LLP

Timothy R.E. Keeney joined Brown Paindiris & Scott, LLP as an of counsel attorney in October 2018. Attorney Keeney is a former probate judge, who, prior to attending law school, was a member of the U.S. Navy SEALs. As a SEAL he participated in the Apollo XVII splash-down landing. Below he gives his first-person account of that experience.

After returning from Vietnam with my SEAL platoon in August 1972, I was fortunate to be selected to be the Assistant Officer in Charge of the Apollo XVII Recovery Team. Starting in September 1972, the team (18 men) trained and practiced the recovery under the supervision of a NASA engineer for a period of three months. We had a mock up Command Module, which we referred to as the “boiler plate” with the same weight and dimensions of the actual craft, to use for training off the coast of San Diego, and worked closely with the Navy Helicopter Squadron out of Imperial Beach, CA.

The training included a three-day trip to the Houston Johnson Space Center to work with the primary and backup flight crews (astronauts). The primary crew included Captain Eugene Cernan (USN), Commander Ronald Evans (USN) and Harrison Schmidt, a civilian scientist (geologist).



A U.S. Navy SEAL stands beside the Apollo XVII Command Module. The USS Ticonderoga aircraft carrier is in the distance.

In late November 1972, we loaded our gear, including the 3,000-pound boiler plate on the USS Ticonderoga CVA-14 (aircraft carrier) and began our voyage to the recovery area, about 30 miles off the southeast coast of American Samoa. The ship stopped in Hawaii for a few days to break up the trip.

We trained with Simulated Exercises (SIMEX) throughout the trip, with day and night simulated recoveries. While underway we probably completed about seven simulated recoveries, one of which was a night recovery off Johnson Atoll. The ship Captain Norm Green (USN) omitted telling us where the ship was located prior to the exercise. Johnson Atoll, located 600 miles south of Hawaii, is known for shark infested waters. Sure enough, the headlights of the helicopters shining on our deployed boiler plate stirred up about a dozen tiger sharks, which required our termination of the training, much to the dismay of CAPT Green, who wanted to be able to check off the box another completed SIMEX. It is highly unusual for a LT(jg) to tell a Navy Captain that he cannot do something.

Since the Ticonderoga had to cross the equator on route to the recovery area, we experienced the cherished Navy tradition known as the "Line-Crossing Ceremony." Those shipmates who had already crossed the line in previous voyages and had been duly initiated were called "shellbacks." The rest of us were called "pollywogs" and were ripe for the sacred initiation ceremonies. Once a pollywog completes the initiation (like college fraternity pledging), he is able to get in the line of shellbacks and beat on the uninitiated soles behind him. The ship took great joy in setting aside my team of SEALs until all others had been initiated to ensure we received the full treatment from 1200 shellbacks. Ceremonial participants were dressed in full costume, including King Neptune, his cross dressing bride (no women on board), a chief enforcement officer, a doctor and the royal baby. One never forgets such a ceremony.

The day prior to the recovery which was on Dec. 19, a multitude of VIPs arrived via C-1 A, a small propeller driven aircraft which can carry about 15 passengers and land on the aircraft carrier. This splash-down recovery was particularly historic because it was known to be to the last flight from the Moon in anyone's lifetime. The elected officials included members of the Senate and House Space Committees: Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-AR), Sen Lowell Weicker Jr. (R-CT), Rep. Eddy Boland (D-MA) and Rep Bob Giamo (D-CT). Other attendees included a Navy Admiral in Charge of the Hawaiian Sea Frontier, an Air Force General, various NASA officials and about a dozen others.

CAPT Green wanted to pair up each VIP with one officer and one enlisted from the same state as the VIP to act as tour guides. I volunteered to be Sen. Weicker's attendant. We swapped cameras the day of the recovery, since he had packed a Nikonos (underwater camera) and I had a 35-mm Canon. Weeks later, we swapped our respective pictures. A year later, while the Watergate crises was still underway, I worked as an intern in Weicker's Washington Office, followed by a full-time job as a legislative assistant after I graduated from UConn Law School.

Recovery Day, Dec. 19. 1972, went off without a hitch. The weather was sunny and warm with the seas calm and 82 degrees. I recall the gear I had to tote included: a SCUBA tank to protect from toxic fuel fumes from the Command Module, a K-Bar knife, shark darts with three-foot shaft, a radio, a full wet suit, a weight belt (15 lbs), swim fins, and a face mask. My recovery team carried out our mission in exemplary fashion without any unforeseen incidents. After three months of training, we could practically do it in our sleep.

The first step in the recovery was for me and my teammates to jump from a helicopter into the ocean 20 feet below. We swam to the Command Module and began the process of getting the astronauts out. The officer in charge attached a sea anchor to prevent the Command Module from blowing along the ocean's surface in the wind. Next we attached an inflatable collar around the Command Module as well as an egress raft near the exit hatch. As the astronauts departed the Command Module they were assisted to the egress raft and individually raised up to the hovering helicopter in a specialized net invented for that purpose. After the three astronauts were hoisted to the helicopter, they were flown to

the aircraft carrier. My fellow Navy SEALs and I waited with the command module and had prearranged to have the helicopter crew chief lower to us some “special equipment.” We knew the CBS cameras would be glued to the astronauts when they landed on the aircraft carrier about three miles away. Our “special equipment” included three bottles of champagne. The aircraft carrier made its way back to recover the Command Module and the SEAL team. First, the module was raised up onto the ship by crane. Then, my fellow SEALs and I, each donning about 60 pounds of gear, climbed a 60-foot cargo net to get back on board.

That evening, CAPT Green hosted the three astronauts to a celebratory dinner. Each of the astronauts was asked to share with the ship’s company his most memorable event from the journey. CAPT Cernan spoke of the grandeur and glory of viewing the earth from the moon, while Schmidt mentioned the first ever moon rocks he was able to collect. CDR Evans focused on what it was like in the small confines of the Command Module (with three seats cheek to jowl) to have the “Galley” and the “Head” in the same space.

The next day, the astronauts were flown by helicopter to American Samoa where the populous put on a terrific ceremony at the airport. I was able to attend since one of the helicopter pilots gave me a flight suit to join him as his co-pilot. There must have been a thousand people present, including the Governor, policemen dressed in Lava Lavas and other islanders. After the ceremony, the astronauts boarded a C-141 jet aircraft for their trip back to the mainland United States. We flew back to the Carrier and arrived in San Diego about eight days later, spending Christmas at sea.



LTjg Tim Keeney, an attorney at Brown Paindiris & Scott, was a member of the Navy SEAL splash-down recovery team for the Apollo 17 crew. Keeney is pictured in the middle of the front row. Also pictured are fellow Navy SEALs LT John Smart (left front row) and ENS Dave Walker (right front row). The astronauts in the back row, from left to right, are: Harrison Schmidt, CAPT Eugene Cernan, and CDR Ronald Evans.