

The Buck

Stops Here

The evening of February 8, 2001, Scott Waddle watched an episode of *Seinfeld* with his wife, took in the late night news, and went to bed thinking he had it all. He lived in a tropical paradise with his beautiful wife and daughter. He had fulfilled his career ambitions: he was the commander of a nuclear attack submarine, the billion-dollar *Greeneville*, one of the most powerful submarines ever to blow through the underbelly of the Pacific. And his crew and command were the envy of the Navy.

Just twenty-four hours later, Waddle lay awake in his bunk aboard the *Greeneville* asking himself again and again how it could have all gone so wrong. He listened with despair to voices fading in and out through the emergency distress communications broadcasting the search-and-rescue operation taking place a stones throw from his stateroom. But he knew it was virtually hopeless. It was too late. The worst had happened. Nine lives were gone – four of them kids – and nothing could bring them back.

By Laurie Zuckerman | Photos provided by Steve Lis

It had been his call. Eager to impress the 16 visiting civilians aboard his vessel while putting his crew through a few rigors, Waddle had ordered an emergency blow, a procedure that would blast the seven-thousand-ton *Greeneville* from a depth of about four hundred feet to the surface in a matter of seconds.

Then, just as the submarine reached the surface, BANG!

Waddle grabbed for the periscope. He peered out through the eyepiece and reeled. It was a ship. A ship! How could they have hit a ship?

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Squinting intently he could make out the words on the side “High School.” No! No! He wanted to scream at the teenagers scrambling to stay on board the rapidly sinking vessel. Finally, he cried out loud, “God! Get them off that ship!”

Just three and half minutes later, the gutted vessel was yanked down to the bottom of the sea. The people left on board were sucked down along with it. And Waddle was helpless, helpless to do anything to save them. The *Greeneville's* collision with the *Ehime Maru*, a Japanese fishing vessel, was the most catastrophic ever to occur between a nuclear submarine and a civilian vessel in the history of the U.S. Navy. And it was his submarine. His command. His failure.

The next evening, back home in Pearl Harbor, Waddle slipped out of his bed, careful not to disturb his wife's sleep. Walking through his house, a ceremonial Russian naval officers' dagger caught his eye. He stopped in his tracks. *It would be so easy, he thought, to take that dagger and to go upstairs and put Ashley down and then take care of Jill, and then myself. Then our family wouldn't have to endure any more of this ugliness and pain.*

Instead he walked outside and sat down on a bench near the water, the same spot that just hours before had been lined with eager camera crews. Peering into the Pacific, Waddle cried out, “God, why has this horrible thing happened?”

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Over two and a half years later, in a coffee shop nearby his office at Centennial Campus at North Carolina State University, Waddle acknowledged that the images he saw through his periscope that tragic day will forever haunt him. But he also said that in a process that began the day he publicly stood up and accepted full responsibility for the accident, he has finally found some peace, some comfort, and a whole lot of hope.

“Failure need not be final,” Waddle said. “That is the message I want to get out. Individuals with the right mindset can lead meaningful and productive lives and through failure grow stronger. Certainly, nothing can ever be done to take back the lives that were lost. But something positive can grow out of tragedy.”

Waddle now gives talks around the country. He has written a book called *The Right Thing*, a firsthand account of the *Greeneville's* collision with the *Ehime Maru* – a sequence of



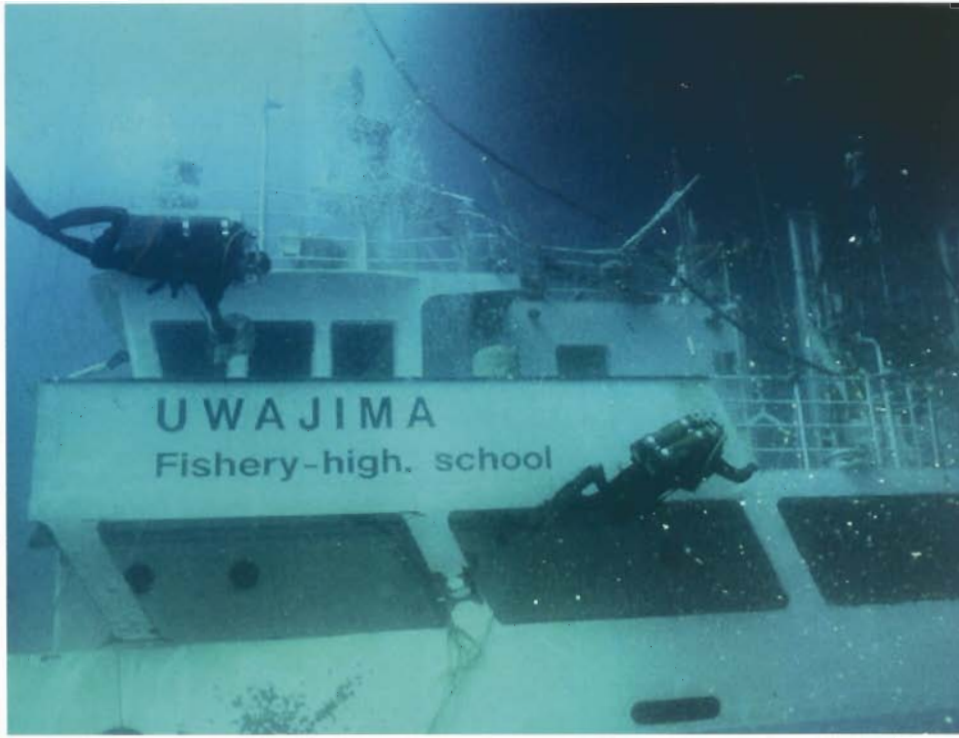
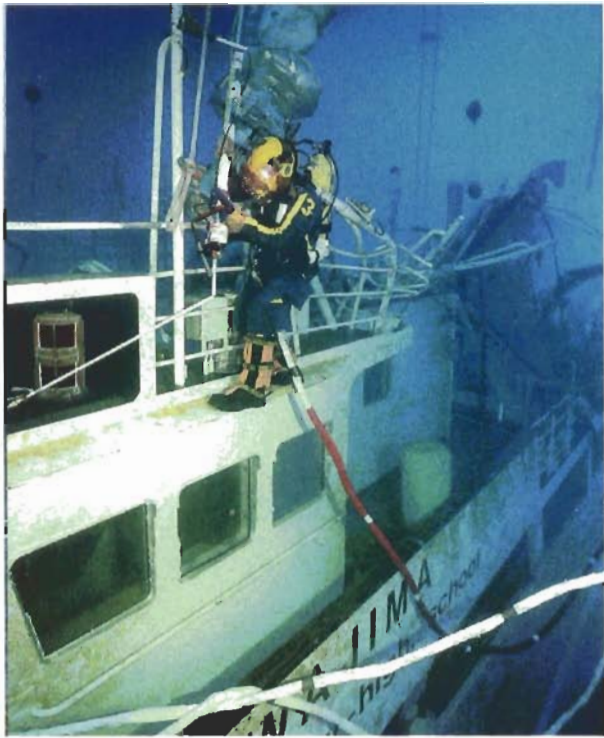
events he has scrutinized thousands of times in a court of inquiry, in the media, with the victim's families, and most of all, in his own mind.

It was a sequence of events that, as Waddle's attorney said in court, couldn't possibly be replicated again in a million years. A hazy day, a faulty piece of equipment, a rushed surveillance, a fire control technician who didn't offer Waddle all the available information – no one element would have led to the collision, but put it all together ... And still there were questions unanswered, even in Waddle's own mind.

Nonetheless, as Waddle wrote in his book, “The captain is responsible, so I knew then and I know now that the buck stops here.”

The act of taking responsibility was far more of a struggle than he could have imagined. Immediately following the accident, Waddle was thwarted when the Navy's public affairs office refused to let him apologize to the victim's families through the media.

Later, when it became obvious to Waddle that the Navy – or at least someone in the Navy – wanted him to, as he wrote in his book, “take my medicine, shut up, and go away qui-



etly," he realized he needed a plan. Though his legal counsel strongly advised him against putting anything in writing for fear of jeopardizing his case before the upcoming court of inquiry, Waddle wrote a personal letter of apology to each of the family members, the crewmembers, the captain of the *Ehime Maru*, the principal of *Uwajima* High School, the Japanese prefecture of Uwajima, and Japan's prime minister.

It wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. Even though Waddle had four times been denied testimonial immunity during the court of inquiry and even though his attorney had advised, cajoled and finally threatened Waddle against taking the witness stand, Waddle knew what he had to do. He would stand up and take sole responsibility.

"The court and the families need to hear from me," he said on the stand during the court of inquiry, "despite the personal legal prejudice to me ... and because it is the right thing to do."

The upshot was that Waddle did not have to face a court-martial, but he was found guilty of dereliction of duty and negligence in the collision. He was issued a formal letter of reprimand and asked to retire from the Navy.

On October 1, 2001, Waddle's last day of service, he walked out the door as if he was

going home on any other day. "There was no fanfare. No congratulations. It's difficult to leave something I'd been a part of for 24 years without even a simple handshake or a wish of good luck. There's a little bit of bitterness there," Waddle admits.

Still he had no idea of the devastation yet to come from leaving behind an institution that had, over the decades, come to feel like a brother or a father. "It was as if I had been excommunicated, that's how extreme it was," he said. "The pressures seemed insurmountable." In his despair, he turned to his religion for comfort and fortitude.

His spirituality began to feed his soul, but it couldn't feed his body. The pension he received wasn't enough to take care of his family. Waddle received a number of book offers, but the publishers' visions failed to mesh with his own. He didn't want to sensationalize the event or come across as a cowboy or, worse yet, a martyr. He wanted to tell the story the way it happened. Then he met Byron Williamson, the president of Integrity Publishers. Within seconds, he knew that he had found the right person. He accepted the much-needed book advance with the agreement that a portion of the funds would go to the Japan Club of Saint Louis High School in Honolulu, Hawaii for the preservation of the *Ehime Maru* Memorial and Saint Georges Episcopal Preschool in Honolulu. Waddle's hunt for his first-ever civilian job

coincided with the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attack – a difficult time for anyone to be unemployed. Finally, he found a job in Austin, TX that seemed a good fit. He and his wife put money down on a house four blocks away from Waddle's father.

Though relief was starting to set in, Waddle was still intrigued when a job as a project manager in the power technologies division of ABB Inc. in Raleigh opened up. Waddle interviewed for the job and he and his wife toured the area. They were hooked. They moved to Cary in August of 2002 and began building a new house in North Cary.

As his personal life stabilized, in December of 2002, Waddle finally put together the funds he needed to make what he considered to be a long overdue trip to Japan to fulfill a promise he had made to the families of the victims. Waddle stepped off the plane to face over 50 Japanese news crews hanging from the walls on elevated platforms. He thought the worst was over till he walked out of the terminal and saw over 200 camera crews and reporters jockeying for position. "It was like running a gauntlet," Waddle said. "We had to force our way through. It was extremely overwhelming. I got in the van and just panicked."

High emotions continued. Waddle's first visit was with four of the surviving students and their parents. They came armed with questions. Why did you hit our ship? How could you not see us? How did you feel? How do you feel now?

The worst was still to come. Waddle met with the parents of Yuske Terada, a 17-year-old boy who was killed in the collision. Mrs. Terada brought photographs of her son and letters that he had written. She read the letters out loud. "The words were piercing, Waddle said. "It was so painful. But I knew this was part of the redemption process."

Waddle almost memorized by heart one letter which Yuske wrote to himself at age 15 when he had graduated from secondary school. Yuske planned to read the letter when he graduated from high school. Waddle paraphrases what he remembers: "Dear Yuske, I hope this letter finds you well. I wonder what you are like three years from now. I often wonder if I will continue to pursue studies in computers. I do love computer games. I wonder how you are spending your time. I am anxious about my exams, but I hope that I am successful and make my mother and father proud of me. Well, Yuske that is all I have to say. I wish you the best of luck."

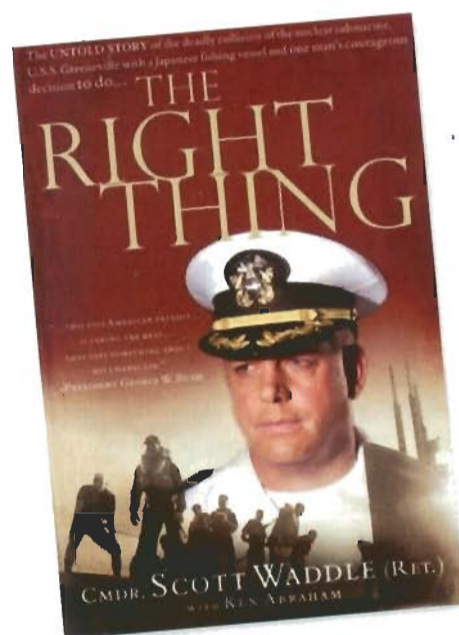
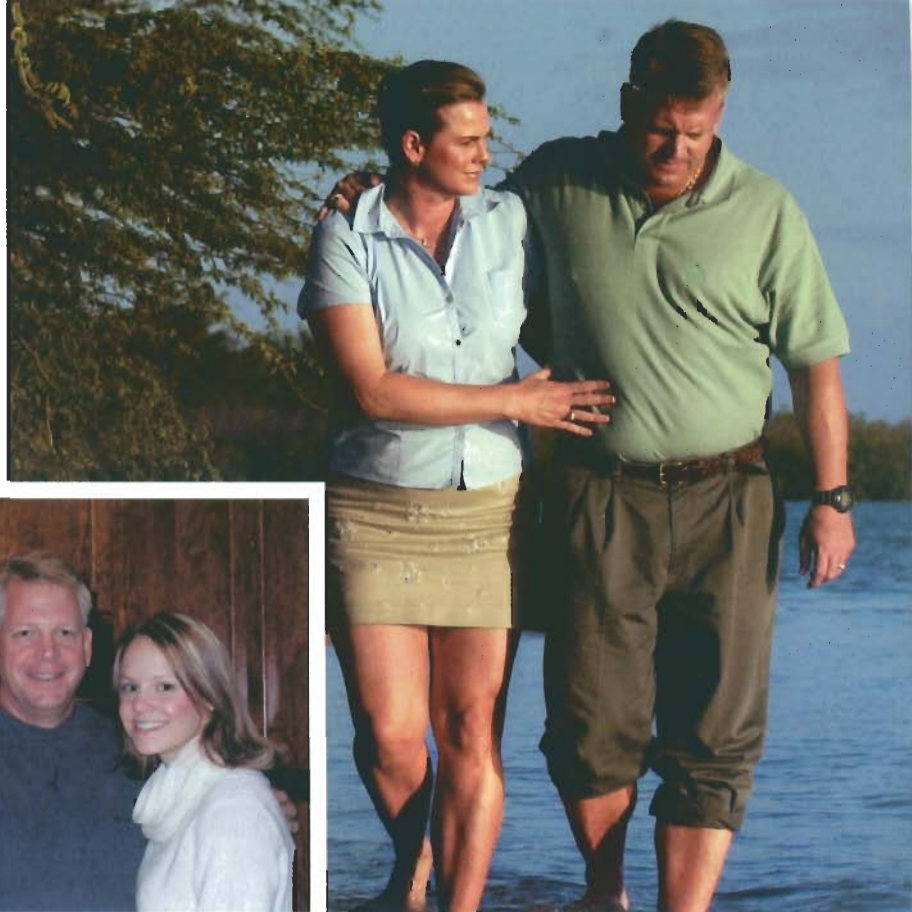
As Mrs. Terada read this letter, Waddle broke down. Mrs. Terada then pulled out a bag that contained a recovered artifact, her son's clock. The time was frozen at 1:53. "At some point between the collision and this time was death," Mrs. Terada told Waddle.

After over two grueling hours of discussion, Mr. Terada began chiming in: How could it have happened? Could it have been avoided? Did you see our son? Waddle answered his questions as best he could and at last Mr. Terada told Waddle, "I can tell this has caused you great pain. I know that you feel deeply saddened by this event. Everyone has suffered enough."

In the outpouring of Japanese press regarding his visit, Waddle was commended again and again for his tearful apologies and his sense of honor. He flew home knowing that his pilgrimage had lifted a huge weight off his shoulders. He also knew it was time to move on; to create a new life for himself and his family.

And from the start, Cary has felt like home. Ashley immediately settled into Cardinal Gibbons High School. Waddle himself became active in the community. He serves as chairman of the Sequoia District Oconneechee council of the boy scouts and was recently inducted into the Cary McGregor Rotary. And all of the Waddles are heavily involved in their church.

"You can't live in the past," Waddle said. "The past is important, but you can't dwell there if you intend to move forward and be productive."



If you would like to read more about retired Commander Scott Waddle in his book "The Right Thing," it is available at Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, Borders Books and most area book stores.