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James Lawrence Faughn Biography

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Elizabeth N. Shor, January 1986



James Lawrence Faughn & scientist, on bridge of R/V Stranger, during Naga Expedition

James Lawrence Faughn was at Scripps Institution of Oceanography from 1947 until 1974, in a remarkable variety of administrative appointments. He served during the directorships of Harald U. Sverdrup, Roger Revelle, and William A. Nierenberg. He made significant contributions to the postwar Scripps fleet, to the Southeast Asia Project (Naga Expedition), and to the Alpha Helix Program. He was recognized by his colleagues as a quiet, unassuming person, diplomatic in all personnel matters, and very effective in the tasks that he tended at SIO.

Born in Lincoln, Nebraska on December 11, 1910, Faughn joined the U. S. Navy in 1927, at age 16, and served in it until 1942, reaching the rank of warrant electrician. He spent considerable time at sea. His discharge was for physical disability (a collapsed lung), which was treated at the Naval Hospital in San Diego. In 1942 he was married, and during most of the remainder of World War II, he served as an engineer and as a captain in the Merchant Marine and the Army Transportation Corps, chiefly at sea.

When it became possible in 1947 for SIO to enlarge its oceanographic fleet, Finn Outler of the Marine Physical Laboratory recommended Faughn (whom he had known in the Navy) to take charge of the arrangements. Director Harald U. Sverdrup interviewed Faughn on Friday, October 31, 1947, and promptly hired him. On Monday, November 3, Faughn went to the Navy shipyard at Vallejo, Calif., to inspect available surplus vessels

for SIO. He was employed as Marine Superintendent (Engineering), in which capacity he directed the conversion into research vessels Horizon, Spencer F. Baird, Crest, and Paolina-T.

Because he enjoyed time at sea, Faughn requested to be "skipper" of Horizon for Midpac Expedition in 1950, which was led by Acting Director Roger Revelle. When Revelle became Director of SIO in 1951, he appointed Faughn as Technical Administrator. On Northern Holiday Expedition in 1951, Faughn was Captain of Horizon for a month, and began his long custom of keeping a daily journal when away from home.

Except for a leave of a few months in 1953, Faughn worked with John D. Isaacs during the early 1950s, on several nuclear bomb tests. In 1956, he headed the scientific group for a resurvey of Eniwetok Atoll, requested by the U.S. Navy.

When the Southeast Asia Project was under consideration in 1958 by SIO, Revelle assigned Faughn as Project Officer. This program in the Gulf of Thailand and a portion of the South China Sea was intended to provide oceanographic information in relation to fisheries, to train oceanographic and fisheries scientists of the participating countries, and to lay the groundwork for continued development of marine resources in the area. The countries with which the U.S. government, through the International Cooperation Administration, was cooperating were Thailand and South Vietnam. The SIO Research Vessel Stranger was designated for the project and Faughn was appointed its captain. He selected the name Naga (sea serpent in Thai mythology) for the two-year expedition. Dr. Anton Bruun of Denmark was appointed project scientist, and he participated in much of the preliminary planning, but he became seriously ill just as the sea-going work was to begin. Faughn carried out the details of the international program from 1959 to 1961, at its headquarters in Bangkok, Thailand and aboard Stranger on many of its cruises. He wrote the summary report of the project in 1963, and he compiled Volume 1 of the Naga Reports: Scientific Results of Marine Investigations of the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand 1959-1961 (published in 1974).

After his return from Thailand in 1961, Faughn carried out some sea tests for the Advanced Oceanography Group of SIO, and in 1962 conducted bathymetric work in the South China Sea as a follow-up of Naga Expedition.

A major program of physiological studies at SIO, that included a ship to be used as a floating laboratory, was approved for funding by the National Science Foundation in 1964. Faughn was assigned to be the University representative at the shipyard in Tacoma, Washington; he was there until the ship, Alpha Helix, was completed in February 1966. He presided at the transfer of the vessel to the University of California nine miles off the coast of the state of Washington, and was its captain on the homeward trip to San Diego. The program of physiological studies to be done using the Alpha Helix was being established through the Physiological Research Laboratory at the same time, headed by Dr. Per F. Scholander. Quite unlike the sea-going expeditions of SIO, this program consisted of shore-based studies, chiefly physiological, at remote locations. Faughn noted that because "the ship would be operating for long periods of time in foreign waters rather than in international waters" the program was "quite an undertaking." [autobiog., p. 129] (Extensive files on the Alpha Helix program are in the SIO Archives.)

Faughn was captain of Alpha Helix on its first voyage, Billabong Expedition to Australia in 1966. He set up the format of a docked laboratory vessel and an adjacent shore camp that was used successfully for several Alpha Helix expeditions. He visited Brazil in late 1966 to arrange for the second expedition, and then again served as captain of Alpha Helix on Amazon Expedition in 1967.

In 1968, Faughn became administrator for three units of SIO, and in 1969 was appointed Staff Officer to carry out a multitude of duties for the Director of SIO, including the scheduling of the Institution's research ships. He retired from SIO in 1974, and died in Vista, California on September 18, 1985.