

*Conversation*  
*with*  
*John Leenhouts*

July 3, 2017  
Haller Air Field  
Green Cove Springs, Florida



Recorded and Transcribed  
by  
Lyn Corley



TAPE 1 SIDE A

JOHN-My name is John Richard Leenhouts. I was born in 1950, October of '50, in a place called Bryan, Texas. Most people know it as College Station. The only reason I was born there is because as my father pointed out to me, while working in the oil fields of South Texas I had been conceived in Reno, carried in Kingsville, and as they were driving through Bryan they stopped and delivered me. We continued to move all across the south between Freer, McGowan, Alice, Reynoso, Matamoras, San Antonio, Burleson, Ft. Worth then we moved into Kansas. Up to Hays, Great Bend, Salada up to Utah to Salt Lake and Beryl and finally in 1961 we moved to Illinois. I resided in Illinois with my folks there until I got into college at Southern Illinois University. I spent one misfit year there and got wrapped up in the anti-war movement in 1969 and was asked never to come back to Southern Illinois. They didn't want me or my money. Go somewhere else.

My father, being a World War II veteran, he didn't take kindly to the fact that I had rioted against the war so he cut off, severed the financial umbilical cord and I became a nomad so to speak. He said, "You can live in our house until the end of the summer, get what money you can, and then when school starts we don't really care where you go but go."

LYN-That was during draft time also.

JOHN-Oh yeah.

LYN-If you weren't in school you were...

JOHN-Going to be drafted.

LYN-In the same position we found ourselves.

JOHN-My number was one eleven, 111. So it was a pretty high probability so I called my grandparents up who lived down right outside of Tulsa, I said, "Can I use your home as my home of record to see if I can't get into Oklahoma State University?" I applied and got into the school. I pretended as if I was living in Oklahoma, had been. In those days they didn't check. I just had a home of record and so I only paid in-state tuition. I guess it was maybe six or seven dollars a credit hour back in the '70's. So I worked on a road crew in Southern Illinois for the summer. Make enough and put everything I had in my 1953 Willys Jeep that had "Oklahoma or Bust" on the side. Dad wished me well and I headed south.

I went to school at Oklahoma State and worked on the oil fields in Wyoming and Montana during the summers and during the school year I just, I very cautiously managed my money. Then I got a guaranteed student loan in 1970 because Oklahoma State had a pilot's program. You could use that money to learn to fly. I took my guaranteed fifteen hundred dollars, which is

a lot of money, but it was only seven hundred dollars to be a private pilot. I got my license when I was nineteen in September of 1970.

LYN-And was that a life-time desire to fly? Where did that start? Do you remember?

JOHN-I got exposed to it from some of my father's friends were aviators. My father was a waste gunner in B-26's during the war so he talked about flying. He never flew an airplane he was only a waste gunner. I heard, and also the stories from some of the fellows around me, my father's family and you know they talked about it. One uncle was a pilot but he did it for the pipe line. He was a pipe line checker, nothing really major.

In any event, I just decided that I wanted to fly and then actually the real turning point I was sixteen years old and we were visiting our grandparents, my grandparents in Burluson and they had an air show going on at Carswell Air Force base. No one else wanted to go so I hitch hiked from Burluson up to Ft. Worth to the air base and as I was walking around and looking at all these really cool jets, not really knowing what they were just they were really impressive, I walked by a guy who was there in a flight suit, I believe he was probably an Air Force captain, and I just started talking to him and asked about the airplane and you know what it's like to fly. It was really pretty cool and I thought, "I can do this." He goes, "Yeah, you can do this. You just gotta go to school and come out, you need math as a background, math and sciences." So at that moment I said, "If he can do it I can do that and I don't want to be pumping gas in Kansas when I'm eighty years old so I'm going to go do this flying thing."

That's why in school I went for an engineering degree with no intent of using it but having that math and science background in aerospace engineering with a minor with a major in mechanical. So, all that got me through college and then two years before I graduated this guy comes flying in a T-34B.



T-34B

It was a recruiting airplane with two seats made my Beech. It had Navy wings on the side. He was immediately surrounded by all the female co-ed students and I'm like, "Man, I've got to be that dude." So I said, "All right, I walked over and said, "What are you doing here?" He said, "Well, I'm here recruiting." "Tell me what this naval aviation is all about." He said, "Oh it's great. Meet me downtown at this bar this evening and I'll tell you all about it." At that time I was twenty-one.

So he told me about it. He said, "It's real easy to become a, what they call an aviation reserve officer candidate." I said, "OK." "You don't have to join. You raise your right hand but you just swear an oath that you will, if you graduate you will then come in and try and if you don't want to do it you don't have to. Either way, if you don't want to do it you can quit." So I signed up two years before I went in service which I didn't know what I was doing but it was the smartest move I ever made because the day I got my first pay check in the Navy it was dated as if I had been in two years earlier. So, I had two years of longevity all the way through my Navy career. That's a huge chunk of change. So, I went down and did boot camp in Pensacola, in the pressure cooker, the summer of '72. I almost washed out on a heart problem. It's called a WPW syndrome. The doc caught it and I basically lied my ass off and said "I didn't even know I got it." I knew there was something going on.

LYN-What is it?

JOHN-It's a false bundle branch block so what happens is the electrodes connecting there kicks on and (makes fluttering noise). I could be standing there and my heart would literally go into over-drive as if I had just run a marathon. It wouldn't really bother me. I just noticed it. So I just said, "I don't know what you're talking about." Further investigation says, "it looks as if this is congenital, you don't have it regularly." They needed cannon fodder for Vietnam. Sign me up and keep going, don't stop. So they let me keep going. I continued on.

Out of our class of a hundred and twenty less than twenty of us got through. That was very standard for those days. They let anybody try out but once you got in it was really hard. The drill instructors were trying to make you quit. They gave every ounce of energy they could to create an environment that you wanted to quit. If they got you to quit there then they wouldn't waste the money in flight training. Once you got in flight training they didn't want you to quit then. They wanted you to succeed.

I got through that first summer, finished college, came back in January of '73 and finished my last eight more weeks and was commissioned in March of '73 [corrected to '74] and then I went directly into flight training in Kingsville in the T-2 and I trained with that all the way through January of '74, that had to be wrong. I got my wings in '75 so I was commissioned in March of '74 so I had gone back to flight, to do the boot camp in January of '74. I had graduated December '73. That's what it was.



Navy T-2 Buckeye



Navy A-4 Skyhawk

So, flight school went through August of '75 and in June of '74 in between the T-2 and the A-4 Skyhawk I had about a three-month break. I came back up to Oklahoma City and married my college sweetheart.

LYN-Her name.

JOHN- Pamela Sue Alsch. Her father was an Army Air Corp C-47 cargo pilot, a flying sergeant. He and I hit it off. He stayed in the Air Force and he retired out of the Air Force as a major at twenty years then he went to the FAA and he was a Nav Aids, navigation equipment checker that flew around the world in Civil Air. So, he worked at the FAA there in Oklahoma City.

From the time I met the guy we were best buddies. It was a natural. I think he was pretty forgiving because I think I showed up at the front door with shoulder-length hair. That was probably not the smartest thing I could do. You know what he did, he tested me. He said, "You know what, we're gonna check you out boy. You said you could fly." At that time I had my private license in commercial and was an instructor pilot. He said, "I'm gonna take you out here and see if you can fly this Boeing 720." It was a simulator but it was the real deal and he was testing me to see if I really knew what I was talking about and that I wasn't just some blow-hard bragging that I could fly an airplane.

Well I guess I did well enough because we went home had marguerites and we've best friends forever. So, married and finished flight school and really, really wanted to go F-4's out of San Diego. Had a lot of instructor pilots who were Phantom instructors or Phantom pilots during Vietnam and lived San Diego and I'd been there on the cross-countries. I really wanted to go there. But the Navy said, "No, you're gonna go be in Corsairs out of Cecil Field." I didn't have a clue where that was.

LYN-Where Cecil field was. No one had a clue where Cecil Field was. I always ask about your first impression of Cecil Field, of the area.

JOHN-The first impression, my wife was in a '71 Toyota and I was in my 1965 Austin Healey 3000. We had driven as a pair with everything we had from Kingsville right to Cecil and it was a forest. We never got to Jacksonville. We came in on 92 in those days and we came rolling into Cecil Field out in the middle God's country. Nothing. It was pitch black. Checked into this dumpy little BOQ that had rats and then we went to get something to eat at the Kentucky Fried Chicken on 103<sup>rd</sup> Street.

LYN-Which is still way toward town.

JOHN-Yeah. There was nothing else out there. The guy there offered her a job on the spot to work as a waitress behind the counter. She was a teacher by the way. In any event it was a rude awakening. I said, "OK, this is where I'm gonna be hanging out for a while."

LYN-So did she teach in Duval County?

JOHN-She taught in Clay. She actually went on to start ESOL [English as a second language] in Clay County. She had her own school. She was the first teacher in Florida to be certified to do ESOL and she and another lady started a school so she left the public school and went to a private school she and another lady developed.

LYN-Which school was that?

JOHN-You would ask me that question. It was so many years ago. It was there in Orange Park off of 17. I couldn't tell you now. Seven Bridges maybe, something Bridges. She taught in Clay County for over twenty years then retired. In any event we check into the A-7 RAG, VA-174 the Hell Raisers. I went through flight school there. Yep, you were probably there at one time. [Referring to my husband, Ted Corley, who was in the room]



LYN-1970.

JOHN-You were a little ahead of me.

TED-VA-83 had been on the Forestall and they came back and transitioned from the A-4's to the A-7's. That was the reason I was there.

JOHN-There you go. You were there in 1970-71.

LYN-You went out January 1, 1971 on the Forestall.

JOHN-I was in the last seven of us to train in the A-7B, the old Bravo model, which was nothing more than an A-4 with more wing stations basically. It was the oldest jet in the fleet at the time beside the F-8. In any event so there was only seven of us. We were going to go to one of two squadrons that had them. That was VA-46 and 72. None of us liked the, we had heard stories about the skipper of the Clansman, the VA-46 guy so we all went over secretly to talk to the skipper of VA- 72 and as it turned out the skipper of 72 said, "I only get two of you."

They got two guys and I was not one of them. I went to 46 with four other guys. There were five of us and this is very rare. Five of us checked in same way, same day getting ready to go on work-ups. The first one of us that got introduced to skipper was Fred Sanders and so the skipper, he was a goofy guy, he could never remember our names. So he just called us all "Fred". So all the new guys were just "Fred" so we had name tags made that said, "Fred Number One, Fred Two, Fred Three, Fred Four, and Fred Five" and that's who we were and that's he remembered because he couldn't remember our names. As a matter of fact I have "Fred Number One" I have his name tag over there. It says, "Accept no substitutes." It was Fred Sanders. So anyway, we did the work-up on Kennedy and then we went right to the North Atlantic.



LYN-So the Kennedy was at Mayport at that time.

JOHN- No, the Kennedy was out of Norfolk. It didn't move to Mayport until the '90's. But yeah, we cruised on Kennedy to the North Atlantic for two months. We came home and did a quick turn and in December or January we left for nine months on Kennedy again to the Mediterranean. We came back in September of '77 and that's when I transitioned to the Tomcat. I had all of October and November and December to get qualed in it and then we turned around and left again.

Let me think about that, we went to the North Atlantic, came back, yeah that's right. We went up in January, came back in September, I got the transition. We went on, we started our work-ups again in, oh I know what it was, we came back in September, I qualed on the Tomcat and we went right back on the USS Eisenhower to bring it out of the yards on a shake-down for two months in the Caribbean for mid-October to early December.



So, I had just a small window to get it done, go out on the cruise, turn around and come back, and then we stood down, we didn't cruise again until March of '79 so we left in June of '78. We worked-up after doing the Eisenhower we worked-up January through May and left in June. I remember that

because we lost Bill Kincaid was my roommate. He got a bad cat shot. We also transitioned to the A-7E so we got rid of the B's and got into the E's. He was a tanker and took a bad shot off of CAT-3 and went in the drink and drowned. That was on Kennedy getting ready to go on our second cruise back to the Mediterranean.

USS DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER CVN-69 (above) and USS JOHN F. KENNEDY CV-67



We did the whole Med cruise, returned and I had, something was really bizarre. We had flown so much that I already had four hundred traps as a Lieutenant JG. I flew up as an Ensign in the

squadron and I left there as a lieutenant select and right before I went to the RAG they went ahead and advanced me but I was a JG for the whole tour that I was there, ensign or JG. It was four hundred traps. That was just nothing short of a small miracle. We were flying three times a day. We did a day CAT shot, a day trap, a day shot, night trap and a night launch and a night trap.

LYN-Tell us in world events what was going on during that period of time.

JOHN-You know it was the Cold War for us. That was from '76 until '79 and I don't think there were any world issues. The Soviets were constantly tattle-tailing us. We would try to run from them and hide but we'd go to find them. We'd circle all over the Cresques and Crevacs and all the Soviet combatants out there. We were rattling our sword but never slashing anybody with it. It was always a cat-and-mouse game with them so we were battling an enemy that didn't want to shoot and we didn't want to shoot either but we had the guns cocked all the time. I don't recall anything major in world affairs other than the fact that, the biggest thing that affected all of us was when they got rid of Carter and Ragan gave us a fourteen percent pay raise in 1980.

LYN-I've heard that one before. It was a big deal.

JOHN-Oh my gosh. That changed all of our lives. We were living on food stamps for crying out loud.

LYN-I think we remember that, don't we? (Turning to Ted)

JOHN-I mean during those first four years in the Navy our evening, week-end activities would be we would get another couple from the squadron or two, I would check out a sixteen-millimeter movie from the Jacksonville Library for free. We'd put up a white sheet in the living room or whatever we had and I would check out from the base a sixteen millimeter projector. We would cook Jiffy Pop and we'd get Old Milwaukee Light because it was a buck a six-pack or something. That was our, that was the week-end party because there was no money. We lived on beanies and weanies and peanut butter and jelly.

LYN-Where were you living?

JOHN-We lived out behind the credit union on Blanding right there at Aurora. It's south of the mall. It was the only credit union in those days. Back in the back there was a little road called Capella, 301 Capella. It was a thousand square feet. Huge.

LYN-Everybody was moving to Orange Park.

JOHN-Yeah, everybody told us to move out there. We paid twenty-three thousand dollars for it. I thought I had lost my mind. I couldn't believe it. I think at the time, you know with tax returns in those days, I was making about seven or eight thousand dollars a year. That was our standard

salary. That included flight pay so it wasn't very much. So getting a loan for twenty-three thousand dollars was pretty challenging. I remember making those house payments.

We lived in that house until I became a lieutenant and the pay raise came in with President Ragan. We built a home down in Ridgecrest in Orange Park going south. There was nothing down there at that time and we had it designed for sixty thousand dollars. Fifteen hundred and eighty square feet by golly, it doubled our square footage.

We had a big yard and fence and then my mother died about a year after we moved down there and I think I got an inheritance of like twelve or thirteen thousand dollars, which was a lot of money to me at that time, so we put in a pool for eight thousand dollars. We had so many squadron parties there because we lived in that house all the way up until I took over the strike fighter wing. We literally lived in that house for seventeen years. We raised our daughter there and we were just fine. We were just average Americans. Everybody in the neighborhood was below the middle class, we were all struggling. Every week-end then we would do garage drive-way parties. Somebody would say "Hey, come on down to the house. I'll bring the guacamole dip, you bring the Milwaukee Light and get the kids and the kids would play and we all sat in the drive-way in lawn chairs until the sun set."

LYN-They were mostly Navy.

JOHN-A lot of Navy. We're still in touch with them a lot today. Pat and Keith Lerrick and Lou and Raynelle Myers. As a matter our kids are close to this day. They still keep in touch. As a matter of fact of Lou's daughter lives in Kansas and she's a nurse and she just came back to see my daughter and brought her kid. They stayed out here for a week or so.

LYN-It was your family.

JOHN-It was. The neighborhood was a family.

LYN-Cecil Field became family.

JOHN-It was. Everybody knew everybody. For crying out loud if you did something wrong everybody knew so you didn't want to tick off your squadron mates.

LYN-So once you saw this isolated base with all the pine trees and realized you were going to be in a squadron you didn't really want to be in...

JOHN-Flying the oldest airplane in the fleet, an airplane I didn't want to fly, and going to a squadron I didn't want to go to, and being poor, and living in Mayberry RFD.

LYN-You loved it though?

JOHN-I was in heaven. I was flying jets off carriers and I found my niche and that was the one thing that just made everything else go away. I loved, I was in my element flying off the ship. I don't know why. I was scared to death of it the first time I ever did it. I guess everybody is.

LYN-Everybody says they are.

JOHN-Just absolutely petrified of it. I was petrified of doing it at night. I never got to liking night but I got to tolerate it. But the day-time stuff, I got to where I just loved it. I liked being on the carrier. It was a rigid, focused life, and I'm very organized.

LYN-I can see. We're sitting here in a museum of very organized one hundred thousand, at least, items that are very well organized. (Laugh)

JOHN-And that's what I loved about it. I loved the comradery on the ship. I mean I love my family and I love coming home but I just was enamored with the flight ops on the carrier.

LYN-So your wife was good with that way of life.

JOHN-Yeah, you know her father had been a traveler. He traveled around the world so he was gone for extended periods of time. Not months but he would be out two or three weeks at a time and back and then gone again. So she kind of knew what that was all about. I won't say she loved it but she was OK with it. She was a very strong person. She raised our daughter pretty much because I wasn't there. I let her take the check book and kind of manage everything. I really didn't have time for it. So, she did well and then she died at fifty years old of a brain aneurism.

LYN-Was there no warning?

JOHN-Well, as we go back and review it now, two weeks prior she had started getting little dizzy spells and the doctor thought she might have an ear infection causing the vertigo. The autopsy proved that was the aneurism leaking putting fluid back there. Well, ultimately it burst in the middle of the night and she went in a flash of a light. She was dead. So the doctor did the autopsy because a fifty year old shouldn't die. I was just totally mortified.

So anyway we went back there in the squadron then I came back and went to the RAG as a RAG instructor, a RAG LSO. I loved that because you know if I'm not flying off the ship, well I actually got to because every month I would take another class and clean them up to land on the ship at night in the A-7, day and night. Each one of those events we would go out on the carrier for a week and as soon as I got the guys done then I could jump in a jet and go around the pattern and hewn my skills. So I'd get what's called "bagging". I would go bag a few traps, get my proficiency up and stay current. I was always around it. That finished up the RAG instruction and I went back, I'll never forget, the detailers, the guys that write your orders.

LYN-We tried to make friends with detailers.

JOHN-Well, this guy's name was Don Weiss, he was an A-7 guy. He was a detailer, a junior officer detailer out of Pax River. He came down about once a year and would sit down with every lieutenant that was getting ready to come up for orders and talk to you about what your options were. I'll never forget he brings me in the office he was using there temporarily. He says, "Well, I've taken a look at your record here, Lites. This reads like a dime store fuck book." He said, "You're going nowhere in a hurry." I went, "Oh, really?" He said, "Yeah, it looks like you don't have performance to go anywhere. I'm not even sure I can get you a job as a LSO in an air wing. You'll have to go back as a shooter or a field officer." "Oh, this is not good."

I hadn't been paying attention, I was just having fun. You know I didn't really think I had a career in the Navy. Well, at that moment I thought, "Either I'm gonna get a career or I'm done. Something is gotta happen here." So that was a moment of clarity if you will. So, as it would turn out one of my previous commanding officers, because I had gone through three of them in the A-7 squadron, was a guy name Jim Matheny, "Tank". Jim Matheny was coming back as an air wing commander and Tank got his call sign because he drank, he drank like a tank. He was built like tank. He was a big guy. I was doing some training with him and when I came in I said, "Hey, what about a few beers." He said, "Let's go." Well that turned into I woke up on his couch in the BOQ with him in his room sleeping. Whatever we had done we had a pretty big time. That morning he goes, "You know what, you're just the guy I'm looking for. Do you want to be my CAG LSO." "I'm your man." (Laugh)

LYN-What a seriously planned career you had. (Laugh)

JOHN-I was like, "OK, let me make this work now." So that's when I got busy with the CAG LSO tour and that was on America, a great ship.

LYN-When you say "Great ship", can you compare the ships. I haven't gotten any comments. They all say "It was just a ship." You say the America was a "great ship".



JOHN-It was the people. It starts with the leadership at the top. Kennedy was a good ship but it was a hard ship. It wasn't a lot of camaraderie on the ship. The air wing and the ship personnel kind of were at odds with each other but the America, the captain was Snuffy Smith, went on to be a four star. He was, he had been a light attack A-7 guy then a commodore. He went to be a commodore. I'm telling you, that guy was phenomenal. He brought everybody together. The ship and the air wing worked really well together. Denny Wise I think was the XO, an x-Blue Angel. He was good.

So, I went there as the CAG LSO with my other buddy who I had cruised with, the guy I trained in the A-7, the F-14 guy Chris Weitrick, I got him signed up to be the other CAG LSO. So we were buddies from two cruises before, both had been RAG instructors. We got him to come back and be my partner and bunk mate there on the America. That was good fun. I flew with VA-72 that time. They were back on there and air wing one and also VA-102, the Diamondbacks, a Tomcat squadron.

That was a great tour I mean that was probably the most rewarding tour I ever had and anyone will tell you that if they are a CAG LOS and you're the guy who's on the back of the boat making things happen, as long as you do your job right it's extremely rewarding. It wears you out but it's rewarding.

From there it was on to, I thought I was going to go, I was promised to take over the LSO school here at Cecil Field and then I got a call on the MARS phone. Remember the MARS phone on the ship where you, "OK, over." Then they would say something and they would say, "Over." So I get a call from detailer and he goes, "You've been selected to be the Atlantic Fleet LSO." I said, "No I'm not." "Oh, yes you are." I go, "I was promised to go to the LSO school. "No, we're gonna put Bob Yakely in that job. You're not going there." I'm like, "But you promised." "No, no, it's over you're going. Do that or get out. Your choice." "Oh my god, if that's what I've got to do." So, I went back and told my wife.

This would have been 1983 so our daughter was just turning two years old. My wife was teaching down here and I talked to the guys who were, I was going to the air wing at the Atlantic Fleet staff in what they called the "Ready Room". It's all the air wing guys. There was a guy representing each aircraft type and senior guy was an old, was a previous air wing commander. All of them were commanders. So I was the junior guy in there. I'm a lieutenant commander just made it and I was going to represent all carrier operations for the Atlantic Fleet. I thought, "No, I can't handle staying up there and doing this."

My wife and I talked it over and she said, “You just get back when you can. In those days they had the P-3 school, so every, they had people who were going to school up there but lived down here or vice versa so every Sunday was a movement. There was movement on Friday and there was movement on Sunday. But then I got check in with the Tomcat squadron with the fighter wing, Paul Cash, he said, “Well, you can always have access to one of our airplanes that’s not being used on the week-ends.” So, I started flying home on Friday. I launched out of Oceana and around four in the afternoon. I’m at happy hour at home and then go back on Monday morning. My boss said, “Yeah, if you want to come back and get in the office by nine then you’re good to go.” So, I’d come home on the week-ends in a Tomcat.



Navy F-14 Tomcat

LYN-That’s some commuting.

JOHN-That was a forty-five minute run which was really nice. That job was a real eye-opener. I didn’t understand all the interactions of the ships and the air wing. You get to see more and more of how the real Navy operated. I worked for a three star admiral, Bob Dunn, great guy. I was able to make some changes and improve the carrier qualification requirements and change the natops on that.

LYN-Can you talk a little bit about that. What kind of changes?

JOHN-Well, we changed some of the requirements, the days in-between. We started there, you could go something like three weeks without a night trap and then go out and fly at night and it was just crazy. I’m trying to remember what we got it down to. I think you had to have two day landings in the previous three days or you couldn’t go at night without a day trap that day. So we condensed the requirements to be more rigid so you couldn’t end up without accidents left and right. They just weren’t proficient. They would go days without flying off the ship and then they would shoot them off at night and they would kill themselves. So we fixed that.

I brought brown boots back to the Navy. That was one of those bizarre situations where even I couldn't figure out how to do it. John Lehman had allowed us to bring back the brown leather flight jacket. He also authorized brown shoes with kakis for the aviation community. He authorized that in 1984 and we had them taken away from us in July of '76. I know that well because that's when our fiscal year used to roll over was July 1<sup>st</sup>. Then it went to October. So we all shot our shoes into the ocean off the carrier in '76.

So, now here we are in '84 and he allows brown shoes with khakis. So I extrapolated that and said, "Well, that means we can probably have brown boots to wear with my flight suit." So I go to Red Wing and I get a pair of brown boots with steel toes, steel shank, non-slip bottoms and I put those on and I start wearing them. Nobody really asked me, the guys in the Ready Room didn't see me wear them because I'm only wearing them on the ship when I go out on these detachments. So I'm getting the junior officers are like, "Did you get these in the Navy system?" I said, "No." "Well, are they authorized?" I said, "They meet or exceed all Navy specifications." They go, "Can we get them?" I said, "I got mine. Nobody has told me I can't do it yet."

So that started, that was in probably March or April of '84 and a year later by the summer of '85 we got everybody wearing brown boots and everybody just accepted it. It just became OK. Even up to the point where when I came, had a squadron I called up Red Wing and brought the Red Wing truck out and fitted everybody up, paid for with a Navy credit card. Everybody got brown boots and they still wear them to this day. That's where it started.

LYN-What a fashion statement.

JOHN-Here's another cool thing. Look behind you. See the jacket. You see, everybody had leather name tags but you see all the leather patches? They are all over that jacket. Well, in 1979 at Orange Park I just got into the RAG and I went down on Tuesday there was an old place called "The Topsy Gypsy" and they took care of horse tackle. They would do saddles and bridles and stuff like that. It was a little leather shop. So I go in there. The guy's name is Bob Hare. "Hey, do you ever tool leather?" He goes, "Yeah." He makes those flowers that go on saddles and tooled by hand and everything. I said, "Well, have you ever thought about tooling a piece of leather that had like a name on it or something?" "Yeah, I can do that." I said, "I brought in my father's from his jacket." I said, "This is what my father had on his and it is tooled leather." I said, "Could you do this?" He goes, "Well sure."

So, he tooled my first wings and a name on it in leather and I put it on my flight jacket and everybody liked that. They went, "That's pretty cool." Normally they were embossing them. They originally were like this. See the embossing on there? That's what they all had. That is carved in leather. "Well, could you make a squadron patch? Can you make my Hell Raiser patch here?" "Well, sure."

Well, that started it. He made that Hell Raiser patch, made a Corsair patch for a thousand, anyway he made all these patches and everybody is going, "This is way cool. Where did you get

these done?" At the time he was only charging I think fifteen bucks a piece for them. Well, fast forward fifteen years. He sells the business for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Those patches are sold all over the world now.

The Air Force got into them. The Army got into them. The Marine Corp started getting theirs there. So he sold the business. He got out of the horse tackle business within five years of me starting him down this path. Within fifteen years he was totally out of doing anything. All he did was he built a big warehouse at his house out there at Fleming Island, but now he now lives at Welatka though, he has moved. He built a shop and he was mass producing these things and he made a fortune doing it. (Laughing) Old Bob Hare. I'll tell you about Bob Hare. This is a really funny story.

LYN-Do you still see Bob Hare?

JOHN-I talk to him on occasion just for fun to see how he's doing. I guess I've known him maybe a while. This would have been, Bob's pretty old and this would have been '79. He would have been forty years old. He was divorced. He had been an executive for a shoe company and he just like couldn't take it. He was like a wild spirit. It was called the "Topsy Gypsy" obviously. He left that business and he also left his wife, his kids were grown. He said, "I couldn't take that anymore. She wanted this life and I didn't want, I wanted to live out in the woods." He built this A-frame up on the St. Johns right there at Fleming Island.

Anyway, this girl comes in, she couldn't have been twenty and they kiss and I'm like "Ugh, OK. Cousin?" "No, that would be my wife." I'm like "really?" So as we became friends he tells me the rest of the story. He started dating her. It was his best friend's daughter. Best friend's daughter and she was about seventeen or eighteen when he started dating her. Sadie Hare is her name and to this day they are the happiest married couple. There was twenty years between them but you wouldn't know it. He's just as spry as he can be. I said, "How did those Christmas and Thanksgivings go?" He said, "Well, they weren't so good in the beginning but we're OK now." (Laugh)

So back to the CAG LSO tour. Then I go to AIRLAMP. I have to say that after twelve years on the back end of a ship, no hits, not runs, nor errors all our planes safe on deck. I never crashed a one. That was a good thing. I was very fortunate.

LYN-We were talking about the changes you made. We talked about the patches and the brown boots.

JOHN-Yeah. We tried, well we did reduce the time between events so that you stay more current. Then we brought the first night carrier landing trainer to Cecil Field for LSO's. We had a night carrier landing trainer for pilots but this was a reverse display where you could actually talk an airplane in at night in a dome. It's old technology but that was pretty new then. So I got that in at Cecil Field. We used that to train the LSO's. We never had a LSO trainer it was always

was just standing on the platform and learn. This was the first time we ever had that. I think, I know they have one up in Oceana now but it's a whole lot better than what we had back then for crying out loud.

Then, I thought I was going to go to Hornets. It was all set. I'm leaving AIRLAMP and I'm gonna fly F-18's at Cecil Field. Well, that didn't go so well. I had a reputation for being pretty much my own man. Not many squadron commanding officers wanted me on their team.

There was one that did, a guy named Bob Closterman, and he and I had been in the RAG together and he had taken over VA-46 and he said, "You know what Lites, I'll take a chance on you." I said, "OK, I appreciate that sir. I'll give it my best shot." So I go to work for Bob in VA-46 flying the A-7E's again back in my original first squadron at Cecil and we were going out on America again, back on America. Well, I had to come in and I had to do the safety officer tour and I got to the admin officer and I finally got to be the officer of maintenance in there.

The executive officer is a guy named Tom Van Brock. He hated me with a passion. I don't know why, he just did. So I did all I could to make it right but we were always at odds with each other but the skipper, Bob Closterman, wrote some glowing fit reps on my performance and I was the number one guy there for a couple of years running. So that obviously sealed the deal for getting command.

During the time frame we did El Dorado exercise, Operation El Dorado King. That's when we did the strike on Tripoli and Benghazi, April 15<sup>th</sup> of '86. I had just gotten there. I did not fly the strike. I was what they call a rescue combat air patrol. I was stationed on deck on alert status. I never launched on a strike. I had just gotten there so the more senior guys got the action which is fine. They did a really good job. That tour, I think I matured a lot in that tour. I had more responsibility so I figured out what need to be done. At the completion of that I went to, we did one cruise on, we did the '86 cruise on America and then we did the '88 cruise on Eisenhower.

I know that one very well because we called that "Club Med '88". We were on CV-69 cruising through the Mediterranean from April until September, summer in the Mediterranean. We had every unbelievable resort town all through Europe and North Africa and Israel.

LYN-You must have hit France in May so that was Cannes Film Festival.

JOHN-Yeah, we did. We actually did Kelan and Cannes and while we were in Kelan, the XO at that time was Ed Faye, Fast Eddie Faye. He went on to be the skipper of the Kennedy. He was my, he was the XO and he and I and Andy Ziegler had taken bikes to tour Europe on. So we got on our bikes and we rode from Toulon to San Trope, fifty miles up and down the hills, beautiful, for Easter week-end. We had this most wonderful time in San Trope that week-end. We rode those bikes all over Europe everywhere we went. Then on the last day of the last port in La Borno, Italy we, he and I had been on our bikes, we had ridden them back from Pisa and we got

in late and went and had dinner at this tiny, little Italian restaurant right outside the city limits, the guy didn't speak much English.

We were the only ones there so they were giving us all this wine and we are having a great time meeting his family. He is admiring our bikes and he wants to buy it. My buddy Fast Eddie wouldn't sell his but it was the last, my bike was pretty worn out and I said, "Sure." He goes, "How much do you want for it?" I said, "A hundred dollars." He gave me a hundred, American one hundred dollar bill. "Man, this is the deal of a lifetime." So I got on a pretty taped up old bike Fast Eddie was driving and I was riding on the handlebars and he peddled us back to fleet landing. That was crazy stuff.

Anyway, that was a great tour with 46. Then I came back from that and went straight to the wing. I was assigned to Cecil Field at the wing as a readiness officer. While I was there I selected for command and because I was still currently A-7 they gave me a....so I still didn't get into the Hornets.

So, I went back now as the XO of VA-72. These are the two A-7 squadrons I did my whole twenty years with for crying out loud. It's really bizarre.



That was a great squadron. They were all tight and we were back on Kennedy. So, I went and refreshed out in Lemoore and then came back and joined them and we went and did U.S. Fleet Week. We did the Caribbean and then went up to Fleet Week and came home and it was August of 1991 and we already had one cruise on the Kennedy and I was probably within a couple of months of taking over. I think the change was going to be probably in November.

Well, I'm on the beach with my wife and daughter and some other friends in St. Augustine on a Friday afternoon. My daughter comes running down the beach, we're staying in a condo for the week with our friends. She says, "Hey Daddy, there's, the squadron called. You've got to call them." I went, "Oh, I don't want to call them it's Friday afternoon. I'll call tomorrow." So she went upstairs and she came back and says, "They just called again. You really ought to call them." I thought, "This is serious. Somebody got hurt."

So I go in and call and it was Bubba Cominsky goes, "Hey, you've got to get back here right now." "What's going on?" "I can't tell you. You just got to get here." So I hadn't shaved in a week. I'm at the point that I look like a little brown beach bunny. So I took a shower and shaved and jumped in my Healy and ran back up to Cecil Field. I came in there late on Friday afternoon and they, "We're leaving on Monday. We're going on Kennedy to Kuwait." I'm like, "You're kidding me." They said, "No, we're going, we're really going." I said, "We are half-way transitioning our squadron to Hornets. We were in the transition phase coming out of A-7's going into Hornets so we had half our squadron was gone. Half our airplanes have been given to another squadron. So we started packing stuff up right there.

I called my wife and said, "Hey, you guys gotta come back by yourself. I can't come back down there. I've got to get everything ready to go. I'm gonna start packing my sea bag. We're bouncing, we're practicing carrier landings Saturday and Sunday and they have to leave on Monday morning and we're flying up Monday afternoon. So, I think we went Monday or Tuesday. We were on-board ship by Tuesday morning, we were on-board heading east thinking, "Oh, we'll just go out for a couple weeks and drill around and come back."

Well, we went all the way across the Mediterranean. We hung out there for the better part of a month. Then we headed in I think somewhere around October we went through the Suez and went into the Red Sea and started operating in there. Then we started operating with the tankers getting all joined up with you know getting tanker operations under control figure out what our tactics were going to be if we had to pull this thing off.

LYN- Was there another carrier in there?

JOHN- We got there first then came Saratoga. When we got over there the Eisenhower had been there but they left. We replaced them in the Med. When we got there the Saratoga showed up and then right before the war started America showed up. She only operated with us for about a week. The Theodore Roosevelt came through and kept on going. But we became Red Sea Battle Force with Kennedy, Sara, and partly America for about a week or so.

In any event, we did all of our training over Saudi Arabia until we got ready to go on January 17, of 1991. So, it was August of '90 we got the call. So my change of command never happened. So, I got two years in command without, XO and I didn't get command of it because we finished the war, came home, and they decommissioned the squadron because there were no A-7's.  
(Laugh)

So, the commodore at the time was guy by the name of John Curtain, call sign Spade. I had flown with him in a previous A-7 tour when I was a LSO and he walked up to me at the fly-in and he goes, "So Lites, I'll give you your choice. I need a commanding officer for a Hornet squadron and you can go just get quick transition and then go and skip the XO tour or you can go through training and go back as a XO." I go, "I'm liking this XO thing. I'll do it again. What the hell?" Gets more flying.

LYN-Oh, I see, more flying.

JOHN-So I literally went from, I did, a normal tour of your XO through commanding officer is those days it was supposed to be eighteen months each. So you get thirty-six months or basically three years from start to finish. So I had two years already as the XO so I went back and did another year and a half as an XO and a year and a half as a skipper. So I got five years back-to-back of XO-CO which was great. I loved doing that.

Anyway, I transitioned to the Hornet and the RAG I went to VFA-136 which was, they had just gotten the Night Hawk Landing pod for night operations. We were just getting goggles. That was the early days of night attack.



Anyway, we went out on Eisenhower. I joined the Eisenhower in the Indian Ocean. They were over there operating Southern Watch so I got over there October of 1991 and I came back, we went from there, we had an emergency sortie and go because one of the carriers couldn't get to the North Atlantic so we from the Red Sea right to the North Atlantic and did two months up there then went home. That was fun.

Then after that there was change of command and then I took the squadron on the maiden voyage of the USS George Washington. So, we did the work-ups on the GW. I was the commanding officer, at this time I'm senior guy in the air wing except for the air wing commander.



USS GEORGE WASHINGTON CVN-73

Then there was interesting thing that transpired right here in the middle of this, I'm wrapping up my command tour and I haven't screened for anything yet, major command. The air wing commander, we're on cruise on the GW and Herb Coon calls me and he goes, "You're gonna put in for the Blue Angel boss job." I went, "No, I'm too senior for that." He goes, "No, you're gonna put in for it." I said, "Well, really?" He goes, "Yeah." I said, "Why all of a sudden? Why me? They're so many other guys that are more qualified." He goes, "Because the Atlantic Fleet Commander wants you to." That was the guy by the name of Sweet Pea Allen. I'd known him for years. He was an A-6 Intruder BM and he said, "You're the guy for the job." I said, "OK."

So, I caught a flight back from the Mediterranean all the way back to Jacksonville and got my hair cut and my uniform up. I went to Pensacola with five, all total six of us. I did the whole interview process. It takes about, in those days it was three or three and a half days. You start on Monday and ended up on Friday but you would go through all these get to meet the blues, the blues talked to all of you. Then you would do several social events. They want to see how you handle yourself then you would go through a drill where all these Navy captains were grilling you on these different situations, "How would you handle this and how would you handle that? What's your attitude toward this, gays in the service, female pilots and all these controversial things you had to answer.

Well, all this gets done and at the very last you go interview with the commander of Naval Air Training. It happened to be a friend of mine, T-Ball Hayden. He'd been a Tomcat squadron guy

back when I was with those guys on the Kennedy and T-Ball, a great guy, we chatted for about forty-five minutes and he goes, "Yeah, I'm kind of surprised to see your name on the list here." I said, "Me too. Whatever the Navy wants me to do I'm glad to do it." He says, "Yeah, you'll be a good choice but tell you what why don't you go round up the rest of the guys and bring them on back in here?" I said, "Right now?" He goes, "Yeah, I think we've got a message in here. We all know what the decision is going to be." So we all go smartly marching back in there and he says, "All of you have been selected to be here. It's quite an honor but we made a selection and it's Donnie Cochran, call sign Big Time." Donnie's black and Donnie had been with Blue Angels before. He was their first affirmative action African American on the Blue Angel team. They had had problems. They tried to fire him but couldn't but he was told to put in for this and so he did and he got selected to be the Blue Angel lead. So, I'll go back and finish the rest of my career.

That took place and then about a year and a half later he gets fired. The team won't fly with him. He's too dangerous. So they fired him and they brought back Bob Stomp who was the previous skipper. So he did one year as the Blue lead and it was horrible. He started the second season and they just quit so they brought back the old skipper Bob, a great guy, just a wonderful American. In any event, when was John McCain running for President, see that was '98? Would it have been 2000? That would have been the election year in 2000 so '99. So he comes through town...

LYN-Town being?

JOHN-Cecil Field. He's politicking, he's doing his stomping. So, he comes through town, John McCain does. On his tour bus is Bob Stomp and he pulled me aside and he said, "Lites, I just never told you this but you need to know that when you were being interviewed you were selected by the team. You were the team selection."

LYN-Congratulations.

JOHN-Well then it gets better. I go to the Oceana Air Show and who is there but T-Ball Hayden. He's retired and I am about to retire. This would have been in 2000 and he's there. He says, "Lites, how are you doing? Could you come with me a second here?" We walk around behind the tent, the VIP tent, just the two of us. He says, "I just want to apologize to you. The Board of Captains selected you to be the Blue Angel skipper and the CNO Mike Bortel told me that he wanted a black guy and I didn't have the guts to tell him no. It's nobody's fault but my own. I just wanted you to know you were selected and I apologize for not doing what was right." I said, "Wow, T-Ball, OK. That's pretty nice to know."

LYN-It is nice to know.

JOHN-Well, I really didn't care per se. It was nice to find out but I mean it could have been any one of the other guys. They were all qualified guys. I knew all of them and actually when I met

Donnie Cochran there I knew he really didn't have his heart in it because we were talking. He was told that he was going to do it. It filtered down from CNO. CNO wanted a black guy in the front office of the Blue Angels. Of course Mike went on to shoot himself. He didn't make a lot of good decisions obviously.

In any event, Big Time and I shared a suite in the Pensacola BOQ with each other. There's a common area in the middle and he and I sat there and talked a couple of times during that week. He didn't want to do that. You have to be the number one commanding officer in your air wing. He was number five for crying out loud but they put him in for it anyway. Anyway, it was too bad. It was a sad situation but what came out of it was the detailer goes, Paul Cash, he said, "Well, what do you want to do?" I said, "I guess I need to go to a War College or something." He goes, "How would you like to go to the Air Force Golf and Country Club?" I said, "I'm all about that." (Laugh) So I went to Montgomery to the Air War College, nine months. It was the only nine months in my whole Navy career that I didn't fly.

LYN-Did your family follow you there?

JOHN-We came back every week-end. We went there to Cecil Field and I came back. There were four other Navy guys and myself. Three other Navy guys and an Air Force, we leased a doctor's mansion with a pool and a tennis court that had enough for all five of us to stay in. We turned it into one long liberty port and had a great time.

Then that is when I selected for a major command. They decided I was going to take over the strike fighter wing. Well, before I could do that, to take that job, the guy that was in there was still had a year and a half to go. So they said, "Where do you want to do?" I said, "I'll just hang out here in the RAG and be an instructor pilot." So I'm hanging out in the RAG just being an instructor pilot and having just a grand old time then I get a call from the Bureau.

TAPE 2 SIDE B

JOHN-So then I get a call from the head detailer...great guy who went on to make four stars. He said, "I've got, I need you for a special project." I go, "Woe, woe, woe, woe, woe. Nothing on the phone." This would have been January of '96 and I said, "I'll come see you." That was the time we were doing weapons training with the RAG out in Fallon, Nevada. So I got in a Hornet with another guy and we blazed back to Cecil Field. I came in and talked to my wife. I said, "I know what they want because I've already heard about this. My old buddy Chris Wietricks is coming home and the guy who is supposed take his place, Chis Sladen, has had a heart attack and he can't go." So Chris has to come back and the guy who is supposed to go can't go and I'm not doing anything for another year so I mean, I've got a bull's eye pointed on my forehead to go to Japan and be the ops officer for battle force seventh fleet.

So I said, "What do you want to do, honey?" Our daughter at this time was, she would have been sixteen years old in high school. I said, "I think I can work this out where I can do it for one year

unaccompanied. If you go we're gonna be two years. They will move all our stuff and we're gonna live over there." She said, "If you can get it to be one year unaccompanied let's do it." So I got my Hornet and flew up right at the biggest snow storm D.C. had seen in a long time. Landed on an ice, snow-covered runway at Andrews, swapped out and got a base car and drove into the detailer.

This is gonna sound funny but I remember this from my grandfather. My grandfather had gone when World War I broke out he was a chemical engineer. He went into the recruiting office and told them what he was going to do. They went "What?" He said, "I just told them. I'm a chemical engineer. I'm gonna come in as a second lieutenant and I'm gonna go over there and run your fuel farm and manage your aviation fuels for your air base." They were like, "OK. That's a good idea." So he did.

So I took the same philosophy. I never forgot he told me that. I walked in and said, "Here's the deal. Timbo, we're buddies. I'm gonna, I want to go on my record that I volunteered to go to Japan for a year unaccompanied. I'm gonna be fully qualified in the Hornet and I'll fly with the air wing over there and I'll do exactly one year and then whatever day I get there that month counts as one of those twelve months. So if I get there the first or the twenty-first or whatever that counts. "It's a done deal. You're set. Good to go. Thank you very much."

So I went back and got CQ qualified and this is so crazy. We had just bought a house in Orange Park Country Club and sold our house in Ridgecrest so I've got to move us in there. I've got one week to get this done and I've got to be there in February so I'm scrambling. So I get everything into our house in Orange Park literally on one night, moving ourselves, and I leave the next day for Japan for a year. Everything is just scattered, most of the garage is filled. The beds are put together and there's some open boxes but it was pretty much pandemonium.

Wait, wait, wait, wait. I'm sorry. My apologies. I got that all backwards. I missed the dates. I'm mixing up the dates here. So yeah, I didn't buy the house then. The house doesn't come until ... Oh, I know what I missed here. Yeah, so that's all right, that's all correct except the house purchase. So I almost forgot this one.

So back forward to '95 and in '95 it's August of '95 and I'm hanging out at the RAG just flying and they call and say, "Hey, I just need you to do a couple of months for me in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia while we're waiting for the air wing commander to get over there and go be the Joint Task Force Southwest Asia Deputy Ops as a captain. I said, "Oh, I can do a couple of months for you. That's no problem." So that's the one that we had bought the house and I literally put everything in there and I left for Saudi Arabia, for Riyadh, and I went over there in, it wasn't two months. I got there in August and I came home for Christmas. So, it, that's what it was. I was back for Christmas and in January I was out at Fallon and got the call about the job in Japan in February. So I had just come back from Saudi Arabia which was a bizarre place.

I lucked in, there was, in those days we were staying in the royal Saudi Arabian Air Force Headquarters and they had these big high rises. I think we were on the twelfth floor or the fourteenth floor or something like that. We had, the top floor was a penthouse but it had enough bedrooms in it for five captains up there. There were four Air Force guys and a Navy dude. That would be me. So I walked in up there and they were all sitting around watching TV and the guy goes, "Well, welcome to Ground Hog Day at the Betty Ford Clinic. (Laugh) Every day is gonna be the same and there ain't no alcohol." I'm like, "OK." I'm thinking, "I can do this two months."

Of course, five months later I get out of there then back and then off to Japan. So I get to Japan and I just fell in love with the place. I just fell in love. The people were so wonderful. The Japanese loved Americans and life was good and we just had the best time. I just traveled everywhere. The air wing commander was a dear friend, Fryer Calhoun, and every week-end I had a jet and I'm on my way going all around the Pacific Rim with a couple of junior officers to lead me around. We went, anywhere I wanted to go in I was the guy writing script for the carrier port calls so I said, I asked the admiral at the time was Willie War, a crazy guy, he went on to be a three star, "So Willie, what kind of schedule do you want for training." He says, "It better be a fun one. Better have some good ports." "OK, I always wondered who wrote the schedule."

LYN-It was you.

JOHN-So I wrote the schedule and this was this incredible port to port to port starting off in Sydney to Perth to Kuala Lumpur to Pattaya Beach. I mean every possible fun port.

LYN-Did you go to Malta? I can't find anybody who went to Malta.

JOHN-No, never did.

LYN-He was in Malta. (referring to Ted) After that nobody ever went back to Malta. Seventy you were in Malta twice I think.

JOHN-The carrier stopped going there somewhere either '70 or '71. That was one of the last ones to put a carrier in Malta. They go into Rhodes but they wouldn't go into Malta. Interesting.

LYN-It is. You enjoyed Malta. (addressing Ted) Yes.

JOHN-Well it's a quaint little island. Nothing really big or spectacular.

LYN-Well, Paul was there. The Bible Paul. (Laugh)

JOHN-Oh yeah.

LYN-And Ted was there.

JOHN-So I did a year over there and actually it was towards, well it was December of '96 and they said, "You know, you've done a great job and if you want to go back early you can." I said, "You promised me twelve months."

LYN-You really loved it.

JOHN-I wanted to go to the Ice Festival in Sapporo, I wanted to go to Saipan, I hadn't been there yet and see where the atom bomb had been loaded. There was just so much history over there and the people were so willing to take you around and show you their country. So I loved it and I stayed until February of '97 and came back and in April took over the wing, the strike fighter wing and had the wing until I was supposed to only be, yeah that job was supposed to be a two, two and a half year job but Admiral Wazac and he said, "Lites, you're gonna have to move the wing. They're closing Cecil Field and you gotta move the wing. That's your job."

LYN-So you were there.

JOHN-I said, "Well, here's the deal. If I'm gonna be responsible to move it I will move it and be there until they are fully open and running and functional in Oceana. I'm not gonna have people say 'Oh it's all screwed up because Lites didn't do this or didn't do that.' I'm gonna own it. I'm gonna do it lock, stock, and barrel from start to finish." He said, "OK. You'll have it all the way until you've opened up in Oceana for a year."

So we put a lot of hours in planning that. How to shift squadrons, you know try to get them so they didn't have to come home off cruise and move to Oceana and then go on cruise. Get it in the middle of a turn-around so, that's just so hard. I told everybody, "Our goal is not to lose a jet or any person. We don't want to lose a guy in an aircraft accident because he's running back and forth or one of the guys, we know, you can't stop these families, these guys are gonna drive back and forth on I-95 and they are gonna do it late at night. We can talk ourselves blue in the face but they are gonna do it. Our job is to make it so they don't do it. Make it so it's easy." Knock on wood, we didn't lose a single jet, didn't lose a single person and everything was up and functional and I left there and retired in September of 2000.

LYN-So you were at Cecil with Sam Houston?

JOHN-Yes.

LYN-He put on tape that call that came about being in Washington Monday to hear the news. So how did you respond when you heard?

JOHN-That Cecil was going to close? I thought our political system was extremely screwed up. I knew that Snuffy Smith had been on the BRAC Committee as a three admiral, made four star, and I kind of thought that maybe he didn't fight hard enough for us but I found out later that he fought vehemently for us and that they, what really had transpired was the fact that Senator Warner of Virginia walked in the day of the vote in Orlando.

LYN-It was in Orlando?

JOHN-At Orlando at the Navy Base in Orlando. That's where they were doing the vote and he walks in with two Marines, armed Marines and a brief case that is shackled to his arm and they go into a secret skiff there in Orlando at the training facility with the Chairman of the BRAC Committee, the civilian, and they go into this room, the committee had already decided to close Oceana. That was the decision.

LYN-No one ever told me that.

JOHN-It is true. The votes were there. The only reason I know this is because I spent so many hours up in, at the House when we fought to bring it back in 2005. Do you remember that?

LYN-I remember it well.

JOHN-I was working with Governor Bush to bring it back and so we tried to figure out, "How did we lose it the first time and what do we have to correct?" We didn't lose it. Cecil was the winner. They had all the max points. Oceana was to be closed. Warner goes in, opens a brief case and tells a bold-ass lie to the head of the BRAC committee that "SEAL Team Six was a national asset that had to be ready to go twenty-four/seven within a manner of two or three hours and the only place they could do that because they were up at Dam Neck, was out of Oceana. That's the only way it could be done. They cannot move." So, he comes in and goes "Well, my hands are tied. The national command authority has already told me we can't close Oceana because it's a national asset to have SEAL Team Six there." Nobody knew about SEAL Team Six in those days. It was quiet. So that's how they made the decision to close Cecil. That was the biggest mistake they ever made and they regret it to this day. They put the money in Oceana just like Senator Warner wanted. He wanted all that money in Virginia Beach and in the state of Virginia. So we went back in '05 and I testified in front of Congress on this one. All the truth came out, that actually came out.

LYN-It did come out.

JOHN-It came out. They said, "It is not a requirement to have, they can move anywhere. They're not required, the SEAL Team doesn't have to be within three hours of deployment of Oceana. They can go anywhere." That's how I knew about it because it was public testimony. There you go. So we won that fight. We literally won except for one jerk, retired surface officer in Oceana who convinced the BRAC Commission, "Well, give Oceana one year. Just give them one year to clean up the encroachment." OK, the year went by and they didn't. The decision was "Move Oceana, the fighter wing back to Cecil Field."

LYN-There was no encroachment here. It was enormous property.

JOHN-I know. I flew it every day. So when we did that that's when things were happening that just weren't making sense to me. John Peyton was having these town halls about "Do you want

the Navy back?” [John Peyton was mayor of Jacksonville] He held it out at Whitehouse. I was “You’re beating a hornet’s nest and you don’t have enough protection here. What are you thinking?” I was there. I had to go up there and answer questions. It wasn’t making any sense to me. Then he comes out and he says, “Well I’ve decided that the public doesn’t want the Navy back. They don’t want them out at Cecil Field.” I didn’t get that. Then I talked to the lawyer.

LYN-What lawyer?

JOHN-Dan, he was a Navy JAG. He was with us on all the trips to D.C. I’ll have to think about that one. Dan McArthur, bright guy. He says, “Well, I’m going to tell you something in confidence but it’s public record, I suppose it’s not a secret but John’s father owns ten square miles of acreages just west of Whitehouse and they are going to develop it. It won’t work with Navy jets flying overhead.” I’m like, “You’ve got to be kidding me.” “Nope, dead serious. They’re developing out there and they don’t want jets.”

LYN-What’s there now? Do you know?

JOHN-Nothing.

LYN-No those ten miles. Did they develop?

JOHN-I don’t know.

LYN-I don’t think they did.

JOHN-Haven’t been out there so I can’t answer that question.

LYN-You have just answered some political questions I had, I didn’t know the question to ask. It was all a mystery and yes we did sit through that debate. My husband and I attend all city council meetings for eighteen years. We do watch what’s going on and that has been a mystery. Anything with John Peyton was a mystery actually because his dad had so much control in the city.

JOHN-And the wife was a cover story. That guy is as gay as a two dollar bill.

LYN-Well he was elected as a single man and then got married but it has been interesting. I’ll offer to you a really interesting book. It’s called “New Boy”. You can get it at the library. You’ve been to the library because you got your tapes there. We still get our DVD’s at the library for free. “New Boy” is Herb Peyton’s autobiography.

JOHN-Oh really?

LYN-I think you might enjoy it. It doesn’t have that part in it but you might enjoy how he began and how he saw his life and his rise to power in this city. “New Boy” by Herbert Gate Peyton.

Well I appreciate that story very much.

JOHN-It all came to light during the hearings.

LYN-So it's on record. All this is on record.

JOHN-No secret there.

LYN-So the ten square miles at Whitehouse I don't believe that ever came to be.

So, you retired.

JOHN-Yep. Then I went to Northrop and Boeing, got in a bid war and Northrop won.

LYN-Where was that?

JOHN-Right here in St. Augustine.

JOHN-So I went down there and I worked at St. Augustine for about maybe a year or so and a month. They were upgrading Tomcats and E-2's and then that translated into me moving up to Cecil Field again and going back to my old office and managing the F-18 modification line that I had started. You know this, all this is so weird.

Seven years apart when I was a commodore it would have been in '97 or '98, '98 probably I met with the leadership of Boeing who at the time was on the F-18. So I met with them looking at upgrades to the aircraft that we needed and there was so much technology that was developing very rapidly that the depots couldn't keep up and so I said, "What you guys need is you need to build a modification center and we'll come to you. We'll fly our jets in and leave them for a week or two or three or whatever and put all this new technology in it and satellite, antennas and precision mission weapon systems."

I recommended Carswell Air Force Base. I said, "Right there on the joint reserve base Carswell and Ft. Worth center of the universe. "We can both get to both coasts." He thought it was a great idea. "I'll use it." Shopping list. We can pick what we want, send the jet down, and get it done."

Well, Cecil closed. As it's closing he goes, "I wonder if we can get in there?" So the Boeing leadership decided to try it at Cecil and Northrop had already gone in Cecil and was doing Tomcats and E-2's up there. Well, when Boeing opened up their little facility I was, I flew the first Hornet into Cecil. I was the last Hornet out and you'll love this one, I flew it down here to do the closing of the base so the day the base closed on the last flight to leave and I do it. I take off and I tell the tower I said, "I've always wanted to do this. Can I do a loop over the field?" He goes, "Sure." So I just came down the runway as fast as I could and did a loop right over the runway and departed headed back to Oceana.

Then about a year later or so, I'm gonna say it would have been about 2000, from 1999 close to '99, I flew back in in a Hornet and delivered it for the first satellite antenna mod. It was a five

day thing. Then I took it out of here so I delivered that. So the last airplane to fly, last Hornet flying out and the first one flying in for the mod center. Then I came back to take over the mod center.

LYN-Wow. You couldn't get away could you? Isn't it nice to be wanted?

JOHN-Oh, my gosh. So I had from basically from August of '75 until when I left here in August of '11.

LYN-That's a long time.

JOHN-August to August '75 until '11. So that would have been thirty-six years.

LYN-So it was home.

JOHN-It was home. I grew up here. I lived here. I mean I would go off on deployments but I always came back and I always had a job here so that was pretty nice to have thirty-six years at Cecil Field.

LYN-So, I know the answer to this but the effort to have a memorial at Cecil, you must be very heartened.

JOHN-Oh, I'm overwhelmed that he's doing this, that Michael is taking on this task. They all came down and visited, he came down once and then he came down with John and Sam, Big John and Sam Houston and we gave him all kinds of information. Having now run our own museum for five years and figuring out you don't want to run a museum, you want to have something that is interesting for a family besides artifacts. That just won't sell any more. So we gave him a lot of insight to things that they can do. It turned out to work out pretty good for them. They have a lot of good ideas. So I'm excited as all get-out to help them.

LYN-Well, we're excited to have you help them. Thank you. I want to thank you. This is quite a career that you have shared. I'm still trying to take it all in.

JOHN-That's a snap shot. If we had a case of beer and all night I could tell you stories.

LYN-I do want to know about your life in Lakeland. Could you put that on tape?

Why Lakeland? What took you to Lakeland?

JOHN-Well, I was going to stay here. We were within about a year and a half of retiring and we were just gonna fly our Stearman around or fly the Harley or take a British sports car and cruise around to different clubs.

I got an email from a friend of mine, a retired admiral. He said, "Hey, one of your buddies says there's a job with your name on it down in Lakeland." I go, "What?" It was John Cotton, Balls Cotton, who had sent it to Fast Eddie Faye and Fast Eddie Faye sent it to me and I saw the link

and I went, “Oh my gosh, that’s the present CEO position of Sun’n Fun. I’ve been going there for thirty years flying down there for all the fly-in.” It’s an aviation expo. So I thought, “That’s ridiculous but what the hell.”

So I called the number and the lady goes, “Well, I’m sorry but they’ve closed the application.” I said, “Tell you what. How about if I just send you a resume anyway, electronically this afternoon. If they want to look at it they can if not no harm, no foul.” So I real quickly right there on the spot just took a resume I had used to get hired at Northrop and I threw it together, put a couple of things on it, and shot it down to her, down to this lady. I think nothing of it.

Probably a month goes by or something like that and I get a letter in the mail saying, “Congratulations, you are in the top thirty.” They had a hundred and eight applicants. I got in the top thirty. I say, “OK, that’s heartening.” Then I get a call from the lady and I’m talking to her and she is the executive assistant to the president that was there then. She says, “You know my brother is in the Navy, still in the Navy.” I say, “Really what did he do?” “He was a Tomcat pilot.” I say, “Really? Where is he at now?” “Well, he’s up in D.C.” I said, “Well.” I’m trying to think of what his name is now because it’s not her last name. Oh, I can see his face. I cruised with her brother. He’s an admiral now up there. I’ll think of his name in just a second. But anyway I knew him and he knew me.

So I’m sure she’s probably calling and asking “What’s this guy like?” I hope he gave good remarks because somehow I got in the list of those to be interviewed. The next thing I know I get a call from her and she says, “Hey, you’re in the top ten now and they want to do an interview with you.” So I said, “Well, OK.” She gave me this Wednesday and I say, “I’m gonna be in Los Angeles for a business meeting. I can’t make that one.” She said, “OK, well thank you anyway” and hung up. I thought, “That’s it.” If you can’t make the interview they don’t really call you back. It’s just an easy way to if they really don’t want us it’s an easy way to get one guy out of business.

Then I got a call the next day. They go, “Well, could you make it on Friday?” I said, “Well sure.” I’m actually going to a birthday party and it’s in Tampa so we’ll just come down a day early. She goes, “Well, we’ll get you a room at the Hilton Garden Inn down here.” I said, “Oh no, no, no don’t do that.” There was no way I was going to win this thing but I thought I was going to see how Sun’n Fun works and maybe get some VIP tickets and just show up.

I said, “We’ll get our own room.” She said, “Are you sure?” “No, don’t waste your money on me.” That should have been a bell in my head but anyway we get a hotel room and go down there. We go down on Friday. I do the interview with them and during the interview they ask, I just rattle on kind of like this. “What have you done?” One of the guys on the board, unbeknownst to me, I didn’t know at the time, had been at the Cecil Field Air Show that we did in 2010. It was the largest collection of air show performers in the United States ever coming together at one event. It was a fund raiser for a pilot who had broken his neck, Allen Henry.

Anyway, one of the guys that performed was on the board and had come to the party out here. I had a performer party Saturday night, pizza and beer for all the flyers. So, he had come out here to see the place and he said, "Oh yeah. I've been to your place." I said, "Really. When did you come to my place?" He goes, "I was one of the guys." I didn't recognize him. There were so many. There were two hundred of those guys. So he goes, "Oh yeah. I've seen your place." So he knew I had passion and so during the interview they said, "Well, do you have any questions?" I said, I figured "I've got no chance. Yeah, who's bright idea was it to move the dates up into March for crying out loud? It's freezing as all get-out and trying to get out of Jacksonville most of the guys north of the Mason-Dixon can't make it. So that was a bad idea." They all pointed to one guy. (Laugh)

I thought sure enough, when you critique them that's usually not good. In any event they said, "OK, we need to meet your wife." I was number eight in the line of the ten. This is Friday afternoon and they had two to go on Monday. So that afternoon we go to the Hilton Garden Inn for a reception. There's another guy, another individual who is interviewed ahead of me that day and I knew him, Micky Markoff. He put on the show down in Ft. Lauderdale.

Anyway, they go, "Let's meet for cocktails. Come casual." So I meet there and Micky Markoff is there and he looks like Miami vice, the slacks, the shirt, the jacket and gold chain. He's got a trophy wife. My wife and I show up and I've got on Docksider shorts, a Harley dress shirt you know but one of those nice ones and she's casual capris. Unbeknownst to me, several of the board members are Harley riders. So we started talking motorcycles. We were talking about, of course I fly a Stearman and we are just having a big old party right there. Everybody is getting along really well. I say, "OK, we've got to go. It's all over here." So we headed to the hotel.

So we get to the hotel and in the bar is one of the board members who is part of the selection had been one of my Navy flight instructors, A.J. Jackson, who wound up being an America pilot. He had recused himself out of the search process because he knew me. But he had made sure that that's how my, when I got in late, he said, "I see his name. You've got to interview him." That's how I got in the interview from him.

So he meets us at the bar. Well, he was supposed to meet us right away and he said, "Oh, I can't make it. Something came up." Then it's about an hour later and he comes walking in the bar there at the Terrace in Lakeland and so he come in there and he goes, "Be ready." I said, "For what?" That's when the maître de walked over to us. "Are you Mr. Leenhouts?" I said, "Yeah." He goes, "Well, you have a phone number you have to call." I said, "Right now?" A.J. says, "Call him right now." So I go call the head guy and say, "What's up Gene." He goes, "You want the job?" I go, "Well, yeah." He goes, "It's yours." "What about the two guys on Monday?" "We're done. You're it." I go, "OK." Right then.



So, that began it and then it was one of those, “Now what do we do?” This was Friday night. I had just taken a job that I wasn’t ready to take. We had no plan of doing any of this. We were already going to retire and live down here and built this up [Green Cove Springs at Haller Air Field]. So we didn’t call anybody. On the way back up on Sunday, on Saturday we called. All of our daughters lived here at the time. We told them all, “Saturday night mandatory dinner at our house at six o’clock. Be there.” “Oh no, what’s wrong. Are they getting a divorce?”

So, we brought them in on Sunday night and told them, I told them the same thing I told my boss when I told him on Monday morning. I said, “We won the lotto.” “You won the lotto and you’re rich?” Well, not exactly rich but we got the best gift in life. We got the ultimate opportunity for me to go give back to the aviation community.” Of course, they knew Sun’n Fun because I had been going for all these years. My daughter had been there several times so she knew what it was all about. She had flown down in the airplane with me.

In any event there was mixed reactions between “yea” and “you can’t leave. Who’s going to baby sit?” You know all that crap. Anyway, I went and told my boss the next day and of course he says, “So, I’m guessing that we can’t offer you more money.” I said, “No, I’m taking a pay cut to go do this.” So off we went and fortunately enough the chairman of the board is a very wealthy individual and he had a ranch on the north side of town and he said, “You can live on the ranch until you can either find or do what you what to do. If you want to build you can.”

We tried to buy a house but the foreclosure and short sales was a miserable process and it was gonna be more money to put into them. First, the market was down so that the home builders were building for free almost. So we built a house for a hundred dollars a square foot. We built a small mansion down there because the price was ridiculous. So we built this thing in nine months, no five months. We looked for four months and built in five months and built a house and took over the Sun’n Fun.

I will tell you that the excitement of getting the job, the euphoric feeling was great, but it took me about six months to figure out that I’d made a mistake, I mean I made a huge mistake. I hadn’t looked at the books. There was a reason they were firing the president and CEO. They had mismanaged the finances so bad that by the time I unraveled it all and figured out what was going on they were just short of three million dollars in debt with no money coming in. Three million dollars in debt with the bank saying, “There’s more cash in the line of credit.” They were paying employees, I was paid to begin with, off of a line of credit. It was just horrible.

The guy who ran it had been there for ten years. They were in debt when he got there but you know they would get in debt and they would get out of debt when they would have the big show. They would get out and go back into debt. It was a cycle.

They just couldn't figure it out and so I brought the team together. I got everybody in a room. The first people I told was the staff. They had no clue. They thought everything was swimmingly going along. I said, "Guys, we're on the precipice of bankruptcy here so we can either continue to do what we're doing and if we expect to change then you're all idiots or we can change the way we're doing business and get this fixed because it's repairable.

We have an opportunity here but it's not going to be easy for any of you. So, if you thought it was fun before you better get off the bus because it's not going to be fun for a while. We're going to have to dig, we're gonna have to get together and work hard on changing our culture here. You think it's other people's money you're spending. It's our money, OK. You spent their money. We're gonna save our money and we're gonna make more of it.

I'll let anybody that wants to come into the strategic staffing planning room to figure out, we've got to have a road map. We've got to have a destination so let's figure out what our mission in life is. Why are we here? Because if you don't have a reason to come in here every day it gets real boring really quick and you don't give much heart to it.?

So we created, in a couple of days, I think about seven or eight of us in this room arguing over what we thought the mission was and making it so that you could know it. It's not some paragraph that's on the wall as you walk in the office. I'll never forget to this day, we were all going the same direction; we had this vision of what we wanted to do but this little accountant, she's our accounts receivable, Annette. Annette is probably fifty-eight, very quiet mousy lady. She's a numbers lady. She was listening all of a sudden she says,

**'To preserve and enhance the future of flight through world-class events, inspiring and educating people of all ages'".**

We all turned like, "Holy crap, that's it." That's what we wrote.

We wrote it down. Everybody memorized it and that's what we do. We turned all of our attention from just generating money from this fly-in and having a spring break for pilots to now we have world-class events all year round, we rent the facility, we have a high school, we are now the number one provider of aviation scholarships in the United States.

We went from three million dollars in debt to debt-free for the first time in Sun'n Fun history with a million in the bank as a reserve for a war chest. And we do a half-million dollars in scholarships every year to deserving students.

A high school, we teach pilots, mechanics, and engineers all wanting to go into aviation. If they don't we give them all the skill sets to be good citizens because everything you need in aviation

works well in any walk of life. Having confidence, having decision-making skills, social awareness, process analysis, self-reliance. All those come together being responsible and accountable to be a good citizen.



LYN-We were just talking about that about four hours ago concerning our schools and not preparing for life.

JOHN-Oh, we prepare them for life all right. That's what we do. I can tell you, the Publix headquarters, the foundation is run by Barney and Carol Barnett, good friends. They had never given a dime to Sun'n Fun. If I had been them I wouldn't either. There was no reason to. Well, I kept telling Barney we had turned this thing around and got it going again and the high school and all of our scholarships and the good citizens we're building. I said, "You've just got to come see this Barney. You won't believe it. Just go take a look." He says, "All right, I'll come." So, he came over, gave him a little overview of our finances and we were stable again.

By the way, if you backed up four years earlier he had given a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to Sun'n Fun as a part of a project they were gonna build this, another part of the campus. I gave that money back to him. I gave it to him and I said, "Barney, we're not building that building right now. We've got a lot of work to do. I'll be back to you when I have a good reason for you to donate. Right now I'm giving your money back." He said, "Nobody has ever given us money back." I said, "Well, that's who we are."

LYN-Nobody gives money back so congratulations.

JOHN-So we gave it back. We could have easily used it but I did it because he gave for a purpose. "I want you to know that when you give us money we are doing what you expect us to do." So, I brought him to this tour, I do this with all the guests, I go to the high school. Four or five of the students, usually seniors, come up and show off their skills because they're really proud of them. It's an elite school. It's free to the public. Anybody can come to it.

LYN-What's the name of the school?

JOHN-Central Florida Aerospace Academy. It's accredited and we are a top model of high schools in the United States.

LYN-It's in Lakeland? It's on my property. It's right there at Sun'n Fun property. We own it lock, stock, and barrel. We lease it to the county and then they populate with teachers. Then we oversee the curriculum from consortium perspective.

So anyway, Barney goes on this hour-long walk through the school and the students show him all about it and he gets done and he goes, "Wow, all of ya'll gonna be pilots?" They said, "No." He said, "What? Why do you come here?" A young man goes, "Because I learn to be a good citizen here, sir. I learn how to be accountable, responsible for my actions, how to make decisions, how to determine what my future is gonna look like, plan together, and I have confidence to go out and do it. That's what I learn here."

Barney turned to me and said, "Whatever you need." I said, "I need some help on this 727 Boeing jumbo jet that I'm turning into the world's first classroom." "Will a hundred and eighty thousand dollars help you some?" "Sure, thanks." He did it right there on the spot.



727 "classroom"  
at Central Florida  
Aerospace Academy  
Lakeland, Florida

So that's the kind of environment we've created now where we actually have people that are donating and they see things happen, real dollars coming in, real changes. Our first scholarship recipient is now an airline pilot at twenty-two. He goes to the ripe seat of twenty-three in November.

LYN-Now who is that?

JOHN-It's Phillip Herrington.

LYN-From?

JOHN-From Lakeland. He was gonna work at Wendy's. Yeah, that was as far as he was going. D.J. Boulette was the name, is the brother to her. I'm sure she called and asked about the fighter guy that I served with. [brother of executive assistant to president of Sun'n Fun]

LYN-That ended up being the admiral in Washington.

JOHN-So anyway, we're in a place where we are just thrilled to death. We'll work probably another three or four years.

LYN-So what does "Honey" do?

JOHN-At school or at Sun'n Fun.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-She's a volen-told. I do what I'm volen-told.

LYN-He tells you where to go and you go. And you're from Jacksonville.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-I am from Jacksonville. I was born in Pensacola but I've been in Jacksonville my entire adult life.

LYN-What did you have to do with Navy?

MRS. LEENHOUTS- Absolutely nothing. I had nothing to do with military.

LYN-But you ran into Navy. (Laugh)

MRS. LEENHOUTS-Head on, yes.

JOHN-She didn't see that one coming.

LYN-Well, this is a fabulous story. Can you tell me how Sun'n Fun happened to be in Lakeland? What was its founding?



JOHN-1973 there was a group of men down there that had home-built aircraft or vintage aircraft and they were always flying to other events and they said, "Let's have our own." They have an experimental aircraft association chapter and they said, "Well, let's start doing this."

LYN-When did you say they began?

JOHN '73 is when they started talking about it. In January of '74 they did the first one.

LYN-When were we there?

TED-'82, '83, and '84.

LYN-Do you remember a plane crash? A man had built his plane and he and his wife were out flying. I was their daughter's piano teacher and I was getting her ready for a pageant and she had just been with me. She went to her grandmothers that day and they crashed on that Sunday. I can't remember their names but I would imagine that you would have known.

JOHN-We were there. I was going, I would have gone there in '80 and '81.

LYN-They lived in Lakeland and he had built the plane and they went down. They left two beautiful daughters.

This is more than I expected. Look at the smile. I'm going to go back to where we began about your dad. Your dad said, "Go do something." How did your dad react to this career?

JOHN-He was extremely proud. You know, I will be the first to admit I was not a very good teenager. I was always into trouble at home, at school, with the law. I was always all over the map on my own program so you know he didn't expect I was gonna go anywhere. They really didn't think I was going to amount to anything at all that I was just going to be a wasted kid working at some garage.

LYN-He must have known you were very bright?

JOHN-No, I'm not very bright. My IQ is probably below sub-par. I have a lot of people skills. I would tell you that who you see here today is a compilation of hundreds, thousands maybe of people I observed. "When that works I'm gonna use that. OK, that's a good idea. That person speaks well, that person holds attention, that's a good decision, that's how you build a team, I'll do that." So everything I've seen...

LYN-You're a great learner.

JOHN-I paid attention. You know there was a moment, that first junior officer tour was a turning point in my adult life. I was pretty much all my own program right up to that first tour and I'll never forget, I stood up in front of everybody to do a presentation on "How to get somebody off the ship and home on emergency leave if a Red Cross message came in while you're in port." Nobody's around. How do you get them out?

I started to tell this procedure and the skipper said, "Sit down Lites." I said, "Yes sir." He goes, "You can get back up here when you know what you're talking about." That was one of those moments I said, "OK, you have to be better at your oration and you're gonna have to know your subject well enough that you are smarter than anybody else in the room. You've gotta learn and you've got to be able to know it."

I watched how people delivered and how people watched them. Then I will never forget the junior officer's one night coming and round me up and saying, "You better start being on the team or you're gonna be off this boat in a hurry." I would go off, we would pull into port and I would just go off by myself and do something I wanted to do. That was really not smart at all and they convinced me that it was better to be part of the team and that was part of that growth pattern that started changing little Johnnie Leenhouts into who he ended up being later on in life.

LYN-The war protestor.

JOHN-Well, I got past all that, yeah. That was not good. I went to jail on that one. Oh yeah. I spent a night in jail in Southern Illinois. That was one of those, that was a really bad idea.

LYN-Well thank you for sharing your story. Thank you for what you do. This is quite an amazing thing. The school has touched me very much. Education is lacking in so many ways and the life skills you are talking about are important.

How many students at the school?

JOHN-Three hundred and fifty. Code will take us to five hundred but we are going to go to four fifty and shut it off. The reason is we don't want to get but about twenty-eight in a class. Class size is really important. We're pretty proud of it.

LYN-I guess you are. Look at the smirk. I'm watching your wife smirk, the "volen-told". They are very proud of the life you are creating.

JOHN-The high school and all these other buildings we've painted them all to match and created a logo and it's one of our 501, one of our 501's is now called the Aerospace Center for Excellence. It's not "of" it's "for" so it's for your excellency. It helps you, the individual, whether you be a young man or an adult, we help you reach your highest level of skill. It's just great stuff. We really love it.

LYN-Are you aware that in Duval County there is some kind of relationship with aeronautics with two schools?

JOHN-I know about JU.

LYN-This Jean Ribault High School.

JOHN-I'm not familiar with that.

LYN-I don't know how successful since the school is on the possible closure list by the State of Florida. I don't think it has been that successful so I would wonder would there be any possibility of working with other school systems now that you've had this success?

JOHN-We have now been recognized by the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association; it's the largest avocational organization in the world. Their president came down and they did a symposium in our aerospace center for excellence and touted us as the benchmark now for all youth aviation education in America.

LYN-We have a new superintendent who is a past assistant superintendent who is a friend and I would be so delighted to tell her about you.

JOHN-Come on down.

LYN-I will. Her name is Dr. Pat Willis.

JOHN-We typically, I don't know if we don't go a month or two without having another school come down to copy what we are doing. There's a consortium of investors out of Miami that have put two hundred million dollars together and they want to build five of our schools.

LYN-Well, I want to build one of your schools. I want Duval County to have some success.

JOHN-Do you know how much trouble we have with the students? Zero.

LYN-That's, we must learn that.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-We also have a one hundred percent graduation rate.

JOHN-One hundred percent graduation.

BREAK IN TAPE FOR PERSONAL CONVERSATION

MRS. LEENHOUTS-The Friday of the fly-in we either have the Blue Angels or the Thunderbirds. They alternate years with us. So, on that Friday morning, whichever team is there, let's just say the Blue Angels are there, they were there this past year, we invite local middle and high school students...



Navy Blue Angels



Air Force Thunderbirds

JOHN-We will bring out eighth graders.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-Eighth graders, OK. All the eighth graders in our area are invited to come and listen to the Blue Angels speak.

JOHN-I'm sorry, for that we do only high school students.

LYN-In Polk County?

JOHN-Polk County or Hillsborough because Tampa is right there beside us.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-If you can get there you're invited. You spend an hour with the Blue Angels and they tell you how they got there and what their background is and they answer questions. Then they get to spend, the students get to spend the whole day on our campus for free. We don't charge them to come in like we do everyone else. That generates interest. They go back to school and talk about it. Then the freshmen and the juniors, the underclassmen can't wait to go next year. So it's one of those things where you know...

JOHN-I thought you were talking about...

MRS. LEENHOUTS-No, I was talking about the assembly.

LYN-So they come in as ninth graders? You don't take anybody in as eleventh graders?

JOHN-We do.

LYN-You don't have to go the whole four years.

JOHN- We have people move from Alaska and New York and they want to come...

MRS. LEENHOUTS-They hear about the school then they make arrangements to move their families because they want their children to go to the school. This happens every year. We get one or two families that move to go to the school.

JOHN-We have a graduating senior this year that drove from Pinellas County, drove an hour every day each way.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-I'll tell you that our girls that go through the flight program, the girls almost always finish the program faster. The girls are on it. They want to prove a point and that airplane doesn't care if you're a boy or girl. That airplane doesn't care if you're black or white. That airplane only cares if you know how to fly it.

LYN-So when you graduate you are a pilot?

JOHN-You can be.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-Some of them are a pilot before they graduate.

LYN-Is that one of your goals that they be?

MRS. LEENHOUTS-If they choose.

JOHN-It's not required. It's an extra-curricular activity but we pay for it, twelve thousand dollars per student. We just put wings on our fifty-eighth pilot. It started four years ago. Our goal is to do about one or two pilots a month on average so about, we'd like to do twenty-four pilots per year.

We also do aircraft mechanic training and we pay for that. Then we do five thousand dollars per year per student to go to college right there at Polk State if it's aviation related. So we've handed out, probably now pushing a couple of million that we've handed out. So we're, again, we're one of the largest scholarship providers in the State of Florida.

LYN-I would think Publix would be very interested in supporting.

JOHN-I think they're gonna be a bigger contributor than they have ever been. It's just a matter of time. They don't do anything fast.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-They didn't have a good track record in the past so we had to prove that with the new management, so to speak, that we were going to do what we said and we were going to be good stewards of the money that they bequeathed to us. So that's the only way that you can prove to someone, they have to see it. They want to watch and they've seen it now for five years going on six years and now they're thinking, "Woe, now. They really do what they say they're gonna do. The money really goes where they say it's gonna go so let's take another look at that."

LYN-Are teachers chambering to be there or has it been hard recruiting teachers?

JOHN-It is hard because we have pretty high standards. They've got to have more than just a teaching credential. We like to have some aviation background, military when we can get it because they are very disciplined. So it is hard to find the right ones but we, you know we find them sooner or later.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-We also have a program where we fly teachers every year to get them interested.

JOHN-Yeah, that's one of the things we started down there that we were the first ones in the United States to do it. We do what we call "Classroom in the Sky" and we bring forty or fifty teachers, we invite them to come out for breakfast. We do a ground school with them and then we take them flying and bring them back and we show them how to teach sciences through aviation. We write the lesson plans for them. So then, once you get on the mailing list, our email list, they get a lesson plan a month on aviation. All it does is teach science, technology but we use aviation to do it. So that's gotten rave reviews because who wouldn't want to have another lesson plan done for you. They love to fly and they get enthusiastic about it then they go tell the kids then the kids want to come to our school.

We also have, we give quite a few grants and one of them we use to pay for buses. The county, a lot of kids just don't understand what is going on out there but if they could see it they can understand it. We couldn't get them to come out.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-We've got the money in our budget to bus the students to us.

JOHN-We have the money to bus them during the school day and we go get eighth graders all around the county and we bus them out and they go through our school and they go through all of our programs, the summer school, week-end events we have for them and all this is available to them...

MRS. LEENHOUTS-They go home and tell their parents....

JOHN-And they say, "Where do I sign up?"

LYN-Let me go back. You are a public school?

JOHN-Yes.

LYN-You are a public school so how did the system, Polk County School System buy into this? What did that take?

JOHN-It started before I got there. It had three classrooms, about twenty-five students in one of our buildings with just teaching the basic curriculum for aviation. A benefactor who has since departed and gone west, he came down and saw what they were doing in these three classrooms and he said, "I want an aerospace high school." So he gave Sun'n Fun \$7.5 million to build this school in nine months. They built it and then nobody came. They couldn't get anybody to come. (Laugh) I got there just as the school opened up. The first class was maybe sixty kids.

LYN-In a seven-million-dollar building.

MRS. LEENHOUTS-They didn't understand. They didn't understand the process and they didn't understand that your student can come there and it's not going to cost you money. So it took a while for it to catch on then after we do more activities the newspaper and the local television station got interested in what we were doing. Now you mention our academy around the Lakeland area and everyone's heard of it and now the interest is there. But it takes a while to get something started and especially when the original group of students that started there were so proud because this building is fabulous. It's a three level building with twenty by twenty tile floors on every level. It's state of the art everything; hanger doors for classroom doors and ready room seats in the classroom. It's just a beautiful setting.

LYN-I want to go back to high school!

MRS. LEENHOUTS-Once it caught on that was when it became, "Oh, my goodness." So in essence what happened and correct me if I'm wrong, the building is on our property.

JOHN-We own the deed. We own the deed to the school. We lease the school to the county. The county populates the school with the teachers and then we pay out of the monthly rent what we get. That's where most of the scholarship money originates.

LYN-So now they do have transportation for the students like a magnet school?

JOHN-Some students will drive straight there or some of them will go, they'll bus,

LYN-Go to local schools.

JOHN-Go to there and then get bused to us from there. What I didn't tell you is all of this is based on partnership. We partner with the county. We finally convinced the city that Sun'n Fun

belongs to the county, we just run it for them. This is a county experience. The school board is still the same way. When we went to the college, Polk State College, and we got them to be part of our consortium to help write our curriculum so we are ready to go into their program. In doing that they started doing dual enrollment so you dual enroll at Polk State. What that generated was Embry Riddle in Daytona saw this. We showed them. They came down and went, "OK, we'll accredit Polk State so all the credit you get at Polk State is good at Embry Riddle.

LYN-Goes to Embry Riddle.

JOHN-This, in the perfect world you could be a freshman and start at our high school and you can end up leaving as a senior in high school. You can leave with a private pilot license, an airplane power plant mechanic's license, and one year of Embry Riddle all those for free.

LYN-Thank you for a wonderful success story that we get to share.

NOTE-After this interview I realized that my cousins' grandson is a graduate of Central Florida Aerospace Academy in Lakeland.