

Conversation
with
Robert A. Buehn

University of North Florida Campus
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Recorded and Transcribed
by
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TAPE 1 SIDE A

LYN-Today is July 20th of 2017 and I am at the University of North Florida and I am interviewing today Bob Buehn. I have a little bio on him and I'm looking at quite a career. He is now working at the University of North Florida and I'm going to let him introduce himself, his background, and into this interview tell us about what he is doing at the University of North Florida. First of all, thank you for agreeing to do this Bob.

BOB-Glad to.

LYN-I understand he goes by "BB".

BOB-Call sign "BB".

LYN-Tell us about growing up and then into the Navy career if you would.

BOB-Sure, I had a similar childhood to military kids because we moved around a lot. My dad was with Gulf Oil Company and he was on a crew, a seismograph crew so we moved all over the south and the west. I was born in Oklahoma but that was just kind of a brief stop.

I consider Florida home. We, my mom's family was in Sarasota and we used to spend a lot of time there. Then years later my dad got into the space program so we moved to Melbourne, Florida near Cape Canaveral in '63 so I was in junior high school. Having gone to almost a different grammar school every year, which ended up happening to my kids years later.

LYN-Now, what did your dad do in the space program?

BOB-He got into electronics and became a test engineer. So, he was in the early days of the space program, not the very beginnings but he worked in the Apollo Program, Gemini and Apollo Programs. So, in '63, and he retired in the early '80's. But we used to watch the shots, the space shots, the manned shots you know.

LYN-Live. Not on television.

BOB-We watched the lift-off on television and step out in the back yards and we could see it. You could feel the rumble and all that. We were probably twelve miles from the launch pads at our house, something like that. So, that's where I grew up. I feel like Florida is my home. You know I went to high school all four years in Melbourne. Went to the University of Florida after high school.

Got a degree in journalism and actually got a job on a newspaper, small newspaper in Stuart, Florida which was further down the coast. But it was a great opportunity and I worked there almost five years so I didn't come into the Navy right out of college.

Really, for my whole Navy career my peers in rank were all about five years younger than me. So, it was interesting. Had I been, I was a year group '78 officer but had I gone right out of University of Florida I would have been '73. Really, might have changed, probably would have changed somewhat my career but one thing, in '73 they were really, it was winding down Vietnam War.

I'm not sure I could have even gotten in aviation because they weren't taking people. In fact, in '76, '77 when I started looking at it, it was still, they were only just beginning to really get ramped up again.

LYN-I know that many pilots had been let go from the Navy after that Vietnam era.

BOB-When I finally got in, some of my flight instructors had gotten their wings and didn't even get flying job for the first three years or so. So, yeah, it just worked out the way it worked out.

Flying was a great experience for me as a young person to work on a newspaper and do everything. I covered county government and did features and you know, it was a growing area, Martin County. So, from '73 until '78 you know that little paper went from a twice-weekly to a daily paper. Saw a lot of growth.

It was great but along that way I was always interested in aviation. I had an uncle who was an Air Force career pilot and about, well, in '76 or '77 I started taking private pilot's lessons. I wasn't making a lot of money but I scraped together enough to get my private pilot's license in Stuart in a little Cessna 150. I had a great time flying around south Florida.



Cessna 150

LYN-I'm going to ask, did you just want to fly?

BOB-I did. I just wanted to fly.

LYN-It wasn't to get you somewhere, you just wanted to fly.

BOB-No, I just wanted to get up in the air and fly. I enjoyed it right from the beginning. I got my license, and I thought you know, I barely had enough money to pay for everything. Then my thought was, "Now that I've got my license I can take other people flying and they will help me pay for it." All my friends did that once and then they said, "OK, we're not going to do this every week." My theory didn't work out. (Laugh)

I enjoyed it so much the obvious thing I was thinking, "I would like to do more of this and get paid for it maybe was the military." So, I started looking at all the services really. The Air Force wasn't taking anybody and the Army wanted helicopter pilots but the Navy the first time around

they said, “We don’t, you’re qualified but we don’t need you. You can be a naval flight officer” which I didn’t really know what that was but it didn’t sound like what I was looking for.

So, I just went back to work at the newspaper. Six months or so later they, the recruiter called me. He said, “If you’re still interested we’re taking people.” So, I jumped on it and you know February of 1978 I swore in down in Miami and four days later reported to Pensacola for what was called “Aviation Officer Candidate School” at the time. Class 0478. We had Staff Sergeant Little was our Marine drill instructor and Staff Sergeant Clark who was a scary Marine, you know. They met us on the sidewalk just like in the films you see. They met us walking up there and you know everything changed. (Laugh)

But I had a Volkswagen van and I had everything, I went from Stuart, everything I owned I put in the back of that. I had fishing tackle and surf board and stereo and some clothes and drove to Pensacola. I kept that parked out on the seawall.

LYN-So, you didn’t go with a family.

BOB-No, I was single and I, you know, went up there with everything I owned was in my car, like a lot of guys do.

So, that was four months and I got my commission in May of ’78 as an ensign and waited around a little bit. There was a little delay to start flight school, primary training. I was going to be at Whiting which was just up the road there in Pensacola.

So, I spent about two months of that summer working on the yawl, a forty-four-foot sail boat that the aviation school had in those days. It was a former Naval Academy boat and those were farmed out all over the place. We used, we had a great time. We went sailing every day. We took anybody they told us to take you know. Sometimes it was a spouse’s group or it was, sometimes it was the up-coming class. You know, just visiting people. It was a way for the base or the CO of the school’s command to entertain people.

So, that was great but then I went out to Whiting and started in earnest in flight school. I flew T-34 Charlies when they were brand new. I mean, just coming from the Beechcraft factory and truly smelled like a new car inside. They were brand new airplanes.

I had really wanted to get my hands on a T-28 the old, you know the old radial engine airplane but they had all moved, you know Whiting was transitioning to T-34 Charlies so we flew those. They were far more sophisticated than we needed. We just were flying around looking out the window you know. We did VFR, we didn’t use all the instrumentation very much. But, it was a great airplane to fly.



Navy Training Plane
T-34C

Then from there got selected for jets and went to Meridian and flew the T-2 and the A-4, got my wings, got S-3's which were in, that was a fairly new airplane at the time, S-3's and F-14's came in in mid-seventies together. So, the S-3's were less than five years old, had been in the fleet less than five years.



The training for that was in San Diego so we trekked out to San Diego. In the interim got married to you know, my finance had been on the newspaper also. We got married and went out to San Diego to do the training and then got assigned to VS-24 before of some thing. I started the carrier qualifications [redacted] Navy Airplanes T-2, A-4, S-3 [redacted] landings again. That was on Ranger out of San Diego so I got a look at San Diego. Didn't know at that point that I was going back.

LYN-So, you never landed on the Lexington?

BOB-No, because America on the east coast, Lexington was in the yards at the time I was coming through. I really wish I could have flown the T-28 and landed on the Lexington. But, I did America, Ranger, and then I CQ'ed in the S-3 which included night-landings then.

I was assigned to VS-24 so that's my connection. That's how I got to Cecil Field. The VS-24 was an east coast squadron based at Cecil.



LYN-Were you surprised by that selection that you were leaving and going east.

BOB-No, we only had the one training, the one RAG and it was VS-41 so everybody went there and then they either went east or stayed there. I was happy to come back because I was from Florida.



So, I showed up at Cecil Field and they immediately, I had been working this out on the west coast, I went to LSO school which was in Oceana and I was a landing signals officer.

So, I really wasn't at Cecil much before we actually deployed, a few weeks. Our squadron was already in some temporary spaces and getting ready to go on the Nimitz. The Nimitz was out of Norfolk so I was up there doing training and came back and went right back up.

We had a busy deployment schedule in those days. This was '81 by the time I got there it was June of '81 when I showed up at Cecil Field and we deployed that August I think it was of '81. Did mostly a winter-time thing in the Mediterranean. Came back that spring and then went again so out of my first seventeen or so months in the squadron we were gone a year of it.

We turned right around, did back-to-back winter Med cruises. This is the Cold War and so, we were AWS, anti-submarine warfare airplane so we were tracking actual Soviet submarines. They were out there all over the place.



LYN-Let me back up to, I love to ask this question, “Had you ever seen Cecil before?”

BOB-No.

LYN-Your first impression.

BOB-No, I had never, I remember because I worked at a summer camp on the St. Johns River, before I went to college. I was a life-guard at a summer camp over at what is now Switzerland area, Julington Creek area just south of there. I remember being down on the riverbank around the dock and watching A-7's fly out there and I thought it was great. I was drawn to that but I never drove all the way out there. I never saw Cecil Field before the day I arrived out there.

LYN-So you drove up.

BOB-Drove out 103rd Street which was two-lane and you know, didn't know what to expect. It was a sprawling, huge place. It was, Marine sentries at the gate. You know, there was all the other complexes, the weapons complex and the housing areas too but I stayed, I think I was just staying in the BOQ because I knew I was leaving on deployment. There wasn't much sense, in fact my wife at that time went back down to Stuart and she went back to work on the newspaper because I wasn't going to be around anyway. So, she stayed down there.

Really, I think we were thinking at that point that I might not stay for a career and we ended up buying a house down there and thinking maybe I would eventually get out and be an airline pilot or do something like that, you know. Of course, that all changed. But, so we kept that Stuart connection for a little bit.

But, Cecil was very busy, A-7's and S-3's, lots of flight operations, things going on all the time day and night, you know. The squadron was getting ready to deploy so we were doing bouncing you know, practice landings for the carrier, FCLP's, field carrier landing practice.

We had Whitehouse which is was an out-lying north of I-10. I used to spend a lot of time there as a LSO getting pilots to do ten landings a piece and go switch out and come back. So, yeah, just very busy place. It seemed very full of life and people everywhere. The barracks, we had all

those big barracks full of enlisted people. We had the housing area, you know, a lot of people lived out there. Just lots of comings and goings. Cecil, it felt very vibrant, a great place. But, very rural getting out there. You went through pasture land.

I used to go, well, this was later. Later on, in another tour there I lived down in Fleming Island and used come up 17 to 295 to 103rd Street. You could make it pretty quick in those days. There wasn't much traffic.

LYN-Not any more.

BOB-Not now. So, I did those, that was my first fleet tour as a naval aviator and after two deployments though and a lot of flying I was pretty salty as a lieutenant then and I got selected to be a LSO in the training squadron, an instructor. So, back to San Diego.

So, '81 and '84 I was at Cecil and then went back and immediately wanted to get back, envisioned coming back as soon as I got my instructor tour done I was going to try to get back to the east coast.

But, the Navy being what it is I ended up doing three tours out there. I was an instructor and then I was an air wing LSO based in San Diego, based in Miramar in CAG-13 then I became the Air Pac LSO which was a prestigious, and it was great. I was the first S-3 LSO to become the fleet LSO you know, in charge of all the west coast.

By then I thought, "Well, I guess you know, we're staying here and I had my sons, both sons had been born during that period of time out in San Diego. Both of them were born in San Diego. We, so we bought a house in Bonita. I was, "Well, I guess we're gonna stay here." Almost immediately got orders back to be a department head in VS-28 at Cecil Field. (Laugh)

That turned out to be good because with California, the crazy real estate market, we sold it and made a decent amount of money just by dumb luck and were able to buy quite a nice house here again. We are still in the same neighborhood.

At that time, I came back as a department head in VS-28 and we were deployed on Forrestal, USS Forrestal. So, it was right here in Mayport.



USS FORRESTAL

LYN-It was, that's the question we have been asking. My husband was on the Forrestal and it was not here. Do you have any idea when it was here?

BOB-Well, we made the last fleet deployment. That deployment which was just post-Desert Storm so that was '91 you know. I came back in '90 and we deployed I think it was March of '91 and then when we got back that's when they moved it to Pensacola. It did a brief stint as a training carrier but then it just got decommissioned.

So, I think it was at Mayport for most of its life so probably the eighties, for sure the eighties maybe even the seventies but I know that by '93 it was probably gone.

LYN-It was in Norfolk in the seventies.

BOB-It must have come to Mayport somewhere maybe in the early eighties. So, that was nice, instead of having to...

LYN-Was there just the one carrier?

BOB-No. There was Saratoga, there was Forrestal and Saratoga. Previously, the Roosevelt had been out there. I do remember at one time seeing three carriers in port in Mayport.

LYN-Oh, my goodness, amazing. [there are no carriers based at Mayport at this time] In Ribault Bay.

BOB-Ribault Bay, yeah. But we would drive from Cecil. It was quite a trek you know, we would load our gear aboard and we would drive out there but I remember it seemed like we took some convoluted route where we came out, I guess JTB was there but I remember going on San Pablo and working our way around to Mayport Road and getting out there but it seemed like a real far way.

There was no Wonderwood Expressway. But, we would load aboard. That was, we deployed with Cecil squadrons just like we did VA-7 squadrons that we, I think by then they were Hornets. But in the early eighties tour at Cecil it was VA-82 and 86 that went with us, VS-24. So, three Cecil squadrons were deployed up to Nimitz in Norfolk. Of course, we would fly the airplanes on. When I was junior I had to go up there and stand the duty but later I got to fly on. So, the ship would pull out. We would leave Cecil and fly aboard somewhere off the east coast.

I remember the fly-ins at Cecil, returns were pretty exciting. You know, we would, and sometimes the S-3's got a jump on us because we had long legs and you know, four hundred miles out or something they would start launching us. But, we would always come up with some elaborate formation arrival trying to impress the families and everything. Those were always you sweated those things. One, getting all the airplanes off the deck and the other one was we were doing something we hadn't done in a long time which is like a ten-plane formation. (Laugh)

LYN-All we knew is that you were coming home.

BOB-Yeah, that's all they cared about. You are right. We had great homecomings out there you know with families. They always would have food and you know it was a great time. It was

always fun and plenty of room for that kind of thing, the ramp and those hangars and parking lots and all those, lots of space out at Cecil.

So, that was, so my second time there was '90 and pretty much through my command tour. I had command of VS-32 and that was, that was before the base closed. That was '96-'97 and that was the end of my time at Cecil.



After my change of command, I went from there, I became XO of Constellation, the carrier. So, I went up to surface warfare you know to learn all the ship-side of things and then went to the west coast. It was in San Diego. Never came back to Cecil before it was closed.

By the time I got back I became CO of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Spent three years down there and by the time I got back up here to be, and it was at Mayport. I was chief of staff of a battle group at Mayport. By then Cecil was closed. You know, we would go out there and look around. It started to change as they tore down buildings. The BOQ that I lived in which seemed like a pretty sturdy brick building, it was gone.

LYN-Tell us on tape, if you would, do you remember when you heard that it had been chosen to close.

BOB-I remember vividly because we were, my in-laws were visiting and they used like to stay at Sawgrass out, you know they were from Denver. They, I remember listening to it on the radio. I said, "I can't believe they are going to do this." They are going to BRAC, it was a last-minute decision and everybody felt Oceana was probably going to be on the chopping block and overnight it changed and I'm sure it was because the seniority of our politicians here had changed. Charlie Bennett was gone and they still had some old-timers up in the Virginia delegation.

LYN-John Warner.

BOB-Warner, right. And you know it was bogus about whatever kind of secret thing they said they had up there because...

LYN-The SEAL Team 6 location.

BOB-We had just as much out here going on so that was just a smoke screen and it was just a political decision. I thought it was horrible and you know, I think, what year was that? Was that in '95? Well, I think I was either XO of the squadron or I was the CO and I knew, you know they

said it would be '99 that they were going to close. So, I knew it wasn't going to affect my command tour there but you know they ended up moving the S-3's to NAS for the last few years of that community's life. It just wasn't the same flying.

That's one thing, I always tell people that Cecil Field, it was the best, it was a master jet base so it was the best place to fly carrier jets east of the Mississippi. It had to be. I mean, we had this beautiful run-way lay-out. We were just out there in the pine trees. You could make noise and you could fly fast and you could replicate how you operated around the carrier which is what, especially as a LSO, we thought was important to train like you are going to do it at sea.

So, at Oceana when they come in for arrival they have all these convoluted altitude restrictions and things that, now you want to be able to do at the field what you do at the boat. So, we just to come in at eight hundred feet to the break and break just like a carrier break and fly just like a carrier landing. I think it made Cecil pilots better carrier pilots, I really do. But we just don't have it any more.

LYN-Well, it is still there. (Laugh) Of course the effort came to bring Cecil back. Where did you stand on that?

BOB-Oh, I was for it. I wanted to bring it back the first time around. It is ironic that I ended up working for Mayor Peyton when I retired but it was after that all had happened. My predecessor, Dan McCarthy was involved in that.

The mayor didn't support it so that killed it. Even today, I have a good friend, Retired Admiral Tom Watson, who lives down in Hibernia, he still envisions some way to get the Navy back out there.

LYN-I thought that thought was probably was still out there.

BOB-Oh yeah, any time, you engage Tom Watson and he will come up with an idea about leasing part of the base back there. But it's really changed out there now and it's got really changed out there now. And it's got a lot of commercial enterprise that evidently is successful.

LYN-There is still a lot of big open space.

BOB-There is.

LYN-So, you are at Guantanamo Bay. Tell us about that.

BOB-It was a great experience. You know I was XO of a carrier so but I was not a nuclear trained person, the Constellation was an oil-burning carrier, but my hope and my anticipation was that a lot of carrier XO's would get a deep-draft ship and get a carrier, be in command of a carrier. That would have been a dream. But, at the time there were very few oil-burners left. The Constellation was one of the last two I think, the Kitty Hawk and Constellation.



So, they just, what they needed were nuclear-trained officers and they needed to get them in those deep-draft ships so USS CONSTELLATION CV-64 In't, I didn't have the academic background to get through that.

So, I didn't get a deep-draft but I got major, they call it "major shore command". So, I had a, there was a list of bases that were available. Through the years I had gone to Guantanamo several times. I went there as a mid-shipman when I was in OACS for some crazy trip we did down there. Then I flew the S-3 on a drug, counter-drug operation down there for a number of weeks I was there. Then I flew down a couple times during the migration crisis. I was just taking people down and you know had various reasons to go. I loved it. I thought it was great.

So, on this list of bases that were available for me was NAS JAX which was tempting you know, because it was right here. And Signorelli, a bunch of places. But, Gitmo was on there so I went home and talked to Pam, I said, "You know we could have kind of a fun adventure here if we do Gitmo." Everybody said, "Fine." So, we went down there. Two boys, one was in elementary school and one was a freshman in high school. We lived in, the CO of the base is a beautiful home on the end of the point out there. It's like a mansion. I told the boys every day, "This is the best house you're ever gonna live in. Enjoy it." (Laugh)



US NAVAL STATION GUANTANAMO BAY "Gitmo"

It was great but what turned into being a historic tour was you know, I went down there in the spring of 2000 and the base was in, it had gotten much smaller than it had been say ten years earlier. It used to be a big ship repair place there. All the flow training group was down there. Well, all that had shifted. They closed the ship repair and the training was up here in Mayport. So, it was a sleepy place. We had a few support to counter-drug ops and did logistics but it was just a very quiet place and getting smaller.

So, my marching orders when I went down there was "Keep the lights on but we're not gonna, we're funding, the term was 'minimum funding'." So, they just were trying to minimize how much they put in the base. In fact, we were demolishing buildings. That was a good way to reduce expenses and get rid of, because there were so many empty buildings and housing areas that were not occupied. Because, the base had had ten thousand people before and we were down to about three.

I mean there were goats running around and chickens because it was just very, but it was kind of a neat atmosphere. I really enjoyed being there. It was like being in another world. But, during that time, eighteen months later 9-11 occurs. [September 11, 2001 was an attack on buildings in New York City and Washington, D.C. by foreign airplanes] Three months later we're the center of the world's attention as we begin to bring the Taliban prisoners in. [Men were arrested who were members of the Taliban and jailed at the base] So, that became my legacy was a year and a half of decline and keeping very quiet and then overnight you know CNN was there doing live reports for weeks and weeks. That of course is still going on today.

LYN-Why was it chosen for the Taliban prisoners?

BOB-The working thought was, "It's really Cuban soil, we lease it from the Cubans." Even today we lease the base. They thought this was a way to not allow these Taliban to have any of the rights that a prisoner in the U.S. would have. It turned out that wasn't the case. No one, no court bought that because we had complete control of the land. You know Castro didn't even want us there but we were still there. They said, "No, it doesn't really count as foreign soil."

So, I've got a whole brief I give about my time at Gitmo, the first hundred days and how it stood up and how it was a case study. In fact, it is a case study in the War College and I re-wrote it with another guy a few years ago. It's a case study in change in leadership and management and how do you go through this wrenching change in such a short order, in an organization like a base where we had a lot of civilians. We had foreign nationals. We had, it was in a foreign country and limited access. You know, it was really interesting.

But it turned out to be probably for me more historic, more meaningful than had I gotten a ship. I don't know about a carrier, you know carriers are always part of history. I still would have loved to have done that but I didn't have any regrets about the way it turned out having gone to Gitmo.

LYN-How does that lease still exist? How long does it last?

BOB-Well, it's an open-ended lease and the trick of it is there's no, the only way the lease can be cancelled is if both parties agree. We just have never agreed. And, we have to uphold, in fact I went to briefings before I went down there, at the state department, and they said, "There's not much you have to do but you have to do these things because if you don't it could, in the court of world opinion at least, it could appear we, that we failed to uphold the lease.

One of them was to maintain a channel, shipping channel right through the bay to the north end which is where the Cubans were. We had to maintain a fence line. We had to pay, we paid about four thousand dollars a year. It was based on some formula based on the value of gold in 1934 or some arcane formula but we did pay whatever it was. The legend was Castro never cashed those checks, supposedly.

Just those few things we had to do. I was very careful that we did those things. We kept, of course we wanted to keep the perimeter fence anyway and it was easy to keep the channel updated and all that.

I met with the brigadier general of the Cuban eastern army every month. Once a month we met at the fence line to discuss issues of local interest, not policy, not Washington-Havana but fence line issues. We did have occasionally have something like a brush fire that would cross the fence. They had mines on their side. We had mines on our side. We had mines when I first got there but during my time there our mine field was cleared.

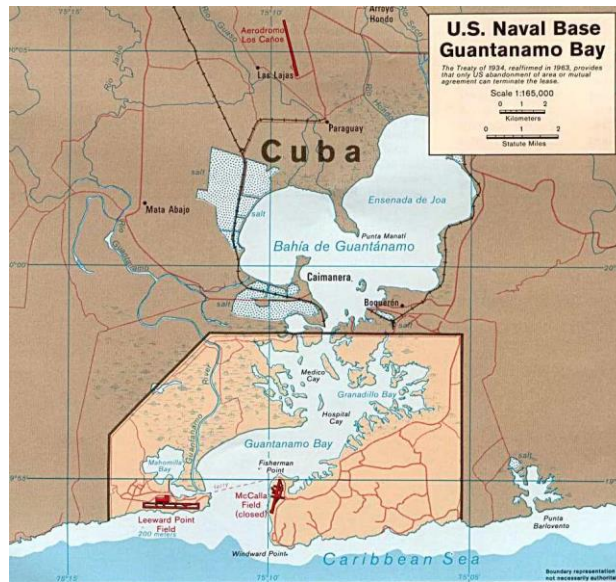
LYN-So did the Army Corps come in and keep that channel.

BOB-Well, fortunately it's a great natural harbor, it's real deep. We didn't have to anything. We just maintained the navigation aids but I don't ever remember we did any, had to do any dredging. But, you went up through, in fact those Cuban boats went right past my house. They

could be combatants. There was a gate. They had where the bay narrowed they had actually a floating barrier that they would open up to let their boats come through and then they would close it.

LYN-How large was the base? Do you remember?

BOB-Forty-five square miles. It's a big base, big base. It's almost like a small county. But a lot of that is mangrove swamp and there was a target, you know, bombing range and you know only a small percentage of that was developed. It was a big base. It was nine miles on the coast and nine miles east to west and I think seventeen miles of fence line.



LYN-Did you have any access to the rest of the island?

BOB-No, not, one time, Father's Day 2002 we did a trip to Guantanamo City with that Cuban general under the auspices of an exchange between the hospitals. They had a hospital up there. We looked at their hospital because they had a burn unit that was pretty capable and we brought them and showed them our hospital because we, one of our fence line exercises was a medical emergency kind of thing where we would help each other out in the case.

So, it was very interesting to go up there but it was the only time and it was just me and the CO of the hospital. We got to see that. The average resident of Guantanamo never got off the base except by the rotator flight that came to Jacksonville and they would come up for Christmas holidays and that kind of thing.

LYN-So your family certainly did take vacations off the base.

BOB-They did. They would but not too often. I didn't go, as CO I didn't feel like I, I didn't even want to leave. I had my boat down there. The fishing was great you know. (Laugh) I flew the C-12 up regularly here to Jacksonville because I worked for the admiral at the base. I got off often enough but the kids they were happy down there. They had a happy time. They had a Hobe

cat they sailed around and they played soccer with the Jamaicans and had a great time. No, it was wonderful. I mean, it was a great experience.

People, and it changed but it was like the '50's. It was like, we said, "It was Mayberry on the Caribbean." You know, nobody locked their cars, nobody locked their doors. There was nowhere to go. If you needed a car you could always find one with keys in it. The farthest the car would go would be the ferry landing because there was ferry that went over to the air field side. But, where are you gonna go? There's no outside which made it odd. In my brief, but 9-11 up here they closed the base and then when they re-opened they search every car and there were back-ups for hours and all that.

We felt like we should do something but we didn't have anything. At one point we started, I think that next day they said, "Well, you better check ID's at the Navy Exchange and Commissary." (Laugh) We can do that but everybody knows everybody. A stranger stood out down there. Even from the Filipino guys and Jamaicans who worked there, we knew all of them too. So, you know, and the only way to come in is by air. But we did worry when the Taliban finally, when we set up Camp X-Ray in the beginning and we didn't know what to expect. We were worried about an attack, some symbolic, another airplane attack or something like that. We spent a lot of time worrying about that but it never happened.

LYN-Were you afraid your kids were losing track and they had to come back to America or they were just happy?

BOB-They were very happy and the school, in fact my younger son Will, you know you saw this news about the states and he was actually worried when we were coming back. He said, "I'm worried about gangs or some kind of violence at school." He would have been happy to stay down there. It was wonderful. They were the CO's kids so they, everybody, fortunately they are good kids and they didn't get in trouble and they were good athletes and good students and they have wonderful memories of Gitmo.

LYN-So you left Guantanamo Bay and...

BOB-Then I became chief of staff of the CRUDESGRU-12 at the time which was at Mayport.



Jim Stavridis who is a name many people recognize was a one-star and he was the one who called me down there. He was looking for a chief of staff. He wanted an aviator because he was a surface warfare guy. But, I crossed paths with him years earlier when I was an air wing guy at

Diego Garcia of all places. He was a young lieutenant commander I think, but a brilliant guy and done a lot of writing. I knew of him.

He asked me to be his chief of staff so I came right up from, in fact I left Gitmo and came up and started getting ready for deployment on Enterprise and the family, because it was March, they stayed in Gitmo, in a different house to finish the school year. So, my wife and two boys were down there and I was in Mayport living in the BOQ and some of my time was up on the ship in Norfolk.

That was great because Jim Stavridis eventually became a four-star and was the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, the first Navy admiral to hold the job that Eisenhower had first. He is now a dean at Tufts at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. You see him on TV all the time. He is a brilliant guy so that was another lucky thing for me to be associated with him because I admire what he has done so much.

So, I did that for two years and that's when they built those staffs. There were two strike group staffs at Mayport and both of them got decommissioned. There was no carrier there. Of course, we ended up on the carrier in Norfolk anyway.

Then I became, another lucky stroke, I became the CO of Fleet Area Control and Surveillance Facility at NAS JAX. This was 2005 and you know now I was pushing thirty years in the Navy so I told the detailer I said, and it was my third command tour, I said, "If you give me this, give me three-year orders and it will take me right up to thirty and you will never hear from me again." So, he did.

It was nice because the kids were in high school and we were able to keep them stable in one place. So, when everybody came back from Gitmo in 2003 then we just stayed in Jacksonville for, until now. So, they are both Naval officers today.

LYN-They are.

BOB-My oldest son is a pilot, flew the Super Hornet in VFA-22 and now he is flying the F-35 out in California. The younger son is a Naval flight officer in VT-1, well he was in VT-1 and now he is in Misawa, Japan on the staff. One went to the Naval Academy and one went to Florida. I'm very proud of those guys.



Navy F-35

LYN-I guess you are. So, retirement came from the Navy but it is obvious retirement is never coming to your life. (Laugh)

BOB-Someday I've got to do that but, right out of retirement I went to work, the timing was right, I became the Chief of Military Affairs for Mayor Peyton. He was, Dan McCarthy was in that job and he was moving on to another job at the State Attorney's Office and I had that opportunity. So, for the last two and a half or so years of John Peyton's term I worked in City Hall. That really built my veteran, military and veteran network here outside the Navy.

Then, of course, it was a political appointee so when the next administration came in you know, all of us who were appointees were released then I was looking around for something. I actually for a short, less than two years I had a contract that I managed at NAS for DLA, Defense Logistics Agency through a great little company called Compos Solutions but that went away with sequestration you know, thanks to our friends in Congress. The contract just didn't get renewed because the money wasn't there.

That is when I started, a little after that I started my association here at the University of North Florida. I work with Retired Captain Ray Wickström who was the director and I started doing more and more with him and eventually was on track to relieve him which I did the first of July of this year, 2017.

So, now I'm the director at the University of North Florida for the Military Veteran's Resource Center. We, what we do here is we take care of all the military affiliated and veteran students that we have most of whom are here on the GI bill or some version of it.

So, one of our big tasks here is to help them with their benefits, you know, make sure they get, we get, there's a lot of tracking that has to be done with that. Then we help them with their transition from military life to civilian life, everything from you know admission here through their graduation and job hunt afterwards.

LYN-I'm going to interject here, I just realized as I came into the building for this interview that my granddaughter [Rebecca Corley] who was a student here at the University of North Florida was actually an intern right here in this office. So, that was eye-opening.

BOB-Isn't that ironic? I know, you think, this is a great resource. Not all veterans use it but you know not only do we have the expertise and advise but we also have a physical nice lounge, a place where veterans can come and use a computer to do any kind of administrative stuff. They can make all the copies they want at no charge. We have a kitchen if they want to store food. We often have food here. It's just a good central place if you're going to school here for veterans to come.

They are a little bit different population. They are older, a little bit older, many of them have families and you know they are serious students. They are here to get a degree and they know they are on the clock because GI bill doesn't last forever. Then they want a job. They want to get a good job. Some of them already work and they do this part-time.

LYN-Then I am reading a bio and realizing there are some other things you have been doing, quite a few things. You are on boards. Do you want to tell us about that?

BOB-I'm on three boards. I'm on the board of Specialty Hospital which is, I really appreciate, it's, I don't spend a lot of time with that but it introduces me to the health care field which I didn't know anything about.

LYN-So, it is over off University and the interstate.

BOB-A great little long-term acute care hospital that has a very professional staff. I've learned about just health care in general by being part of that. You know, I think I give them a perspective that is from outside the industry. So, I've enjoyed that association.

I am on the board of the St. Augustine Lighthouse Maritime Museum which I really love. I got into that through, they have always had a Navy officer on their board and Greg Streeter who was a friend of mine who was going off, he recommended me.



LYN-That's dear to my heart. I'd like to add to the tape because Chuck Meade, what is Chuck's title?

BOB-He's the head marine archaeologist. He heads up the maritime archeology program.

LYN-He and I have something, a desire that is similar. He can do something about it and I can't and that is to recover anything that has to do with the fleet of Jean Ribault that was lost in 1565 due to a storm. There were five or six of those ships. These people had come from France and they were seeking religious freedom and they came to our shores. Unfortunately, most of them lost their lives in that effort but refusing to renounce their beliefs so quite a noble heritage, I believe.

Chuck had a grant to seek that fleet off Canaveral. A man, who I have grown very affectionate to, Douglas Armstrong, did find some remnants from that 1565-1566, maybe 1567 some men who did survive and left remains on the coast, Mosquito Coast. Chuck had an effort and did for two months a search for that fleet remains. It was not found.

BOB-They did a pretty exhaustive grit search. I remember tracking, I was going to go out with them one day and go down there and Jerry Maloney, who is a board member, did do that. I have gone with them on the field school diving but I didn't get to go down there.

LYN-Since that time a privateer has located what, at first, they said was the remains of perhaps the Trinite which was Ribault's ship. Now, it is just kind of changing for political reasons I believe, legal reasons that maybe it is just an English ship. Regardless, there are pictures that show a Fleur de Lis on a column or cannon or something and now efforts are underway to claim who has the right to salvage that. Chuck is still leading, I think, that effort to protect the materials that are there.

So, thank you for serving on that board. We look forward to...

BOB-I love my association with that group. I went down for a launching. They have a heritage boat works there too and they launched a skip jack. It was built with plans that were boats that sailed the St. Johns River and were used in the shad fishery. They have this beautiful replica that they launched. I was down there last week for the christening.

LYN-Then I'm seeing something else.

BOB-Well, I'm chair of the board of the Greater Jacksonville Area USO. I've been on the board but I'm actually chairing it this year. Well, the USO, our organization here is called a chartered center so we are associated with the big USO but we don't get any funding. So, Greater Jacksonville USO is self-funded. People who want, I always tell folks that if you want to support the local USO you have to donate not to the big USO but to us.

So, they do a lot of great things. I was a supporter of USO when I was on active duty. I saw what they did for the young sailors and so I am happy to be part of the USO. I even got to, last month got to go be Grand Marshall of the Firecracker 250 because Coca Cola was supporting USO and they asked for a representative and as board chairman I got to go down there.

So, I got to ride around the track in a race car and I got to, my big task was to say, "Drivers, start your engines."

LYN-You did?

BOB-I got to say that.

LYN-Pretty famous words.

BOB-It was fun. It was a great experience down there. Daytona is exciting.

LYN-I'm seeing the national director of the Navy League.

BOB-I am Navy League. I was past president of the council here and now I am national, there are many national directors. There's a hundred and twenty-five I think. But I still stay active with the Navy League.



LYN-Talk to us about the Navy League.

BOB-Navy League was established in 1905. Teddy Roosevelt had a hand in because at the time they were trying to promote a bigger fleet and sea power. Even today, the Navy League is an advocate for maritime presence, for sea power for maintaining a strong Navy and a strong merchant fleet as well.

So, it's education and advocacy and it's not just retired Navy people like myself. It really is an organization that should be more civilian-flavored, people who maybe are supporters of the Navy for various reasons. You know, people in the industry or people just interested in national security. I always say if you care about national security, you know, you care about maintaining a strong fleet, sea power.

LYN-So, you have had quite a career. You know that.

BOB-I got myself into a lot of things. Post-Navy I've gotten myself into so many organizations and I don't seem to be able back out of very many. Now I'm involved with the Cecil POW/MIA Memorial which I think is wonderful. I certainly will stay involved in that.

LYN-How do you, how do you envision that? Do you have a dream? We are having different dreams and that will all come together.

BOB-Right, right. I think, I love the idea of the chapel being brought back to life because we, all of us who served out there, and I said this before the City Council, I was one of the folks who spoke briefly. You know, we all have memories of that chapel because we know people who got married there. Sadly, many of us went to multiple memorial services for aviators, lost aviators.

Our XO was killed on the runway out there. His name was Greg Owens. He was the XO of VS-24. That first three-year tour of mine at Cecil, as wonderful as it was, our squadron had a very ruff go. We had, in those three years that I was there we had three fatal class A mishaps in the S-3 and the S-3 is a very safe airplane.

They were freakish. All three were odd, but we lost our CO and a whole crew right out in that very first cruise. The next cruise we lost a crew, only one survivor who was my room-mate Tim Gunbaugh. Then after that got back to the field and had a freak accident, an A-7 and a S-3 collided on the ground and all three were killed.

LYN-On the ground at Cecil?

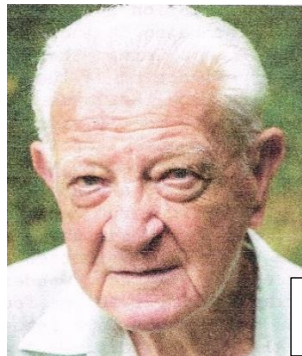
BOB-The S-3, it was night, the S-3 had landed and this was the parallel runway thing. You know, he, my XO landed on the I guess it was 36 Right and was rolling out, cleared the runway and an A-7 was cleared to take off on 36 Left and they met, unfortunately, you know, they hit. Nobody survived that one.

So, we had a lot of memorials and a lot of fly-overs, you know missing-man formation. It wasn't just us. In the A-7 squadrons you know, so the chapel I hated to see it as just as a storage area.

LYN-That what it was, I saw it.

BOB-I saw it that way too. I think that's wonderful. Then, I'm not very imaginative when it comes to what the building and a memorial should look like but I just think it's important that we do it. You know, we have the names, this POW/MIA is fantastic.

I have a really good friend who is ninety-four years old, his name is Andy Ramotnik. He is a World War II POW, shot down in a B-25 and kept in a German prison, Stalag 17B is where he lived. He tells a great story and I think about him still alive who survived World War II as a POW.



Andy Ramotnik

Then right up until, through you know the Vietnam POW's and I know Dick Stratton who lives here. He was a Vietnam POW. Of course, we all know John McCain.

You know, then the MIA's, there are still an amazing number of MIA's. People need to be reminded about. I think it's wonderful. I was surprised when Mike and the organizers said that there really isn't a national POW/MIA. There are monuments and things but there's not a place where that is memorialize. What better place than that?

LYN-Well, I hope it does become national. I hope that we have the where-with-all and the guidance to take it to that point. We certainly have a wonderful location. The westside has

suffered tremendously economically from the loss of Cecil. We have room, we could use the economics, and our nation certainly needs a place to remember and to remind.

BOB-It would be interesting to have it not be in Washington, D.C. but have it here. Why not? We have great legacy here. Other areas do too but, my memories of just overall of Cecil are just so, all of us who served out there just loved the place. We didn't appreciate it then like now looking back I think. Just as a facility and as a place to fly and as a place to be with your squadron.

I don't know if anybody has mentioned that in the BOQ, in those years in the '80's and I think into the '90's, the Rocket 17. Have you ever heard anybody talk about, Rocket 17 was the bar in the BOQ. That was where Thursdays were big.

Squadrons would all go with the CO's and we would go, and this doesn't happen anymore because people got worried about drinking and driving and rightly so, but it was a big part of the camaraderie was to go into the Rocket 17 and, not only with your own squadron but with your sister squadrons that were in the airwing. It was not uncommon for the CO and XO and all the wardroom to be in the Rocket 17 on Thursday.

So, great memories from that. Great camaraderie. That's where I had my reception for my change of command when I left command. I took command at sea of the squadron but when I got back you just didn't think about going anywhere else but the Rocket 17.

LYN-So, when you settled in Jacksonville there was never any thought of settling anywhere else.

BOB-No, not really. I feel like I'm a Floridian. I don't want to live anywhere but Florida. I don't want to live in South Florida so I love Northeast Florida and you know, what I've done since retirement has just re-enforced that. It hasn't made me want to go anywhere else.

LYN-So Cecil made this your home.

BOB-It did. Cecil make it my home. I think back to being at that summer camp and seeing those A-7's flying out. I remember the big radio station tower was WAPE. The Big Ape.

LYN-WAPE, I remember.

BOB-I could see because that would be prominent and the A-7's, I could see them streaking back in there. Little did I know that was '69 that here in 2017 I'm still thinking and talking about Cecil Field.

LYN-Thank you for a wonderful time of service to our nation and for this interview. We do have high hopes for this memorial and what it will bring to our nation.

BOB-I will do all I can to help.