

Conversations
from
Cecil Field, Florida



TRANSCRIPTIONS OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDINGS OF NINETEEN WHO SERVED

Lyn Corley

Out in the piney woods of Northeast Florida was born NAAS Cecil Field, child of NAS Jacksonville. From two hangars, Hangar 13 and Hangar 14, and a 2,000-foot diameter circular landing mat it grew with the addition of four 5,000-foot runways. It grew to house a jet squadron in 1949 with Carrier Air Group 1 and Fleet Aircraft Service Squadron 9. It grew with four 8,000-foot runways to become the first Master Jet Base in the South. It grew to have eight hangars and 19,000 acres with its own outlying fields. Its extended 12,500-foot runway grew to become an alternate landing site for NASA space shuttles. It grew with the addition of Naval Weapons Station Yellow Water with over 10,000 acres, Outlying Field Whitehouse, and Pinycastle Bombing Range. Cecil grew to encompass 3% of the land area of Duval County, Florida.

Cecil served our world by becoming a training base for those who would protect American lives and freedoms that we cherish. Tens of thousands of men and women came through its gate to serve. They lived and died in that pursuit. Cecil had promise “to continue to be a station of significant importance to readiness in the U. S. Atlantic fleet” according to public relations materials but, NAS Cecil Field passed away on September 30, 1999. Many fought to save its life and the City of Jacksonville, Florida and those who served there mourned its passing.

“Conversations from Cecil Field?”

“Conversations from Cecil Field” records the voices of men and women whose lives revolved around Cecil Field, Florida and who today seek to make sure that it and those who deployed around the world from Cecil are not forgotten. The Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial organization leads that charge to keep the memory of Cecil and all military who are still missing in action around the globe in the minds of Americans. Their mission statement reads “Honor all former prisoners of war; Remember and never forget those quiet, missing in action heroes and the families that wait for their return.” The memorial represents the establishment of the country’s only national recognition of missing military personnel.

This oral history project, contains taped interviews of nineteen men and women who served at Naval Air Station Cecil Field as military personnel and family members of military personnel. The interviews were taped and transcribed by Lyn Corley during the calendar year 2017 between March and November. The microcassette tape recordings of the interviews and bound typed transcriptions with accompanying release forms will be archived at the Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial in Jacksonville, Florida and will be available on the organization’s website. Copies of the transcripts will also be archived in the Special Collections Section of the Jacksonville Public Library, the Preservation Department of the Planning Department of the City of Jacksonville, and The Jacksonville Historical Society.

The project will be submitted to the Florida Historical Society for consideration for the 2018 Samuel Proctor Award. The goal of this submission is to encourage archiving of the material at the Society in hopes that it will be preserved and become inspiration through the years to come.

The method of gathering “Conversations from Cecil Field” included meeting with and recording on microcassette tapes each participant. Each participant was given the focus of the project and

asked to share their early life stories and memories that related to Cecil Field. Each participant was allowed to speak on the subject without time limitations and afforded interview time on additional days beyond the original interview date when needed. Each interview was transcribed into a standard oral history format.

The project chronicles stories of Cecil Field personnel that were most memorable to each of them. Many of the stories give first-hand testimony to events that were witnessed on the world stage. Three of the interviews come from those who have themselves served as Prisoners of War or family members of those who were lost during war time.

The project also chronicles the post-military service that many of the participants lead in the community in elected, appointed, and volunteer positions. Each participant has become invested in the effort to preserve the history of Cecil Field with the restoration of buildings and memorials on a twenty-six-acre parcel of property that has been leased by the City of Jacksonville to the Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial, Inc.

The interviews support the view that as each entered through the gates of Cecil Field for the first time they knew that their mission as military personnel and their families was to defend the United States through land and sea attack. The uniqueness of many of those interviewed is that they shared that every day of their service was one that placed them in harm's way.

THE HISTORY OF NAVAL AIR STATION CECIL FIELD

Just before the United States entered World War II, in foresight of the need to train airman for impending war, an auxiliary field was created for Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Florida. Twenty-six hundred acres of farm and timberland was purchased in Otis, Florida. With the consolidation of Duval County, that base became part of Jacksonville, Florida. The base was labeled, in its beginning, Naval Air Auxiliary Station Cecil.

The first commanding officer of the Southeastern Navy Air Defense Base suggested the name of a friend, Henry Barton Cecil, that would become the official name of this new base. Commander Cecil, was one of seventy-three men killed during the crash of the Navy airship USS Akron in 1933. He had been the first commander of the flight division of the Navy Bureau of Aeronautics and a member of a family boasting five sons known as "The Flying Cecil's".

The base began training replacement pilots for combat in 1942. Cecil became the principal war-at-sea and dive-bombing training center for the United States Navy and United States Marine Corps. Pilots completing training were assigned to squadrons that would serve in combat with either the Atlantic Fleet or the Pacific Fleet

Cecil Field became inactive after World War II but was later designated Naval Air Station Cecil Field, Florida in 1952. Soon the base was designated as one of the four Master Jet Bases in America. The two major criteria for the designation of master jet base were that a base be near a Navy seaport base for their logistics support and far enough from large population centers to

allow for major expansion to accommodate advancing jet-age technology. Cecil easily met those criteria with Mayport Naval Station in close proximity and miles of piney woods surrounding it.

The aircraft flown by the pilots of Cecil were used in wars beginning in World War II and continuing through the Korean Conflict, Vietnam War, and Desert Storm/Desert Shield. The following list of aircraft, hopefully inclusive of all, included the RF-8 Crusader, A-4 Skyhawk, A-4F Superfox, A-7 Corsair II, S-3 Viking, F/A-18 Hornet, ES-3 Shadow, C-1A Trader, US-2B Tracker, T-28 Trojan, C-12 Huron, F-6 Hellcat, F-8 Bearcat, F-9, PVY's, F-8 Crusader, TA-4J, F-4, and TV-1B.

Of world-making history were the RF-Crusaders from Cecil Field who detected the presence of nuclear-armed ballistic missiles in Cuba leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Squadrons from NAS Cecil Field were aboard every Atlantic Fleet aircraft carrier deployed to Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. Thirteen of those pilots were listed as Prisoners of War or Missing in Action. The first Atlantic Fleet squadrons to fly the A-7 Corsair II, the F/A-18 Hornet, the S-3A, and the S-3B Viking were all based at Cecil Field.

CECIL FIELD SQUADRONS

The pilots assigned to Cecil squadrons were on their way to combat. One of the interviews included in this project clearly states the mission of Cecil pilots was "Bombs on the ground." Those who trained at Cecil state that it was the best place to train and the Cecil Field pilots were the best prepared as they deployed aboard the air craft carriers.

The memorial plaque for Operation Desert Shield at Cecil Field reads "America's strength lies in the men and women who prepare to defend the ideals of this great country to the fullest. The highest sacrifice anyone may make is to give one's life so that universal freedom throughout the free world remains steadfast." This statement gives clear testimony to the mind-set of those who prepared at Cecil Field.

The Operation Desert Shield memorial plaque lists the names of men who trained at Cecil and gave the highest sacrifice-Lt. David A. Warne VFA-86, PO-3 Anthony J. Fleming VS-30, PO-3 Michael L. Belliveau AIMD, AA Randy L. Neel VFA-83, LCDR M. Scott Speicher VFA-81, and Lt. Robert J. Dwyer CVW-8.

Cecil Field's POW/MIA- You Are Not Forgotten plaque makes the boldest statement of the focus of those who prepared at Cecil and went into service beyond, "War is an ugly thing but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. A man who has nothing for which he is willing to fight; nothing he cares about more than his own personal safety is miserable creature who has no chance to be free unless made and kept so by the exertion of better men than himself."

Nearby is the "Spirit of Cecil Field" Hero's Walk and Freedom Trees with the sentiment "From this Master Jet Base Naval aviators have served their country in times of war and peace. It is this

“Spirit of Cecil Field” which provides Naval carrier forces capable of responding worldwide. In the course of this response some have been called upon to provide sacrifices in combat. We dedicate a Freedom Tree to remind us of what they have done. This Hero’s Walk was established so that their dedication will be an inspiration to us.” The sixteen plaques and tress were placed in memory of LCDR M. Scott Speicher, LT Robert J. Dwyer, LCDR Phil Craig, CDR Peter Schoeffel, LCDR Lee Cole, LT Steve Musselman, LCDR John Davis, LCDR Denver Key, LCDR Michael Hoff, LCDR Fred Wright, CDR Jim Hall, LCDR James Sullivan, LT Dale Raebel, CAPT Bruce Nystrom, LT Carl Wieland, LCDR Randolph Ford.

Listed is the most comprehensive list available to this project in detailing the commands who have served at Cecil Field.

Commands

Numerous commands operated from NAS Cecil Field over its lifetime. During the 1980s and 1990s, in addition to the station leadership of NAS Cecil Field, the principal tenant commands were:

- Commander, Light Attack Wing ONE / renamed Commander, Strike Fighter Wing Atlantic
(December 1992)[2]
- Strike Fighter Squadron 13 (VF-13)
- Strike Fighter Squadron 15 (VFA-15)
- Strike Fighter Squadron 37 (VFA-37)
- Attack Squadron 46 (VA-46) {disestablished as an A-7 Corsair II light attack squadron, June 1991 }
- Attack Squadron 72 (VA-72) {disestablished as an A-7 Corsair II light attack squadron, June 1991 }
- Strike Fighter Squadron 81 (VFA-81)
- Strike Fighter Squadron 82 (VFA-82)
- Strike Fighter Squadron 83 (VFA-83)
- Strike Fighter Squadron 86 (VFA-86)
- Strike Fighter Squadron 87 (VFA-87)
- Strike Fighter Squadron 105 (VFA-105)
- Strike Fighter Squadron 106 VFA-106 {F/A-18 Hornet Fleet Replacement Squadron }
- Strike Fighter Squadron 131 VFA-131
- Strike Fighter Squadron 132 VFA-132 {disestablished as an F/A-18 Hornet strike fighter squadron, June 1992 }
- Strike Fighter Squadron 136 (VFA-136)
- Strike Fighter Squadron 137 (VFA-137)
- Attack Squadron 174 (VA-174) {disestablished as an A-7 Corsair II light attack squadron/A-7 Fleet Replacement Squadron, June 1988 }
- Strike Fighter Weapons School, Atlantic

Commander, Air Antisubmarine Wing ONE / renamed Commander, Sea Strike Wing ONE (May 1987) / renamed Commander, Sea Control Wing Atlantic (October 1992)[3][4]
Sea Control Squadron 22 (VS-22)
Sea Control Squadron 24 (VS-24)

Lockheed S-3A Viking of VS-31 at NAS Cecil Field in 1976
Sea Control Squadron 27 (VS-27) {disestablished as an S-3 Viking sea control squadron/S-3 Fleet Replacement Squadron, September 1994}
Sea Control Squadron 28 (VS-28)
Sea Control Squadron 30 (VS-30)
Sea Control Squadron 31 (VS-31)
Sea Control Squadron 32 (VS-32)
Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron 6 (VQ-6)
Commander, Carrier Air Wing THREE (CVW-3)
Commander, Carrier Air Wing SIX (CVW-6) {disestablished as a carrier air wing, April 1993}
Commander, Carrier Air Wing SEVENTEEN (CVW-17)
Commander, Carrier Air Wing Reserve TWENTY (CVWR-20)
Strike Fighter Squadron 203 (VFA-203); based at NAS Cecil Field
Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 142 (VMFA-142); based at NAS Cecil Field
other CVWR-20 squadrons based at NAS Atlanta, NAS Dallas (later NAS JRB Fort Worth), NAS New Orleans, NAS Norfolk and NAF Washington
Commanding Officer, Marine Aviation Training Support Group (MATSG) Cecil Field
Naval Air Reserve Jacksonville, Detachment NAS Cecil Field
Naval Branch Medical Clinic, Cecil Field
Naval Air Maintenance Training Detachment
Naval Meteorology and Oceanography Command Detachment, NAS Cecil Field
Aviation Physiology Training Unit (APTU), NAS Cecil Field
Marine Barracks, NAS Cecil Field
Marine Aircraft Group 42 (MAG-42), Detachment A

THE PASSING

In 1993, a phone call came to Cecil Field Commanding Officer Sam Houston telling him that Cecil Field had been placed on the base closure list. He was told to speak to no one about the issue and to report to Washington, D.C. the next day. When word of the potential closing reached the Naval communities, it stunned the military community and The City of Jacksonville.

Suppositions, gathered from many sources during the interviews for this project, are that there was pressure on the U.S. Navy to offer a potential installation that was felt could be part of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission process. The Navy had not been cooperative prior to that BRAC cycle. The supposition is that Cecil Field was offered to the commission because it was not in any way considered as an acceptable base for the commission to consider closing.

Captain Houston and base personnel worked with The City of Jacksonville and Congressional Representatives from the area in efforts to support Cecil's continued service to the Navy. The BRAC process included a point system for each facility that had been offered on the list of potential closings.

Public records from Washington hearings now clarify that Cecil Field was not being considered for closing by the Commission. The point system identified NAS Oceana, Virginia, as the facility that would be closed. The community around Oceana had been unresponsive to the Navy's need to protect the base from public land encroachment.

First-hand accounts tell of the final commission hearing in Orlando. Senator John Warner of Virginia appeared at the hearing with two Marines and a brief case chained to his wrist. After a secret meeting, it was announced that NAS Cecil Field would be closed.

Available today, in public records, is the information that Senator Warner offered to the Commission. The information stated that the Top-Secret Unit, Seal Team-6, was required to maintain its location in the vicinity of NAS Oceana which required that a base other than Oceana be closed. It is well-known now that there was no need for the unit to remain in Virginia.

After six years of preparation for closing, NAS Cecil Field, Florida chained its gates on September 30, 1999. Bill Foley's newspaper article from 1993 describes what was passing away in the City of Jacksonville, Florida.

“FROM LITTLE OTIS, A MIGHTY JET BASE GREW-CECIL FIELD”

By Bill Foley-Florida Times-Union March 21, 1993

“Not a bad deal. For \$16,861, the Navy got 2,600 acres of pine woods at Otis, Fla. Used it as one of 40 rinky-dink airfields and practice ranges near Jacksonville Naval Air Station.

Then, along came jet planes, and VA-ROOOM!

Otis, Florida became Cecil Field, the screamingest, naval air base in the world.

For a full 50 years, the base flexed Navy muscle: bustling, burning, shrieking, streaking, day and night, day in, day out, year after year, all year 'round---master jet base without compare.

Through Cecil passed most Navy airmen.

Astronauts and Airdales, cabbages and kings, princes and peasants, shahs and shave tails.

Now, after a half-century as the shining prince of jet-dom, screaming Cecil Field faces somber twilight.

The Navy top jet base stands like neon on a list of 31 big military bases and 134 other installations that Defense Secretary Les Aspin says he wants cut, consolidated, or realigned to save money.

With Cecil's loss---if the supersonic megaplex is whisked clean from the map---would go 8,557 Jacksonville jobs and \$586 million in local annual economic effect.

There's doubt that the board shall be swept so clean.

But it's sure that things never shall be the same on Jacksonville's Westside.

For history has been written at Cecil Field, and history, once writ, is done, and memory takes its stead.

Should Cecil disappear, it would leave not a simple void but an abandoned state of mind, a lost lifestyle."



CECIL FIELD-Gone but Not Forgotten

CECIL COMMERCE CENTER

The vast land mass on the west side of Jacksonville, Florida that had been named NAS Cecil Field began transition after the BRAC decision. The City of Jacksonville began plans for the land's future use. This project did not include interviews from those who were part of the transition.

According to the Jacksonville Airport Authority promotional materials, The Jacksonville Airport Authority assumed ownership of more than six thousand acres which included the airfield, ramp space, buildings and hangars. Clay County, Florida took ownership of more than one thousand acres. The City of Jacksonville, which is Duval County Florida, assumed the largest amount of property with over eleven thousand acres.

“Today-The JAA enjoys a fully utilized and leased Cecil Field. Each of the eight hangars and all airside buildings are leased to aviation-oriented customers. The Airport’s future role is focused on increasing its Maintenance-Repair-Overhaul capabilities using facilities and infrastructure that served a similar purpose when the field was commissioned as a Naval Air Station.”

“Flight training is a major component of this airport’s general aviation activity. Approximately 85 percent of the traffic at Cecil is related to flight training, and 80 percent of that traffic is military.”

The Cecil Commerce Center website lists tenants at the property as follows: SAFT, Wood Group Pratt & Whitney, Boeing, Bridgestone Americas Tire Operations, FRC Southeast, Civil Air Patrol. Department of Homeland Security, State of Florida Division of Forestry, Flightstar Aircraft Services, Florida State College Jacksonville Aviation Center of Excellence, Florida State College Jacksonville New Cecil Center, Florida Army National Guard Aviation Supply Facility, Internext Group/Cecil Pines, Jacksonville Aviation Authority, Jacksonville Fire and Rescue, Jacksonville JetPort at Cecil Field, Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office, JEA-Jet Turbine Services, Logistic Services International, Hillwood/M&T Co., Northrop Grumman, United States Coast Guard, VT Griffin Services, Vystar Credit Union, KCI Aviation, Fleet Readiness Center SE, Robinson Aviation, Jet Port, and Engility. The most current lease is to Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial, Inc.

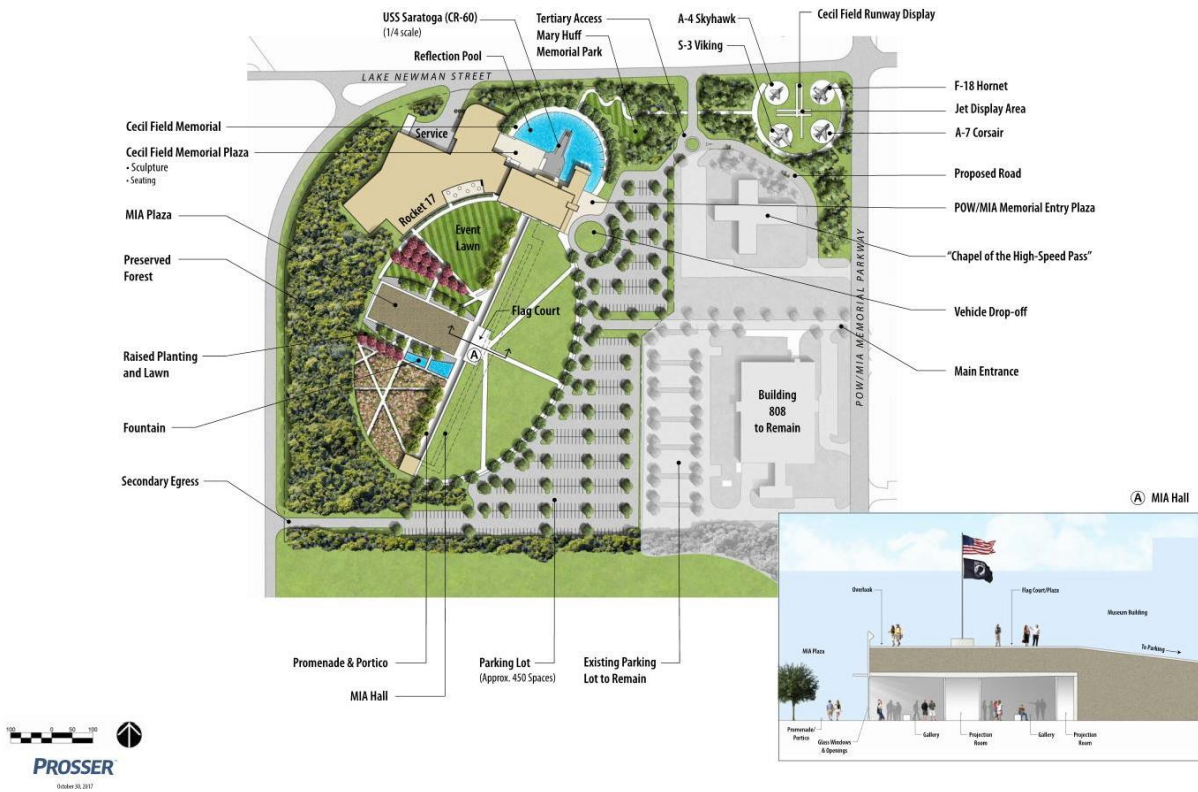
THE MEMORIAL

A group of men and women, many former Cecil Field pilots, have joined efforts to memorialize Cecil Field, give conservation status to the beloved chapel, and create a place that will honor and memorialize those of all branches of the military service of the United States who were held as prisoners of war during their military service and those who did not return from the duties they were performing away from their home bases.

The existing memorials, placed at Cecil Field decades ago, will become part of the larger memorial park. The chapel, that served for joyous times of marriages and change of commands and many more times as times of heart-felt sorrow with memorial services, will be restored for use to its former purposes.

The theater building will become the POW/MIA Memorial Center. The additional acreage will be built as a memorial place for all Missing in Action. Unashamedly, this group of visionaries working on the project believes that the former Cecil Field site will become the national memorial for military of all branches, for POW’s and MIA

Cecil Field National POW/MIA Memorial Park



INTRODUCTION TO INTERVIEWS

MRS. DOROTHYROSE PRIMM, wife of Fred Wright, USN

Primm was a Mississippi girl who migrated to Pensacola to teach school. It was in Pensacola that she met Frederick Williston Wright, III while he was in flight training, her future husband. Primm talks about what it was like as a Navy wife to realize that her husband was flying with patrol planes photographing Russian ships during the build-up to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

After Fred transitioned to jets he was deployed on a West Pac cruise to serve during the Vietnam War. She remembers, "I was working Navy Relief at Cecil Field and the door opened and in came a chaplain and Captain Mow. I sat up and I thought something might be wrong but I didn't know what." What was wrong was that her husband, Lt. Commander Fred Wright did not return from his mission over Vietnam. Primm, her daughter Cynde, and her son Frederick waited for Fred to return.

Fred's answer to Primm's question of "When are you gonna be home?" had been "When you see the whites of my eyeballs" early in his military service. Much of a Navy's wife's life is spent in

waiting but Primm never did see Fred again. After he was declared dead, Primm had a memorial service for him at the chapel at Cecil Field.

Eighteen years from the time Fred was declared Missing in Action, then Killed in Action, then having no remains of her husband, Hanoi released twenty remains and Fred's name was on one of the caskets. In her interview, Primm shares her journey of being notified that Fred's remains were being returned and her journey with him as a military escort to his final resting place in Arlington.

Primm's level of dedication to being a Navy wife remains. She says that "if I could be catapulted off the carrier I would go."

Concerning Primm and Fred's duty station at Cecil Field, Florida her response, like most all interviewed was, "There was nothing down 103rd and there is still nothing down 103rd" but we loved Cecil Field and our life there." [103rd Street leads to the entrance of Cecil Field]

CAPTAIN DAVID A. DOLLARHIDE, USNR (Retired)

Dave Dollarhide shares in his interview that after talking to Navy recruiters during his days at Mississippi State that he "became convinced right away that wearing that white uniform I saw those recruiters in and going to Pensacola to fly airplanes was a grand adventure for me." The first surprise of the interview came as Dave said that he had never even flown in an airplane until his training in the T-34.

Dave is totally honest concerning his early days of training to be a pilot and his first experience with a catapult shot, "If you flew jets your first experience with fear starts with the catapult shot. You either do this or you're going to die."

Dave Dollarhide, call sign "Hide", experienced the worst peace-time shipboard accident in Navy history. He was in the cockpit of his plane, sitting on the flight deck ready to launch "when a rocket came across the flight deck in a microsecond and hit the drop tank of Fred White which was two airplanes down from me on the other side of McCain. That four-hundred-gallon fuel tank exploded as a fuel bomb type of explosion. The shrapnel from that caused the injuries to the other people around the flight deck. This is before a bomb even went off."

This sensitive interview shares the horrific accident aboard the USS Forrestal and the losses that Dave witnessed that day, 29 July 1967 beginning at 10:51. Because the USS Forrestal incident involved Senator John McCain and false accounts of the cause of the incident have come forth, Dave carefully explains the truth of the incident with the facts that he witnessed first-hand.

Flying never stopped in Dave's life. He shares about his career as an airline pilot and the Naval Reserves, and his passion that remains as he enjoys his Recreational Airplane flying from "NAS Haller". He serves with other pilot friends in honoring fallen aviators with the missing man formation fly-overs during burial services. He, like all the former Cecil Field pilots, share a passion to see the POW/MIA Memorial vision become a reality that will honor the men and women who were lost serving our nation.

All who were interviewed were participants at memorial and funeral services at the Cecil Field Chapel. Dave's memories are of a happier time-he married his wife Chris there.

CAPTAIN DENNIS MICHAEL GILLESPIE, USN (Retired)

"I always wanted to be a pilot. I wanted jets and I wanted to fly off air craft carriers." Dennis, better known to everyone by his call sign "Dizzy", remembers Naval Academy Service Selection Night when he got to choose what kind of airplane he wanted to fly and what coast he wanted to fly from. As a testimony to Cecil Field he comments "I was lucky...I got to pick the A-7 at Cecil Field."

This most articulate man, Dizzy Gillespie, explains his process through the Navy. "So, in college you learn how to learn, in the training command you learn how to fly, and then at Cecil Field that's where you begin the process of learning how to lead and then learning how to do your job. Of course, you're dropping bombs and shooting guns and the inevitable baggage that goes along with that. But you're young and you don't think about that because all you've ever done was drop bombs down here at the targets and shoot guns at targets." Just to add to the sobriety of the subject, Dizzy went on to explain that at Cecil the pilots were learning escape maneuvers from possible nuclear detonation because "we were nuclear capable pilots."

Dizzy's interview clarifies the responsibilities aboard an aircraft carrier. For those cruises that are spent along the Mediterranean with exotic ports of call, the crew "is typically working with NATO. The ship is always working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week when you are underway. The ship is always going somewhere specific." "The carrier battle group is this moving Cecil Field in a way because the focus is protecting the force and getting the strike aircraft to where they can get to." He explains in a way that puts the carrier organization in a nutshell, "The captain of the ship owns the ship so you are flying from his air field. The admiral onboard the carrier owns the battle group." "Everybody's job on an aircraft carrier has one focus, to put a bomb on a target."

During his Navy service Dizzy was called on during many well-known events that shaped history. He recalls being in the War Room of the USS Kennedy after Ghadaffy fired against American planes. The conversation was between the Admiral of the Kennedy discussing the plan of action. Over the phone The Secretary responded, "Wait one, I'm gonna put the boss on. Then on the phone is President Ragan saying 'Admiral, I'm going to make it real easy for you. If it flies it dies. Any question?'"

Discussing the most sensitive time of a Navy pilot's life, Dizzy says that "If I knew I was going to be shot down I wouldn't go. You have to turn your family off. You have to turn your troubles off because once you get in that airplane you have one missions and it's to do it and get back." He shares remembrances of telling his kids good bye and saying "OK, I'll see you in six months" Dizzy stated that he did that nine or ten times.

Like three of those interviewed in this project, Dizzy was present during the Haifa, Israel ferry incident when sailors from the Saratoga were lost. Like other men aboard the Saratoga, he

remembers his last time with local pilot Scott Speicher. He recalls the real-life incident that many of us viewed in the movie “Black Hawk Down” as he as wing commander aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln learned that he was headed to Mogadishu, Somalia. He smiled as he recounted “I ended up taking two F-18’s to descend over the city at a thousand feet as fast as those airplanes could go...we can at least show our people on the ground that we’re coming.”

The sensitive issue of women on Navy carriers became Dizzy’s real-life issue when he became the first airwing command with women. The loss of the first female carrier pilot, Cara Holtgreen, is told in Dizzy’s interview.

The issue of women on ships is followed in this interview with Dizzy’s account of the Tailhook Convention that gained national attention in the news. The interview includes his days assigned to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and the United States’ efforts to keep Saddam Hussein from attacking his own people.

“Dizzy” Gillespie has become the most capable spokesperson for the Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial organization. His presentation to the students of The Foundation Academy that is mentioned in this project, brought a sharp realization to the students, faculty, and guests of what patriotism is. Dizzy’s service to this nation is patriotism.

Like Dave Dollarhide, Dizzy continues the joy of flying from “NAS Haller”. He honors many families with the missing man formation fly-overs that have been witnessed by many veterans’ families.

COMMANDER KEVIN M. KUZEL, USNR (Retired)

Kevin Kuzel’s interview began with the most un-expected story of his father who immigrated from Czechoslovakia and went on to serve our nation during World War II. The interview includes the story of his father’s plane’s loss over Holland and his days in Stalag 2a.

Kevin’s family’s story continues with the service of his mother who served as a radar plotter during the war but became best known for her artistic talent that was put to use painting artwork on the noses of U.S. bombers. Then follows his grandmother’s story of recruiting during the war right from Jacksonville, Florida.

Kevin begins the topic of himself with, “I was crazy about airplanes from the time I was a little kid.” Throughout the interview it is obvious that Kevin is still crazy about airplanes. He joined the Air Force ROTC at Texas Tech University and a series of events led to the opportunity for Kevin to begin flying during those college days.

Kevin chose to fly for the Navy rather than the Air Force because his career began at the end of Vietnam when the Air Force was not taking new pilots. He was selected for jets after flight training in Pensacola then started flying the T-2 in Kingsville, Texas. Kevin’s keen sense of observation of the world around him led him to a time that he observed one of the last classes of students flying the T-28 trainers with their canopies open and scarves flying in the wind,

“Snoopy-style”. His observations of situations enhance his interview concerning especially airplanes and flying.

Concerning his mission as a Naval pilot he states, “Our job as Naval aviators was to train as hard as we could and be the best so that whatever we encountered we would be able to defeat. That was our mind-set of the Navy and the Navy flight-training program.”

His humorous comments about his first introduction to Cecil Field are “I had looked at it a couple of times as far as on the map and the charts and saw two sets of parallel runways you know on the charts. One of the runways was twelve thousand five hundred feet and I said, ‘Hey, that’s plenty of runway. I like that, that’s good. When I started coming up Normandy Boulevard the single-wides with the trucks up on jacks and without tires did begin to disturb me just a little.” My first thought was “Why did they send me here?” Kevin found Jacksonville to be a large small town. This interview gives great example to the joys and trials of flying various Navy airplanes.

Kevin went on to retire in Jacksonville. His conversation includes times of service to the community as he was selected by the base commander as public affairs officer for Cecil and ran the base newspaper, “Cecil Field Air Winger”. His representation for the Navy on the Clay County Chamber of Commerce and the representative to the Westside Businessmen’s Club gave him opportunity to experience civic service in the area.

His own military electronics business was Milcom Electronics. Being a person of many talents, Kevin also shares about his work with film studios working with and advising on props for motion pictures.

Kevin became involved with the Park and King Association in Avondale which led him to a friendship with Jim Love, both former A-7 pilots from Cecil Field. Kevin aided Jim’s campaign for City Council which led to Kevin’s current service as the Executive Council Assistant for District 14 in the City Council Office.

Councilman Love says that “Kevin does a wonderful job and describes Kevin’s ability to deal with the different personalities in District 14 and assist their needs as attributed to his degree in psychology. It is obvious that Kevin’s abilities are far more advanced than his college degree. He serves the City of Jacksonville with a wealth of knowledge and advice.

CAPTAIN JIM LOVE, USNR (Retired)

Jim Love was born into a military family. His father served as a Marine during World War II, joined the reserves, was recalled to Korea, then joined the Air Force. Jim himself received a Navy ROTC scholarship to attend Auburn University.

During his time in ROTC Jim recalls three weeks on a nuclear submarine. He comments that after those three weeks “That’s when I realized I really didn’t want to do that.” He shares that a comment from one of the men aboard the submarine was “Midshipman Love, do you have good eyesight? You should be flying.” That’s what Jim did.

During his time at Auburn he went through the Flight Leader Indoctrination Program where he got to fly. After training in Pensacola Jim reported to VA-174 at Cecil Field.

At the transition squadron, VA-174, the well-known POW survivor John McCain, was assigned as skipper. From 174 Jim was assigned to VA-104 and reported on February 14th. The fellow pilots thought that Lt. Love appearing on the flight schedule on Valentine's Day was really a joke. It was Jim.

Concerning early marriage and carrier duty, Jim talks about his wife following the ship. It was a time when there was little communication between those who served on the carriers and their families. During times of deployment of carriers in the Mediterranean, many wives chose to spend their time in Mediterranean ports which allowed them time with their spouses when the ship was in port during the cruises.

Jim shares about his time as a flight instructor in Beeville, Texas, and the birth and naming of his son, James Russell Love, for the only pilot to ever eject from an A-7 underwater, Russ Pearson. After instructor duty Jim decided that he wanted to start his own business. He opened a State Farm agency in Avondale and also decided to return to the Navy, the Reserves. Jim retired after twenty-six years of Navy service, seven active and nineteen in Reserves.

Jim shares about his last flight in the back seat of a F-18, a plane he had never flown. He compared the A-7 that he had flown to a pick-up truck compared to the F-18, more like a Ferrari. The pilot Jim flew with was a former Beeville student who happened to be a Jacksonville man, Scott Speicher. Scott became the first military casualty of Desert Storm.

Jim's civic leadership led him to a run for City Councilman from the Riverside-Avondale area. He is now in his second four-year term in office representing District 14. He has actively been involved in the pursuit of securing the new, stealth F-35 for the National Guard here in Jacksonville.

Concerning the Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial, Jim co-sponsored the ordinance through the Jacksonville City Council which granted a five-year lease to the organization. His thoughts concerning the project reached far beyond the memorial. Jim can foresee an industry of military tourism for Jacksonville and shares that vision in the interview.

CAPTAIN JOHN R. LEENHOUTS, USN (Retired)

John knew from an early age that he wanted to fly. He shares a moment that changed his life when a Navy pilot flew into campus and said, "It's real easy to become what they call an aviation reserve officer candidate." So, he signed up two years before he went into service. "I didn't know what I was doing but it was the smartest move I ever made."

John made his way to training in Pensacola and explains the elimination process there. "The drill instructors 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. After

you got to flight training they didn't want you to quit. They wanted you to succeed." He explains at that time in the history of the Vietnam conflict pilots were "needed cannon fodder".

John married the daughter of an Army Air Corps cargo pilot, a flying sergeant. They wanted an assignment in San Diego but the Navy said, "No, you're going to be Corsairs out of Cecil Field." As with most pilots assigned to Cecil his thought was "I didn't have a clue where that was."

His career progressed from being one of the last to train in the A-7B and then qualifying in the Tomcat. He describes the era of the Cold War as a "Cat and mouse game, we were battling an enemy that didn't want to shoot and we didn't want to shoot either but we had guns cocked all the time."

After a time of being a "misfit" youth, being at an isolated base, being in a squadron he didn't want to be in, flying the oldest airplane in the fleet he found himself "in heaven flying jets off carriers. I found my niche." He takes pride in changes that he brought to the Navy and discusses changes with carrier qualifications, changes that came unofficially to uniforms, and the addition of night-landing trainers at Cecil Field.

Like many of those interviewed, John shares the story of having only a week-end to prepare to deploy because of an event that was occurring around the world. John deployed on the USS Kennedy to Kuwait. His career progressed from carrier to carrier and doing what he loved, flying.

John's career progresses through a time at the Montgomery Air War College, a temporary assignment in Saudi Arabia, a tour in Japan, then the surprise assignment, "Lites, you're gonna have to move the wing. They're closing Cecil and you gotta move the wing."

Fast forward in the interview and John gives the story of working with Gov. Jeb Bush in 2005 in an attempt to re-open Cecil Field. In trying to figure out what had been wrong when the decision was made by the BRAC to close the base the comment was made, "We didn't lose it. Cecil was the winner. Oceana was to be closed." This part of the interview speaks to the heart of a city that mourned the passing of this place called Cecil and brings clarity to the flawed process that took place that changed our city's landscape forever. As the Hornets departed Cecil, John took the opportunity to fly the last and loop the field. Just a year later he flew the Hornet into Cecil for the first antenna modification. Soon, as a civilian, he would come back to take over the modification center. His sentiments about Cecil, "It was home, I grew up here."

The next extraordinary assignment for John Leenhauts came when he became executive director of Sun'n Fun in Lakeland, Florida-famous for their airshows. A program designed to "show off" flying abilities evolved with the addition of a high school. John was able to re-direct the multi-faceted program of Sun'n Fun with the adoption of the mission statement, "To preserve and enhance the future of flight through world-class events, inspiring and educating people of all ages." Their public high school of aeronautics has become the number one provider of aviation scholarships. The school offers every student the potential of becoming a pilot. "We just put wings on our 58th pilot since we started four years ago."

He and his wife have devoted their lives to their mission statement.

WILLIAM L. HEMBREE, USNR (Retired)

Bill Hembree gives testimony to the longevity of the service of Cecil Field and his own longevity. "I tell people I signed up in June of 1945 and the Japs surrendered in August as soon as they heard I had signed up." Bill began flying with an aerobatic flyer and spent his life pursuing flying.

After World War II Bill made his living in crop dusting. During the Korean conflict he was called back to active duty. Knowing that he could get a deferment because he was in dental school, Bill told the Dean, "They spend a lot of money on me and I had a wonderful life doing it and that he would not feel comfortable if he didn't fulfill his duty to join his squadron on active duty." Bill explains that the Navy had decided that their aviators should be able to fly every plane in the Navy. He trained in TBM's, torpedo bombers, dive bombers, and fighter planes.

In his interview Bill remembers that Cecil had outlying fields that we used for "bounce drill", where the landing signal officer was training you to go aboard the carrier. He comments that "nobody particularly wanted to be stationed there but they all liked flying there."

Bill served on the carriers USS Wasp and USS Philippine Sea. He explained that during his years there were escort carriers with shorter decks. The CVE's had been designed as cargo ships but then had decks added to them.

His love of airplanes is emphasized when he explains that he has owned seventeen private planes. He made his living as a dentist but it was only to have enough money to own and fly airplanes.

CAPTAIN SAM. K. HOUSTON, USN (Retired)

"I remember as a child the jets, low-flying jets over our farm. It was fascinating. They were flying fast and over low over the ground. I said, 'That's something I would like to do'."

Like other pilots in the project, Sam already had induction papers to the Army when he reported to the Navy. The surprise of his story came when he said that the first time he ever flew in an airplane was when he flew down to join the Navy and be sworn in.

The military draft guided many men into the Navy. Sam openly admits his memories of his first solo flight as, "Oh Lord, I've got to take this thing off by myself with no one with me. Taking off is easy you know. When I got airborne I said, Oh, now I've got to land this thing."

Sam got his wings in Corpus Christi and was assigned to Pax River, Maryland. By 1972 he was assigned as an advisor in country to Vietnam. The very first night in Danang there was a rocket attack. "I remember taking my weapon and crawling under the bed." He explains that Danang was called "Rocket City" and was hit with rockets over four hundred times during the year. His experience in Vietnam and his positive determination to serve is shown clearly in his interview as he speaks of volunteering to teach English to children in that country.

Sam was sent to Quonset Point only to have the base close. Little did he know that another base closing would enter his future career. He was assigned to Cecil Field and joined the Nimitz during the time of the pirate take-over of an Italian cargo, the Achille Lauro, and describes the Navy's assistance to the world that occurred during that event.

Throughout the interviews there is acknowledgment of the dangers of life on an aircraft carrier. Sam shares his experience of one airplane crash that caused the loss of sixteen airplanes and the lives of thirteen personnel.

After a tour at the Pentagon, Sam and his family settled in Giada, Italy. Learning later that war was going to break out he sent his family back to the states. "I knew we were going to be at sea for a long time."

When Sam returned to Cecil Field he returned as the Commanding Officer. He would spend seventeen of his last twenty-two years at the base. Whenever talk would turn to BRAC closings Sam would say, "It's the best master jet base the Navy has. No way would they ever close Cecil. It's just too big of an asset." Sam got the first call to come to Washington and to tell no one that Cecil was on the closing list. His comment about the base is, "It was my life."

Sam's interview offers his opinion and knowledge of the base closing. The base did close and Sam returned to an assignment in Washington with the Office of the Secretary of the Navy.

When Sam decided to retire he took up the position of Division Chief of Fleet for the City of Jacksonville. Retirement appeared again with the change of mayors for the city so Sam retired to Spring Park Elementary School.

I met Sam at Spring Park where his wife had taught for a number of years. Like every assignment Sam had, he performed with the most positive, capable spirit possible.

Sam's most current assignment is right back at Cecil Field. He is acting as Chairman of the Board of the Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial.

CAPTAIN ROBERT A. BUEHN, USN (Retired)

Bob's inspiring relationship with flight began in his own back yard near Kennedy Space Center. His father worked in the early space program and Bob watched manned-space shots from his back yard. In his interview he also shares the memory of watching the A-7's fly overhead at the camp where he was life guard in Julington Creek and thinking how great it was.

He pursued a career in journalism in Stuart, Florida but even then, continued his desire to fly. He earned his pilot's license and began seeking opportunities in the military as a pilot. In 1978 a recruiter called and asked if Bob was interested and four days later he was reporting for Aviation Officer Candidate School in Pensacola.

Bob continued training on the west coast but then was assigned to VS-24 at Cecil. He was sent to Oceana to be a Landing Signal Officer and then served a full year away from the base during his first seventeen months in the squadron.

His “job” in the Navy was in anti-submarine warfare airplanes where he spent his time tracking Soviet submarines. Just to demonstrate the need for his “job” he states about the Soviet submarines, “They were out there all over the place.”

Bob was reassigned to the west coast but orders to VS-28 sent him back to Cecil. He was aboard the Forrestal’s fleet deployment from Mayport. At Cecil, Bob took command of VS-32 just before the base closing. His statement about Cecil “I always tell people that Cecil Field was the best, it was a master jet base so it was the best place to fly carrier jets east of the Mississippi. We were just out there in the pine trees. You could make noise and you could fly fast which was important to train like you are going to do it at sea. I think it made Cecil pilots better pilots.” After the base closing he moved on to become XO of the USS Constellation.

Bob chose orders to a quiet base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba that he described as “being like the ‘50’s Mayberry on the Caribbean. But soon change came after the 9-11 attack on America. His base became home to Taliban prisoners. Bob explains the logic for using Gitmo to house the prisoners- “The thinking behind using Gitmo as a prison was that the base was actually on Cuban soil even though it was leased from Cuba. Having the prisoners on foreign soil prevented them from having the rights of U.S. prisoners-however the courts ruled that it didn’t really count as ‘foreign soil’”.

Bob moved from CRUDESGROUP-12 in Mayport to Fleet Area Control and Surveillance Facility at NAS JAX. He was able to end his tour in Jacksonville.

His sons have followed the Navy path with one now flying the F-35 in California and his youngest son, a previous flight officer in FT-1, now on staff in Japan.

Bob was selected to serve the City of Jacksonville as Chief of Military Affairs and now is director of the Military Veteran’s Resource Center at the University of North Florida. In addition, he serves on the board of Specialty Hospital, the St. Augustine Lighthouse Maritime Museum, and currently is chair of the board of the Greater Jacksonville USO. He continues to advocate for maritime presence, now serving as a national director of the Navy League.

Bob is supporting the efforts of the Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial and recalls memories of the chapel, “because we know people who got married there. Sadly, many of us went to multiple memorial services for lost aviators there.”

CAPTAIN PHILIP D. VOSS, USN, (Retired)

Phil was born the son of a Danish Merchant Mariner, on the Mississippi River. Without exception, his father took each of the five boys in the family to enlist in the Navy as they turned of age. Phil served in the Naval reserves at the University of Southern Mississippi. Just to add stark reality to the era of being a Navy pilot, Phil recalls asking why the only billets were for

aviators. He was given the reason, “They are shooting down two Naval aviators a day in Vietnam right now so we need more aviators.”

Phil selected for props after flight school. This man of humor gives us foresight into his future assignments. “After 31 years in the Navy every ship I served and every station I served and every airplane are in museums or disestablished or gone.”

After flying with VT-31 above the Artic Circle off the USS Intrepid, Phil was assigned to Quonset Point. The base closed so Phil found himself shuttling planes down to Cecil Field, Florida. His love of the area began during flight training when he flew over Jacksonville in cross-country flights and looked down and would say, “Man I love this place with all the water because I grew up on the Mississippi River. With all of that water there’s got to be a place for me somewhere.” His place was waiting on the Ortega River where he resides today.

His love of Naval history is revealed throughout his interview but the most impressive story describes how he was promoted to commander aboard Lord Nelson’s ship HMS Victory, in Lord Nelson’s cabin. Phil’s history lesson continued in the interview as he introduced the reader (and listener) to the term “Commodore”, a term that comes from Lord Nelson’s navy. Phil went on to serve as Commodore of Cecil Field

Phil has the distinction of flying the longest carrier air craft flight in history, four thousand and two hundred miles. He was called upon to deliver a terrorist from the USS Saratoga to Andrews Air Force base, a world-news event. He recalls his thoughts during the flight, “This is really happening. This is really, really happening. This isn’t a dream. Wow, this could be history. Wow, this could be bad.” It all ended good and news articles chronicling the event are included in Phil’s interview.

During his thirty-one years of Navy service Phil served nine tours at Cecil. His Navy career is chronicled in the interview. After the announcement of the closing of Cecil Field, Phil became involved in how the base would be used. He shares that his vision was to locate the National Cemetery at Cecil Field- because he wanted to be buried there.

After Navy retirement his days were still spent at Cecil. His company won the first lease from The City of Jacksonville at Cecil Field.

Since Cecil retirement and the sale of his company he has a new noble goal, to take his wife to every place he has ever been on earth before. There are many!

Phil gave a “peek preview” of some of the chapters that will be included in his book “Hangar 13”. Look for it!

CAPTAIN JAMES B. RENNINGER, USN (Retired)

J.B.’s interview introduces the reader to the reality of the days of the military draft. After college at Penn State on a student deferment, Jim joined the Navy to avoid the Army. He recalls with humor his early days of training squadrons at Pensacola. He describes “going out to the boat was the first real experience of stark terror. (describing the first carrier flight landings)

After serving in Corpus Christi Jim was sent to Cecil Field with the hopes that he would transition from props to jets. He was assigned to bring ten new S-3's to Cecil from North Island, California. In his first impression of Cecil he found it as "a great place to fly airplanes but not much else. It had all the trimmings of a World War II base."

His service continued on the USS Nimitz and his hopes for orders back to Pensacola ended with a tour in Beeville, Texas. He describes his time there as, "It was like the old west. Pilots did crazy stuff."

J.B. was on the initial cruise of the nuclear carrier USS Carl Vinson, a nine-month cruise. His part of the 155-day cruise, without seeing land, ended when he was recruited to VS-32 at Cecil. A part of J.B.'s interview includes an event in the COQ bar, Rocket 17 and involves the new commander of VA-174, John McCain.

As the executive officer of VS-24, J.B. "greeted new junior officers by saying VS-24 has killed more pilots than any, maybe all the other squadrons combined in the time I wasn't in the squadron." He recalls the tragic incident of the Commanding Officer of the squadron crashing his plane as the squadron was celebrating "mishap-free flights".

Like the other interviews, there is a unique incident for this pilot. His words detail the "barricade landing" on the carrier when his nose wheel would not come down and there was no divert landing. There was found not only a defect with the landing gear but the defect with his ejection system. The incident study led to the reality that twelve other planes were flying with the same unsafe ejection system.

J.B. followed Phil Voss in the position of Commodore of Cecil Field. Realizing that he was not going to become an admiral, J.B. decided to retire but the Navy had other plans. He went on to serve Admiral Mullen as Chief of Staff. Then after his retirement, like so many others interviewed, his days at Cecil continued.

J.B. began the job at Florida State College at Jacksonville running the aviation center. He became the "architect" of a private-public partnership locating a company in a paint hangar that could paint airliners. The project boosted the local business to more than ten times the previous number of employees. J.B. details his journey in securing the air-traffic controller school for FSCJ, over the objections of the FAA.

After his wife was term-limited as a member of the town council of Orange Park, J.B. was pressed into service. He served on the town council for nine years with two of those terms as mayor. He continues his engagement with the local communities and currently is on the Orange Park Fire and Pension Board, the Board of Penney Farms Retirement Community, King's Ridge Apartment complex, a condo board in Pensacola, and President of Navy League.

CAPTAIN WILLIAM H. KENNEDY, USN (Retired)

Like many others, Bill joined the Navy to avoid being drafted in the Army. He was told that he would be sent to either Newport or Pensacola and explained that Newport was to learn how to

drive ships and Pensacola once you got commissioned you got into flight training. “I elected flight training.”

Bill began his service with three deployments on the USS Essex and USS Wasp flying S-2’s. His comment about those tours is, “It was absolutely thrilling. Carrier aviation was absolutely exciting.”

His plans to exit the Navy were short-circuited by a CO that told him, “If you worked hard, flew hard, and you could continue your experience in carrier aviation you could be a commander of the squadrons.” He told his wife, “I would like to see if I have the capability of qualifying as a commanding officer.” She said, “It that’s what you want let’s do it.”

After serving as an instructor pilot he was transitioned to staff on USS Independence. He was assigned to an ASW wing to train other pilots and became XO and then Commanding Officer. After a time at NAS JAX he realized he was miserable because he missed being on carriers.

He returned to a carrier, the USS Forrestal as the Navigator. In the conversation it became obvious that Bill was looking to “drive his own boat”. He states that he started looking for that opportunity. He became XO of the USS John F. Kennedy and joined the Kennedy battle group during Desert Storm/Desert Shield.

His own ship came in the form of the famous USS Lexington, the training command carrier. He states, “I was thrilled. I was honored because that was my goal was to be command of a United States carrier.” Unfortunately, with the Lexington Bill had to tell his boss when he deemed the Lexington not safe to take to sea again. The Lexington was decommissioned and replaced with the Forrestal.

Bill was assigned as Chief of Staff at Mayport of Cruiser Destroyer Group-12 with the USS Saratoga as its carrier. His next chance to command a carrier came only a short time later. He was assigned as Chief of Staff on the Saratoga when the skipper had a heart attack. The admiral placed Bill in command. His comment, as he choked up during the interview, was, “I was flabbergasted”.

On September 30, 1994 at 16:30 Bill departed the ship. “I went to the bow of the ship, saluted Saratoga, and both of us were retired that day.”

Bill continues to work with sailors, his heart’s desire. He serves as Director of the Mayport Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society. The Society was created to help widows and orphans and grew to help active duty and retired sailors and marines when they have a severe financial shortfall. They help with the immediate needs of families during illness or death. Bill is proud to recite the fact that last year the society assisted over fifty-six thousand families world-wide.

CAPTAIN BRUCE EDWARD STUTSMAN, USNR (Retired)

Inspiration of military service comes from Bruce’s father, an Army Air Corps then Air Force member who participated in the invasion of Normandy during World War II. His life revolved

around the cycle of moving with military orders. Then Bruce was selected for the Naval Academy.

During the sophomore year at the academy, students are exposed to all branches of the Navy that they can pursue-black shoe, submarine, and aviation. He recalls that after surviving his first Navy flight in Pensacola he decided it as the arm he would take.

Bruce trained in Pensacola, Corpus Christi, Beeville and then was sent to Cecil Field. He wanted single-seat aviation and he wanted the A-7. He recalls his first impression of the master jet base as having “a lot of activity and being very professional.”

He found Cecil the perfect training site to become proficient in low-level flying and air-to-air combat and air-to-ground delivering air-to-ground ordinance. In VA-86 he found himself deployed thirty-one of the first thirty-seven months, accumulating over four hundred carrier landings.

The exciting part of his deployment that he shares concerns the aborted hostage rescue mission in Iran. Bruce is able to explain in detail the reason the mission failed and then the mission that was able to get troops out of the desert as the mission was failing. During that build-up and operations, the Nimitz remained at sea without making ports so the time at sea was for extended periods of time. Bruce notes what many might be thinking, “It was good to be a pilot in that at least you were able to see land during that time. Your adrenaline was going. You trained for this for months and years on end. That was what we had trained for and we were excited.”

As I had begun to suspect during the interview, Bruce made the statement “It’s hard to share with anyone who has not experienced the same level of adrenaline rush, the same level of potential harm, the loss of life that you see that’s why you find a lot of military personnel aren’t very willing to share those experiences with people who also have not gone through that experience.”

It was an honor to sit in interviews with these men who had gone through that service for our nation and to record the parts that they were willing to express.

After receiving orders to VA-174 in Jacksonville to transition to Hornets, Bruce did another change in thinking. He decided to leave the Navy and give his children a more stable life than he had growing up. “I didn’t want the family separation.”

His interview candidly discusses the family stress of deployment away from family in Navy life. “The stress builds as a Navy person builds their careers through deployments, a barrier would be erected essentially between him and his family.”

After law school at Cornell, Bruce returned to Jacksonville to practice law. He became part of the Navy Reserves and did his active-duty time back at Cecil. During that time of Reserves, he was able to serve as Command Officer of the last reserve unit to serve the USS John F. Kennedy at Mayport.

Bruce has served the City of Jacksonville as a member of the Planning Commission. Even though it is a demanding, volunteer position Bruce saw it as “A good opportunity to be involved

in the future development and growth of Jacksonville.” Today his home sits on acreage on the West side of Jacksonville, just ten miles from Cecil Field.

MASTER SARGEANT ANDY RAMOTNIK, USAF (Retired)

Captain Bob Buehn introduced us to a local legend, a former World War II POW, Andy Ramotnik. Andy did not serve at Cecil Field but his interview has been included in order to add the words of a Prisoner of War in a place where those Missing in Action and Prisoners of War will be memorized, Cecil Field. Andy brings amazing attention to listeners as he tells his story over and over to different crowds. The recent presentation to Foundation Academy at the kick-off with the Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial organization demonstrated how he is able to give understanding to students of what military personnel give to this nation with their patriotism and determination to protect our land.

Andy is clear about why he enlisted in the Army Air Corp two weeks after World War II broke out, and it was to get away from his coal-mining home town and get the twenty-one dollars a month in pay. He continues his interview with his plane being shot down over Italy, being taken prisoner by Germans, escaping the German camp, being recaptured, and then escaping again. His final days of World War II were in hiding at a farm and it was from there that he learned that the war had ended.

His Air Force career continued for twenty-two years and he recalls his time of service in Chinese Advisory and his involvement with the Berlin Air Lift. After retirement Andy continued his career in aviation electronics with Grumman.

Not a man to be put off, after seventy-two years of seeking to get un-paid funds for his days “on the lam” during his escapes, he has become a local television personality. Included in the interview are the transcriptions of two local television news segments that focus on Andy’s determination to get back his thirteen dollars that he considers owned to him for the days he was an “escapee” during the war. Andy is a character that no one forgets and with Senator Marco Rubio working on his behalf we look forward to a final accounting between the U.S. Air Force and Andy Ramotnik.

PETTY OFFICER 2nd CLASS ANTHONY W. CASSATA, USNR (Retired)

Tony’s military story begins before Tony was born when his mom was stationed in the Army at the Pentagon and his dad in the Navy in Illinois. As a young child Tony remembers his father’s time being stationed at Cecil Field.

Tony details his days as a “Navy brat” and the joy of making friends with other Navy personnel. His father’s orders took the family to Lemoore, California, Key West, Florida, Puerto Rico, and then Orlando, Florida.

That brings the reader to Tony’s opinion of the recruits he saw working out during basic training there in Orlando. He shares how he would drive around the base and watch the guys out there doing all the jumping jacks and this stuff and it was hot and I would just kind of look at them, “Oh, what a bunch of suckers. Just a few years later that was me.”

After marrying and having two sons, Tony decided to enlist in the Navy. He was guided toward the anti-submarine warfare operation side. After being at Cecil Field for only twelve days he was on the USS Independence for his first cruise. His comment about the cruise was, “I couldn’t stand one day of it.”

Remembering returns home after long cruises Tony tells that at one homecoming he remembers “facing his son only to realize he didn’t even know who he was.” Tony and I both became emotional during the interview as we discussed the times when ships leave home port and leave their families behind. He shares one particular experience when he was “manning the rails” and the Lee Greenwood song “Proud to Be an American” began to play. Tony says, “I just lost it.”

His most distinct memories of his time aboard the USS Saratoga include the cruise of the first Gulf War when the skipper announced into the chow hall, “Well, about one or two o’clock in the morning Saddam Hussein is gonna get a big surprise.” Tragic events aboard the Saratoga are remembered in the interview as Tony talks about the night the ferry boat carrying U.S. Navy men was capsized off of Israel. If not for a cancellation of his shore patrol that night, Tony would have been on that ferry. He also recalls the night that Scott Speicher’s plane was being prepared and an incident that has been left in his memory since. Of course, Scott Speicher did not return to the Saratoga.

During his sea duty Tony had the opportunity to serve aboard the USS Constellation for work-ups. He recalls the time that as a young boy he was aboard that same ship when his family went out to meet his father as that same ship returned to home port.

The conversation includes a tragic incident that occurred during training with NATO and how a missile stuck a French ship. Tony explains that when there is an accident, no matter whose fault it is, the captain of the ship is relieved. In this instance, a captain that he most admired was relieved from duty on the ship.

“The Tiger Cruise” is introduced in the interview and will be re-introduced in the final chapter of this project as Tony’s son Michael talks about his experience when the sons of men aboard the USS Saratoga were allowed to join their fathers for a week on the ship, a great thrill for both Tony and Michael. That cruise was the decommissioning cruise for the Sara.

After over fourteen years in the Navy, Tony decided to leave and pursue a career that would afford him more stable time with his family. After seven years he returned to the reserves to conclude his Naval service and retire. Today he works for a company that maintains air craft for

a contractor. They work on planes for customs, border protection, and Department of Homeland Security-from Cecil Field, Florida.

COMMANDER EDUARDO P. CALLAO, USN (Retired)

Ed Callao introduces himself into this project as having many unique categories for Navy personnel. He served the United States Navy as a Filipino, he served not as a Filipino steward but in maintenance positions, and he rose through the ranks of enlisted to that of Navy Commander.

Ed began his life in the Philippines as the son of a Philippine Army general. He pursued his career there with training and became ROTC Corps Leader in the largest program in the Philippines. He gives first-hand testimony to a time that his nation was facing war with the Muslim-Christian conflict and martial law was declared.

Following some buddies with a bet, Ed applied for service in the United States Navy. They had been inspired by a Navy recruiting newspaper advertisement. Little did he know that out of the group of dare-devils, he was the only one to carry through.

Ed's decision to join the U.S. Navy disappointed his father but he promised, "I know you want somebody to follow in your footsteps but one day I promise you this that I will be commissioned as an officer in the United States Navy."

Ed paid the price for that pursuit and his interview gives detail of his earliest pursuit of advancement. As change came in the Navy, Ed found opportunity to pass Aviation Electricians school and even though he could not receive his promotion he realized that he could advance if he became an American citizen. He did.

His service at Cecil Field began just after basic training in San Diego. He tells that he didn't even know about Florida much less Cecil Field, Florida. During electricians training in Memphis, he married a former Philippine classmate, Delia, who was in a nursing program there.

Back at Cecil, Ed was assigned to VA-174 where his skipper was John McCain. He then went to VA-87 as an AE, 2nd class aviation electrician specialist. He left that squadron as a Chief Petty Officer. His abilities were noticed as he was selected for the Limited Officer Program, one out of thirty-two men who applied from Cecil.

As a commissioned officer he was aboard the USS John F. Kennedy in general maintenance stationed in Mayport, Florida. He reported to the first Hornet squadron, VFA-81 where he witnessed the last conversation with Scott Speicher, the first man lost during Desert Storm.

He became a Lt. Commander of HSL-42 and then, in order to progress in his career, took orders to Atsugi, Japan as the CAG maintenance officer. He returned to Jacksonville to VT-30, the largest training squadron in the Navy which was teaching pilots from countries around the world.

Ed was selected commander and took orders to Pensacola as Director of Training and Maintenance. Then he was off to Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma where the 737 aircraft that provided services for executives, such as the President of the United States, were maintained.

After Ed's thirty-third year of service he made the choice to retire. In honor of Ed's service, he was able to retire at Cecil at VS-30. He said, "I started it all in Jacksonville. I'd like to end it in Jacksonville."

Ed continued to serve in the community as he founded the Filipino-American Community Council, works with the Philippine-American Veterans Society, the mayor's Asian Advisory Board, and is an advisor for the Philippine Nurses. His newest assignment is to the board of the Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial. He served twenty-six of his thirty-three-year career at Cecil and wants to give back to this community.

KATHERINE CAYTON (Mrs. Mike), USN WIFE

Kathy Cayton was born into the Navy and no one who knows her would believe anything else but that she will die being Navy. Her father served thirty years in the Navy and she shares that every generation going back to the Revolutionary War has served in the military on her mother's side. Her most determined statement made in the interview about that service was when she told her boyfriend, Mike Cayton, that she was going to marry a sailor so what was he going to do. Of course, he joined the Navy.

Kathy includes in her interview stories about duty stations in Millington, Tennessee, Brunswick, Maine, Norfolk, Virginia, Rhode Island, and Pensacola. It was during her husband's tour at Whiting near Pensacola, that Kathy was recruited by her mother-in-law into Navy Wives Clubs of America.

The interview shares that during times of deployment the Navy Wives were those who she called on "when I needed a shoulder to cry on or who I called when I needed to get busy and get out of the house or who I called to watch my kids so I could go and do whatever I needed to do.

The interview follows the career of both her father and her husband Mike. Mike retired after twenty-six years but Kathy's life still revolves around the Navy life. She served in various roles in Navy Wives before becoming national president in 2009.

Kathy's Chapter, Daughters in Dixie Number 300, established at Cecil Field, provides various service projects to the community. The latest project is the publication of a cook book that is focused on the Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial. Half of the proceeds of the book is being donated to the project.

Kathy has been involved in many services to the community through the Northeast Veterans Council, Community Hospice Veterans, Jacksonville National Cemetery as a Jacksonville Lady, Florida Fallen Heroes, and the Children's Home Society.

The fun statement of the interview that Kathy made was one that has made many laugh for decades, "If the Navy had wanted you to have a wife, son, they would have issued it with your

sea bag.” Neither Kathy or I or millions of other wives of Navy men were issued with the sea bag but we were wives who were there as the motto describes, “They also serve who wait.”

MRS. PAM MAUTERER CAIN, USAF (Missing in Action) DAUGHTER, NAVY WIFE

Pam Cain was born into a military family, Air Force. Her father served at the end of World War II, went to college, and returned to begin a career as a fighter pilot. He instilled the love of flying into his children with flying trips from the local flying clubs on base.

Pam expresses well her father’s devotion to our nation as she says, “He felt an obligation to this country. They trained him so whatever his government felt was right he was prepared to fight that battle.” He volunteered for a tour in Vietnam.

Pam remembers being told in a matter-of-fact, calm, blunt way that “Dad is going to have to go, this is something that he needs to do. Our country is involved in what could be a war, it’s not pretty, it’s not something that he wants to do but he needs to go.”

They understood that the tour was for a year and rejoiced when he was able to join them for R&R during that tour for Thanksgiving. Pam clearly remembers the next February when she was walking home from school and saw her grandparent’s car in front of their home. As she entered the front door and saw, for the first time ever, her mother crying she knew that something had happened to her father.

Pam details the process that the families of military personnel go through after their loved one does not return from a mission. For years the family isolated their thoughts and comments about her father being lost over Laos. She recalls the protests in her home town of Washington, D.C. and the language used by those protestors calling our military “Baby Killers.”

Later on, when there was a memorial service at Arlington for her dad she remembers, “I was angry. To be in there having service for my dad and knowing that not one thing had changed.” Then she realized “I’ve got to find him, we’ve got to bring him home That’s when I got in the League and there were all these other families now it’s not just my family.”

There are ONE THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED AND TWO men still missing from the Vietnam War. Her father is one of them.

In 2010 a photo of Oscar Mauterer was produced by the Vietnamese government and witnesses that saw him on the ground in Laos were found. Pam made the trip to Laos believing that there was eye-witness as to the burial site of her father. Nothing was found but she told her mother that she was going to bring her dad home before her mom died. She was unable to do that.

Pam is now serving on the board of the National League of POW/MIA Families. She states that the goal of the League was to close as soon as everybody came home. The League is active in relationships with government officials overseas, with political officials, ambassadors. “We have some avenues and some communication and ways of working it so that we can help the government.” She sadly says that even today people say to her, “Oh, they’re still looking for

missing over there? She hopes to lead others to realize that the Missing in Action families have a bond of sharing something that a lot of people in this country have never shared, Thank God, and she was able to be with people who really did understand.”

After Pam married, her husband announced that he wanted to fly. Off they went to Pensacola and Pam became a Navy pilot’s wife. Like so many who served at Cecil, she remembers driving back and forth from Virginia to Jacksonville and back to see her husband off on cruises and meet him as he returned. She was bold enough to tell me that she remembered crying every mile of the way. I remember doing the same.

Pam is now involved with the on-going process of creating a POW/MIA Memorial site at Cecil Field.

MR. MIKE CASSATA, CECIL FIELD MIA/POW MEMORIAL FOUNDER

Mike Cassata’s father decided that he wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps right after Mike was born. Tony enlisted in the Navy. His father’s and grandfather’s duty stations are mentioned in “Conversation with Tony Cassata”.

Mike spent much of his youth passing through the gates of Cecil Field because his father worked there. Not until 2014 did he realize that men of Cecil Field had paid such a price for the freedoms of our nation. With the realization that there was already a small memorial for men who had been lost while serving at Cecil, he had a vision to not only make a place to honor them but to honor all who are still missing from the military services of our nation.

Mike’s vision was received by not only former Cecil Field personnel but by the business community of Jacksonville, then the Mayor’s Office. Through a tedious process he created an organization known as Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial, Inc. and approached the owners of Cecil Field, The City of Jacksonville, about a lease for the memorial.

With the lease signed, the organization has begun the restoration of the beloved chapel on the base. The chapel is remembered as a place of military weddings, change of commands, and many memorial services. It is the focal point that is seen as drivers pass into Cecil Field.

Beyond the restoration efforts of the chapel there are plans for an inter-active POW/MIA Memorial Center in an existing building. The most important plan is for a Missing in Action Memorial on the twenty-six-acre site. The plan is for a portion of Cecil to become a national memorial to remember those missing in action and bring comfort to the families of those who were lost serving in the military for our nation.

Mike has never served in the Navy but his grandfather and father served and his brother is still serving. Mike’s goal is to add his name to that list of those who served. He is in the process of applying for his commission in the Naval Reserve Program.

It is the vision of Michael Cassata and the Cecil Field POW/MIA Memorial organization that guides the City of Jacksonville into the fulfillment of the motto-Cecil Field-Gone But Not Forgotten.

FINAL STATEMENT

The transcribed interviews of the nineteen “Friends of Cecil Field” follow this introduction. They are presented to give inspiration of the service of a small portion of our military and their families who served this nation, those who are representative of millions who have accepted the challenge of protecting us even with the prospect of giving themselves as the sacrifice. The project further seeks to help others remember that there was a place where our military trained to carry out their missions on a world stage, Cecil Field, Florida.

Recorded and Transcribed
Lyn Corley
1547 Harbor Oaks Road
Jacksonville, Florida 32207
lynprayjax@aol.com
904-398-5517

Technical Support
Ted M. Corley
1547 Harbor Oaks Road
Jacksonville, Florida 32207
tedprayjax@aol.com
904-755-3191

ADDENDUM

Fortunately, the voice of Mrs. Mary Hoff, widow of Navy pilot Michael Hoff, has been added to this project. The interview between Mary Hoff and Cindy Cheatwood that was recorded in 2012 in Orange Park was located by Mr. Mike Cassata in the Clay County Archives in Green Cove Springs. Permission has been granted by Ms. Cheatwood, the Archives, and the family of Mrs. Hoff to allow for transcription of that interview.

Mary Hoff's husband was reported Missing in Action in 1970. It is now known that his plane went down over Laos and his body was never recovered. Remains of that plane were recovered years later.

Mrs. Hoff became a powerful voice for the families of those who had missing loved ones in the military during the Vietnam era. Her most noted effort was to give the families, and our nation, a recognizable symbol for the mission of recovering information concerning those missing-a symbol for their remembrance.

Mrs. Hoff instigated her mission with Annin Agency. The assigned graphic artist, Newt Heisley, produced only one proof of a symbol that would represent the mission and it was accepted immediately by Mrs. Hoff. That image has no trademark and its duplication is encouraged.

Today the black and white image of the POW-MIA flag with the words "YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN" flies from our nation's capital, state government houses, and homes and businesses across the nation.

It is an honor to include the interview with Mary Hoff, photos of the Hoff family, and supportive materials concerning the MIA/POW flag with this project.