

Speaker: Merrill Wood

Date Recorded: 10-26-2016

Merril Wood. I'm going to start out in 1954 and retiring as a captain of the United States Coast Guard. I think I may have been a second senior captain in the Coast Guard when I retired on November 30th of 1984, yes. Now we're going to talk about where we went and how we got there.

Well, I'm not the typical, perhaps, because I didn't come from the factory. I didn't come from the academy. I grew up in a part of the world that heard very little about the Coast Guard. I grew up in Grand Forks, North Dakota. There, if I had seen anything about the Coast Guard might have been a postcard in front of the post office or something like that.

After graduating as an electrical engineer from the University of North Dakota in 1950, I did take some post-graduate work in '51 and by then I thought that I needed to be elsewhere. There during the war years with my family. My dad had taken the family out to Bremerton, Washington. We had a few relatives out in that area.

If you're in North Dakota, you kind of wonder which way am I going to go? Well, go West, young man. I loaded up my car and I headed to Seattle, Washington. There, the idea was to go ahead and someplace become employed. I didn't know if it was going to be Washington, Oregon, or California. I didn't really have a specific destination in mind. What I had and after staying maybe a few days with relatives there in Seattle in the Ballard section of Seattle, I understood that Boeing Airplane Company was hiring people.

At that point, I went ahead and thought, well, it wouldn't hurt to just go ahead and test the water a little bit. I went ahead and went down and talked to the Boeing people. Of course, they were hiring young engineers at that point. They were quick to give me an offer. I don't recall right now how long I thought about it, but the idea of being employed and being in the Seattle area was something that was attractive to me.

There you had the water, on one hand, you had the mountains and they were closely connected. I went ahead and took the employment with Boeing at that time as project engineer. If I can remember right, I went to work for them as a young engineer for \$215 a month, which is a little different in today's economy.

Shortly I found that where I wanted to be and what I wanted to do involved being a part of something that was called experimental flight test. I applied and I was accepted as a flight test engineer. In those days, the big thing that was happening

was the B-52. The first two, basically I call, hand-made models were in their final stages of production and being instrumented for flight.

I became a part of that team. I worked mainly on the XB-52 and a bit on the YB-52. In those days, the pilots were a mix of test pilots for the company, Tex Johnston, and Air Force test pilot named John Fornesero. Wait a minute, no. Bill Magruder. Bill Magruder is, matter of fact, that name he was a co-pilot along with a lieutenant colonel named Guy Townsend.

Anyway, Bill Magruder wound up in aviation history. A little later he was a young captain, at that point, but he wound up being our federal government's program manager for the SST while it was being built and all.

Anyway, so much for ... I found myself ... I had drafted four months because they were drafting at that time. You would get, the company would apply for it and you'd get drafted for a month. It was for six months. One of the vice presidents went back and met with at that time, they had a selective service system, it was called General Hershey. They came up with a formula for the aircraft industry where they would let them bring on a new hire and keep them for a period of two drafts for months.

My problem was that when that was decided and done, two draft deferments of six months, one year, I was on my seventh draft deferment, which meant that when my deferment ended I was fresh meat on the market. I had several other young compatriot young engineers that were in the same situation. There were four of us. We'd meet together for lunch. We'd work with the Air Force hand in hand. Let's find out what the Air Force is doing.

We kind of split up. One went to the Air Force. One went to the Army. One went to the Navy. Maybe one went to the Marine Corps. Finally, we'd collected all those and nothing was happening. Somebody said, "Well, anyone know anything about the Coast Guard?" One of us went to the coast guard and they found that they said, "Yeah, we'll take your applications and I think we can have an answer for you within possibly 30 days."

Well, we were on a short suspense at that point so we ... Out of the four of us, three of the four of us went into the United States Coast Guard as seamen apprentice officer candidates going to the Academy and knew them as officer candidates. That would have been in November of 1954. Had a number of great classmates.

Dave Bosemworth was one of my classmates. George Garby and a number of others that also got into aviation. We were fortunate that when I was commissioned on the 1st of April, 1955, they needed people in aviation. We were able to apply for and selected for aviation.

At that point, going back to Boeing, just about all the people I was employed with there were pilots. I felt like I need to join this fraternity. I got a couple of the guys to take me out and got private instruction. I got a private pilot license and didn't have enough money at that point to buy an airplane so I put together a group of seven others. We called ourselves The Lazy 8 Flying Club. Each threw in \$100. We had \$800 and I went out and I bought an Aeronca Champ that we all used.

From that we ... I did have my private pilot's license when I came into the Coast Guard. The opportunity going to aviation was paramount in my mind. I jumped at the opportunity. I reported to Pensacola in probably late April of 1955. From there on it was a matter of going through and, again, I am an SNJ guy. The SNJs were the basic trainer, at that point. By the time I was finishing up in 1956 they were changing over to a newer aircraft for basic training.

I had the opportunity to fly T-28s at Corry Field. Corry Field. As just since I'm mentioning that, I'll just sidetrack for a moment. I live in a military retired community in Melbourne, Florida, it's specifically Vierra. It's called Indian River Colony Club, about 750 homes and all of my fellows are primarily officers of the Armed Services. A bunch of Coast Guard people with a lot of Air Force, Army and Navy and so on.

I moved into a home at 1428- Well, we looked at, which brings up a couple other stories. I moved into that home. Getting to know our neighbors, we invited over our next-door neighbor Mel and Dora Steinberg, right next door. As we sat out on our patio around the pool we talked about where we had been and what we had done. Mel, after going through flight training, shortly he got plowed back in as an instructor at Pensacola, specifically at Corry Field.

As we talked, I began to think and something started provoking my memory. I got up and said, "Wait a minute." I went in and I grabbed my log books out of my file cabinet and brought it out, looked at it for a few minutes. Picked out the dates and probably early ... late 1955 and there it was. My flight instructor for flights in a T-28, Mel Steinberg. Here we are some, let's see, we're some 50 years later and my old flight instructor was living right next door.

We're in Indian River Colony Club. That has a little bit of a story to it as well. One of my best friends in aviation because we had been stationed together out on the island of Guam at Coast Guard Air Detachment in Guam. That was in 1962. Started in little before that, 1960. The person that I'm talking about is Dick Lacey. People of my age used to read in the comics about a guy that was an aviator named Smiling Jack. Well, Dick Lacey was Smiling Jack as far as I was concerned. One of the greatest pilots Coast Guard ever had.

I say that because he did great things in the Coast Guard, but later on, he went in commercial aviation and flew some of the highest line equipment in the world and not only- well, throughout the world. He was based in Germany for a while.

Anyway, great family. They also, one of the things the Lacey family did was after retirement they had a motor home. At one of the roosts, we went out and saw them and sat in the motor home with them and talked about what they were doing and so on.

Anyway, we picked up the bug, as far as motor homes, and we bought a motor home as well. The other one that was instrumental in that was Vera Mosley and B.J. had a motor home. We bought a motorhome and we traveled. As a matter of fact, we traveled about five months out of the year. I wish we had started that much earlier.

None of those things happened in our lives until I had had a heart attack at 65 and as part of the recuperation and so on, that was something that I could still do.

Speaker 2: Let me take you back to, let's go back to Pensacola. Pick it up there where you're in flight training.

Merril Wood: Yeah. I've been going off and excited.

Speaker 2: That's okay.

Merril Wood: Anyway, since I mentioned Lacey, we attended Dickley's funeral. He's, some years ago, he died of pancreatic cancer and is buried in Bushnell National Cemetery. We had just attended his wife's interments there within the last two weeks, Phyllis.

Again, picking up, interesting that I got my wings on the 19th of June 1956. That's kind of indelible in our life because that just happens to be our wedding date from June 19th, 1954, when Mona and I were married in Seattle.

From there, Putra Sound area was kind of a home away from home. I'm sure that must have shown up on my wishlist and we were assigned to Coast Guard Air Station Port Angeles, Washington. There, I used to see some of the old guys I used to work with at Boeing and find out how things were going. I was so pleased to begin the Coast Guard and the flying there out of Port Angeles. Had some interesting flights.

I just ran into George Seman a few minutes ago. I was a little bit ahead of George as far as getting there. I headed to plane captain in the 18 of 16 and George was my co-pilot. We were out on a flight to try to find an S2F that was off the coast of Oregon coming up from Alameda to Whidbey and disappeared offshore.

We were sent in there at 2 o'clock in the morning. We were being vectored by radar and they said, "Can you see any lights down there? You're right over the position where the aircraft disappeared." All of a sudden, I saw a glimmer of light and I rolled the aircraft up like 90 degrees and maybe if it was it was probably a good thing because we were at probably 300 to 400 feet. We flew right down the Main Street of Depoe Bay, Oregon at 300 to 400 feet. Had we proceeded, probably within another mile inland to the east, we would have splashed on the hillside there.

That's a story that George Seman and I, as a young aviator, we survived one of those things that shouldn't have happened in the first place. From there on, our next assignment was Coast Guard Air Station on Met. I think at that time we still might have been a Coast Guard air detachment.

Big problem over there was if you're going to have your family, where are you going to live? There were in little conclave, there were a bunch of Quonset huts leftover from World War II that Coast Guard guys had resurrected. It turned out that one had orders out and I had orders in. I was able to get his Quonset hut, a 16x40 leaky Quonset hut with an oil stove and so on. That was Omar Coles.

We arrived up there in the summer of 1959. That was interesting because it's a Indian reservation, but because it had a flat area on it, the airfield for Catchcam was built there. There were about 300 people between Coast Guard, Weather Bureau, FAA, Pan American Airways, and the Ellis Eveline's people flying into Catchcam.

We arrived there with, at that point, we had two children. Jeff was probably he was three years old. Allison was less than a year old. We got moved into our Quonset hut. I had some great neighbors. Commanding officer was on one side of me and at that time it was, anyway, Walt Kerwin was there as CO. On the other side of me was Deece Thompson. The person that taught me to fly in Alaska was Deece Thompson. He is one of the greatest people, greatest aviators. He was experienced and he passed on his expertise. I was grateful. It kept me safe and out of trouble, mostly out of trouble the rest of that two and a half years, I extended it.

There was a time during that period of time that a helicopter disappeared up in Glacier Bay west of Juneau, district headquarters. There the ... it was employed by Petroleum Helicopters. They must have had some tremendous political clout because they were really putting pressure on the Coast Guard. The weather was really crappy. It was lousy. We tried for several days to get in there and see if we could find the helicopter up on the glacier or something like that.

I think I was about the third day trying to get in. I thought I had an opportunity to get in under a low, low overcast. I started poking our nose up Glacier Bay and I chose to go along the eastern bank of closure bay and it kept narrowing down and

narrowing down. It just the ceiling was coming down. Again, probably at 300 feet, I said, "We've got to get out of here." I banked very sharply to the west to put me, keep me over the water and put it in a tight bank, but as we came out of that I started to roll wing's level. All I saw in front of me was tall pine trees.

In that instant, called for maximum power. We went to 2700 rpm and I grabbed a skyhook, went to needle power, well, take-off power, as a matter of fact, and we climbed from 300 feet up to minimum enroute altitude up there. I think it was possibly 7,000 feet. I kept on that take-off power a couple of thousand feet because there are a lot of mountains around there.

Finally, when we got up to minimum altitude, we pulled the power back on our engines to cruise power, I lost an engine. The next thing we're on single engine. Alaska. 7,000 feet. In the clear, at that point, and the weather to the south was better. Our chances, the only places we had to go into was to try to get into Juneau or to try to, well, there was an abandoned airfield on an island called Gustavus.

With a little collaboration so by far, Gustavus was close by and we could get there safely and get on down. It had a good length runway, open, a lot of sea around it. The only problem was it was uninhabited for all purposes. We were going to have a sick airplane and we were going to put it down in an unfriendly, hostile area. That's what happened. We made a safe landing and the great maintenance people that we had at that time, I think Ed Cope was the engineering officer or could have been Bob Mercier a little bit later. Those guys did a great job. Brought up, got a QEC up there. In adverse conditions, they put a new engine on and get the airplane out and back.

Anyway, that finished up two and a half years at Annette after that. I was selected for an engineering job because I had basically an engineering background. They sent us to Chanute Air Force Base for maintenance officer training. I trained there for whatever it was, six months, with the Air Force. Found out how the Air Force did it, which had nothing to do with what we were doing in the Coast Guard.

From there on, we went to had to know the Navy supply systems so couple of months down at Navy Memphis. While there, another Coast Guard student in the program we ran into each other. It was Howie Thorst. Anyway, we ... turns out the operations officer of the Navy in Memphis happened to be one of my flight instructors from, well, I left out the fact that I went through Pebolt at Corpus Christi after leaving Pensacola.

Anyway, the operations officer was one of my instructors at Corpus Christi. He said to me one time, he said, "We've got all these airplanes around here on the weekends, why don't you come get one and go someplace?" I thought that's not a bad idea. Here I am in Memphis, I'm from Grand Forks, North Dakota. Go

someplace? Wouldn't that be great to fly back to my hometown with an airplane, a Navy airplane?

I mention it to Howie Thornton, who was from Minnesota, I think Austin, Minnesota at that time. Howie went with me and the two of us flew up on a weekend and Howie's dad came out to an airfield where there was nothing located, picked Howie up. I dropped him off on probably a Friday or a Saturday and I went on then in the T-28 to Grand Forks, North, Dakota and spent the night there with my folks and my friends and able to show them my airplane. Back to pick up Howie and back and turn our airplane in and continue on our way.

From there, we got ordered out to Guam and that was 1959. We arrived out there in August, having gone out on MSTs by ship on a General Gathy. It's a nice 20-day trip by sea for a guy that grew up in North Dakota.

We were there only a few months and I'm just trying to think, I think Ray Miller might have been the skipper at that point, either that or Dick Lacey. Bill Cooper was XO. Bruce Solomon, well known in Coast Guard aviation history was there. We had two HU-16s. We used to run through the islands servicing the RAM stations. Ran A's up in Saipan, Loran-A and Ulithi Atoll and Loran-A down in the islands of Palau.

At that point, everything was fine until November of that year. Being part of the military community, we were invited to be a part of Marine birthday history there. Went to the Marine birthday ball. That night, about 9 o'clock, the senior officer there, Colonel Rooney, stopped things there and said, "Folks, Typhoon Karen seems to have an absolute bullseye on our island of Guam. We're going to discontinue the party at this point. Recommend you all go home, get things closed up, take care of your families and everything else."

Well, we had already known, of course, that this was going on. Our airplane we had lost an engine. We had one of our HU-16s without an engine, a clean flyer well. We were fortunate enough to get into the Navy hangar. That typhoon wiped all wind measuring equipment on the island. What was recorded afterward at 188 miles an hour. By pressure extrapolation, the conclusion was that the peak winds had hit 213 or 216 miles an hour. It passed directly over to the island so it was absolutely fierce. We were all hunkered down in our homes were concrete block.

Anyway, all of a sudden the wind stopped. We got up and we walk outside and look around and so on for a few minutes. Then the other side of the eye comes through and it was fierce again. It destroyed practically all of the housing on the island of Guam, anything that- except the federal government housing which was made out of cinder block. Everything else seemed to be made out of corrugated metal.

There wasn't a single thing green on the island above the level of the grass. Palm trees, you name it, it was shredded just like mulch. It pasted to the side of any wall that was standing. Anyway, we had finished our tour there. At that point, we didn't have water for a while so flushing the commodes was done by going out to the Officer's Club pool, getting a couple buckets of water, bringing it back, pouring it into the toilet tank and flushing the toilet.

We went without water or electricity for almost must have been close to ten days. The first communications off the island were by Dick Lacey, who I mentioned a little bit ago. He was a hand-radio operator. He then was the first person to be able to get to the outside world with what had happened on the island.

After just a little side issues, we had kids from the Trust Territory, they ... the school system was administered by the Navy and for anyone from the outer islands and the Oceania Western Pacific, they had to have permission from the Navy to come to Guam to go to high school. Those kids had to live someplace.

The military families were the primary people that took them in as a part of their family that lived as just a part of your family. We had about five of the kids rotate through our home during the period of time. A couple of them stand out in our minds and they have since- they call us their Guam parents.

One of them, who had his ... he came from Koror, Palau. His father was Japanese, his mother was Palauan. His name was Kuna Woola Nakamura. Kuna Woola went on to sanitary engineering at the University of Hawaii. Went back home and became the president of his country. He was a two-term president. Their system of government tracks our same US system of government.

One of the other fellas that we really helped a lot was Kaala Boto. I mention that because we tried to get him into the University of Washington in the medical program. He finally graduated from Saint Louis University as a hospital administrator. Went back as a hospital administrator to the Trust Territory of Saipan. Found an opportunity that came across his desk for to send somebody to medical training in Fiji. Elected himself, went to Fiji, became a medical doctor. Came back then was the first medical doctor to the people in the island of Papua.

Kaala lived as part of our family for a couple years. He, at the present time, we still are in contact with Kaala. Kaala, again, is a foreign minister. He is island Trust Territory government- Excuse me, the government of Palau, their ambassador to the United Nations in New York.

We felt like we had some influence in a couple of kids that really did some great things. Continuing on career-wise. We came back to San Diego. Ed Cope was the engineer at that point. I was an extra engineer. I'd been flying fixed wing all that

time. There was Coast Guard decided that why can't we, perhaps, train our own people.

So they set up a program called BOTU, Basic Operational Training Unit at Savanna, Georgia. Les High was the commanding officer if you had some support from great guys. Wyn who's going to be here, I believe, at the Roost. Max Casper and oh my gosh two others who are not popping up right at the moment.

I was one of, I think there were four of us. Our training was totally by our fellow Coast Guard officers, pilots. It was all in the H-52. As I was opening up a whole new world of aviation to me. Now after all those years of being a six-wing pilot, to go back and be a rotary wing pilot.

The thing that was kind of a tribute to, I think, our Coast Guard guys who trained a number of us, four of us, is that I went back and within about two to three months they had a helicopter competition there by all of the helicopter pilots. They set up a bunch of criteria of how they were going to run the competition.

Anyway, I'll just cut it short and say the guy that just got trained by the Coast Guard, myself, was the one who won the competition against all of the other guys that have been around for a long time. Anyway, I thought that was a tribute to Les High and the rest of the guys.

From there, that was a short tour and we went to San Juan, Coast Guard Air Station San Juan. There was with some great people. Charlie Maids was the commanding officer. We had a rusty old hangar and our facilities were terrible. We lived at, what was called, Fort Buchanan, some eight or ten miles away from the air station.

Interesting that we arrived down there, I think on a Friday or Saturday. Probably were staying in temporary quarters and on that Saturday late after we arrived, a sailor was out on the street of San Juan close to where some of the Coast Guard housing was located to stop seven and half. Somebody driving by in a vehicle shot him and killed him. That, and it was done by Independentistas, the revolutionary group at that time.

That sent all of the military service Navy and everyone into complete lockdown. The only way that you would venture off was to be going to work and back, we could do that. After, those were great times. We had HU-16s. We had H0-4S. We had some good jobs there, good rescues. I participated in a number of them.

Speaker 2: Does one particular rescue come to mind?

Merril Wood: Yes. It was just off the Condado area of San Juan. We got word that a boat had overturned, there was a bunch of people in the water. It was just outside

of the coral reef line on the island. When their boat went over, of course heavy outboards on the transom. The boat sunk and was the only part of us that was above water was just maybe a foot or so of the bow, the smooth bow. There were two men and two women that were holding on with their fingernails as the surf was coming in and bouncing up and down.

We got in and were able to pick up all four of them, bring them back, put them on dry land. As we got out and so on, they came and they just grabbed us and hugged us and so on. I can remember one of them saying, "You are my father." I asked then what that meant in the culture. It meant that I could ask of anything of him and he would be obligated to try to comply with it.

It turned out the two guys that were there in the water were doctors. The women were I'm not sure they were necessarily their wives. Anyway, that died down very quickly. They hushed that up as much as they possibly could. That was one that comes to mind quickly.

From there, I put in for a school, to go to one of the military schools. I was selected for the Armed Forces Staff College. Went there as a part of the 50th Golden Anniversary class. Anyway, it turned out to be one of the highlights of inner service times. Turned out that I was a commander at that time. We were broken up into groups of about 20 called "Laps" I believe. I was turned out to be the senior officer in the group so I was the class leader and we were broken up into Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy, Coast Guard.

Here I was Coast Guard and we had to learn about the other services and I had to be a part of trying to explain what the Navy was to the fellows from the other services. Obviously, not well equipped. Anyway, out of that grouping of fellows that were part of my group were fellows like Gary Luck, who was a three-star Army general who had all of the airborne troops in Iraq. If George Bush hadn't decided to have \$100 War, Gary would have turned towards Baghdad. Probably been in Baghdad two days' time.

Another fellow in my group was a Navy guy, lieutenant commander who became an admiral and had the fleet in the Western Mediterranean. When unfortunately for Denny, they shot down an Iranian airliner and with a couple hundred people on it. That was just like the skipper or the vessel running it aground. That, of course, really ended Denny's career. A couple of the other guys out of my young class became generals and admirals.

Out of that, then Armed Forces Staff College, which was at north of Virginia. I was assigned out of aviation now to the second Coast Guard district as the director of the Coast Guard auxiliary. I covered 22 states, which second Coast Guard district was a heartland Minnesota down to Louisiana, from Wyoming to Colorado back to

West Virginia. I was- throughout that area, I had four directors of the auxiliary in each of the four regions. I had about 5,000 auxiliaries.

It was an interesting learning period of time because after being a military Coast Guard officer for the many years, here I was dealing with volunteers, which required a completely different set of motivations at all. Again, a very interesting time in my life. After Coast Guard Auxiliary I was with, I was also the executive director of the National Boating Safety and Advisory Council.

It was interesting, one of my council members at that time was the fellow that started Bass Pro. He started with a \$5,000 investment and I guess we all know what Bass Pro is these days.

We're now up to the 1980s. I was in St. Louis. We were there for the several- for three years. Something happened during that period of time. My wife, Mona, who was just really an out there unusual person with unusual abilities and we had three children. She was selected for a program that was very, very paramount at that period of time. I think it was 1974 she was selected as the Coast Guard Wife of the Year. As such, we were hosted in Washington at the Shoreham Hotel.

Our link platter was the Master of Ceremonies with probably 500 guests there. There was a Coast Guard Wife of the Year, Navy Wife of the Year, Marine Wife of the Year, Air Force, Army. Anyway, that was a really significant event at that point. As a part of that, Mona was hosted at the White House by the President's wife and met a lot of dignitaries.

I remember I was along as we walked into the White House and we're standing around there talking. Standing next to us and talking with Bob Hope and President Nixon. It was Pat Nixon that we stood and we're talking to, along with Bob Hope. My district commander at that time was Owen Syler. We were very fortunate, we were close by neighbors of theirs. We used to look after their dog whenever they were out traveling to Coast Guard events. Mona and Betty Syler became extremely good friends.

At that point, the number of admirals that we had, whatever that number was, it was significant number. Anyway, the second junior admiral in the entire group of admirals was selected as commandant. That was Owen Syler. Owen and Betty moved to Washington and I said, "If I could ever work for him again, I would," so I put in for a Coast Guard Headquarters. His administrative aid was going to be replaced. I said I put in to be his administrative aid. It was fortunate because I knew nothing about Headquarters that I didn't get selected but I went to boating safety. There, I was the executive director of the National Safety Environment, Executive national safety, boating safety advisory council then on to director of auxiliary.

Following those times, I was ratted out to the FAA. We had two Coast Guard officers with the FAA. I went there to be a part of bear traffic control. I no sooner got over there and in a few months Pat Co went on strike and tried to lock up the entire commercial aviation system. The contemporaries that I worked with over there were so fantastic and they were the ones that dug us out. Fortunately, Ronald Reagan said we're not going to be held hostage. Those people that walked out with Pat Co, sorry, fellas, but you're gone. You're history.

That was an interesting period of time. When I came back from that it was just about time for retirement and very shortly thereafter I retired from the Coast Guard from Coast Guard Headquarters. Probably 30th of November 1984. Now we're talking about 2016, there was life after the Coast Guard 32 years later. Here I am at a pterodactyl gathering looking forward to seeing some of my compatriots.

When I mentioned Dick Lacey, he was aviator number right around 380. I'm Aviator number 700 and there aren't many of us left. As I look at the group right now, I think probably the only one I can think of that would have a lower Aviator number would probably be Pop Shelly, Frank Shelly, who I'm looking forward to seeing this evening.