

The National Museum of the Pacific War
(Admiral Nimitz Museum)

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Cliff Robertson

December 7, 2001

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Today is December 7th, year 2001. My name is Floyd Cox. I am a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War. We are here in Fredericksburg in the Nimitz Hotel today to interview Mr. Cliff Robertson, Academy Award winning and Enemy Award winning actor, writer and director concerning his experiences during World War II.

Mr. Cox: Thank you very much for allowing us some time to interview you today Cliff.

Mr. Robertson: It is my privilege Floyd.

Mr. Cox: I would like to start off by asking you a little bit about your background, where you were born, when you were born, where you went to school, and we will just take off from there.

Mr. Robertson: OK. More years ago than I care to admit I was born in California. My hometown is La Jolla. Went to school there and after high-school I was in my Herman Melville-Joseph Conrad period where I thought it would be very romantic to go off and ship out to sea in some old freighter. So I talked a buddy of mine, a fellow named Bill Meanly, and I said, "Let's go up to San Francisco and hop on an old freighter and see where it goes." Because from there we're going to college, so its a chance to kind of go through this Herman Melville-Joseph Conrad-Richard A. Haliburton period that I was going through. I talked poor Bill into it. We went off, and he ended

up on a Danish
Island ship called the
4,000 tons at the
and I thought this
dreams as a youth in
We ended up
miles out
[an exotic
the wheel
to 8 in the
morning watch at
ship, and was with
standing there. They
off in the distance I saw a
looked just like, in my mind,
the Sikorsky Clipper that
designed for international

ship. He went out and I ended up on an old Hog
SS Admiral Cole, an old freighter. It was maybe
most. At top speed about 8 knots. So we went off
is wonderful, I'm realizing all of my adventurous
La Jolla. Little did I know what was ahead of me.
going, of all places, to the Phillipines. We were about 150
of Iloilo, having picked up a load of Philippine Mahogany
wood] and I had the 4 to 8 watch, which meant that I was at
at 4 in the morning, from 4 till 8 in the morning, and then 4
afternoon. I had just come off of my 8 o'clock, 4-8
the wheel, went back to the fantail, the stern of the
a Filipino sailor and an English sailor. We were
were having cigarettes. We looked up and
four engine amphibious airplane, which
the China Clipper. The China Clipper being
Juan Tripp and Pan American Airlines had
travel, if you recall.

Mr. Cox: It landed on water.

Mr. Robertson: Landed on the water, exactly. It even had bedrooms on it. I

remember saying, "Gee, look at the China Clipper." Then one of the
sailors said to me, "Gee, I don't think that is a China Clipper." I said,
"Oh yeah," and they said, "No, look." And sure enough here was a big
yellow, or orange red meatball, as they refer to it, painted on the wings.

We recognized it as being Japanese. Well we knew that there were

strained relations at the time in Washington because we had heard
about it on the radio. I thought, well, I guess they are just keeping
close watch on us. Then it went astern of us about 5 miles and
throttled down. I can still remember hearing those four engines just
purring and they descended down to probably 1500 feet, and then I
saw, I couldn't believe it because they were then down to, probably
110 knots and I saw the big bomb bay doors open. I couldn't believe
it. Then the next thing you know we actually saw a bomb coming
down. Then the next thing you know the bomb landed just off the
starboard bow. There was a lot of shrapnel and it sort of knocked me
to the deck. I immediately picked myself up and went down the ladder
to the, lower deck cabin. I was just an ordinary seaman. So I shared
it with two other seaman. The one that had the 12 to 4 watch was still
asleep. So I went down to wake him up because he was a sound
sleeper, and also grab my life preserver, and as well as a camera
because I, at that time, thought I was eventually going to study
journalism. I was infatuated with the idea of getting a picture of this
mistaken identity incident. I was certain that there was a mistake that

had been made. I pictured myself taking this camera, taking a picture of this mistake, taking it to Henry Luce of Life Magazine and getting a lot of credit as a young reporter. I raced down and a fellow we called Joe Bananas, who was a young blond heavy set guy was sound asleep. We didn't know there was anything going on. We were 5,000 to 7,000 miles further west than Pearl Harbor, so we were way in the Phillipines. I said, "They're bombing us," and I shook him, and he took a swing at me. He said, "Get out of here," and I said, "I'm not kidding you Joe." I reached up for my life preserver and the camera. I cracked open the camera, and of course it was empty. I thought, "darn." Then I took one more shot waking Joe. I said, "Joe, I'm not going to stay here any more. "The Japs are bombing." And he swung at me again and I darted out and up the ladder. Just as I got to the stern, to the deck, a bomb went off just off the port side of the bow and it broke, or buckled, some plates. Again, it knocked me down. Now, at the time, we had a lot of monkeys on board because in those days some of the sailors would get monkeys and take them back to the States as pets sor to sell. We had about a half a dozen of them. For some reason or other, I guess all the shrapnel and stuff, but they got lose. In this middle of this absolutely surreal experience, I remember seeing something that seemed very funny. Two things: One. I saw one of these monkeys running over to the fantail of the ship and jump over the fantail. Just as he went over, he grabbed the bar with one of his

furry fist and he was looking down at the water and then looking back up and trying to figure out which way to go, and then I saw the second funny sight. I saw a white streak, looked like greased lightning, it was a white, chubby body of Joe Bananas, without a stitch of clothes on, darting up the ladder, darting across the deck load of Philippine mahogany, darting up to the starboard life boat, there were only two life boats, one on the right side - starboard; and one on the left. I was assigned to the left. For some reason or other all the crew were running to the boat on the right, but I being the obedient, young kid, went to the left because that is where I was assigned. There was only one other guy there and that was the carpenter, who they called Chips, and he was there struggling, trying to turn the davits because usually you had three men on each davit to turn those big cranks so that you could get the life boat out. He was struggling and I joined him. Then again, another bomb just exploded off the bow, and we're struggling with our life boat. Then the big Japanese amphibious four-engine Navy bomber came around at right angles on the right side and I could hear the put-put-put-put of the machine guns, and then at the last minute, Chip said, "jump." I just instinctively jumped behind him and right where I was standing a ribbon of machine gun bullets went through the deck. That was close. Then the big Navy bomber circled. The ship was now dead in the water and listing, so they must have figured we were goners and they weren't going to

waste any more bombs on this silly little 4,000 ton SS Admiral Cole. They went off and I remember thinking, "what now?" When this incident occurred, a fellow named Lipsky, he was a Polish kid from Chicago, was at the wheel. Well, in the middle of all of this, he had left the wheel and, I guess, joined the other people in the starboard lifeboat. Now at the time, the radio operator, who worked in a little shack up in on the bridge, hadn't gotten up yet, so we had no news. He didn't know that Pearl Harbor, at the very same time that we were being attacked, was being attacked. Well, after we were bombed, the Radio Operator got on the radio and we got the news that Pearl Harbor was being attacked. He sent out an SOS, which evidently was picked up by various sources, subsequently relayed to somewhere in South American, and then South America eventually relayed it north, and then my buddy, Bill Meanly's, Dad heard from some source that we had been reported sunk with all hands. So I had already one designation, and that was the first Gold Star in my hometown. A Gold Star being a boy who had joined the service and who had been killed. If you had a son, or a daughter, in the service, you had a little flag with a star, but if that son or daughter had been killed you got a Gold Star. So I was the first Gold Star in La Jolla. After the attack, we would go travel at night and we would hide out in the daytime in the coves and bays of the little islands. You know there are 7,000 islands in the Phillipines. We'd see planes and ships from a distance. We painted

the ship as gray as we could so we couldn't be seen. We got into Zamboanga and when we were there a Major from the U.S. Army came down and told us that not only had Pearl Harbor been attacked, but, that the Japanese were marching to the southwest Asia, toward Sigapore and Phillipines. He told us he was going to take his "little rag tag" band of American Army guys and a few Filipino soldiers, and head for the hills. So he turned to me and the other two young fellows and said, "You fellows want to come with me?"

Mr. Cox: You are a civilian, right?

Mr. Robertson: Yes, I was. He said, "You want to come with me?" You know because of the Japanese we were going to head for the mountains. I was tempted to go. You know, being just a young kid, I still thought it was kind of adventuresome. Then the other two, Joe and Plinsky, said, "No, let's stay with the ship." So we did. We were in the China Sea when the Houston was sunk. We finally got out down through Tora Straits and then out along the Great Barrier Reef to Sidney. We were, as far as I know, the first American freighter that escaped out of that particular area because they all came aboard. They, being the journalists in Sidney. We weren't allowed to go ashore. They all came on board and interviewed us. Because we had damage to the ship, and also one of our engineers was hurt they said that we would go across the Tazimanian Sea to New Zealand. Now I had always wanted to fly. I mean, I'm a pilot now, commercial pilot thank goodness. Have been

flying for over thirty years so I love airplanes. I've had a Spitfire, I still have a Messerschmidt, I've got a French aerobatic biplane called a Stomp SV-4. I also have a glider as well as a Beach Barron plane. So I'm into airplanes, but in those days my only flying experiences were in the summer. When I was 14 I would ride my bicycle from La Jolla 13 miles into San Diego to a sleepy little airport called Speer Airport, and I would go into there in the summer and would work in the hangar and work on cleaning airplanes and engine parts. Never got paid a penny, but every third or fourth day they'd say, "Cliff go get your cushion." I was short for my age. I'd go out to a little red Taylor Cub and I'd get 15 precious minutes of flying with the instructor. I thought I was the luckiest kid on the block.

Mr. Cox: I'll bet!

Mr. Robertson: Now not long ago I was at an East Hampton airport washing my Baron and a kid about 14 years old, on his bicycle comes up to me, and he asked me a few questions. I, naturally, identified myself with him because I remembered how I felt about planes when I was that age. So the young man started asking me a few questions, so I finally said, "Hey, son, would you like to help me finish washing the airplane? I'll take you for a ride." He said, "OK, how much will you pay me?" I thought, whoops, they've lost it.

Mr. Cox: Times have changed.

Mr. Robertson: What has happened to the work ethic? So I told him to forget it.

But getting back to my episode. I had always wanted to fly. Well I
also knew that in the Dominion of Canada in New Zealand they were
taking pilots who did not have 20-20 eyesight, but they would have a
goggle that would bring it up to 20-20. I knew my left eye was not
20-20. My right eye was. So I knew even at that young age that I
couldn't get in the Air Force, and in those days you had to be 20-20
uncorrected. So, I started to hatch a plan. Typical Robertson. Young
kid. But I now realize that the Dear Lord has protected me more than
I deserve, I guess, because I had so many scrapes, and I'll tell you
more later. Anyway, I thought, well, I knew that in New Zealand, we
were going to stop there for about five days to have repair work done
before we took this slow, 8 knot, tramp steamer all the way back
across the Pacific, back to America, if we could make it.

Mr. Cox: Right.

Mr. Robertson: So I hatched a plan. I was going to jump ship. I knew they'd give
us leave after what we had been through, and I was going to go hide out
until the ship took off and then I was going to go down and
volunteer for the New Zealand Air Force, and maybe lie about my age
because I wasn't old enough. It all seemed possible and plausible.

So when we got to Wellington, which was then a city of 100,000, we all had a few days of leave. I got off and headed right up the hill. In those days there was a graveyard overlooking the docks. You could look down on the docks and see the ships. An old steam ship like I was on had to usually steam up, get steam up, and it would take a couple of hours before they'd ever be able to pull out from the docks. So I knew that the ship was going to leave if you saw steam coming. You knew it was within two hours of leaving. I bought some carrots and some raisins because I had done that once before. That is another story. I thought that was a nutritious thing to live on if I was trying to stay away from the law because they would be looking for me. So I went up in the graveyard with the carrots and raisins and I hid out, and I slept up there at night. It was cold, but I was determined. On the fifth day I looked down and I could see my ship and I saw it start to steam up. So I knew it was getting ready to leave. So my plan was to wait for it to leave. I thought, well, I know there is a movie theater down there on that main street, but it is a big city and because it was now wartime and it is full of soldiers and all kinds of people, nobody is going to find me. Silly little civilian kid. It was really cold.

Around 5pm I told myself, well I know it is going to leave any minute, I'll walk down this road and it goes right into the main drag. Then I'll go a block down there and if I see a movie house I'll sit in the movie house and watch a movie until it was over, then I'd report in. Now

what I forgot to tell you was, as soon as I jumped ship, or I left the ship, I called the U.S. Consul on the phone and I posed as the purser from the SS Admiral Cole. Well everything was so disorganized with the war going on and everything, they didn't ask too many questions. I told them that I was a purser, that there was a young man named Clifford Parker Robertson, III, who wanted to join the New Zealand Air Force. He had had some experience and he thought that he would be a very good addition to the New Zealand Air Force. He would like to join up. The man at the Consul said, "Well, you tell Mr. Robertson, yes, I guess that it is all right if he passes the physical, but he has to realize that if he does that he is going to have to give up his citizenship. At that point I thought, well that is just one of those details. The main thing was that I would get to learn to fly, really for real. I said, "That's no problem." So he said, "When will he be in." I said, "Well he'll be in in about five or six days." So, now the ship is getting ready to leave, and I went down the hill, getting ready to go to the movie house. I plan to go to the movie house and see the movie, and then afterwards call the Consul. I get down to the main drag, and boy you talk about serendipity; as I got into the main drag there was a little black Austin [car] right down the road with two gentlemen with boulder hats, sitting in this little black Austin, and I'm walking down the street, fat and happy. A fellow gets out, walks over and tips his hat, and says, "Excuse me. Is your name Robertson?" I looked him right in the eye

and said, "No." Bold face lie, but I didn't use a New Zealand accent. Not that I could have, but he knew right away I was an American. So he kind of half-smiled, and he said, "Are you sure your name isn't Robertson?" I said, "No, I'm not sure." They whisked me into the black Austin, they whisked me down to the dock, they saluted the police, and turned me over to them. Now the spring lines were off, but the off-shore lines were still on the ship, so they whisked me right up to where the ship was. Then as they did a crew member dropped the Jacobs Ladder, a rope ladder, down and they pulled the ship over closer to the dock and I had a very long climb. I remember thinking, oh boy, I'm in big trouble. I got to the top and the Captain was standing there. All he said was, "I'm surprised at you Robertson, get up to the bow." That is where I was assigned to be. What I didn't know was practically all of the rest of the crew had been missing for the five days as well. They had been in bars getting drunk while I was up on the hill waiting for the ship to leave. Anyway, I got on. Later on we found we had a stowaway. We didn't find him until after we left, and then we had a long, long voyage all alone in that little 8 knot freighter. At that speed we were very susceptible to any Japanese submarines. We finally got to San Pedro. As soon as we got there I called home. My Grandmother was in tears because she had heard I'd been lost at sea with all hands, but characteristic of her rather strong Christian Protestant faith in the Lord, she had refused to accept

the Gold Star. She said, "No, he is going to make it." So, anyway, she said, "Where are you?" I told her and she said, "Are you coming home?" I said, "Well, not exactly." She said, "Why?" I said, "I just saw a four-mastered sailing ship on the dock next door." She said, "Oh, they don't sail those any more." Well they were. They needed anything that floated and they were loading them up with lumber. It was called the Star of Scotland. I had already gone over to ask them if I could sign up. Here was the chance to really be in a Herman Melville mode. So I'd gone over, and also they were going to pay more money than I was getting, but that wasn't the thing -- it was the excitement. So I said, "Well, no I'm going to get off and I have to go to San Francisco." Because that is where we started, and then I'll come back and get on the Star of Scotland. She said, "You've been admitted into college, please don't, please don't do that." I thought about it and she was kind of teary, and she had raised me. She was a wonderful, wonderful woman, named Elinor Willingham. My Mother died when I was two and a half. My Mother and Father had split up when I was two. He had immediately remarried his second of ultimately four wives, so she, my Mother, had gone to live with my Grandmother, and then when she died six months later my Grandmother made sure that I was under her wing. She had a son, name of Ormond and she had a daughter named Vivian. The son was living with her so he was like a father figure to me. She had

another daughter named Ramona, and then she had this daughter Vivian, her eldest child, who had become widowed at 28 with two children who came to live with us. So I had virtually a whole family. I had two cousins who were like brother and sister, I had their Mother that they called Mom, and I called Mom, and my Uncle was a Father figure. I had my Grandmother. I did not have my Grandfather because he and my Grandmother had split up years before.

Mr. Cox: You did have a family unit.

Mr. Robertson: I had a family unit and nothing seemed unnatural. I went up to San Francisco and signed off the ship and then went on back to Antioch College where I immediately plunged into the Bates Eye exercise program. Bates being a famous optomologist who had developed this system of increasing eye muscle strength for simple myopia, and I thought if I can get my left eye up 20-20 I'll be able to get in the military, American military. So I worked like crazy back there, and at the same time I worked for the Springfield Daily News in Springfield, Ohio, because writing came easy for me and I still had these journalistic ideas. So then when I got my left eye up to 20-20 momentarily; I couldn't keep it for very long. I went down to join the Navy and I wanted to go in the Air Force, Navy Air Corp. I went down to the Post Office, took the exam with all these other guys, passed it, and then, I'll never forget. I remember it like yesterday, as we were walking I thought, I'm probably going to Great Lakes Training, and

am going to be a pilot. I was so excited. That dog-gone Chief Petty Officer said, "Hey you - Robertson." I kept on walking. He said, "You heard me. Robertson." I turned around and said, "Me Sir?" "Yeah," he says, "come on back here." I said, "Why?" He said, "Let's do that again." I thought oh boy! I'm in deep do-do. I went back, and, of course, I choked because he made me go over the eye chart thing again and I couldn't do my little palming system, and it began to fade, and he kind of smiled and said, "Nice try, partner." So, I said, "OK." I started to walk out and he said, "You're going the wrong way." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You go down to the other end of the hall." I said, "Why?" He says, "There is a national emergency and they are sinking all of these merchant ships daily, two and three a day off the Atlantic Coast." At that time the highest percentage of casualties of any service that we had was in the Merchant Marine.

Mr. Cox: Due to german submarine activity.

Mr. Robertson: Oh, all the way up and down the East Coast. And he said, "I see here you've been to sea." Well I had, one trip but then I was raised around boats in La Jolla. He said, "You go on down there." So I went down there. "Oh," they said, "you're just who we've been looking for." I said, "Why?" They said, "We need you. We need people to go in the Merchant Marines, the maritime service, so sign right here." So I was trapped. They said, "Well, its either that or

Army I guess.” I said, “All right.” I signed and they sent me out to California. Got to California and they sent me out to Catalina Island, Maritime Service, because I had had, they thought, considerable maritime experience in that one trip. I went through this program and then they said, “Well, you can stay here and teach.” I said, “No way, I’m not going to stay on some dumb island, 25 miles off of southern California, and teach while there is a war going on.” I said, “Put me on a ship.” So that is how I ended up in the Maritime Service, and I had some very interesting experiences.

Mr. Cox: What was your first ship that you were assigned to at that time, Cliff? Do you remember?

Mr. Robertson: I wish I could remember the name of it. There was one called the SS Craig. There was a tanker, the first one. I can’t remember the name of it, but it ultimately broke in half. Not while I was on it. Then there was another one called the SS Johnathen. I went out to the South Pacific and was down there in the South Pacific and I came back and got an ear infection. They put me ashore for a little while. Then I went back again to New Guinea and I got malaria, but I didn’t want anybody to know it because they were putting these guys in these Quonset huts in New Guinea, and they were just sitting there. So I faked my way that I was all right. Everybody thought I had a fever and I kept pretending that I didn’t. So I got away, but I had actually gotten malaria.

Mr. Cox: What were you transporting on your trips?

Mr. Robertson: The first trip was oil. It was an oil tanker. I wish I could remember the name of that ship. That is the one that I heard had ultimately broken up. And the other one, the SS Craig, we had a lot of stuff, including beer, because I saw it. Somebody once asked me, “ what is the greatest acting performance you ever saw?” They expect me to say Sir Lawrence Olivier” But, one of the greatest little acting performances I ever saw occurred in Port Brisbane, Australia. We came in and we had munitions. We had everything. They were loading it off and I was standing there and watched this big truck come to the dock. This Sergeant got out of the truck, and boy he did it with more authority than General MacArthur. I never saw a guy like that. He said, “Now get those cargo slings over here.” He knew exactly where the beer was that was coming off. “Now put it on that truck you guys.” He is ordering these guys around. They were snapping to. Turned out he was stealing. Somebody had a lot of beer and probably made a lot of money. Was one of the greatest performances I’ve ever seen. Oh, I forgot to mention, on the SS Admiral Cole, when we left San Pedro to go to San Francisco we were going along the coast and we saw behind us a submarine. It was getting dark and we saw this submarine, but we thought well maybe its a U.S. Navy submarine, and we went right up along Santa Barbara where the refinery was. Well, about 12 hours later that refinery was the first American installation

to ever be hit by a foreign, in this case Japanese, shell.

Mr. Cox: You read about that in history books.

Mr. Robertson: Yeah. Well we were right ahead of it.

Mr. Cox: Oh my gosh!

Mr. Robertson: So I missed another one. Now I should also have added the Star of Scotland, which I had wanted to get on was subsequently sunk off of South Africa. It was sunk with all hands, so I missed another one. By that time I was back in Antioch College and I was working on the Newspaper and they also had me working over at the radio station, and going to college at the same time. I'd go into the teletype there where they were saying "medium size freighter was sunk off of New Jersey, or off of Florida," everyday. The Germans were sinking them like crazy. They would never identify the name of the ships sunk, but the interesting thing was this one particular one, the Captain that was on that ship that I was on, his ship was sunk. The reason I know it was, they said, "a small, or medium size, merchant ship was sunk, 32 men were lost. The Captain was lost by a sudden shift in the cargo after it was sinking." They gave his name. So he was lost.

Mr. Cox: So the ship went down.

Mr. Robertson: Yeah. If I had been on that, I wouldn't be here. If I had been on the Star of Scotland I wouldn't be here. There are a number of others. There are a few airplanes that I've missed, so I've been very lucky. The Dear Lord is saving me for something. I hope it is something

good.

Mr. Cox: I'm sure he is. He already has.

Mr. Robertson: Well, I've been luckier than I deserve.

Mr. Cox: Well, may I ask how many trips did you make in the Pacific in the Merchant Marines?

Mr. Robertson: Well, several down to the South Pacific. I know we were down there for the Invasion of Hollandia, and we were down at Espiritu Santos. Then, of course, we were in Australia. Then, later on, I went to Officer's School up in Connecticut. Then I was a Third Mate. Then I was on the Jonathan Edwards. We were there in the Invasion of Southern Italy, and then I was on another one when I was Third Mate. We were in the North Atlantic when V-E Day occurred. Then we went to Sweden and we were shipwrecked on the Isle of _____?_____. We went from Goteborg, to the town of Malmo on the coast of Sweden. On the way there we got in a storm. We ended up on the rocks. They finally rescued us and we came back. I wish I could remember the name of that ship, but I can't. I was Third Mate on that one. I went home after V-E Day. All of the kids in La Jolla were collecting 52-20. They were saying, "Oh we can sit around and go surfing." I said, "I can't do that." My work ethic thing and my Grandmother didn't think that was a very productive thing to do. So I said to myself, well I'll go back to New York and see what I can do about getting into journalism because I had worked for the paper,

Springfield Daily News, while I was going to college.

Mr. Cox: If I might interrupt, for the benefit of the reader Cliff, can you explain what the 52-20 was?

Mr. Robertson: Well, it meant for 52 weeks of the year you were going to get twenty bucks for doing nothing. Just for being a veteran. They were sitting around. Of course, in those days twenty bucks meant more than it does today. But, in my soul I knew that was not productive. And I was restless. I wanted to get on with my life. I went back and I sailed as a Third Mate for about a year with the Atlantic Gulf Weston Steamship, going down the Mediterranean as a Third Mate. Then I got off for good. I thought, well if I'm going to write. Oh, I had been accused of being able to write at the paper. They said, everybody said, well you ought to write for the theater instead of a deadline. So I thought, maybe that's an idea. I didn't know anything about the theater, so I came back to New York and everybody said, well, you've got to learn if you are going to write for the theater. You've got to learn about the theater. So, what do I do? Well, you go out in the provinces. You go into the regions. You go into Summer Stock Company. You go into these little Winter Stock Companies. You learn. So, when I learned to drive a truck, and learned to build flats, and everybody at the Double and Brass had to act. Acting was never

anything that came difficult for me. Not that I was necessarily a born liar because my Calvinism prevented me from being a really good liar as a kid, but I did learn something Floyd. I learned in Miss Radford's Third Grade that if you volunteered for the class play you wouldn't have to stay after school and clean the erasers for doing something naughty, like pulling Katherine Mollings pigtails. So to me acting was a dodge, it was an evasion, it was a way of getting out of something that you didn't want to do. I also learned in Prep School; (I did go to a Military School for a couple of years) the same thing. If you didn't want to have to carry that darn 40-pound pack around in the quad for doing something bad, volunteer for the darn plays. So it was an evasion. But it was never considered an honest or a reasonable or possible vocation. So anyway, when I went on to Summer Stock I was still in my Ben Heck/Charles MacArthur newspaper mode, looking down my nose at scants at all of these would-be actors who took themselves so seriously, they were so grand. I was in these companies, but everybody had to act. I mean you might build flats and drive a truck and all the rest of it, but you still had to play a part because they are very modest. I think they paid us \$30 a week and room and board. It was in a borsch circuit and I came from a very white-bred society of La Jolla. I didn't even know what borsch was. I remember looking at the first kippered herring, or whatever it was on my plate one morning and wondering what it was. In the Catskills you know, these

country clubs cater to the people from New York, and naturally there was a lot of Jewish dietary food. I didn't even know what a Delicatessen was. Anyway, so I went out and I would act and I took it very cavalierly. I think I was kind of a probably callous little wasp from La Jolla, and these actors didn't appreciate me because: One, I didn't take it or them seriously, and two, I seemed to do pretty well at it, which probably ticked them off. The next thing I knew I was actually kind of making a living off of off-Broadway, and then finally Broadway, and then finally early television, and finally movies. But I didn't live out in Hollywood. I never embraced the lifestyle. I'm grateful. I'm not looking a gift horse in the mouth and I've just finished my 59th film, but it's not a lifestyle that I've embraced. I prefer the country. Now I have a house in La Jolla, but it is too big for me and my cat. My two daughters are grown. They live on the East Coast. One is married, lives in Charleston. I have my first grandchild, a four-year old girl named Cynthia. Cynthia Parker Jackson.

Mr. Cox: Diamond of your life.

Mr. Robertson: Yeah. Absolutely. And the other one, her Mother, Stephanie, equally lovely. My other daughter, Heather, is not married. She is still living in New York City trying to "find" herself. I tell her if you want to find yourself, come over to me I'll help you find yourself. She is a good kid, but she's, you know, a little distracted. They all go

through that.

People say,

exposed that

on this guy

Pictures.

Streetgate, well

about. It was 1977

Not all, but a lot of them. Anyway, I've been very lucky.

well you didn't work for three and a half years when you

Hollywoodgate corruption, and when you blew the whistle

Beagleman, who forged my name as the Head of Columbia

You know, there was a Watergate, there was a Wall

there was a Hollywoodgate people have forgotten

through 1980.

Mr. Cox:

You did what was morally right though didn't you?

Mr. Robertson:

I did, I did. Not that I deserve Sainthood, or anything of that

nature,

but it is just a reflex. I was brought up that way. But as a

result I was

black-balled for three and a half years. My Accountant

said, "Cliff, the

Congressional Record wrote you up, Mr. Mo Udal,

God Rest his soul,

he wrote you up, and all of the creative people in

Hollywood are proud

of you, but please no more Don Quixote. There is

no money coming

in." So I learned that after three and a half years my

noble stand was

tough on the pocket book, but I survived. We did

the right thing. I've

been very lucky.

Mr. Cox:

May I ask you this Cliff. How did the part come about that you

were

offered the part of John F. Kennedy on PT-109?

Mr. Robertson:

OK. There was a lot of talk in those days about wondering who

would

play the part because the book is out. There was a rumor that

Warren

Beatty was going to, then there was a rumor that it might be

Peter Fonda. Can you picture him in uniform? Like everybody, I think,
well yeah I can kind of see Peter, I guess. And you hear of other possibilities, but I never in my wildest dreams thought of myself. I was doing a movie at Paramount called "My Six Loves". Nice little light comedy with Debbie Reynolds and Richard Jansen. Studio people came to me one day and they said, "Oh, take these scenes, take them home and learn them they want you to do a couple of scenes tomorrow at Warner Brothers." I said, "Well, I can't do it I'm working at Paramount." They said, I'll never forget it. They said, "It's been arranged." When I heard that phrase I knew somebody upstairs somewhere -- it's been arranged. Somebody powerful had gotten to somebody. So I went home, learned the words, went over to Warner Brothers, shot the scene, forgot about it. Three days later I got a call from a friend of mine, a girl back in New York. She said, "What is going on? Your picture is in the New York Times along side of President Kennedy. You are going to play Kennedy. He has chosen you." Well, I didn't know that. So I called my now ex-agent and I told him the news. The next thing I know I'm playing Kennedy. Later on, I was in New York doing another film with Jane Fonda called "Sunday in New York" when I got a call from the White House and they said, "the President would like to know if you'd like (I'd done PT-109 by then) to come down to Washington. He'd like to meet you." I said, "Well that is very kind." They said, "Well when is convenient

for you?" I said, "Whenever is convenient for the Pres is convenient for Cliff." So I went down there and got there three hours early. I didn't want to be late. I went into the National Gallery and looked all those pictures. Didn't absorb one single one because I was so in awe. I kept looking at my watch. I'm going to meet the President. Anyway, I went in and he couldn't have been more charming. We had about a 45 minute meeting, and we ended up like all fathers talking about our daughters. Caroline was older than my first-born, Stephanie. He gave me presents for Stephanie and for myself, and we corresponded in the short time left in his life. He was killed November 22, later that year.

Mr. Cox: If I might ask you, how did you study his part? Did you read anything or listen to....

Mr. Robertson: Yeah, I read as much as I could about him. Of course he was President, so you were getting information all of the time. I would watch him on television. But I found out he did not want the Boston accent. I think, as I understand it, it was felt that any nightclub comic could do that. "Ask not what your Country can---" That would just be distracting. Just play it straight so the audience wouldn't be distracted. So I learned quite a bit about him, and, of course, met the family and subsequently have known the family and they have been very kind to me.

Mr. Cox: I imagine it would be quite an honor to play a President like that. It has been said that he did make some mistakes during his military

career and consequently he got injured due to one of them.

Mr. Robertson: You hear all kinds of stories. Whether it was a mistake, or was just bad luck, I don't know. You know you always hear those things. Hindsight, but I think it is one of those anomalies that is never going--- You know, you hear all kinds of stories, but--- I know this that I talk with surviving members of his crew, and they adored him. **Mr.**

Cox: That is what I've heard.

Mr. Robertson: Yeah.

Mr. Cox: I met one here at the museum.

Mr. Robertson: He'd do anything for his crew.

Mr. Cox: Yes, yes he would.

Mr. Robertson: He had great loyalty.

Mr. Cox: May I ask you this Cliff, do you have any of your ship's papers that you received when you signed on to a Merchant Ship? Did you have ship's papers that show the names of the ships on which you served?

Mr. Robertson: Probably have somewhere. I don't know where they are. I'm very bad that way. Matter of fact, not long ago I came across an old picture of the SS Admiral Cole, and I can't find it now. It was taken while we were in Massinlock, a little mining town in the Phillippines. This would have been taken around the first of December. Massinlock, and if anybody has access to the old---maybe the old Merchant Marines would have access to pictures -- the way you can get a picture of it would be, they had a line called the Admiral Line and I think they were

on the West Coast out of San Francisco, but the Admiral Line. The Admiral Cole was one of their ships and that is the first ship I went on. The Admiral Line. If I can get a picture of that I'd be grateful because people always ask me to write an autobiography and I've got about three hundred pages, and I should get those pictures, you know. It would be wonderful if we could locate as much information about the Admiral Cole, whether it was indeed the one that was sunk when I heard that Captain's name.

Mr. Cox: Exactly what information?

Mr. Robertson: Well, if it was sunk, that would have been in early '42.

Mr. Cox: So that would be '42 question mark.

Mr. Robertson: It might have been sunk later, or it might have had a different Captain. But I would like to know what happened to it.

Mr. Cox: Sure. We'll see what we can find.

Mr. Robertson: There must be a way to find out.

Mr. Cox: The computer does wonders.

Mr. Robertson: I'm glad that you have one.

Mr. Cox: Now you said you had a poem that you would like to relate.

Mr. Robertson: I forgot about that. Well, you people here at the Museum, this is dedicated to you. Two things I wrote. I will read them. It is dedicated about you people, volunteers. [Asside comment: Typical ex-journalist, paper always wadded up.] This is what I read at the ceremonies today.

In the program handed me I noticed next to my name three minutes. Now a fellow can't say a lot in three minutes, but I will try to respect that. Three minutes is not enough time to recognize the American heroes here today, nor those not here, nor salute those who have left this mortal coil. For it will take more than three minutes to say what should be said, what should be written, what should be saluted by history. A history not re-written by Hollywood, but an honest history recorded by museums such as the Admiral Nimitz Museum and the National Museum of the Pacific War here in Fredericksburg, Texas. Museums that have done their research, their homework, and continue with patriot volunteers. With your indulgence I'd like to read a salute I've written to those volunteers in this last of my three minutes allotted. It is called "volunteerism." Volunteerism is humanism in its most compassionate form. Volunteerism is the best of every religion. It is an extended hand to a voiceless plea. A sun on the best of days. A lighted candle on the darkest night. A selfless spirit in a selfish world. It is that small voice that whispers from our heart reminding us that we all share this small blue marble for so little time that to give it meaning we must share our love.

Mr. Cox: Very well said, Cliff.

Mr. Robertson: Thank you. I will give you the last part of this. At the end of it I said, "Well, I see I've got 30 seconds left. Time to salute our heroes in Afghanistan, and to salute our heroes in Washington, and to salute

the great leadership of our leader -- George W. Bush.”

Mr. Cox: Thank you Cliff. It has been a pleasure.

Mr. Robertson: Thanks Floyd.

Mr. Cox: Thank you for what you did during World War II as a young man.

Mr. Robertson: Oh well. You just do what you have to do.

Mr. Cox: May I ask you this, this quote about volunteers, would you mind if I print that up and hang it on the wall?

Mr. Robertson: No, put a copyright on the bottom. Copyright: Cliff Robertson
and put the date.

Mr. Cox: OK. Thanks again.

Mr. Robertson: It would be a good thing for here.

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