Interviewer: This is Danielle DeVore interviewing Carl Clay at his office. Are you aware that this conversation will be recorded and the tape and the transcription will be placed in the Lee College library? Do I have your permission to do this?

Veteran: You have my permission and are not holding a gun to my head.

Interviewer: How did you join?

Veteran: I joined the Navy in April of 1985. The reason why I joined the Navy was because at that particular time the job economy wasn’t stable enough. I was working for Conoco Oil in Pasadena and having experienced college, I wanted a few more things in my life, so I chose the military. I didn’t think I was going to be in this long—I’ve been in 17 years—but I chose the military, and it’s been pretty good so far. I have three years before I retire.

Interviewer: What made you choose the military?

Veteran: The stability. I wanted to learn a field that I could apply once I get out of the military, because I had planned to use the military just like you would college. College gives you the book experience and knowledge that you need. The military also provides the book experience that you need to get ahead in life, but also job experience, and so it gave me the opportunity to learn a job trade that I can use once I get out, and so it’s made me more marketable just like college would.
Interviewer: Let’s go back to the beginning and ask how was boot camp?
Veteran: The military has changed a lot. The military, in my opinion, is a lot easier—more friendly than it was, but times have changed. Boot camp was nine weeks long, and it was in Chicago, Illinois. All the branch’s boot camps are different, because the requirements of the military are different for each branch. Navy boot camp is not as strenuous as the Army and Marines. Their boot camps are longer. In boot camp you learn teamwork and how to become one as a team. You build friendships for life. It’s a culture shock because you’re bringing people from all different parts of the country, different races and nationalities, bringing them together to think as one, and so it’s a good experience. It’s something that they won’t ever take away from you.

Interviewer: How was the food?
Veteran: That was different, because you’re eating in a confined structure. It’s like hurry up and eat so you can get back out there. Once you get out of boot camp, the food is A-1, but in boot camp it’s not like Wings ‘N More or Jack-in-the-Box. You miss the fast foods when you’re in boot camp.

Interviewer: After boot camp, where did you go?
Veteran: Once I got out of boot camp and the way the Navy works is once you’ve picked your job, you’re guaranteed a school for the training for that job. I’m in aviation, so my school after I left Chicago was in Lakehurst, New Jersey, for aviation training. My job is to launch and recover aircraft and rescue pilots when they crash, so the training for that at that particular time was in Lakehurst, New Jersey—now it’s in Pensacola, Florida. That school was six weeks long. From there I came home for ten days, and then I went off to the Persian Gulf.

Interviewer: Did you pick your job or did they give it to you?
Veteran: No, the way the Navy works is before you enlist you will have your job guaranteed, and it will be the job that you picked. Your school of training is guaranteed to you, you’ll know how long that school is for, and where it’s located. You’ll have your money for college guaranteed and whatever enlistment bonus you qualify for. If all that’s acceptable, you join the Navy, so, yes,
everybody that’s in the Navy picked their jobs. We’re the only branch that wears our job titles, or our job descriptions, on our sleeves. I’m an E-6 and the rest of the guys in the office are E-6s, but we do different jobs, which means we can never do each other’s jobs.

Interviewer: How long was your training?
Veteran: My technical training was six weeks, and then the rest of the training that I obtained was through OJT in various schools that they send you to once you’re actually in the military. Like I say, I’m in aviation. I chose aviation because at that time Houston was booming with this aviation program. We have the Space Center down here, so I wanted to get into something that once whenever I decided to get out of the military I could have a job to go to.

Interviewer: After your training, when did you start putting your training into play?
Veteran: I graduated my A-schools, which is what your technical training is called, July 30, 1985. I came home for ten days, and then from there I was flown over to the Persian Gulf. We were just finishing up Beirut back in that time, so I got a chance to be initiated into the end of Beirut, so for me, individually, my exposure to what the world situation was in was right off, which was good in my opinion.

Interviewer: What was your opinion of the war?
Veteran: To join the military you have to be realistic about the company you’re joining. I mean, you’re joining the United States military. Your job is war—that’s your job—to protect the interests of the United States. So you can’t go into it naïve. You’ve got to know exactly what you can be faced with. If you’re called to do your job you have to do your job. Just like anybody else who’s joined the military, it’s something new so it makes you grow up a lot quicker, because you’re exposed to reality.

Interviewer: Did you work with any special kind of machinery?
Veteran: Like I say, my job was aviation. Whenever I’m on a ship, I work on the flight deck of the ship. We launch and recover the aircraft. Aircraft on the ship goes from 0-200 in three seconds, and they stop from 200-0 in three seconds. If for
some reason they happen to crash, then part of my responsibility is to assemble a crew and we go rescue the pilot. We secure the aircraft, we secure the bombs on the aircraft, and then we rescue the pilot. The mission of my job is to prevent loss of life and damage to equipment—that’s the main description of my job.

Interviewer: Was this the only job you had?
Veteran: Yeah, because in the Navy you choose your job that you want to do, and that’s the job that I said that I want to do. Now when my job converts over into the civilian sector, I’m a certified civilian fire fighter, be it on the structure side, which means like buildings and houses as well as any airports. My intention once I get out is to continue in that field at the Space Center, so I’m doing what I wanted to do.

Interviewer: Were there any mishaps when they were landing?
Veteran: Sometimes you do have mishaps, but the main thing is you have to let that accident happen first and then you respond. We have a saying, “We don’t have accidents, we just respond to them.” Sometimes it can be something physically wrong with the pilot or something mechanically wrong with the aircraft that caused it, because you’re landing on a floating platform out in the middle of the ocean, so sometimes things happen.

Interviewer: What are the steps once something happens?
Veteran: The main thing is when the aircraft is coming and it’s called an emergency, you clear all the personnel out of the way first, and you try to clear whatever equipment could be in the way to give the aircraft a clear path. If for some reason the aircraft is unsuccessful in its landing and does crash, then the first thing you do is assemble all your people, you assemble all your fire hoses. You set fire hoses towards the aircraft, and the reason you set the fire hoses toward the aircraft is you have to shoot a path of foam to gain entrance to the pilot, and then once you send your rescue people in there you go in and secure all the ejection seats, because you don’t want the ejection seats going off on you. Then you secure the oxygen on the pilot’s mask so he doesn’t suffocate or poison himself, and then you rescue the pilot. Then you secure the bombs on there, as well as you set fire
hoses on the other aircraft, because fire or explosions can spread on a ship. When you’re on a ship, it’s not like being on land. You don’t have anywhere to run, so you have to get in there and do your job. It’s real exciting, though.

Interviewer: Since you were on a ship, what was different about being on a ship compared to being back on land?

Veteran: You see the movies about the Navy, and you can form an opinion, but until you experience it yourself it’s hard to imagine a ship with six thousand people on it. Now on a ship you may have three full-sized gyms, you have a full-sized basketball court, you have eighty-two aircraft on there, and it’s a floating city. And when you pull into these foreign countries and you see your ship is three times as big as their tallest buildings, it’s mind-boggling. And then to get out there and witness the capability of the power of it, it’s kind of exciting stuff.

Interviewer: How was the day on the ship—the work hours?

Veteran: It varies. It depends on your job, but normally your work hours are either eight-hour shifts or twelve-hour shifts. You have a day and night crew, depending on what your job is. And then on Sundays we get holiday routines, where we either don’t work on Sundays or we work a partial day. And then after doing that for a couple of days, we pull into port for a little relaxation. You work hard, you play hard.

Interviewer: So for the most part your ship was out at sea or was it in port?

Veteran: It’s a combination of both. We do six-month deployment, which means we leave our home for up to six months, and we deploy around the world, but during that six month timeframe you probably hit anywhere from six to twelve countries. Usually our travel time, like we’re in Hawaii and we’re getting ready to go to Japan, it may take us four or five days to get there. During that four or five days we’re training, and doing our practicing, and stuff like that. Then the captain will allow us to pull in to maybe Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, or wherever, and we’ll pull in there for about four or five days, relax and not have to come back to the ship until we pull out. That’s the main reason why I joined the Navy was the
ability to have quality training provided for me, but also I wanted to see the world.

Interviewer: Because it was the Persian War, was your ship ever a target?
Veteran: In my opinion, and I can almost base it as a fact, the Navy is the safest branch, and the reason why we’re the safest branch is because we’re two hundred miles away, so we go attack you—you can’t really attack us. And we carry enough firepower and we have enough satellites that it’s almost impossible to get to us. Now, on rare occasions, like what happened to the USS Cole, things do happen, but our mishaps are far and apart. All branches of the military are targets, but we’re the most powerful country in the world, and that’s something that we’re proud of. So, you’re kind of protected, but sometimes things do happen.

Interviewer: So ya’ll had very few casualties?
Veteran: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was the name of your ship?
Veteran: I’ve been on four ships. My first ship during that particular time in Beirut was the USS Iwo Jima, like the battle of Iwo Jima where they were hanging the flag. You know, Navy ships are named after presidents and battles from World War II, so I was happy to be on the Iwo Jima, and that was my indoctrination into the Navy. It was a Marine ship where you combined Marines and Navy together. The Marine Corps is part of the Navy. We launched the Marines out on the beach, and let them do their thing. On that particular ship we had eleven hundred sailors and about sixteen hundred Marines.

Interviewer: After work is done and everything is finished, what did ya’ll do for fun?
Veteran: We have TV 24/7, so like I say, it’s really no different than being over here in the civilian world. We have basketball, tennis, weight rooms. A lot of people get on the Internet. Back then we didn’t have the Internet, so we communicated through writing letters and we had what we called a “pox” line where we could contact the United States and make phone calls to our families.
Interviewer: You said that you liked to travel around the world. What was the most memorable?

Veteran: Of all the places that I’ve been in the world, I would say Rio de Janeiro was the place I enjoyed the most because of the beautiful women. I was single, and I wanted to get out there and have fun and see the world. And that’s the real Mardi Gras—everybody thinks Mardi Gras is New Orleans, but the real Mardi Gras is Rio de Janeiro. It’s around the clock. And Spain—I love Spain. Hawaii was good, but it’s expensive. The only place I haven’t been in my career is Australia, so that’s pretty good.

Interviewer: Your rank was E-6? How high is that—what is that?

Veteran: E-6 is a supervisor level. You’re like a technical manager, so E-6 is one of the ranks that most people in all branches try to achieve. You want to achieve E-6 and at least retire as an E-6, and so it’s pretty good. It’s an enlisted rank. The highest rank that you can go enlisted without being an officer is E-9, so I’m three ranks from achieving my highest capable rank.

Interviewer: What parts of war have you been in?

Veteran: I’ve been in Beirut, been in the Persian Gulf, been in Kosovo. I was in Kosovo in’99—we fed the refugees over there, and that was a pretty eye-opening experience, because a lot of times we don’t get to see over here in the United States the exact things that we get to see over there, for whatever political reasons, but you have 100,000 people that you have to feed, and you have women, and children, and men waiting in line for bread, potatoes, rice. That kind of touches you, you know? I think in America we’re a spoiled country because don’t actually realize what the rest of the world has to go through. I was stationed in Cuba when the Haitian situation first kicked off, so even though you’re in the military and you try not to get emotionally attached, as a human you can’t help but get emotionally attached when you see people starving and dying around you. I’ve been in Somalia, and so I’ve been exposed to quite a few conflicts.
Interviewer: In Cuba, what was your duty there?
Veteran: We were the fire department. Any aircraft, whether it be civilian or military aircraft, we were responsible to make sure the aircraft landed safely—didn’t have any fires and stuff like that. Cuba is like 95 degrees day and night, and so it’s a hot country but it’s a beautiful country. We weren’t allowed on the Cuban side. We had to stay on the base, but we were allowed to travel throughout the Caribbean. Jamaica is only twenty-three minutes away, Puerto Rico is nineteen minutes away, so all the Caribbean is there, and then we’re only ninety miles from Florida, so you could travel anywhere else. You just couldn’t travel on the Cuban side. We were also responsible for when the Cubans defected to our side of the base, we were responsible for security.

Interviewer: And did that ever happen?
Veteran: It happened quite often. The way the Cuban government had it, one way they could have defected would only take about ten or fifteen minutes, but the Cuban government had mines in the field and they put sharks and alligators in the water. So to defect they had to come around about eight miles of mountains, and where they came up they had to climb a cliff, and at that particular point that would be them right on the runway, and they’d just sit on the runway with their hands up, and wait for us to come and get them. After that they were flown off to Miami for political asylum, which is one of the reasons why the Haitian conflict in Cuba kicked off, because with the Haitian situation, they were put in a prison camp out on a hot runway, and with the weather being 95 degrees, you were basically baking them, but with the Cuban situation and with our political views with Cuba the Cubans were flown off to Florida, so it got pretty testy down there. At the height of my time down there, we had maybe like fifteen thousand Haitian refugees on the base in Cuba. So it got pretty testy.

Interviewer: And so what was your job there with all the Haitians?
Veteran: They got all the branches together and we made a security force—it was called a Joint Taskforce—it was Marines, Army, Navy, Air Force. Refugees were in that camp, and you just made sure that security was maintained if a riot broke out, and you tried to dispel the rioting any way you could.
Interviewer: Anything else you would like to add?
Veteran: I could sit here all day and talk about the experiences I’ve had in my seventeen years. It’s been good. I’ve made friends for life. I’ve been blessed that I’ve been around both sides of the world, and it didn’t cost me a dime. Now I’m at the end of my tour—I have three years before I retire. I’m a single parent, so my two daughters have been exposed that the experience. The benefits are outstanding—100% medical and dental for both me and my kids, and like I say, nothing in the world can touch the experience that I’ve gained due to the military, so it’s been pretty good.

Interviewer: How was life like after the war?
Veteran: The way the military works, you do a rotation. One thing about the Navy is when a Navy ship deploys, it’s one of the saddest moments in the world, because you’re leaving your family. You have tens of thousands of people out there crying and waving goodbye, but then when you come home, it’s one of the most exciting events in the world, because you have twenty or thirty thousand people, helicopters flying around, the news people out there and everybody’s out there waving United States flags, so it makes you feel like your job is appreciated. You get to feel the up and down side of it, and so it’s been pretty good.

Interviewer: Thank you.

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