

Oral Memoirs

Of

Chad Etchison

An Interview Conducted by

Chad Eric Joyner

March 15, 2014

Community Veterans History Project

Lone Sailor Memorial Project

University of Central Florida RICHES of Central Florida

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Interview Histories

Interviewer: Chad Eric Joyner

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHERS of Central Florida Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Project Detail

The Community Veterans History Project, a RICHERS of Central Florida Project at the University of Central Florida, includes interviews with Central Florida veterans from all branches of the United States military. Beginning in 2010, the UCF Community Veterans History Project is collecting, preserving, and making accessible to the public the experiences of Central Florida's veterans so that future generations will better understand the realities of conflict. It is a collaborative endeavor supported by multiple departments and offices at UCF. The histories, which are collected by students and faculty, are archived and made digitally available through the UCF library. The UCF Community Veterans History Project will also contribute selected veterans' histories to the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Chad Etchison is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 15, 2014.

Abstract

Oral history interview of Chad Etchison, who joined the U.S. Navy in December of 1992 and served during Operation Active Endeavor and the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Etchison was born in Anderson, Indiana, on December 12, 1974. He attended boot camp at the Naval Training Center in Orlando, Florida and later served on several Navy frigates. He also served President William "Bill" Jefferson Clinton as part of the White House Communication Agency and attended the Fleet Combat Training Center in Dam Neck, Virginia. In Orlando, Etchison served at the Naval Expeditionary Combat Command Operations Force Center and the Navy Operations Support Center. Etchison achieved the rank of Senior Chief Petty Officer and earned a Joint Service Commendation Medal, 2 Navy Commendation Medals, 5 Navy Achievement Medals, and a Presidential Service Badge.

This interview was conducted by Chad Eric Joyner on March 15, 2014, three months before Etchison left the Navy. Interview topics include enlistment, boot camp, NTC Orlando, the Grinder, the White Hat, and Etchison's naval career after Orlando.

Chad Etchison

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Chad Joyner
March 15, 2014
Orlando, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Joyner Today is March 15th, 2014. I am interviewing Chad Etchison, who served in the United States Navy. Mr. Etchison currently serves as Command Senior Chief at NOS – NOSC [Navy Operational Support Center] in Orlando. My name is Chad Eric Joyner. We are interviewing Mr. Etchison as part of the UCF [University of Central Florida] Community Veterans History Project and as research for the creation of the Lone Sailor Memorial Project. We are doing this interview at the UCF Library in Orlando, Florida. Senior Chief, if you will please start off by telling us when and where were you born?

Etchison I was born in Anderson, Indiana, on December 19th, 1973.

Joyner What did your parents do for a living?

Etchison Uh, my dad was a mechanic, uh, for Delta Air Lines and, uh – prior to the Navy, and my mom was a schoolteacher.

Joyner Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Etchison Yeah, I have a[sic] older brother, Mark, who's, uh – currently works for Anderson University in Indiana. He's a football coach, and I have a younger sister, Lana, who, uh, works in advertising in Atlanta, Georgia.

Joyner Growing up, where did you go to school?

Etchison Uh, well, when I was a very young age, we moved to Jonesboro, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. So I, uh, grew up in Jonesboro, went to elementary school all the way through high school right there in Jonesboro.

Joyner What did you do before entering the Navy?

Etchison High school. I joined right [out of] high school. I – I – actually, I joined the Navy, um, just a couple months into my senior year. So I know what I was going to do.

0:01:35

Enlistment

Joyner Um, when did you join?

Etchison I joined in December of [19]91.

Joyner Why'd you join the Navy?

Etchison Um, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do after high school. Um, my brother had received a football scholarship. He was a big sports star. I got a couple offers, but I kind of wanted to step outside—or from under his shadow a little bit. Do something different. Uh, and both my grandfathers and father were Navy veterans and they talked about their time in the service, so figured I give it a shot, and that's what I did.

Joyner So that's why you selected the Navy over the other branches?

Etchison Initially, I wanted to join the Army, but, um, my dad kind of talked me out of it and talked me into talking to a Navy recruiter, and, uh, once I talked to them, I got offered, uh the job I wanted, so I went with the Navy.

Joyner How did your family feel about you joining the Navy?

Etchison Uh, they were a hundred percent behind it.

0:02:42 **Boot camp and training at Naval Training Center (NTC) Orlando**

Joyner Where did you attend boot camp?

Etchison Uh, I left Georgia in November of '92, um, come down here to Orlando, and, uh, I was here for a couple of days, uh, classing up there waiting for all the recruits to get here for my class. Then we officially started boot camp on December 1st of '92.

Joyner What were you trained to do for your career in the Navy? What—what were you trained to do for your career in the Navy?

Etchison At the time, I was just planning on, uh, doing my—I enlisted for six years, so my—my initial thought was just do the six years get the training and get out. See what was—well, what life had to offer me, but, uh, 21 years later, I'm still here so...

Joyner When did you begin your training at NTC [Naval Training Center] Orlando, and how did this come about?

Etchison Um, I graduated boot camp in February of '92.¹ Got two weeks leave and then started, uh, beginning of March—end of February of '92² at NTC Orlando. Uh, I went there, because of—that was the first phase of Electronics Technician School. Uh, the basic electronics was here in Orlando. Um, so I went through there and

¹ Correction: 1993.

² Correction: 1993.

then from there I moved on to the [Naval Training Center] Great Lakes to finish my training.

Joyner What did you know about the region, military, or— or any other information about Orlando, before arriving?

Etchison Uh, actually, my— my grandparents— my dad's parents— live in Winter Haven, Florida. So we'd been down here quite a bit vacationing and spending time with them. So I knew about the area— of course, the attractions and stuff, but as far as the military, um, I really didn't know there was a boot camp here, until I joined the Navy. That's— that's where they told me I'd go.

Joyner How long were you at NTC Orlando?

Etchison Uh, I was there from Nov— at NTC? I was there from March until July of that summer, so several months.

Joyner What was your first impression of the base?

Etchison I loved the base. Uh, it was a training facility, so, uh it— it was nice. Um, act— actually, at the time, they were building some new schoolhouses, and, uh, I had several friends at Nuclear School there, so, uh, it was kind of like a college campus almost, you know?

Joyner What were your first days of the service like?

Etchison Confusing. Very confusing. Um, had no idea what was going on— on— all I knew was just they pointed this and told us to go somewhere, I just followed along and went with whatever they told me.

Joyner What were your primary responsibilities at NTC Orlando?

Etchison Uh, at NTC, I was, uh just a student primary. As a student, we would stand duty and have watch responsibilities, and, um, that's pretty much it.

Joyner What did the watch responsibilities consist— contain or consist of?

Etchison Uh, watch responsibilities, uh— you had watch every four days or one weekend a month. Uh, mainly just staying quarterdeck watch at the barracks, uh, making sure everybody who entered the barracks had proper ID, and a reason for being in there and you'd clean. Basically, cleaning duties, making sure the barracks stayed clean and the— all the showers, they stayed clean.

Joyner What was your overall impression of the recruits and their training at the base?

Etchison At the beginning, you hated it, but at the end, um— I— I got a lot out of it. I thought it was a great experience. Um, you kind of grow up really fast, so the experience was— was for— for a young kid, to me, was a great— was great. I

learned a lot—learned a lot about myself, you know? And the thing back then is there is no such word as “quit,” ‘cause they wouldn’t let you quit. They’d push, push, push, and when you thought you couldn’t go anymore, they’d push more. So it was a—it was a great experience for me. An eye-opening experience being, uh, fresh out into the world, right out of high school. So, um, I got a lot out of it, and I look fondly back on—on those memories.

Joyner What kind of social life existed amongst the recruits?

Etchison Um, first and foremost, respect, you know? Um, they demanded respect. Uh, it’s a little bit different nowadays, we’re more PC [politically correct] with the training, but back then, ultimately, you learned respect and you gave respect. Uh, that was the primary, and then, um, just the basics of being a sailor, what it was like to be a sailor, the routine of, um—of being a sailor and how to survive, uh, in the Navy [*sniffs*] [*clears throat*].

0:07:50 **Taking leave and helping with recruitment**

Joyner How often was leave granted?

Etchison Uh, in boot camp, it wasn’t. Um, when I was in training, if there was[sic] any special holidays, you got—you can request leave. Um, But everybody was offered two weeks leave, right out of boot camp, So I took advantage of that.

Joyner Where did you go?

Etchison Uh, I went back home, and actually, I started a week with the, um, local recruiters, going back to my high school and talking about my experiences in boot camp and stuff, And doing that, they only charged me for one week.

Joyner How did you feel about going back with the recruiters?

Etchison Uh, it was a proud experience to walk back into your high school and see, uh, a lot of the students that were still there. Walk back in uniform and stuff, and—and knowing—even though, looking back, it wasn’t that big of accomplishment, but at the time, to me, you know, going through boot camp and doing that was a big accomplishment for me. It’s kind of, uh, rewarding to go back and have everyone see you in uniform.

0:09:06 **Relationships with other recruits**

Joyner How did your training experiences shape your relationship with other recruits in your class?

Etchison It—it taught me, um—the biggest thing I learned is—is, uh—there were recruits from all over the country. So many different backgrounds and, uh—and I didn’t realize how diverse the military was and, uh—and how different, you know people’s upbringings was[sic] all over the country. So you learn to adapt to

people and learn to, uh—to accept people for who they are, and—because—because you got to work together as a team, and ultimately, that was one of the things they taught us in boot camp—how to work together as a team. So regardless of your differences—your background—ethnic, religion, whatever—When you are part of that team, it does not matter. You're all one team. You have to work together. So that was an eye-opener too.

Joyner Who did you interact with on a daily basis?

Etchison Um, during boot camp, there was a couple of people that I interacted with, Uh—several recruits. One—one—one—his name was Tom Johnson. Um, he was from, uh, Red Wing, Minnesota, and I don't know why, but me[sic] and him just got along. So me[sic] and him would talk on a daily basis.

Joyner While you were at NTC, was there anybody...

Etchison Um, actually, uh, he was also, um, in the electronics technician program too, so me[sic] and him were actually in the same class, and we ended up being roommates, and, um, a third roommate joined us. His name was Troy Slewroo[sp], and I become close friends with him and, uh, he's still serving in the Navy as well, so I talk to him on a regular basis too. Um, after about a year, after I graduated Electronics School, I kind of lost track of Tom, so I'm not sure what happened to him, but Troy I still talk to on a regular basis.

0:11:12 **Instructors**

Joyner Who were your instructors?

Etchison At boot camp, I remember there was a Chief K, and, um BM1 Conner, and, uh, I'll never forget them, 'cause they made a huge impact on me, and actually, several years ago, I ran into—who's now Master Chief Conner. He was a Command Master Chief at Naval Station Mayport, and I was on a ship out there. I was at training and I heard the voice, and I—I know that voice. So I walked around the corner, and, uh, there's Master Chief Conner. I had a conversation with him and I was floored when he actually remembered who I was. So and, um, in—in A School—I don't remember his name, but I know he was a retired chief—electronics technician—and, uh, he was my instructor. I don't remember his name.

Joyner What were your instructors like?

Etchison Um, during boot camp, the two instructors—they were hardcore workout fanatics. So, um, we got in pretty good shape, 'cause, uh, they were all about pushups, sit-ups, doing all that kind of stuff all the time. So, um, they—they were pretty strict, but they also kind of had a joking side. They—they would joke with you and, um, they let you know when it was time to be serious and time to joke.

Um, my instructor for A School, um – he was great. He was a very personable person. Um, very strict in the classroom, but very approachable, and, uh, he helped us out a lot. Willing to do whatever he could to make sure we understand what he was teaching. So...

0:12:58

Hardest part of NTC, proudest moment, and memorable story

Joyner What was the hardest thing you remember doing at NTC?

Etchison Uh, the hardest thing was going through Electronics Technician School. It's just so much information thrown – THROWN at you at one time. Um, and, uh, it was fast and furious, and – and coming out of high school, um, the – the pace was just so much quicker than I was ever use to, And a lot of information to try and retain and, uh, just trying to figure out how to study and – and how to be able to regurgitate that information during our labs and during our tests. So, eh, that was very challenging for me, and – and I struggled a little bit at first, and, um, eventually the instructor to help me along kind of – I went to him and he taught me actually how to study and the proper ways to – to study to help us out, 'cause the pace was just so fast.

Joyner What was your proudest moment?

Etchison Um, making it through basic electronics training. Um, I was proud when I graduated boot camp, but, uh, moving on with Electronics Technician School – that was the first hurdle you had to get through. Um, Otherwise, you could have went to – if you failed out, which we had a couple guys drop out, you got sent to the fleet to a ship – basically undesignated. So you were working with the boatswain, which is not the funniest job, and I joined to do electronics work, so once I got past that first hurdle of graduating electronics school, that was a big – big moment for me.

Joyner Tell me a story of a time at NTC you will never forget.

Etchison There – there's a couple, but the one that stands out the most is, um – was in boot camp, 'cause, uh, the first time we really got, uh, a PT'd [physically trained] really hard, they called it "cycling." And, um, we did what they call a "rain party," where all the windows were shut, all the bunks were pushed back, and they just PT'd us until condensation formed on the ceiling. We were just going and going, and going, and, uh at the time, we were, uh, [inaudible] *This is the worst thing in the world*, but looking back on it, it was like, *Wow*. That was – that was – that was the big start of it all, you know? The – the defining moment of how – how far you were going to be pushed, and you just kept going, because, you know, you were scared to stop, 'cause these guys were on you, you know? So, um, that's something I'll never forget. Looking back on it, I – I kind of chuckle. Uh, that's kinda fun, because they do not do that kind of stuff anymore, but, uh, um – yeah. I – it's kind of a fond memory now, even though it wasn't fun at the time.

Joyner And that was when you first arrived or the first few months [inaudible]?

Etchison Uh, no. In the first week or so of being there, once we finally classed up and got moved into our barracks and started to settle in.

0:16:22

USS *Blue Jacket* and the Grinder

Joyner How would you describe the USS *Blue Jacket* and its function?

Etchison Um, unfortunately, when I was there, we didn't get to do much on the USS *Blue Jacket*, 'cause, uh, they were doing some work on it. So, um, we just got the basic tour, got to do some, um, simple line handling drills on it, and that's about all we go to do, but like I said, because they were doing work on it. So, um, I remember seeing it though and, um, thought it was kind of small for a ship, but, uh, um, I wish we got to the full training, but we just didn't.

Joyner And what class of ship was the *Blue Jacket*?

Etchison You know, I don't recall. Um, if I had to guess, I'd probably say it's a frigate. A small vessel. Kind of really don't recall.

Joyner What was the official purpose of the Grinder and what it – its significance to you and the recruits?

Etchison The Grinder, um – that was the – main thing – that's where we learned how to march, and – and how to follow, uh, calls and military protocol. Um, a lot of work was done on the Grinder. We – in the early mornings, we'd PT'd on the Grinder, and then, uh, we spent a lot of hours in the afternoon just doing marching drills, learning formations over and over and over, you know? Um, it was a big deal when you got your – your, um, dungaree uniform, and, uh, as soon as we got them, um, they took us back to the barracks, and dressed out in them, and went right out to the Grinder, and marched for hours, just to break in your boots. Which we, uh – actually, they were boondockers. They weren't even boots. They were three-quarter inch, uh – three-quarter inch boondockers. So, um, a lot of blisters [laughs] and stuff, but – yeah. A lot of times, just learning drills and marching quite a bit.

Joyner How would you defi – how would you define the Grinder to other people? What would you – How would you – what did it mean to you?

Etchison Oh, um, gosh. At the time, it was a work area, you know? Um, at the time, it meant you – when they said, "Hit the Grinder." You kind of like – *Aw, man. Here we go*, you know? You never knew what you were in for, um, whether we were going to PT at the time, even though we had a set scheduled for stuff, you know? If they said "Hey. We're hitting the Grinder," you kind of – you didn't know what you were in for. You were kind of hesitant at the time, but, uh, that – that was the foundation for learning, like I said, the drills and protocol and all them calls, and, um – and on the Grinder, that's where we become a team, 'cause if one

of us messes up in formation, we all paid the price, so we learned, you know, uh, about being a team.

So when – when I think of the Grinder, I think of, you know – that was the formation of teamwork there and that's how – where we really learned, uh, to be one, and I guarantee you: by the time we did our graduation ceremony, um, we were all in perfect harmony and perfect step, because of we – we worked it all out there on that Grinder, and we were on that Grinder – we were on the Grinder every day, rain, shine, and, uh, I was here during the winter. It doesn't matter what the weather was. We were out on that Grinder every day. So, um, a lot of hard work, but, um, a lot, uh – a lot of teamwork came out of that, you know?

So I guess I look back on the Grinder as a, you know – just a – probably a – significant place in Naval history, you know? Because if you think of all the sailors who walked on that Grinder – who learned the same lessons I did there, you know – it's kind of sad that it's gone now, you know? But it's, you know – I never really thought about it until – 'til you asked me, so it – it's – it's a pretty – pretty significant, I would say, in my past.

0:20:53

NTC in comparison to other bases

Joyner What other training bases did you go to?

Etchison Uh, [clears throat] when I left Orlando, um, I went out[?] to Great Lakes, Illinois, and, uh, did Phase 2 of Electronics School, which is advanced electronics, and then, I also went to, um, the [Naval] Training center out in San Diego[, California] for some follow-on schools before reporting to my first ship.

Joyner How would you compare the other bases to NTC [Orlando]?

Etchison I always questioned why they closed Orlando and – and, uh, kept Great Lakes open, because, uh, to me, the base here was nicer. It was in, uh, better shape. Um, But, understandably, the – the history up in Great Lakes, You know – the historical buildings. There's a lot of history up there, as well, but, um, I always favored this base. It was just, you know – and – and those of us who been through – went through Orlando, kind of take ownership of it, and, you know, um, I [inaudible] – when I first moved down here, uh, six months ago, when I got transferred, I drove over to Baldwin Park just to see what was still there, and, uh, I was kind of sad to see it all gone, you know? I didn't recognize anything over there anymore.

0:22:15

Important locations at NTC Orlando

Joyner What other areas of the base were particularly important to the recruits?

Etchison Uh, on boot camp, um, of course your barracks were very important, because, uh, if you ventured outside of that, you know, it – you – that was kind of your safe zone when you were with your – your company commanders, um, that and,

um, there was a USO [United Service Organization] right outside, and, um, it was a big deal, 'cause I know we were there over Christmas, and, um, we got, uh—I think it's like 45 minutes-an hour. They let us—we were allowed to go over to the USO and just kind of let our hair down for a little while, and, uh, the USO would have some snacks and stuff for us, and, uh, that was always a—a—a great place, you know? I remember going over there and just loving it, and when, uh, we graduated boot camp, everybody migrated over to the USO and that's where you met your families and stuff.

Um, on the NTC side, I remember there was a little club that had the ar—ar—arcade games, and jukeboxes, and pool. Um, that was—that's kind of the place we all congregated either after school or on the weekends, um, and there was a McDonald's. I remember the McDonald's. Um, there was a volleyball court right across from it, um, in front of some barracks. So usually after school, we—we'd run over get changed and go to the volleyball court, and, uh, you know, spend the majority of the afternoon there, and the, uh, go for McDonald's, grab something, and go back to barracks and study for the night, and be ready to go the next day.

Joyner Is that McDonald's still there or no?

Etchison Uh, I don't think so. Not that I remember.

0:24:04 **Graduation**

Joyner What did it feel like to graduate and finally put the hat on?

Etchison Oh, the white hat? Yeah. Uh, that was a big moment. Um, you strive, and, uh, I remember wearing, you know, the other cap—your—your stocking cap all the time, and you're looking[?] and you're like, *Aw, I can't wait until I get the white hat. Can't wait to get*—you know, 'cause to use that was the signal of a sailor, and once you got the white hat, you know, you knew you were almost there. Um, so that was a big goal that everybody was striving for, was to get the white hat, and then once you got it, you kind of, you know—you kinda strutted around, you know, 'cause you saw all the other companies that didn't have theirs yet. So you felt a little better than everyone else. So it was—it was a good feeling.

0:24:54 **Naval career after training**

Joyner What did you do for the Navy after you completed your training?

Etchison Um, when I finished, um, I reported to my first ship the USS *John A. Moore*. Um, I was on there for, uh, three years. Um, deployed a couple times with them. Um, I got to do some work on the USS *Wadsworth*—help out some fellow ETs [Electronic Technicians] for some time.

After that, I—I transferred to the White House Communications Agency [WHCA]. I was fortunate to get picked for that, and, um, I was—I served under

President [William “Bill” Jefferson] Clinton – his last three years, and, uh, Got to setup and maintain all the communications equipment for the President and Secret Service, and, uh, one – one of my primary jobs was to work in the limo shop, so I got to install maintain the presidential limousine, the communications equipment.

From there, I went to Fleet Combat Training Center in, uh, Dam Neck, Virginia, and, uh – and worked on radar systems there. Um, and I – I was fortunate enough to make chief while I was there, and, um, after graduating there I went to the USS *Simpson* – was on the *Simpson* out of Mayport, Florida, for, uh – for three and a half years. When left the USS *Simpson* – when I deployed on to a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] cruiser, during the [Global] War on Terrorism,³ with the *Simpson* and then, um, from there, I went to the, uh, Naval Expeditionary Combat Command. I – I helped stand that up. It was a small staff when I got there. Probably 30-40 people, and, uh, we built up the expeditionary force and when I left we were a staff of 300, uh, plus sailors, and, um, from there, um, I went to Des Moines, Iowa, of all places, with the Navy. Um, I was a Senior Enlisted Advisor for the Navy Operations Force Center out in Des Moines, Iowa. While I was out there, I, um – I made Senior Chief at NACC, and when I was out there, um, I went to the Navy Senior Enlisted Academy and got, uh – and applied and got selected for a Command Senior Chief program, and so, uh, I was at a, uh – a Command Master Chief conference and my [inaudible] was there, and, uh, I got to talking to him, and – and, uh he told me that the, uh – that the Navy Operations Support Center here in Orlando had just, uh, received a Command Senior Chief billet[?], and, uh, asked me if I was interested in coming down here. So, uh, Aft – I thought about it, and I was like, *You know, I’m getting to the point where I might want to retire.* I figured that would be a great place to retire. So I started my career there and – and I thought it would be neat. If I do retire here, to end it here. So this is where I’m at now.

Joyner Of all your previous deployments and stations, which one to you is – was the most influential and significant? Which one means the most to you?

Etchison Uh, probably the USS *Simpson*. Um, that was my first, um, real command. I was a new chief when I got there, and, um, I learned so much on that ship. I had some great people. I had a few people above me that I didn’t think was[sic] great, but still, um, I – I learned a lot of lessons there on how to treat people, on how not to, um, uh, what it takes to run a division on a ship, um, to be that leading chief.

Um, a lot of that lessons learned on that stuff – on that ship, uh – experiences I – I couldn’t have gotten anywhere else, except for being at sea, you know? So, um, I’m very grateful that I, uh, chose to enter[?], and, um – and the lessons learned – you know – good and bad – that – that was just the biggest learning curve for me – was that 3 years, and, um, I was very fortunate to have a couple, um, of chiefs and senior chiefs I still talk to, to this day, that kind of helped mentor me.

³ Correction: Global War on Terror (GWOT).

From, you know, being a new chief, and I feel when I left that command, I was a seasoned chief, and, um, you know, a lot of great, great chiefs helped me along, and—and we had some good officers that really, you know, helped me learn even more. I kind of thought I knew a lot, and then when I got there, I thought I was in over my head, but, um, it was just such a great experience and a learning experience [inaudible]. I'll—I'll look fondly on that command.

0:29:48

Boarding vessels and contraband searches

Joyner Where you ever in an active warzone?

Etchison Um, active warzone? No. Um, we did do, um, boardings, um, outside in the Mediterranean [Sea]. Um, the ships going to and from the Gulf. [inaudible] there's, um—we did boardings—non-compliance boardings—but I was never in an active warzone though.

Joyner Could you talk about the boardings, or no?

Etchison Um, some—some of the boardings, um, [inaudible]—some of them—we did the same thing on—on, uh, my first ship, down off the coast of South America, as well. It's just, uh, you know, um, looking for contraband. Uh, we go, uh, trying to make contact with the ships. If—if they're will to stop, great, and let us board, great. If not, for the non-compliance ones, we kind of forced them to stop, and, um—boarding, and I was fortunate to be part of a boarding team on a couple of those, and, uh, whether they are compliant or not, boarding a ship is always nerve-racking, 'cause you don't know what to expect, and Of course, you're looking for contraband and—and, um—and, uh, going through the ship is always kind of nerve-racking, 'cause you, you know—you don't know what—there's so many places to hide on a ship, and, um—so it—it was—it was interesting, to say the least. Um, nerve-racking, but, um, fortunate enough, um, uh—the few, um, kind of situations that happened, I wasn't involved in those. So I was—I was extremely fortunate, you know? So that's about that. Nowadays, they don't do that.

0:31:45

Contacts from the Navy

Joyner You mentioned you kept in touch with one of your buddies from the NTC.

Etchison Mmhmm.

Joyner Is there anybody else you kept in contact with from the Navy?

Etchison Um, I got a couple mentors. Uh, two—two of them have retired from the Navy, but I still keep in contact with them. I touch bases with them, um, if I got a situation I am in and I'm not sure how to handle that, or what to do. Or, uh, if I make a decision on what I'm going to do, I usually call them and run it by them. I—I kind of get their take, um, and—and I've made a couple of real good friends along the way that—that I keep in touch with. So I would say—and my dad gave

me this advice when I joined the Navy – He told me, um, you know, “Mot everybody’s your friend. You’re going to make a lot of acquaintances, but your – your friends, you’ll keep in touch with.” And so, um, I would say, out of all the sailors I served with, probably about 4 or 5 I keep in touch with.

0:32:47

Naval values

Joyner What values or characteristics of the Navy do you believe made an impression on your life?

Etchison Well, the, you know – our core values are honor, courage, and commitment, and, um, with honor, it’s just not, you know – I feel honored to wear the uniform, but, uh, it’s – it’s an honor to represent not only the United States, but all those sailors that have served before me, and, uh, especially those chiefs who, uh, have made the Navy strong. Because, you know the saying is “The chiefs are the backbone of the Navy.” And my ultimate goal in the Navy was to make chief, once I decided to make it a career, and obtaining that goal and being a part of the mess is, you know, the big honor, and I just want to live up to the standards that, you know, all the sailors before me have set, you know?

Um, and another characteristic is – is courage, and courage doesn’t mean you’re not scared, you know? Um, being courageous is when you’re unsure, maybe a little scared, but you do – you do the job anyway, and – and being courageous is, you know, sometimes making an unpopular decision, you know to, uh – with some of my junior personnel, you know, I know the decision is not going to be popular – not going to like it, but you gotta make it and – and – and be committed to the – to the decision, and, you know, [inaudible] that goes along with commitment, you know? Um, Not only being the decision-maker, but as somebody making the decision, whether you like it or not, or agree with it or not.

Um, we have this saying in the mess, you know: “Acceptance doesn’t mean agreement.” You don’t have to agree with it, but you’re committed. That’s the way we’re going, so let’s go and you drive your sailors to – to follow along. So, um, the values that the Navy hold dear – honor, courage, and commitment – that’s[sic] the ones I take on and try to live up to, and I’ll tell you this: not only in my professional life, but in my personal life as well. ‘cause I – I’m always mindful that my actions out in the civilian world, um, Can affect my professional world, as well, and I – I don’t want to do anything that would discredit, you know, the Navy, as well as discredit my family.

Joyner So overall, what would you say is the most valuable lesson you learned from the Navy?

Etchison Wow. Um, you – it’s – it’s – I’ve changed so much in my way of thinking, in the Navy. Um, I think the most valuable lesson is being, uh, tolerant of, uh, different points of view, different, um, people, you know? Um, it’s okay to have your own opinion and to state your opinion and have your belief, as long as you’re willing

to accept the fact that there's[sic] people out there that's[sic] gonna disagree with you and have a different point of view, and, um, that's one thing [inaudible], uh—uh, where I grew up, um, I kinda had a mindset of a way things should be and my beliefs, but, um, sitting here 21 years later, I'm a totally different person. I think I'm more open and more, uh, subjective to—other people's, um, either backgrounds or, you know, ways of life, and, you know, the way I look at it—I, you know—we're all people. We all have a right to our own opinion, our own way of life, so as long as it doesn't affect me directly, you know, I haven't put much thought into it.

0:36:50

How Orlando has changed over time

Joyner You said when you returned back to Orlando, you didn't recognize the base, so—or the area at all. So how would you say the NTC base or the Central Florida region changed since you left?

Etchison Um, from what I remember, um, there—there's a few landmarks that are here that I remember going to, um, around the base. Church Street Station is still there. Um, there's a couple of restaurants—still there, but the landscape has changed, you know, to being primarily housing now, and, um, I think the demographics of the population has changed too. Um, I think there's more of a Hispanic culture here than I remember.

Um, so, um—and this is the—since boot camp, you know, this is—the last six months is the first time I've really been here—living here, you know, not just kind of visiting to visit the theme parks and stuff like that. That's totally different than actually being—excuse me—being a resident here. So, um, I think the demographics has[sic] changed and, you know, that whole area around Lake Baldwin now, you know, just seems to me to be all housing and stuff now, and, uh, there—there was a club—I think it was called Manatees—outside the gate there—that I was looking for to see if it was still there, and, uh, it might be there, but I couldn't remember my way around, because I didn't recognize the area. Um, I remember that and, uh, there was a hotel in the area we use to stay at on the weekends, just to get away. It was the Colonial Plaza. I don't know if it is there or not. Uh, I've [inaudible]—I've talked to my wife. I was like, you know, "I want to take some time and drive around see if we can find it," or, you know—so—But, uh, yeah. It's totally changed.

0:38:50

NTC's legacy and the Lone Sailor Memorial Project

Joyner What do you think the lasting legacy of the NTC Orlando—of is—of the NTC Orlando?

Etchison I would hope people remembered it was here, you know? And, um, I know the [Central Florida] Navy League has worked hard, uh, to get the—the Lone Sailor [Memorial Project] statue out in Baldwin Park, which, um, that would be a good reminder. Even talking with some of the younger sailors nowadays, uh, when I

told them, "Hey. I went to boot camp in Orlando," they didn't even know, you know, that Orlando even existed as – as a RTC [Recruit Training Center] or that we had a base down here, Other than where we're at now. Um, so I – I just hope people remember, you know, that we were here – that we were a big footprint here, at one time, and, uh, I think that Lone Sailor statue would be a lasting memorial, At least to all the sailors, you know, that[sic] served here, and at least we get some kind of recognition that we were here and did something here. So, um, sad that it's gone, but it is what it is.

Joyner What do you – what do you think former Navy personnel would like to see or be reminded of when they revisit the site?

Etchison Um, I think just having a statue that, you know – the Lone Sailor Statue just represents a – a lot to sailors, and, uh, seeing that there would be a, you know – hopefully, just a good reminder, uh, of the things that went on, you know, at RTC and NTC, and, uh, it's funny when – when I got asked to do this – and looking through my book and thinking about, you know, um – you remember all the good times, you know? The bad times – you just forget – kinda forget them, unless somebody brings something up, but, uh, you remember the good times, and hopefully, having a memorial there, you know, when – when the sailors come back to visit and they see that, it will bring back the good memories of – of that, and the positives that they experienced there.

Joyner Before we finish I want you to fill in the – fil in the blank for me.

Etchison Okay.

Joyner NTC Orlando means what to me.

Etchison [*sighs*] I tell you: NTC Orlando means a new beginning for me. Um, because I was there at, uh, RTC and NTC, where I got the first taste of the world and experience the world on my own, not in a family environment or setting, and, uh, I had to rely upon myself, you know, to get things done or to be more responsible. Um, I – I had to answer to a higher authority for my actions. So it was a total new beginning for me, and, um, looking back, I think I made the right choice for myself, 'cause I couldn't, um – I couldn't imagine myself doing anything else, and – and, um – and having that experience there and getting to experience life, uh, on my own being, able to make my own decisions and do things, you know, um – that's, uh – that's where it all started for me. Right there.

0:42:20 **Closing remarks**

Joyner Is there anything I haven't asked you about or anything else you would like to talk about, sir?

Etchison You know, I – I can't think of anything. Um, not at the moment. No.

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Joyner Thank you, Senior Chief Etchison, for taking your time to conduct this interview for us. We appreciate your service and we look forward to—hopefully to this going forward to become part of the Lone Sailor Memorial Project.

Etchison Uh, thank you for—for inviting me, and, uh, service is a pleasure. So it's my pleasure to serve—serve the United States and to be able to serve its great people. So, um, I appreciate your “thank you,” but it—it's—it's a pleasure and it's an honor to be able to do this. So, um, thank you for inviting me.

End of Interview