

Oral Memoirs

Of

Michael Partain

An Interview Conducted by

Amanda Hill

March 6, 2014

Community Veterans History Project

Lone Sailor Memorial Project

University of Central Florida RICHES of Central Florida

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Interview Histories

Interviewer: Amanda Hill

Cameraperson: Carolyn "Carli" Van Zandt

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

Project Detail

The Community Veterans History Project, a RICHES 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 Michael Partain is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 6, 2014.

Abstract

Oral history interview of Michael Partain, who served in the U.S. Navy during the Cold War Era. Partain was born at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, on January 30, 1968. He enlisted in the Navy on January 2, 1988, but was disqualified due to illness on February 20. During his short service, Partain trained at Naval Training Center (NTC) Orlando.

This oral history interview was conducted by Amanda Hill on March 6, 2014. Interview topics include Partain's background, enlistment, basic training, advanced training at the Nuclear Propulsion School, the effect of the Navy's presence in Central Florida on the region, NTC Orlando, training, his illness and subsequent qualification, and life after leaving the Navy.

Michael Partain

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Amanda Hill
March 6, 2014
Orlando, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Hill Today is March 6th, 2014. I'm interviewing Mike Partain, who served in the United States Navy. My name is Amanda Hill, and with me is [Carolyn] "Carli" Van Zandt running the camera. We are interviewing today Mr. [laughs] Mike Partain, as part of UCF [University of Central Florida] Community Veterans History Project and as research for the creation of the Lone Sailor Memorial Project. We are recording this interview at Mike's home in Orlando, Florida.

0:00:29

Background

Hill Mr. Partain, will you please start off by telling us, uh, where and when you were born?

Partain I was born at, uh, Camp Lejeune Marine Corps Base in North Carolina in January of 1968.

Hill So your parents were in the service?

Partain And[?] my father was a [United States] Naval Academy graduate and a Marine Officer.

Hill In North Carolina?

Partain Uh, yeah, he served in the Marine Corps, uh, in North Carolina.

Hill And so what did your mom do for a living?

Partain Uh, my mother was a housewife. Uh, she's a French Canadian from the providence of Quebec[, Canada], and they met when he was, uh, in the training crews at the Naval Academy.

Hill Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Partain I have one sister, uh, born in Bethesda Naval Hospital¹ in 1970.

¹ Officially called the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

University of Central Florida Community Veterans History Project

A RICHES Project: Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences and Stories of Central Florida

Hill And growing up, where did you go to school?

Partain Uh, well, after my father, uh, resigned his commission from the Marine Corps, we moved to, uh, Central Florida – Polk County.

Hill How old were you when he resigned?

Partain Uh, four years old.

Hill So you moved here pretty early?

Partain Yeah, I've been here pretty much all my life. This is – this is home. Uh, Camp Lejeune's pretty much just a name on a birth certificate.

Hill Were your par – were your – was your father involved in the Navy – the Navy at all when he moved here?

Partain No, no. He was out of the service by then.

0:01:40

Enlistment

Hill Okay. So what did you do before you entered the Navy?

Partain Um, I was a college student. Uh, went to Florida State University for my first year of college and, um, didn't do too well my first year, and when my father got my report card, uh, he informed me that I was on my own.

Hill [laughs] Okay.

Partain That's why I joined the Navy.

Hill So that's why you joined the Navy.

Partain Yeah.

Hill Alright. So how old were you at that time?

Partain Uh, I was 19.

Hill 19. So why the Navy? What...

Partain Well, the – we're a military family. My grandfather had, uh, served in the Marine Corps. Um, my father was in the Naval Academy and graduated 1966, and, uh, served in the Marine Corps of his commission. So going to the Navy was an opportunity. I, uh, saw a lot of different opportunities I can do in the Navy – pay for my education. That was my main thing was to get my college paid for, since, uh, I didn't do too well my first year.

Hill What were you looking to study?

Partain Um, actually, I went in to the Tampa MET [Military Entrance Test] center² for the, um, *[clears throat]* – for testing and did the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] test – scored very well – and they pulled me aside and asked me if I would take the nuc – nuclear test for Nuclear Propulsion School in the Navy, which I did and scored, uh, very high on that. High enough that the commanding officer of the MET center came to me and asked if I would sign an enlistment contract right away, and I said, “No,” and that I was – that I wanted to think about it first, because I wasn’t totally sure that I wanted to go into the military, and I made the mistake of mentioning my father being, uh – was a Naval Academy graduate, and he ended up calling my father, and, uh, the two of them got together, uh, and I didn’t have a chance. I ended up signing my enlistment contract about an hour later.

Hill Wow, so pretty easy decision?

Partain Uh, yeah, it was. I mean I delayed my enlistment. This was in April 1987, when I was still, um – actually, uh, I had just got home from college and, um, I delayed my enlistment until January of 1988.

Hill Why delay?

Partain Just wanted to go in the winter months. I – I don’t like the summer. So I didn’t want to run around in the summer and do PT [physical training] in the summertime.

Hill Makes sense.

Partain *[coughs]*.

0:04:00 Naval Training Center Orlando and Nuclear Propulsion School

Hill So where did you attend boot camp?

Partain Well, I joined the Navy to go see the world, and I ended up travelling about 45 miles north of where I lived and grew up in Orlando, Florida, at the Orlando Naval Training Center.

Hill *[laughs]* Right. Were you, uh, looking to be trained then in a specific career at that point or were they looking to train you in a specific career?

Partain Yeah, I was accepted into the Nuclear Propulsion School for the Navy, and I had to complete my basic training and then A School after that, which were both, at that time – both housed at the Orlando Naval Training Center, uh, here in Orlando.

Hill Can you tell me more about the nuclear propulsion?

² United States Military Entrance Processing Center Tampa.

Partain Well, um, I didn't get that far. Um, uh, basically, from my understanding with the school, once I completed, uh, basic, I was gonna go into A School at the Nu — uh, Nuclear Propulsion School, and — which, um, I — if I completed that, I did a six-year hitch as part of the contract, and if I completed the school, then I would have gone into the fleet as an E[nlisted Rank]-3, which would have been Petty Officer [sniffs].

Hill Okay. So that specific school — what are they — what do they do?

Partain Uh, they train the engineers to run the, uh, nuclear propulsion systems for the Navy's aircraft carriers, uh, and sub — uh, submarines that are nuclear-powered, and it's a promising career path. It opens up a lot of doors. It was very tough. Academically, it was a very stringent program. If you failed, uh, out of the program, then you went into the fleet and served the rest of your hitch [sniffs].

Hill What — what were you hoping to do with that?

Partain Um, it was going to be a skill for me. Um, Open the doors, uh, to — you know, to have a trade and, uh, also go to college. Uh, my plan was to finish college, once I graduated — uh, once I completed my hitch in the Navy, and then take the expertise I had learned in the Navy, along with a — hopefully, a degree in nuclear engineering, uh, and go work in a private industry.

Hill Okay. So then — so you began your training at NTC [Naval Training Center Orlando] in January of 1988?

Partain Yes.

Hill Correct? Okay.

0:06:02 Naval presence in Central Florida

Hill So you were pretty familiar then with the region, right? [inaudible].

Partain As far as Florida? Yes.

Hill Yes, um, [laughs] so were you...

Partain I joined the Navy and see world, and go right into my own back yard. So...

Hill Right. Were you familiar with the Navy's presence in Orlando already?

Partain Yes, I mean, I — growing up here, you know, the — growing up in Florida, especially, uh, at my age, and when the — the telltale signs of World War II are still all over Florida. Uh, Most of your airports are former Army or Navy Train —, uh, naval, um — Sorry. Most of your airports are former Army or naval training centers for the pilots during World War II, like Sebring [Regional Airport]. Even McCoy [Air Force Base] airfield, which is now the [Orlando] International

Airport, was a training field, uh, during World War II. So, you know, there's always been a military presence in Florida.

Hill How – do you remember how you found out about that presence?

Partain As far as – I mean, growing up, I mean, you see the bases. Um, you got NASJAX [Naval Air Station Jacksonville] up in Orlando.³ You got [Naval Station] Mayport – I mean, sorry – NASJAX up in Jacksonville, and you got Mayport. You got Patrick Air Force Base, McCoy Air – I mean, uh, MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa.

Um, as a child growing up, um, the flight path for the Air Force, uh, fighters, to do practice bombing over in, um, Avon Park Bomber Range,⁴ went over our house. After – every afternoon, we'd see [General Dynamics] F-16s [Fighting Falconfly] fly over and practice in Avon Park, and they'd come back, and sometimes they'd fly low, and, you know, you'd always see the military around growing up here.

Hill Why do you think the Navy chose to locate a recruit training center in Central Florida?

Partain Um, no idea, to be honest with you [laughs]. Um, I know during, uh – when a lot of military bases were here in Florida, or located here in Florida, because of the climate here allowed training year round, especially with the flying conditions. So – but as far as the Navy's base in Orlando and the training center, um, I have no idea why they, uh, located it here.

0:08:08 **Illness and disqualification**

Hill That's fair. Uh, so how long were you at NTC Orlando?

Partain Well, um, I arrived in January, uh, – I think it was January 2nd, 1988, and I went through the first part of basic training. I made it through about four weeks – almost my fifth week – into, uh, training at, uh, NTC Orlando, And I broke out in a rash. Um, One of the curious things is it was a rash that I was born with at Camp Lejeune. Um, and periodically through my life, whenever – like if I wore dry-cleaning clothes, or, thing – you know, was around chemicals and stuff, I'd break out. Well, I broke out in this rash, and they couldn't figure out why or where it was coming from. Uh, because normally, I could control it, um, and it just didn't want to go away.

So the Drill Instructor, [clears throat] um, sent me down to the infirmary – the – the naval hospital, and they held me there for, uh, about a week or so, and tried to figure out what was wrong. They finally came up and said that, uh, I was, uh – because of the rash, that I was going to be disqualified for my program...

³ Correction: Jacksonville.

⁴ Correction: Avon Park Air Force Range.

Hill Mmm.

Partain Uh, in the Nuclear Power School.

Hill Did they know what it was at that point?

Partain No, uh, they just called it an “atopic dermatitis.” Uh, and they informed me that it made in ineligible to go to the Nuclear Power School. So I ended up, uh—they asked me if I wanted to stay in the fleet, but that meant chipping paint for the six years I was gonna be in the Navy. So I asked them to go ahead and send me home and, uh, end my enlistment at that point, which they, uh, gave me my uniform. I went home as an E3, so I dressed up in my Navy blues, and got my sea bag, and, uh, they sent me home, but, uh, *[clears throat]* the, um, wha—during that time that they told me I was going home to the time I went home, they put me in what they called a “medical hold company,” where it was—I was taken out of my training regimen, and then put into a, uh, barrack, where other people who had been medically disqualified—they kind of let us sit there for a while. It was about two weeks before they told me, uh, that I had my orders to go home, and that—that’s another—I’ll tell you about that later.

Hill So what was it like when you found out that you had to leave the Navy?

Partain Well, um, I mean, the—the, uh—it was a disappointment, because I really had looked forward into getting into the career. Um, I had volunteered to do submarine duty, which was an extra pay, and, um, you know, to me, this was going to be my livelihood. Something—a school and trade that I could pick up and, uh, um, learn, and spend—you know, be able to make a career for the rest of my life with. So I was kind of left with the, um, uh—you know, I ended up coming home, and having to refigure my life and what I was going to do, and I ended up, uh—actually I ended up going to work for [Walt] Disney World after that, and I worked at Disney World for three years while I put myself through college *[clears throat]*.

0:11:18 **Basic training, group mentality, and team-building**

Hill So let’s back up a bit...

Partain Mmhmm.

Hill To when you first got to the—the base. Um, what were your first impressions?

Partain Well, um, you know, it’s intimidating. I mean, you’re coming off civilian life, even though I grew up in a military—military family. Um, nothing prepares you for the shock of going into the world of, uh, you know—of—of the military. It’s a totally different experience.

Um, the first shock is your lose your individuality. Uh, and that was, uh—that was the hardest thing for me to get used to—is the fact that you had to assimilate

yourself into their world and their program, and, um, you know, you lost the — the “me” part of yourself, for at least awhile.

Hill Can you tell me more about that? What specifically caused those changes?

Partain *[clears throat]* Well, I mean, the first thing they do — they bring you in and you line up. Um, you know, they issue you a uniform, um, and it’s an assembly line. You’re given, uh, you know, your boots, eh, and all your gear, and you have to stencil your name on the gear and, uh — and your sea bag, and, um, and then they, uh, shave all your hair off. Uh, they, uh, you know — just going through that is, eh — it’s more — like I said, it’s an assembly line type of impersonal, um — uh, the impersonal, um, process, because, I mean, you’re — you’re moved from one place to another and, you know, you gotta, uh — eh, you just get to feel like you’re a cow sometimes, um, and, uh the other, you know — the other thing is the — as you go in and you’re all wearing the same clothes, you all look the same.

So everybody is the same, and that’s what I mean by “lose your individuality,” and, uh, then, you know, once you get into the barracks that begins the training process, which one of the first things they start doing is breaking down the individual and starting to form a unit. Because, you know, everybody — when everyone’s acting individually, you know — you have your own routines and stuff like that, and one of the first things *[laughs]* I remember — I knew this was going to happen, uh, because my dad had warned me, but, uh, everyone settled down for the night, and one of the first memories — and it was funny, because it just totally, uh, unnerved me — was, uh, I think, at about three o’clock in the morning, uh, the, uh — the DI [Drill Instructor] came in and threw the trash can down the barrack hall, making all kinds of rackets and screaming, “Get on the line! Get on the line!” And, um, I remember getting — getting up and, um, getting on the line in front of the barracks, and, you know, we’re in our skivvies and socks, and I’m sitting there shaking, and, um, I’m thinking, you know, *What the hell? What the hell have I done?* Because I don’t like getting up at three o’clock in the morning.

Hill *[laughs]*.

Partain I don’t think anybody really does, especially when someone’s screaming at you and throwing a — a metal trash can down the — down the barrack, uh, hallway, and if you don’t — the — the trash cans being metal, makes a hell of a lot of noise, especially in a barrack on a tile floor. So that was the — that was the first morning of recruit training, and, um, they had a lot of different things in store for us as we, uh, went through this process. So it was — some of it was humorous. Um, I knew the purpose of it, which was, you know, some people — some of the guys didn’t do well with it, but, you know, I kinda laughed with some of the stuff that they were doing.

Hill So life in the barracks then — if everyone’s the same, how does that affect the group dynamic?

Partain Well, I mean, you still have people that look out for themselves. That's the big thing is, when you get people who just don't—you know, they're used to taking care of themselves and, um, not—not thinking as a community. Because the whole purpose of the training is to get you thinking beyond yourself, to work as a team, to work together.

Um, like one of the first things that happened, um, when we, you know—we had to march together and they had to form us together and started doing things, of course everyone's going off in different directions. Um, and I remember one morning, we went out and did PT—running around. and, um, came back, and everything that everybody owned at the barracks, uh, including, uh, the mattresses, the actual bunk racks—everything was heaped up into this massive mountain in the middle of the barracks. and we all walked in and we're just looking at this. You know, everything we had was in—in the middle of the barracks, and the, of course, the DI comes out screaming at us, you know, uh, "Get this shit together!" You know, "Get this place in order and get it squared up and you've got 15 minutes, and, I mean, eh, the—we all looked at each other like, *What the hell?* So everyone dove[sic] in and people were calling out names and, you know, "I've got such and such." and we're spreading[?] out trying to get the barracks back up, and of course, we didn't do it in 15 minutes, which proceeded to have more pushups and things like that that we had to do, because of that. Uh, the—once we get it squared away, it happened again, and, uh, later on, when it happened again, we did get it done in 15 minutes.

Hill Are there any other examples of training experiences that helped shaped your relationships with other recruits in your class?

Partain Uh, well, just—I mean, everything that we did. I mean, from the marching, I remember, um—uh, I didn't—I don't keep my step very well, so I had a hard time learning how to keep in step, and, uh, the guy next to me was trying to show me how to skip to keep back, you know—to get myself back into step. For some reason, I have no rhythm. So I just—I was just constantly out of step, and I would try to march on the outside, um—on the edge of the sidewalk, so that that way I wouldn't be seen as much, but never failed. I always got called out for that, but one of the other things they had, uh—one morning, we had inspection and they called in all the, uh, company commanders.

The DIs came in and proceeded to rip the place apart, uh, while we're standing there on the line. and they would come up to each recruit—and it didn't matter how clean or how great you had your rack—your stuff stowed—there was always something wrong, and in my case, um, uh, I didn't make my bed very well. Uh, and they ripped my sheet off, and the DI came up to me—I'm six-foot-two—and my DI was—I think he was probably five-foot-eight or—I mean, he would've done really well in the submarine. Um, But he came up to me and threw the sheet over my head, and was screaming at me and says, "You can't make you're fucking bed!" And he goes, "How old are you recruit?" "Nineteen, sir," and he goes, "You are Casper the Catch Edge Ghost. You are to go around

to each recruit in this command and walk up to them and raise the sheet and go, 'Boo. I am Casper the Catch Edge Ghost.' And put your sheet down and go to the next person. Raise your sheet and go, 'Boo. I'm Casper the Catch Edge Ghost,'" and I had to do that the entire barrack for the, uh—for the company there, which I—you know, you can't laugh, and I—inside, I'm laughing my ass off, because—I mean, to me, it's hilarious, but if you laughed, it just makes it a lot worse.

So I proceeded to do that, and, um, you know, they, uh—and to this day, I don't make my bed [*laughs*], and it's for—ever since then, I do not make my bed, but, um, I had to, um—I just, uh,—it's one of those things that—it stuck with me, I guess, but, uh, stuff like that—I mean, we had, um, you know—people didn't have their stuff stenciled right, so they to, uh—they made them fix that. Just little things, and going through and—this process: they come in and they work on people and break them down, and then start building back up as a team, and over time, start marching together and you start doing activities, um, and things like that to—to get to work together as a team, and, um—the people who are struggling, you start to see your leaders step up to help them and, you know, get them in line, because the ones that were having problems—then they started getting, you know, pressure put on them, because they weren't, you know, keeping up. Like, you know, I learned how to march and, you know, thankfully learned how to skip to catch my step and would get myself back in line, but, uh, you know, there are some guys that struggle with that. They didn't know how to do it or they were intimidated by it, um, and, you know, you start to work together, so that they can't get you. Meaning—"they" meaning the drill instructors, and, um, that—that was the neat part to see—everyone start to coalesce together and work together.

Hill When—do you remember a specific moment or a specific activity that you really started to notice that team coalescing?

Partain Um, I would say the, uh—we had one time, where[sic] we had a head inspection, and, um, no one liked cleaning the bathrooms, and it's, you know—in the Navy, the head is your bathroom. So we had a head inspection and, um, you know, everyone pretty much—we knew what was going to happen if we didn't get it clean. So everyone just dropped everything, ran in there, got it cleaned up, cleaned up, picked up. I remember, um, for some reason, I remember doing—clearing behind one of the toilets with a toothbrush—Not—and not one we were using, but one that we had assigned for cleaning and stuff—and trying to get everything out and spic and span, and, um, that was nice to see that, because, at that point, everyone, you know—everyone was working as a team, and, uh, um, the last part of the training was where you saw the—the team-building. Uh, unfortunately, I didn't make it past, um, my fifth week, so I didn't get to do some of the other stuff that they did—firefighting together and other things that I didn't get to—get to participate in.

Hill Right.

Partain Um...

Hill What would you pinpoint as some of those qualities that really helped bring the team together—that transformation?

Partain Well, I mean, the, uh—the qualities is the—it's the individual learning that they're not the center of the universe, and that's one of the things, uh—basic training in the military is to break down the individuality, to have people understand that, you know, you're—you're part of something, and the world doesn't revolve around you. Uh, some people get it quicker than others. Those that do, do very well in the military. Some never get it, but, uh, that was one thing that, uh—that they, you know—everything was designed to do that. Uh, to do it to break down the civilian and then recast him as a—as person who could think in a military world, because, when it comes down to it, one, you now—in the military world, there is a chain-of-command—a hierarchy—and you are expected to follow orders, and there could be times that something could be going on, and you're given an order, and, as a civilian, you might question it and be like, *Well, I don't feel like doing that right now, and you can't do that in the military*, because someone may tell you to do something, um, like shut a door and secure the door, because there's a fire, and if you start arguing with them, then the fire might spread out beyond the compartment and—and jeep—jeopardize the ship and everybody on it. So part of the—that training is to get people to understand, you know, hey, there's a time, you know—the time to be a civilian is when you're off duty, but when you're—when you're on duty, you have your military bearing, you have—you follow it, and you, you know—you work for the good of the unit.

0:23:16 Social life and lessons learned

Hill When you were off duty, was there ever any sort of social life with...

Partain Oh, when I was in training...

Hill Amongst the recruits?

Partain No, no. There's no liberty or leave—li—liberties really. There was no liberty, uh, in training. Um, the liberty took place when you graduated from boot camp. Um, so I did not get that experience. Uh, once—once I went into the medical hold company, and I stayed there, and, um, you know, that—that—once I got out, then I went home and that was it.

So, uh, one of the funny things that happened—um, my father and grandfather both sent in birthday cards for me, uh, while I was in training, and, uh—which normally wouldn't be a problem, but they were being smartasses and they signed their card—they put in the address of the card—my father put down: "Captain Warren B. Partain, Jr., USNC"—I'm sorry—uh, "USNA class of '66," and, uh—and then my grandfather put, uh: "Major Warren B. Partain, Sr., USNC, retired," and, um, the DIs, of course, got the letters and they called me up to the

office, and, uh, you had to walk up to the office, you had to bang on the door and announce who you were, and then asked permission to enter in, and, uh, so I get into the office and, um, I see the birthday cards in my DI's hand, and he goes, "So your father was a — was a ring banner?" And I knew right then what my dad had done.

The "ring banner" is a term — a derogatory term — for a Naval Academy graduate. So he goes, "Drop and give me 20." *[laughs]* So — and he goes — of course, that wasn't good enough, so I ended up doing like I think 60 or 70 pushups. Um, and of course, you know, that was because of what my grandfather and father had done, but, um, it was their amusement *[laughs]*, but he wasn't a mean guy. I mean, they started to like me. They're not, um — it's not like they're sadists or anything like that — the drill instructors. They do it for a purpose, and then, you know. As you mature and things like that, you get to see what they're trying to do and they really begin to teach you.

Hill What would you say that purpose is *[inaudible]*? What were they trying to teach you?

Partain Well, I mean, how to conduct yourself in a military fashion. A military bearing.

Hill Okay.

Partain Like one of the things — one of the things I still remember is to make sure my gig line is straight. Um, you know, when you get dressed and, uh, get everything together, your buttons line up with your belt — the edge of your belt buckle and your — and your zipper, so you have what's called a "gig line." It goes straight up from — from your neck down to your crotch *[laughs]*.

0:25:48 **Routine, classes, and Uniform Military Code of Justice**

Hill So what was daily life like as a Navy recruit?

Partain Well, everything was structured. I mean, you got in the — in the training, you got up at a certain time, you ate at a certain time, uh, you PTed at a certain time, uh, You had training and different things, uh, at — at different, um — at different times, and then they put you to bed. So you had no choice. I mean, very little free time. The only time we really got free time was laying in the rack before you went to sleep.

Hill Who did you interact with on a daily basis?

Partain Um, well, they kept you too busy. so you talked to your, um — your, you know — your bunkmate and the people around you, but for the most part you're doing what they — they put in classes and they teach, you know — they — one of the first things they start teaching you is the UCMJ for the Univer[sic] — Univerm[sic] — Uniform Code Military Justice, which is the rules and regulations of the Navy.

You know, how to salute, when to salute, um, how to march, uh, what you can and can't do, um, And just, you know – it's an emersion into a different life style.

Hill Who were – you said you were taking classes, so who were your instructors?

Partain Um, just other, uh – other, um – sometimes they were other Dis, sometimes they were, uh, just other people on the base. Um, No one that I really remember specifically.

Hill Okay. Do you remember any of your specific classes?

Partain Um, like I said, most of it – like the UCMJ. One of the funny ones, uh – probably not appropriate for this, but it's one of those things that stuck in your mind. We're sitting there showing slides and talking about the UCMJ, and they had, um – they had this slide come up, and it was on a pink background. It had a sailor sitting down, and on his lap, he had a dog, and there was a big circle with a line through [laughs] it for no bestiality, and I about but laughing when I saw it.

Hill [laughs].

Partain But they had – I mean, just stupid things like that, but, uh, the, uh, you know – when they start getting to the later weeks, like I said, they – [inaudible] – they – they'd have you march, and there was a lot of drill to get you to un – to get your body into the routines, and then later on, you start doing more class work, and, um, they, uh – like I said, they – they – one of the big things was firefighting. We are out doing firefighting duty, and then they have one a week, where you're working KP [kitchen patrol] duty and stuff like that for the kitchen.

Hill Uh, Could you clarify for me what, um – the acronym UCMJ?

Partain University[sic] Code of Mil – Universal[sic] Code of Military Justice.⁵ It's the law for the military. So the military has its own, um – basically its own judicial system, uh, that's separate from the civilian one. So they administer their own laws, and, uh, courts, and everything. So, like if I did something wrong, then I could be, uh – they have what's called a "captain's mast" or "court-martialing." and your – whatever infraction, then you'll assess whatever penalty or – or, uh, punishment that they have.

0:28:48 Most difficult aspect of boot camp and proudest moment

Hill So what was the hardest thing you remember doing at NTC?

Partain The hardest thing that I remember doing, um – I dunno. it was probably just the, um – I'm tempted to say – well, the – well, the thing that I didn't like the most – that was hard or difficult for me – was in the military – medical hold company. Um, this – this was once they disqualified me from service. They put me in a

⁵ Correction: Uniform Code of Military Justice.

limbo, um, where I didn't know when I was going home. I didn't know what was really going on, other than the fact that they were—they, uh—that I was being disqualified from the Navy, and they told me that, you know, it takes some time and it could take a couple days, a couple months. So I'm like, you know—no one likes to be in limbo, and they would have you do stupid stuff, Just to have you do it. Uh, like we went in to one barrack and we scrubbed the whole barrack with hand brushes, on our hands and knees, and it was just, um—stuff like that. That was, you know, trying not to get negged out. Um, that was the hardest thing for me.

I mean, to me, the training is easy. Um, you know, doing the physical activities, the running, uh, the marching, the learning. That was easy and it didn't bother me. I mean, I enjoyed, um, the challenge of that. The hard part for me was when I realized that I was not going to be able to stay in the Navy, Having to wait, and then wait for the bureaucracy to process—process me out. Yeah.

Hill Before we move on to that moment, um—because I do want to talk about that—can you tell me one moment where you felt really proud of your work in NTC?

Partain Um, the—I think the proudest moment—I still have it—is, uh, my photograph. Um, they brought us in after we shaved us, and we're all cleaned up, and they dressed us up, and they marched us in, and we took our photograph with the American flag behind us, uh, so we could send it home to Mom and Dad, and that to me was the proudest moment. Um, I—I still have that photograph. I have it on my Facebook page, and, um, I keep that, and, uh, you know—yeah[?]. It's just a little snot-nosed kid in his little sailor's uniform, but it—to me, that was something that I could show that hey, you know, I'm serving my country. I'm doing what's right and trying to make, you know, things a little bit better than when I found it.

Hill Did you send it home to mom and dad?

Partain Oh, yeah.

Hill What'd they say?

Partain I think, uh—I mean, ma—they wrote me back, and I had a girlfriend, at the time too, and she wrote me. I had letters from her, um, on a daily basis. I still got them, and, uh, the, uh—I've got a stack of letters about that thick that she wrote to—back and forth, and that was nice, you know, to have someone writing back and forth. It—it kind of killed the monotony. You'd look forward to—you know, that was you're little piece of individ—individuality. You get your letter and mail call and—and to read that, and, uh—but yeah. I sent that home to Mom and Dad, and my girlfriend.

Hill So when did you leave the Navy then?

Partain Yeah, I was, um—it was—I don't remember the exact day, Um, but it was in February, uh, of '88. It was roughly about two months after I'd got there. I think I served just under 60—60 days, or somewhere close to 60 days, and, um, basically they came in and told me to collect my gear, um, get my dress blues on, and they sent me home. See, when I enlisted, I enlisted, instead of as a, uh—um, going in as a seamen, I would have—when I completed everything, I would have come out as a, uh, Petty Officer—an E-3.

So, um, they allowed me to go home with a—with that uniform and that rank, which is kinda nice, you know? It was funny, 'cause everyone else were[sic] being sent off, and I get my orders and am being put on a bus. They asked me if I wanted to go on a bus, or I think it was a train to Water Haven, and I said, uh, "Just drop me off at the airport." I called my mom and dad and told them to come get me, because the airport's, you know, 45 minutes from my parent's house. Because a bus would have taken like 3 hours to get there. So I had them drop me off at the airport, and I played video games [laughs] for about two hours while I waited for my parents to come get me, but it was nice to, you know, walk around the airport in the—in my uniform and get home, and I saw my girlfriend in my uniform and that, uh—that's always fun.

Hill Um, so have you—what did you do once you left?

Partain Um, well, once I was out of the Navy, I went back to college. Um, of course, the—my plan of having the Navy, uh, as a career and paying for my college that way kind of fell through. Um, I went to work for Disney World, and, uh, finished my AA [Associate of Arts] degree, and then transferred up to Florida State University and married my girlfriend, and I completed my degree up there, and, uh, you know, worked my way through college.

Made me appreciate my education a lot more, and, uh, one of the things ironic things and—that happened—and it kind of comes back full circle with NTC Orlando—um, seven years ago, I was diagnosed with, uh, male breast cancer. Oddly enough, my birthplace was extremely contaminated with, um, drinking water—I mean, uh, solvents in the drinking water, and one of those solvents is called Tetrachloroethylene, which is used in dry-cleaning, and it's linked to breast cancer. Um, whenever I was a child growing up, I would break out into the rash I told you about, because—well, shortly after I was diagnosed, I went back, and I remembered my experience at NTC Orlando, and the fact that I had broken out in this rash after, uh, I had gotten on base. So I looked up the base, and like Camp Lejeune, NTC Orlando was declared a Superfund⁶ site, um, uh, partly because of the Tetrachloroethylene dumped from the base drycleaner, which was located right next to the barracks, where I was housed as an enlisted, uh, sailor, uh—seaman—in, uh—in 1988, and the base was actually closed down

⁶ Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980.

in 1995, um, and listed in—into the Superfund site at that time, which, uh—it's one of those odd things that I always wondered about is: how bad was the base contaminated? Because, soon as I got home, the rash that I had broken out with, while I was in training, cleared up

Hill Hmm.

Partain Without any—within days of being home, and, uh—and it never broke out like that again, like I did when I was on base, and [inaudible]—when I rented on base, I was fine, and, uh—so it's one of those things that makes you wonder, and my understanding is that the—the, uh, base drycleaner—he said they had been dumping this chemical on the base and it was a plume of it that actually stretched underneath the recruit training barracks, like I said, and ended up, I think, in Lake Druid—is where the chemicals were coming out.

Hill Did—was there ever any cleanup measures taken?

Partain I don't know. I didn't look into that. I've been tied up with the Camp Lejeune issue since then, but one of these days, I'd like to go back. I'd heard some things that had happened here, but I didn't follow the—the end results of, um, NTC Orlando after that. I know they closed the base down and I think the developed it—part of it as a private community.⁷ And I heard there were some problems here, but, uh, you know, like I said, I didn't really follow—follow up on it, but I thought I would mention it.

Hill Did you keep in touch with anyone from the base?

Partain Uh, one of the guys I enlisted with, um, actually, was a high school friend of mine. We both went into the Nuclear Power School together. Um, His name is Alex, and he was actually, um, accepted into the United States Naval Academy, like my father, and he still presently serves in the Navy. I believe he's a Commander or a Captain now. I do not know his rank. I haven't—I haven't kept up with him the past couple of years, but I think he's a commander. but he did serve—uh, he's—he's still serving, and, uh, actually got an appointment to the Naval Academy, which is one of—one of the things I was hoping to do myself.

0:37:07 Lessons learned from the Navy

Hill Uh, so one of the things you mentioned earlier is that, um, the Navy teaches you that you're a part of something larger.

Partain Mmhmm.

Hill Would you say that that's something that you feel you've carried on to the [inaudible]?

⁷ Baldwin Park.

Partain Well, growing up in a military family, it's always been indoctrinated into me for that. Um, Like I mentioned, I, you know, became involved in the Camp Lejeune issue mainly, uh, because, you know, I realized what had happened to me wasn't unique, and I felt a responsibility to speak out and help the other Marines and families, which I've been doing for the past seven years. So, I mean, that's — growing up in a military family, um, you know, you — it just — it's service, God, honor, country. I'm mean, that's the way I was raised, and when you go into the service, you're taught God, honor, country.

Hill Are there any other values or characteristics, um, of the Navy that you think transferred to the rest of your life, as well?

Partain No, I mean, the God, honor, country is[sic] primarily the core principles with which I've tried to guide my life.

Hill What would you say is the most valuable lesson you learned during your time at the Navy?

Partain Um, probably, never give up. You know, you always — you always keep moving forward and just, you know, never give up.

Hill Can you remember a time while you were, um, in training that you felt like giving up, but didn't?

Partain Um, got lonely. I mean, left my girlfriend behind and, uh, there was a time where — yeah. I was thinking, *Okay. I'm going to be doing this, going off at sea for six months, and I don't know if I like that, and*, you know you just — you look back and say, *Well, why did I join?* I joined because I wanted to get an education, I wanted to get a trade, and, you know, the Navy's going to provide that, and, you know, you — you quickly overcome those things. Feelings are temporary [sniffs]. Good and bad [sniffs].

0:39:07

Legacy of NTC Orlando

Hill What do you think the lasting legacy of NTC Orlando or the Navy's presence in Central Florida has been?

Partain Well, the, um — for me — and understanding what I have come across, because of my, you know — because of the issue with breast cancer — it — unfortunately, I mean, NTC Orlando's gone. Uh, it's no longer there. The vestiges are still here, but what the Navy left behind underground, that is going to be here for years to come, and that's something that really has not been addressed in a great deal with the community. Um, And sadly, that — in the end, that becomes the Navy's legacy — is not for the good things they did, but for, you know, the irresponsibility for leaving toxic chemicals behind.

Hill What actions would you like to see taken to resolve those issues?

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Partain Um, well, I'm not familiar totally with the issue to—to see what they've done. I know, as part of the bra—uh, Superfund site, they're required to cleanup. Um, to what extent they've cleaned up, I don't know. Uh, there's a lot of different laws and, uh, different, um, procedures in place, but, in the end, you know, that—that's something the Navy, um—well, I don't know what to say on that. Sorry. I got distracted. The ADHD [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder] is killing me here.

Hill [laughs] That's alright. That's alright.

Partain But[?]....

Hill Um, so...

Partain It'd be—it would be nice to have...

[phone rings]

Partain We have a phone distraction here.

Hill It would be nice to have...

Partain Hm?

Hill You were saying...

Partain Okay. It would be nice to have an independent, um, historical analysis of what, you know—what the Navy did and exactly what the Navy legacy is. I mean, the—the infrastructure of the base is gone. Um, what's left is the land that they owned on the base, and what did they leave behind on that land? and how will that affect the community? And sadly, you know, u, what was not cleaned up by the Navy, uh, will be there for some time to come and, you know, somebody's gonna have to pay that cost.

Hill So how do you think uh,—how is the NTC—well, you talked about how the base has changed. What about the region? Um, Central Florida as a whole. How do you think it's been impacted since the base closed?

Partain Well, the, um—I mean, the base itself, um, wasn't a, uh, mega base, like you would have, say, with, um, Mayport Naval Station up in Jacksonville. Um, It had an impact on the community, uh, but not, you know—there wasn't aircraft being serviced, um, there wasn't[sic] ships and, you know, the contractors to work the ships and things, you know—servicing the ships or what have you. It's a training center. So, uh—and I would say there was an economic impact. To what degree it was, I don't know.

Hill Okay. Um, what do you think visitors would like to see or be reminded of when they revisit the site of the base? The [inaudible].

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Partain Well, I haven't been back since I left, and, um, I've driven by it a couple of times. Uh, there was a gaming store called Enterprise 1701 near the base, where I used to get my board games. That was a hobby I had, and I—it would be nice to go back and see the site, uh, of where the base was, and maybe something commemorating that it was here, and, uh, I am curious to go back and see and see—and see exactly what is there, uh, and what's left, and what they've done with the, uh—with the base and the Superfund site stuff, 'cause there's[sic] things that I'm aware of because of my involvement with Camp Lejeune and being on Camp Lejeune, that, you know, when you go on base, you look at things, and unless you know what you're looking at, you don't know what it is. So I'm kind of curious to see what's there on the base.

Hill Did you ever go back?

Partain No.

0:43:25 **Navy hospital**

Partain I understand that the old naval hospital is the VA [Veterans Affairs] hospital now.

Hill Now...

Partain So I'd be curious to see that.

Hill Were you ever at that hospital?

Partain Yeah, that's where I was...

Hill That's where you were disqualified.

Partain Disqualified from service. They sent me to that hospital. I remember marching by myself with a chip, um, going down to the hospital, and, you know—and then, they were really puzzled, um, by what was happened with me. Matter of fact, I later got my me—my medical records from the Navy, and, uh, they were really puzzled why I broke out, because it was all over my arms and my face and was a blood red rash, and, um, they could not figure out what it was, and, uh, they kept asking all kinds of questions. They—they're like, "Well, you had this when you si—when you signed up," and I'm like, "Well, I was born with this, but it's never been a problem like this," and they said, "Well, how did you get passed recruit training or the recruit indoctrination and all that?" And I said, "Well, I wasn't breaking out." I said, "This is something that—normally, it comes and goes." At the time, I thought it was, you know—in the wintertime, I'd break out or if I wore dry-cleaning clothes, and I thought, at the time, that it may have been the clothes—the polyester rubbing against my skin doing it. I had no idea that it could be anything else.

Hill Right.

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Partain Because it would – I mean, I didn't find out about what had happened to me at Camp Lejeune until, uh, 2007, which is 20 years after I joined.

Hill Um, what was it like in the – the hospital – In the Navy hospital?

Partain Um, just you're standard, you know, ultra-clean hospital. Nothing – nothing special.

Hill Nothing special? Okay.

0:45:06 **Closing remarks**

Hill Uh, well, is there anything else you'd like to share about your Navy experience?

Partain Um...

Hill Anything you think I missed or we didn't talk about?

Partain No, I mean, it's, like I said, the – I mean, for young people, the Navy – and in the military, in general, uh, – presents a lot of opportunities. You know, it's not perfect. I could mention the contamination problem, with something present in the military especially during the '60s, '70s, and '80s, but, you know, for young people, it's an opportunity to start your life, to pick up something, uh, unique, to learn, and more importantly, it – it builds a sense of self-discipline inside you. 'Cause it's very easy to forget that, you know, there's more to the world than just you, and serving in the military is productive. I mean, it – it gives you a respect for yourself, respect for others, respect for your country. Um, and, you know, it's something that, you know – I think everyone should do as a citizen of this country, and, uh – I mean, that's just, um – there's a lot of positives that come out of it. Now, the leadership of the military – that's another story.

Hill What's next for you?

Partain Um, well, I'm 46, and, um, uh, for me, um, I worked my career, raised my children, and, uh, I'm going back to get my Master's [degree] in history, and I'm actually going to be writing about and doing research with, uh, contaminated military bases, uh – is my – my career until I retire.

Hill So your experience has really shaped where you're headed?

Partain Well, the, um – more my birthplace. The, uh – Because of what happened to me, uh, before I was born at a military base, but, you know, NTC Orlando is one of those curious things that, once I put two and two together, I looked at it, and eventually, I'll do the research on it and – and learn what happened there, but right now, my focus is other places.

Hill Well, thank you so much for your time.

Partain Oh, you're welcome.

End of Interview