

Oral Memoirs
Of
Robert "Rob" Matthews

An Interview Conducted by

Mark Miller

March 28, 2014

Community Veterans History Project

Lone Sailor Memorial Project

University of Central Florida RICHES of Central Florida

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Interview Histories

Interviewer: Mark Miller

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 Robert "Rob" Matthews is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 28, 2014.

Abstract

Oral history interview of Robert "Rob" Matthews, who served in the U.S. Navy during the Cold War era. Matthews was born in Lake Wales, Florida, on May 23, 1957. He enlisted in the Navy in February of 1977 and was discharged in July of 1984. During his service, Matthews was stationed at Recruit Training Center (RTC) Orlando, Naval Air Technical Training Center (NATTC) Memphis, and Naval Air Maintenance Training Detachment (NAMTRADET) at Naval Air Station (NAS) Jacksonville. He also served in Attack Squadron 174 (VA-174) and VA-87. Matthews was a Master Training Specialist and received an Expeditionary Medal.

This interview was conducted by Mark Miller on March 28, 2014. Interview topics include Matthews' background, enlistment, training at RTC Orlando, the USS *Blue Jacket*, the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC), Matthews' naval career, NAWCTSD, and the Lone Sailor Memorial Project.

Robert “Rob” Matthews

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Mark Miller
March 28, 2014
Orlando, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Miller Okay, okay. This is an oral history of Rob[ert] Matthews, an RTC [Recruit Training Center Orlando] graduate and naval veteran. The interview is conducted by Mark Miller, graduate student from UCF [University of Central Florida], working in conjunction with the Lone Sailor Navy Memorial [Project] committee. Uh, it is March 28th, 2014, and we are in Mr. Matthew’s offices at NAWCTSD [Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division], um, in[sic] the [12201] Science Drive—Orlando. Okay. Um, some of our first questions are background questions. Um. So whe—when and where were you born?

Matthews I was born in a little town not far from here—a little town called Lake Wales. I was born in[sic], uh, May 23rd, 1957.

Miller Okay. What do[sic] your parents do for a living?

Matthews Uh, my father was in construction, um, and my mother was in the medical field, working as an office manager.

Miller Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Matthews I have four sister—four sisters. They were, um, all born in Lake Wales, as well, and two of them still live in Florida, and two live elsewhere.

Miller Um, growing up, where did you go to school?

Matthews Um...

Miller [clears throat].

Matthews The elementary school is there in Lake Wales. A little school called Spook Hill Elementary [School]. Uh, and junior high and high was Lake Wales Junior High [School] and Lake Wales High School. So it was a small town about 8,500 people.

Miller Oh, so you were home-grown [laughs].

Matthews Homegrown.

0:01:39

Enlistment

Miller Okay. Uh, what did you do before entering the Navy?

Matthews Well, I went to college for a little bit. Um, worked locally in the town there, right at the high school, and, um, after about a year of that, I decided I wanted to go in the Navy.

Miller Okay. So you joined a year after high school, and, uh, why did you join the Navy?

Matthews Well, [*clears throat*] I guess I came from a Navy family. My, uh – in a sense – my father was a in the Navy during World War II for a short period of time. My uncle was – also served in World War II in the Navy. I had a cousin that went to the naval academy. I had an uncle that flew for the Navy, as well. Uh, and I had a brother-in-law that went to the Navy, prior to me going in the Navy. He actually went through RTC Orlando, as well.

Miller Oh, wow. So one of our questions was why the Navy over other branches, and I think[?]....

Matthews I think I explained that [*laughs*].

Miller [*laughs*] Yes, I think I can easily see that. Yes. Navy family. Alright. Um, so how did your family feel about you joining?

Matthews Uh, mixed emotions, I guess. A little bit. Uh, I think they were glad to see me join such a great organization. Uh, I think, uh, my mother would have liked me to have waited and get a commission instead of being enlisted, but I was a little impatient, so I decided to go for it and do it anyway.

0:03:05

Attending boot camp at Recruit Training Center Orlando

Miller So where did you attend boot camp?

Matthews RTC Orlando.

Miller Okay, and what were you trained to do in your career in the Navy?

Matthews Uh, I was a, uh – excuse me – an aviation Electronics Technician, uh, while I was in the Navy, which allowed me to work on the electronics on both the [Ling-Temco-Vought] A-7 [Corsair II] and [Lockheed] P-3 [Orion] aircraft.

Miller So, uh, wha – what was your experience like at RTC?

Matthews It was different. Um, probably the best council I got from, uh, my brother-in-law prior to going over there was: just remember to treat, uh – to treat it as somewhat of a game, and that, uh – don't take the things that you're being told too serious,

um, and what he meant by that was – not that the training wasn't important – it was critical for my own safety, as well as, uh, helping the country, but some of the things that you have to go through in boot camp – those stereotypical things that we have to do to make sure that we're instilling discipline in our – in our young troops. He told me not to take that too serious, and that was probably the best council I got, uh, as I went through boot camp – was just remember that they're sending me through certain experiences so I learn from it and that's not really the way things are.

Miller Well, what were some of those experiences?

Matthews Well, um, back in those days, uh, it was important to, uh, get young people's attention, and the way you did that was you physically exhaust them every opportunity you have, and you try to mentally change the way they see the world. So we would – we would do endless bouts of inspections, and calisthenics, and things of that nature, and it really was to try to, uh, instill discipline that maybe not all of us had when we went there. So we did some pretty silly things over – as I look back now, um, seemed awfully important to me at that point, but now, it's – I'm not sure that having a spit shine on my shoes and my gig line lined up perfectly was, uh, the most necessary thing, but I understand the purpose of it. The purpose of it was: I learned to take, uh, great care and attention to detail, uh, to understand discipline and the meaning of it. So, uh, it seems silly, but I understand why they did it.

0:05:53

First impressions of and days at Naval Training Center Orlando

Miller So what was your first impression of the base?

Matthews Uh, it was a little confusing, uh, you know, I lived in Lake Wales, uh, which was – it's only 60 miles from Orlando. So when I joined the Navy, uh, my first, uh, impression of being part of, uh, the Navy or [U.S.] DOD [Department of Defense] or U.S. Government was to get from Lake Wales to Orlando, I needed to go via Coral Gables and Miami. So I left Lake Wales, instead of heading, uh, northeast to Orlando, I went west to Tampa to catch an airplane to fly south to Coral Gables, to being docked there, stuck on a bus, driven back north, and I think we got on base probably about 11-11:30 at night and it was dark. Um, probably a little bit frightened, um, because, just like you see in the movies, as soon as we got off the bus people were yelling at us [*laughs*]. So, uh, by the time I hit the base, I was pretty tired and I was pretty scared, so [*laughs*] it was a good experience to start with [*laughs*].

Miller [*laughs*] So what were your first days of service like?

Matthews Well, it was, uh, a lot of confusion. A lot of being told exactly where to go, and the best thing to do was just listen. Uh, we were put in lines, um, wherever we went. We were – got our haircuts, our uniforms, a place to stay, were told what to do what not to do, when to do it. Uh, we were led around for the first few

days. It was a good thing, because it was – it was a real culture shock for – for most of us. Um, but I – I would say that probably that – that, um – that rigor that they sent us through the first few days was probably the best way to get over that culture shock. So I didn't have to do a lot of thinking at first. Just reacting to what they did to us, and they really did start forming us as a team. I was in a group of folks. There – there were 80 of us in our training unit, as we called them back then. Didn't know, uh – 79 brand new people I didn't know before. Now I get to spend the next eight weeks with them and they became very close in many ways.

Miller Mmhmm.

Matthews [laughs].

0:08:13 Recruits, instructors, and military leave

Miller Now – yes. You've mentioned to us quite a few times – I was wondering what some of the fellow recruits were like? I mean, were they from all over and...

Matthews They were. They were from all over the country. Um, and it – it was kind of interesting, 'cause I was thinking about this: these were people that, um, like myself – that maybe grew up in a small town. Um, that came from a fairly stable, uh, family life, to, uh, folks that didn't have that benefit. They may have come from middle of, uh, a city – broken family. Uh, and they brought the issues with that, um, and they tossed us all together, um, from all – from all over the country. People from Florida, Texas, New York. Uh, you could almost – although there probably wasn't somebody from every single state in my group of 80 – but a lot of the states were represented. Um, and, uh, I laughingly say there was[sic], you know, 80 people with probably 90 personalities in – in that group of folks.

Um, [clears throat] some of the people handled it very well, and some of the people didn't, and we started with 80. We didn't end with 80. Although back in those days, Navy boot camp was not seen as one to the more rigorous – we certainly weren't Marines. Uh, but There were people that just could not handle the, uh – the stress that we were put through, and you wouldn't have guessed it, uh, from the first day. I think you'd have a very difficult time – maybe experienced person wouldn't[?] – but you'd have a hard time looking around your group of folks that you're – you first get your haircut with and first get your uniforms with, thinking, *This person's going to make it. That person's not.* Because we were consistently surprised by the people that did drop out. We thought they were the strong folks, but it turned out maybe they weren't. So it was an interesting experiment to go through and kind of watch it.

Once more, I'll go back to what my brother-in-law said. I kept in my mind, when *this guy's yelling at me, it's not because he doesn't like me. It's just part of what's going on.* So I never like[?] let that get to me. So I was able to observe other people a

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little bit better, because I wasn't too worried about my own self, I guess. So it was – it was quite an experience.

Miller Do you keep in touch with some of these people?

Matthews No, no.

Miller Oh.

Matthews Um, I can remember – of those 80 people, I can remember one guy's name. Um, and I saw him a couple times – two or three years after boot camp, and that's it. I remember another gentleman's first name and that's it. Uh, and that's all I can remember, but the one person I can remember very clearly was our Recruit Training Commander. Senior Chief Soaper, and that was in the days that the Navy allowed beards, and Senior Chief Soaper, um, was a tall thin man, dark hair, with a goatee and devil's eyes [*laughs*].

Miller [*laughs*].

Matthews And I remember him clearly to this day.

Miller Mmm.

Matthews 30 or 40 years later, or so.

Miller He'd probably be very proud that you said that about him.

Matthews [*laughs*].

Miller [*laughs*].

Matthews He did a lot of good things for a lot of us. We didn't think so at the time, but [*laughs*]...

Miller Yeah, yeah. Um, you said that there were 80 people in – in your training group, but that was really quite a large facility. Uh, you were involved probably with other groups also, right?

Matthews To – to some extent. Um, [*clears throat*] Being it was 80, it was well orchestrated, so that we saw a lot of the other units as were marching by each other. We see them in the chow hall, but you stay together as a unit. Um, when we went to the chow hall, we sat together, we ate together, and we left together. We didn't mix, um, and not that we weren't interested – because this was – this the first years of having, uh, females in the Navy, and – but at that time it was still segregated – that the boot camps did not mix these training units with male and female. so we were there and I – I – hopefully, someone knows the numbers of the – of training units and the training groups that they had – power cells – training units, at that time, but if I had to guess, there was 20 or 30 units going on at a time, easy, of

which maybe two were female. So, um, [clears throat] – and even that was separated. So the chow hall had two sides, and I was in the side that was – it was all males. So we never even saw any females the whole time we were there, just about.

Once in a while we'd pass them, but the groups didn't mix at all so I – I couldn't even – I probably wouldn't even recognize one of those people that were in a different unit, because there so separated. You go to classes together, in your training unit, um, and occasionally there may be a training event where they'd mix two units, uh, but not very often. So you really didn't – really didn't mix too much at all.

Miller Um, you must have done some mixing off-base though?

Matthews [sniffs] There was no-off base. Um, when you start boot camp [clears throat], um, you start day one, you're in boot camp 'til you graduate, with two exceptions: the last week, they allowed us to – they'd load us up in buses and they took us to SeaWorld [Orlando] for the day. We're there in our whites. Uh, we've been given the, uh, strong instructions of how we will operate while we're at SeaWorld, because we represent the Navy for the first time in our uniform. So we, um – we – it was very stunted, if you will, what we could do at SeaWorld.

So that was one day, and then the only other time that, uh, we had any outside access to the base was the day we graduated. We didn't actually transfer 'til the following day. That night we had a couple hours of military leave or liberty that we were allowed to go out of town[?], once we were in a very controlled environment. So other than that, no. when I transferred out of Orlando, I was gone. Uh, so my time at boot camp – the eight weeks I was there – one day in SeaWorld and one night on liberty, and I actually spent that with my family, because they came up, uh, and I spent a couple hours with them. So that was it.

Miller [laughs].

Matthews You didn't get off base.

0:14:37 Primary responsibilities at RTC Orlando

Miller Hm. So what were your primary responsibilities, uh, when you were RTC?

Matthews Um, surviving was my primary, uh, responsibility. I – was not in a leadership position at, um – at boot camp at all. Um, [clears throat] what I was supposed to do was: I was supposed to learn how to become a sailor. Uh, I was a recruit up until they told me I was a sailor, which means I had to learn all the, um – I had to learn Navy history. I had to learn Navy protocol, uh, brinks, uh, customs, the culture, etc. I had to learn firefighting, how to fix a – I had to learn flooding. Any type of ship damage they try to expose us to. Uh, gas masks, you know – how to use a gas mask, what happens if your gas mask is not working. Uh, so they just try to give us the basics of, um, shipboard life, and especially, in case of

emergency. So there was signaling, there was[sic] all the basics of becoming a sailor that they taught us, How to operate a weapon, if necessary. Uh, we did a little bit of shooting. So, uh—uh, how to wear a uniform, how to maintain a uniform, and the different uniforms that go with it, um, and they've got a lot of basic human, uh, nature things that you—that you think you—that most people would know, but recognize once more, these people are coming from all over the United States, from many different home lifes[sic], etc. so they're teaching you hygiene—everything. So it's—they take a raw person off the street and they turn him into a sailor that can function on his own as necessary when he leaves. Uh, and those—that's what my primary responsibility was—to learn these things that they're trying to teach us.

0:16:24

USS Blue Jacket

Miller Um, obviously, we're land-locked in Orlando and—and you're in the Navy facility, how did you learn onboard training and things?

Matthews Well, I learned them on the USS *Blue Jacket*.

Miller What was that?

Matthews That was the, uh—that was the—my first ship in the Navy, and it, uh—It was located right there, where Baldwin Park is now. Uh, it was a plywood mockup of a ship, um, and it had hatches and doorways and it looked like—it looked like a ship. You marched up to it. There wasn't a pier associated with it. There was a little bit of a gangway. Went in there and we did watch standing. Um, it—it truly was the first time that I was on board, uh, or used a Navy simulator. It was called, um—it was the USS *Blue Jacket*. *Blue Jacket* was our training manual. All sailors—that's the—their Bible, if you will. Um, [clears throat] and we spent, uh, many hours, uh, retrieving lines, casting lines, getting underway, uh, practicing damage control drills, things of that nature aboard the ship, and this was a culmination of many, many hours and days of classroom training, where they broke down the different aspects of the things we need to do aboard the ship into smaller chunks, if you will, so we could learn those objectives for that, and they sent us to firefighting trainers. Uh, they sent us to gas mask, uh—the gas mask room, where we went to a room with our gas masks on, and they let off the tear gas, and then they had us remove the mask, so we had some prospective of what that's—what that's like. Uh, did some flooding training—things of that nature—repairs. Just so that when we finally did leave boot camp, we went to further training and eventually did wind up on a ship, we would be an asset to the ship and not a—not a hindrance. By no means, a fully functioning trained sailor, but, uh, far, far, uh, greater value to the Navy after the eight weeks that we showed up and needed haircuts and uniforms.

0:18:32

Memories and proudest moment

Miller So what was the hardest thing you remember doing at RTC?

Matthews The hardest thing was, um, [clears throat] – well, physically, the hardest thing was: we’re in Florida. Um, and fortunately I started in February, so by the time I was done, we hadn’t got to the summer. So we had a couple hot days on the Grinder. Lots of marching, where we weren’t quite up to snuff, so we spent an awful lot of time learning how to march in the – on the asphalt in the sun. Um, and we spent quite a bit of time at either attention or parade riffs in the sun, trying not to pass out from your knees being locked. Um, that was – that was a hard part of it.

Um, I think sometimes that, uh, even though, as I said earlier, I tried to keep in my mind, *This is just a game*, there was some lonely times, you know? Where you’re dead tired, and you see your chief and other folks have been yelling at you all day long, and you still got to shine your shoes one more time, and you’re just dead tired, and you’re thinking, *Boy, is this really the – do I want to spend my life doing this?* and I would – I would say, as hard as the physical part of it was, keeping that positive mental attitude that this too shall pass was kind of difficult sometimes at night. So it was probably that.

Miller And on the flip side, at what moment did you feel most proud?

Matthews That would be my graduation, when, um – when they played the – the patriotic music. We get to march, looking sharp as we do. Uh, we know our families’ in the stands, and we know that we’ve accomplished something. We’ve accomplished something that many people before us have accomplished and many people since, but internally, it’s – it’s something that we’ve been able to do, you know? We’ve been able to, as sailors, recognize that we do have the discipline to do the things that need to be done, and that was probably my proudest moment was – was the graduation, and seeing my folks in the stands [sniffs].

0:20:40

The Grinder, marching, and physical fitness

Miller So was[sic] there other purposes for the Grinder than graduation or marching?

Matthews If there was, I never uncovered them [laughs].

Miller [laughs].

Matthews So[?] that – that’s where we did our, um – that’s where we did our marching, and, um, [clears throat], you know, [clears throat] sailors don’t march. That’s what the other services tell us, but we sure – we sure faked it a lot

[phone rings]

Matthews Um, we spent an awful lot of time trying to stay lined up with each other. Try to – uh, and really marching is just trying to operate as a team – trying to teach folks to operate as a team. You can take the attention to detail, and you can look as good as you are and you can be perfect, but if your teammate’s not, then you

gotta start all over. So marching wasn't to learn how to march. Um, I think after I left boot camp I marched, oh, for another six months when I went to school, because they'd march us back and forth to school, but once I left school, I never marched again. Um...

Unidentified [inaudible] you want to take his[?] call?

Matthews So, um, I—I, um, [clears throat]—the marching was, once more, one of the teaching points. Um, you have the discipline to do it. It seems silly, but it has a greater purpose. Do you have the attention to detail to do it correctly? Uh, and do you have the patience? That's the key: do you have the patience to do this a long time? So I'm going to say that's probably what I remember most about the—about the Grinder [laughs].

Miller Yeah, a lot of vet[eran]s mention the Grinder. That's for sure. Along with the *Blue Jacket* also.

Matthews We did a lot of running on the Grinder. We—they—we spent a lot of time on physical fitness, and—and part of that is, um—part of the physical fitness aspects are, um—we need to be in shape obviously, but the same time, when they teach us things, they have to be able to stress us, so that when we—in a real situation, and there's stress involved, we make the right decision.

Part of the physical fitness is wearing you down to a point where you are stressed. So they would—they would send us through running exercises and physical fitness, and then they'd get us into a classroom environment, and we'd have to start making decisions based on that, and—and that was critical to our training—to be able to say, *you know what? I'm dog tired*, like I said a few minutes ago, *I'm tired, but I still got to shine my shoes. I still have to do this action, I still have to clean up my—my area. My rack still needs to be made perfectly, even though I'm tired and I don't want to do it*, and the only way you can get people to do that is to repeat it, repeat it, over and over again, the same thing over and over again, and even when they do it completely right, have them do it over.

So it was part of, you know—all the services have a long, long history of boot camps and what they're trying to teach, but if you don't understand that concept going in—this is what they're trying to do—it can be pretty hard. You can think, *What difference does it really make that the corners on my rack are folded just perfectly?* You know, *Come on. You're being silly*, and the people that have the hardest time is [sic] the people that push back on that. Um, Like my brother-in-law—he made sure I knew before I went in. just do it, play the game, move on, and from that, even though I was [inaudible] playing the game, I learned the importance of that, and I learned the discipline that comes with it, which allowed me I think, later on in my short Navy career, to function at a higher level [laughs].

0:24:30

Selecting a boot camp

Miller Now, after graduation, did you immediately leave?

Matthews No, I, um—I—I left Orlando, um, and then I—I went to [Naval Air Station] Memphis[, Millington, Tennessee] for about a year of school. Um, So I can't remember if I took any leave between boot camp and Memphis, but if I did, I didn't take very much, um, which is one of the reasons I was in Orlando, because, um, when I was joining the Navy—working with a recruiter—at that time, the Navy had three boot camps. They had Orlando, which 60 miles from my home, [Naval Training Center] San Diego, California, or [Naval Station] Great Lakes, uh, up in Illinois—Chicago, and I said, "Do I get a choice?" He goes, "You can always ask for—request a particular boot camp." I said, "Great." you know, "I want to go San Diego. I don't want to go to Orlando. Great Lakes is too cold. Send me to San Diego." and he said, "Alright. I can do that." he said, "I'll put that down. Probably a good chance of getting it." and I'm thinking, *Woohoo. I'm on my way to California for boot camp.*

He said, "What you need to understand is, after boot camp, you'll get one to two weeks leave." I said, "Okay." he goes, "Before you go to your next station, you'll get," you know, "two weeks leave." I said, "Okay." He said, "And if you want to go home you, you can go home." I said, "Great." He goes, "but the Navy's going pay you to go from San Diego to Memphis. If you want to go from San Diego to Lake Wales and back to Memphis, you're going to pay the difference," and, um, you know, I was—I was pulling down that huge E[nlisted Rank]-1 pay. That's when I decided that, it was just boot camp. I'll go to Orlando [*laughs*]. So long—long answer to your question is: yeah. I did take some leave. I took two weeks afterwards, went home, um, tried to forget everything I learned. It didn't work, and then I reported to Memphis, um, in the summer of [19]77.

Miller Did other recruits go to the NTC?

Matthews I believe some did. Yes, I believe some stayed there. I—I can't recall for sure, uh, but I believe some stayed there. Yes.

Miller [inaudible]...

Matthews Just the sheer numbers, there must have been some that did.

0:26:34 Military leave and the Orlando area

Miller Well, when you were on leave, uh, did, uh, a lot of the sailors to hang out in the area or stay in Orlando for a while? We have stories of them hanging out at [Orlando] Fashion [Square] Mall and, you know...

Matthews Um, well, my guess is—now, in my case, when—when I was released, I could, you know—my family was right outside the gate. I hopped in the car and drove back to Lake Wales. Other folks had transportation to wait for, um, so they may have spent time at the, you know—that weekend at the mall. They may have transferred. I—I do know that, you know—obviously we know that NTC was also a training command for other boot camp. So there was[sic] probably sailors hanging out there.

and I'm supposing here, that the rules were the same as when I went – first went to Memphis, and that was: when you're that young a sailor, if you're going on liberty, you're going in uniform, because we want to be able to identify you as such, because we don't completely trust you yet. You've been locked up for eight weeks [*laughs*]. Um, there might be a tendency for you to get in trouble, so we want to be able to quickly identify you just in case, and we also want to remind you that you are part of the Navy now, and if you're wearing a uniform, maybe that will be a subtle reminder that you need to represent the Navy proudly. Uh, didn't always work that way, but, uh, it was a thought.

0:28:02

Base Realignment and Closure Commission

Miller Well, we're going to go a few years in the future and, um – and, uh – do you know anything about BRAC [Base Realignment and Closure Commission] and – and – in regards to, uh, the RTC?

Matthews Yes.

Miller Oh.

Matthews Yes, I do know.

Miller Um, can you share some of your experience?

Matthews I'll share what I know, because, um – what happened was: I, uh – I spent seven years in the Navy, and I, um [*clears throat*] – when I got out of the Navy, I went to work at the [John F. Kennedy] Space Center for about a year and a half. Then I was fortunate enough to get a job at this organization.¹ This organization was not here in this building² at that point. It was back on NTC Orlando.

So after 'bout eight years, I'm back on base again. Uh, I'm not on the recruit side. I'm on NTC side. and we're in – we're in a bunch of different buildings, um, spread around the base, and these are – some of these buildings are so old, they were built by World War II POWs [Prisoners of War] – German POWs. Um, I – I guess we captured some POWs in submarines off the coast of Florida when they were – Operation Drumbeat. I think it was that what was going on. Anyway, they captured these guys and these guys built these buildings. So here, I'm checking in 1985 and I'm going in a building that was built 40 years ago, and they're spread all over the base, and, um, [*clears throat*] unbeknownst to me at that particular time, there's a move afoot by UCF and, back at that time, Congressman [Clarence William "Bill" Nelson [II] – now Senator Nelson – to – to emphasize modern simulation in this brand new [Central Florida] Research Park that were in now, and so – so he was able to get 40 acres donated to the Navy. Congressman Nelson – Senator Nelson now – was able to get the building, BUILDCON built, and we moved out here, um, in '88. Um, my command – the

¹ Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division [NAWCTSD].

² Naval Support Activity (NSA) Orlando, located at 12201 Science Drive.

command I'm in now NAWCTSD. The rest of NTC/RTC Orlando stayed, uh, on base.

Very fortunate move for us, because as, you know, history shows, in 1995, the 1995 BRAC decided that the Navy only needed one boot camp, uh, and they decided that boot camp was going to be at the Great Lakes, Illinois. So San Diego boot camp was closed. The, uh, Orlando boot camp was closed, and the rest of the training command – because it wasn't just boot camp. It was our Nuclear Power Schools, as well as some other schools – all on base – were all BRAC and were told to move elsewhere. Um, and so BRAC doesn't happen overnight. It takes a series of years to get all the moves made [*clears throat*], and I often laugh, because when I – when I think about the buildings that I was in – as I said, built in World War II – we watched the BRAC process work on base, and we watched government contracting at its finest, and the NTC Orlando was a – was a very important base for the Navy. So important they invested a lot of money in infrastructure. So what they ended up having to do is they had to contractually finish these brand new buildings, so that they could then tear them down, because of the BRAC.

So, um, for those who saw the – the BRAC process, they completely leveled the base. All the buildings that were there, with a couple exceptions like the VA [Veterans Affairs] hospital and one or two other buildings. Uh, and some of the buildings they leveled were brand new buildings. I mean, they had never been occupied, but they had to wait 'til the contract was over and completed, and then they were torn down, and, uh, I don't know if you were around there or not, but they literally created mountains of rubble in destroying this base.

Um, [*clears throat*] was it a good move? I don't know, you know? I don't know the, uh – the financial aspects of it. I do know that, uh, boot camp at Great Lakes has turned into a wonderful facility. I was just there a few weeks ago. Um, and the way we're training our recruits now is so much better than when we were training, when I was a sailor. Um, so from that aspect of it, it has been very positive today for the Navy. Um, Could that same thing have happened to Orlando, San Diego, and Great Lakes? Possibly, but I do know the Navy has improved their recruit training dramatically, and it just happens to be located in Great Lakes, and, uh [*clears throat*] – so I watched the BRAC process, uh, go through. Uh, I know not – I know that the decisions made were not popular by many, but in the end, uh, I think it turned out okay.

0:32:56

Career in the Navy and the Naval Reserves

Miller Okay. Uh, so went to Memphis...

Matthews Mmhmm.

Miller For your training, and what – you trained for...

Matthews Aviation Electronics Technician.

Miller And then what happened?

Matthews So after that, I was stationed at NAS [Naval Air Station] Cecil Field, which is near Jacksonville. Uh, and I was working on, um, A-7 aircraft. um, and I was there for three years, and I had a pretty good, uh—I was fairly fortunate that, in my three year tour in the A-7 outfit, I was able to work both organizational level maintenance and intermediately level maintenance, which means when I first got there, uh, *[clears throat]* I had some training, and then we deployed[?] aboard the ship, and I got to work on the flight deck, uh, and, I *[clears throat]* uh, really enjoyed it, uh—working the flight deck at night, uh, Because I was a 21 year old kid *[laughs]*. Uh, and I—you know, just the danger involved, the excitement involved, what you're doing is just so, so wildly important that I just—it's hardest—it's the hardest I've ever worked in my life, But probably the most enjoyment I've ever had in my life—working on the flight deck for the first cruise.

The second cruise I worked in mid-level[?], which gave me a different, you know—I was more of an Electronics Technician at that particular point, because now I'm working inside the electronic boxes—trouble-shooting, not working the flight deck anymore, but I was able to do that, um, for the second cruise. So I got kind of the best of both worlds when it comes to A-7's, and after three years, uh—at that time, the rotation for the Navy was three years, uh, sea duty, three years shore duty. So I finished my sea duty, made two cruises, um, and then I went to shore duty over at NAS Jax.³ Um, and that was working on P-3s, and I was an instructor for Maintenance Technician and I taught them how to work on the different systems of P, and that was pretty much the summary of my career, because after that second tour, I had been in the Navy for seven years, four months, and ten days. Not that I was counting. Um, I got out and, uh, I went to work at the Space Center, and then I ended up here eventually. So is that what you're looking for? *[laughs]*.

Miller Your career. Did you, um, eh—did—were you involved in operations? Or, I mean, um, did you see combat or...

Matthews No.

Miller Anything happen?

Matthews No, and when—when we went aboard ship, uh, we made two cruises, and, um, it was during the period of time in our history where there wasn't active combat going on. Um, this was—my cruises were from, uh, '78 to '81. Um, had a couple of incidences. The, um, Lebanon missile crisis that occurred when we were coming home one time. We had to take a detour and hang out in Libya for a while. Our pilots certainly flew in dangerous environments, especially over

³ Jacksonville.

Libya, but I myself was never exposed, to my knowledge [laughs], to a combat situation.

Miller Any other experiences that you have—your time in the Navy?

Matthews I did go in the [Naval] Reserves for about four years. Uh, My P-3 background allowed me to, uh, join the Reserves. So I would go to Jacksonville once month, er—excuse me—one weekend a month, and then I would spend two weeks every year in Bermuda, which was pretty tough duty. So then, when they decided that the Navy looked at different things and decided that they were going to close their operations in NAS Bermuda, I figured it was probably a good time to get out of the Reserves. So, um, other than that, the rest of my time—other than a little bit of time working for the Space Center—has been working for the Navy here, um, at NAWCTSD.

0:37:01 Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division

Miller So the Navy was your connection into, uh, NAWCTSD and everything of that sort?

Matthews I think so. Yes. I shouldn't say, "I think so," because yes. It was. Because, um, although I was in the Navy for a short period of time, I got out for reasons. Um, I love the Navy, you know? I loved it then. I love it now. Um, when I went in the Reserves, I met someone that worked here, um, told him my background—the fact that I was an instructor for the Navy, had a degree in education, and all that stuff. He felt that there would be a good fit here at NAWCTSD. So he told me about this place and, up until then, I didn't even know it existed. Um, so he was probably—well, not probably—it was because of my connection with him in the Reserves that I found out about this place, and he told me how to apply for a job, so that's how I was able to get back here. I couldn't have been happier. I don't know that there's a better place that I could have worked. This fits my personality, this fits my background, and—and it's something that I really enjoy doing, so pretty fortunate that way, I guess.

Miller Well, what are some of your responsibilities?

Matthews Here? Um, well, um, my responsibilities now are, um, we have a command of about a thousand people—about 40 military, and this command is responsible for buying the training systems for the Navy. So, um, any sailor—whether that's an enlisted sailor or officer sailor—that has to do something in the Navy [sniffs], is probably trained on a system that came out of here and the people that support it. So whether it's a pilot, uh, flying aircraft, or it's a Maintenance Technician that's working on a training system—working on a trainer of their aircraft—doesn't matter. They've gone through this. Even in boot camp, right now, when folks have to go to boot camp, they're working—using training systems that came from this place.

Um, my responsibility to that is: I'm responsible for all the program managers that – that manage the programs that deliver those training systems. I also have, uh, duties as the, uh, deputy to the senior civilians, so that anything to do with the command, if you will, involving the civilians, I have a, uh, leadership role in making sure that the environment the folks have here is the best, um, environment they can have to produce great results for our Navy. So it's – it's two hats: responsible for the program management and also responsible for the total work force, uh – one of the folks responsible here at the – at the center.

Miller Uh, you said that the command has a thousand people. That's pretty large. Um, what do you think the impact is to this area?

Matthews Uh, lots of studies been done on that [laughs]. Uh, and I've been fortunate to watch that impact grow. Uh, I mentioned that I was on base and then we moved out here. When we moved out here, um, [clears throat] to the building, it was mostly trees, not buildings like we have here now. Our building's here. There's two other buildings. University Boulevard was a two-lane road. Uh, the only close restaurant to go to was the Olive Garden on – on [Florida State Road] 50 – Colonial [Drive], um, and pretty much everything you see around here has come since then, and it's because of, not just the Navy, but our partners the Army, and the Marine Corps – and the Air Force, to some extent – all have centered their training system acquisition here. Um, we've been able to do that, because of our good partners, UCF. and the industry, as well as the City of Orlando, the County of Orange county, and the State of Florida have all invested in this, because they've seen what an engine modeling simulation really is.

So [clears throat] I would say 12-15 years ago, we were pretty busy, and we were doing – just the Navy – doing 2-3 hundred million dollars in business. Now we do about a billion every year. Uh, The Army does two to three times that every year, um, and that's new acquisitions going out every year. Our total portfolio for the Navy is about four or 5 billion dollars' worth of acquisitions we're managing at one time. Because not only are we responsible for putting those training systems out there, the Navy has changed their business model in the last 20 years. In that these training systems that are out in the field for our sailors to train on, are maintained by civilians – by contractors. So were responsible for putting those contractors out there to maintain those – those, uh, devices that train. As I said – I love to say over and over again, every sailor that – in the Navy has touched one of our products. Has – has benefited from one of our products. So that's something I'm very proud of – to be a small part of this big organization that provides that for the – for our Navy.

Miller So the other Armed Forces are very involved?

Matthews Yes, yes.

Miller You don't see that too often.

Matthews Yeah, *[clears throat]* we like to brag. Ourselves and the, uh – the way this organization – this organization, NAWCTSD – whatever it was called back then – actually started in the World War II era in a little Chevrolet – use to be a Chevrolet dealership up in the *[Washington,]* D.C. area, *[sniffs]* um, *[clears throat]* then moved to New York, and when it moved to New York, the Army said, “Hey. We like what you guys are doing.” So in 1950, the Army and the Navy signed a memorandum of agreement that said were going work together on this modern simulation training stuff, and when we moved from New York, the Army moved with us down to Orlando, and that MOA *[memorandum of agreement]* that we signed in 1950 still stands unaltered, and we believe it’s the longest standing MOA between the Army and the Navy ever. So 65 – almost 65 years, we’ve had an MOA that’s been unaltered, and if you’re familiar the way the Army and the Navy sometimes play together, that’s a pretty amazing fact. So we – we’re proud of that. So yes. We’re strong partners with both the Army and our Marine friends, and the Air Force as well.

0:43:55

Lone Sailor Memorial Project

Miller And, um, just some closing questions about the *[Lone Sailor] Memorial [Project]* itself. Um, what – what do you think of the memorial and, you know, memorializing Baldwin Park and, you know, the Grinder?

Matthews I think it’s a great idea. I – I – I think it’s a great idea, and I got to tell you Mike Philips s my hero, because, um, I can’t even remember how many – how many years ago it was. Oh, there. It’s up there. So 2005-2006 time frame, I was president of Central Florida Navy League here, and Mike Philips came to me and says, “Hey. I’ve got this idea. I want to put the Lone S – Sailor Memorial up in Baldwin Park, and I think it’s a great idea.” I said, “I think it’s a great idea too.” and then I – he said that it’s going to cost this amount of money, and I looked at Mike and I just – I almost laughed at him, because, like, “Mike, oh, my gosh. With^[?] that kind of money, I just can’t ever see that happening. As – as great as the Navy was to this place, I just can’t ever see that happening,” and dag gummit, I’m so happy that I was wrong and Mike was right. So I’m really excited about – no – no bones about it. Mike Philips is the driving force behind this. A lot of folks have – have pitched in, and *[inaudible]*, but Mike was the visionary that said, “This is what we need to do.” and his dream and our dream is coming true. It’s just the neatest thing that I could think of.

Miller Have you talked to other graduates who – about this?

Matthews I’ve talked to my brother-in-law.

Miller Mmm.

Matthews And he’s kind of excited about it. Um, both him and I want to do the, uh, paver bricks for, um, our – time there. Um, so – but that’s probably, you know, it – it’s – we work with a lot of people here in the building. Uh, and quite a few

probably have gone through boot camp, but they're in Orlando, but we don't compare that much. I mean, you know, in the Navy, when you start telling sea stories, it's about, "I was on this ship," or "I was on this cruise," or "Let me tell you about this liberty port." no one ever really says, "And I went to boot camp at..." [laughs].

So that's just not, you know, because quite—I shouldn't say this, but quite frankly, when you show up for boot camp, the first day and you leave the last day, it didn't really matter whether you were in Orlando, San Diego, or Great Lakes. It was all the same to you. It was marching behind the guy in front of you, classes, late nights, you know—so that stuff. So there's probably that—that connection that sailors have with their first ship and maybe their first base, as there is with boot camp. doesn't mean it's not important, um, but that's probably why folks don't—I mean, I know there's[sic] guys—I work with a lot of retired guys—ex-Navy guys. I couldn't tell you how many of them went to Orlando, to be honest, you may want to cut this part out [laughs].

Miller [laughs] No, no. All the stories are valuable—but great. Thank you very much.

Matthews Well, thank you.

Miller [inaudible].

Matthews It was a pleasant being asked these questions again and give me a chance to travel down memory lane.

Miller Okay.

Matthews When we started, I told you I didn't have much that I remembered, but you're right once. You start, it just starts to flow.

Miller Good memories. You have a nice smile too.

Matthews Yes, thanks for the opportunity.

Miller Well, thank you.

Matthews Sure. Alright, and I need to sign some forms for ya?

End of Interview