

Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interview with
G. Nicholas Stuparich

October 18, 2006
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Mary Palevsky

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[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 1.

Mary Palevsky: *Nick Stuparich, thank you so much for meeting with me this morning. If you can start just by giving me your full name, date birth and place of birth, and some kind of sense of your early life and how you ended up then as a Curtiss Marine.*

G. Nicholas Stuparich: My name has been legally changed. At the time I entered the Marine Corps it was George Nicholas Stuparich, Jr. I was born August 29, 1935 in Oakland, California. Went to school in Piedmont, California and then went to Army-Navy Academy in Carlsbad, California. I had one year of college before I went into the Marine Corps. I was having some difficulties with my parents and juvenile issues, and so I chose to go into the Marine Corps, which I did. Fortunately I went through MCRD [Marine Corps Recruit Depot] in San Diego, Camp Pendleton and Camp Matthews [both in California] for my marksmanship training, and then for some reason I was chosen to go to Sea School. At that time, our group was chosen to go aboard the *Curtiss*.

And what year was this, approximately?

I believe it was in '54; I'm not good with dates. Then we proceeded with our training for going aboard ship. Went aboard the *Curtiss*, and of course at that time we went through all of the clearance procedures. Matter of fact, I think they started the procedures while we were in Sea School.

Tell me a little bit about what was involved, as you remember.

Well, just going through the—I don't think it was called national agency check then. National security check, I believe it was. They did the background check and then they informed us that

we were signing our security under the Rosenberg Act. It's interesting because the Rosenbergs [Julius and Ethel] actually lived in Montclair, California, which is the area that I lived in: Mr. and Mrs. Rosenberg, lived up on the hill there above Montclair, California.

So, I remember signing the clearance papers and they didn't tell us what we were going to do or where we were going. We went aboard ship as supposedly just a Marine detachment, but then it ended up being as nuclear security. We were well briefed and well trained on what our jobs were aboard ship.

I did security with the devices, once they were delivered to the vessel. We did perimeter security when the devices were being delivered, which meant we were out on the pier and out in the area when the trucks arrived, delivering units. Once the canisters were brought aboard, then we were assigned to security aboard the ship, which meant working in the hole. In other words, the devices were put in a particular compartment. We were responsible for the security of that department, the corridor that led to it, and I can't remember if we were reading the temperature. We had to take a reading, I believe, once an hour and record it. I do not remember whether it was temperature or radiation, but it had to be recorded; I remember that if there was something wrong, and I don't know the standard, but if it went over that standard or under that standard, we had to notify the science officer, who was also the engineering officer. That was Commander Hart, I believe.

Now, let me back up just a tiny bit with the security piece. So there's a point at which you're informed, I assume after you're cleared, of what your mission actually is?

Correct.

Give me a sense of how much detail they give you there, and how much that is connected to what you already might know about nuclear weapons.

That's a little bit confusing because I know so much more now than I did then. I do not believe they gave us that much information. They definitely didn't give us a detailed description of our duties, other than that what we were doing was actually guarding a nuclear device, and [00:05:00] that's all they would say. We and I think about a half-a-dozen sailors were the only ones that actually saw the canisters being brought aboard. There were not very many people. That was secured. The whole aft deck was secured when that occurred.

And how many of there were you, when you say "we"?

There were probably six Marines on the dock, one or two on the trucks, then I think there were a couple in the different corridors—what they did was they dogged the hatches so people couldn't come in when we were loading this particular material.

Then it went down into the hole and then there was a special rack because the canisters had to be triced up in these racks. I can't remember whether there was—I think there were six to a rack. And they were triced up like you would trice up nitroglycerine, you know, with like Bungee cords but I think they were springs.

Say that word again. I don't know that word "trice."

Tricing means to tie, and what it does is it keeps something in balance so that if it's hanging, it's free-hanging, but it's in a rack, and this keeps the canister in line, and it's called trice, you trice it up.

"Trice it up." I see.

We didn't do that. That was done by their people.

And where were you when this was happening? What port were you in?

We were in the Bay Area and I believe we were over at Port Chicago [California]. We were in Port Chicago or—

Port Chicago?

Port Chicago. That's correct.

That's what I was wondering.

Yes, we had to go up to Port Chicago. That's not in the bay. That's up a river, I believe. OK, that's where we were, in Port Chicago. That's right.

OK. And where had you embarked?

We embarked out of San Diego, went up to San Francisco. That's it. We went to San Francisco, went to Hunters Point for something, some sort of refurbishing. Then from Hunters Point we went over to Port Chicago, picked up our merchandise, if you will, and then when we were through with that, when we pulled out, we went down and then into the bay. At that time we picked up some escorts, and then we went under the Golden Gate Bridge, at which time the Secret Service or FBI, whoever they were, had the bridge closed, and they were waving at us as we went underneath.

Wow, they closed the bridge.

They closed the Golden Gate Bridge. It was kind of cool because being from the Bay Area I kind of remembered that. I think I was aft at the time and I was looking up and yeah, sure enough, they did. And that was kind of interesting.

So then we headed out to the Pacific. I think we refueled and resupplied once or twice, a ship came alongside, I think they came out of Hawaii. They used the high line and brought the stuff across, and then they brought the refueler up and then they refueled us. And that's why they call us the Ghost Ship, because almost everything that we did, the replenishing and the refueling, was all done at sea.

So you're a young guy and you just gave me this sense that there were only a few—well, I want to pose this as a question. Was there a limit to how many people knew where the device actually was, where the weapon actually was?

Yes. There was more than one. We were carrying multiple units for the different operations. I cannot tell you the nomenclature, you know, of the body. I can tell you that the arming devices were in canisters, well marked and well inventoried. We had to take it very, very seriously, what we did. Then we would go to the PPG [Pacific Proving Ground] and this equipment would be unloaded, and depending on what the shot was, it would either go to the island or it would go to the barge. And I was on both [Operation] Redwing and [Operation] Wigwam and there were a multitude of operations there.

[00:10:00] *Were you on [Operation] Castle as well?*

No. I started out with a non-nuclear test. I think they were just testing triggering devices at that time, and that was in the Pacific just off California someplace. Operation Surfboard It was Surfboard, Wigwam, Redwing, and then I think it was [Operation] Deep Freeze after that. Well, it doesn't matter. Anyway, I was on for those three.

We were exposed to a great deal of radiation during that period of time. As a matter of fact, those of us who have discussed the issues of not being covered by the government, I guess we're now beginning to uncover paperwork that's stating that the government wanted us rotated out because we had already been exposed to more than what was required as far as radiation was concerned. They had a limit. And so somebody in Washington [D.C.] just decided that since they can't just replace us, it takes almost, what, six months for a clearance, that they would just double the amount of the dosage. And I believe Ms. [Kari] Chipman has that record now. We

have just uncovered it, or I believe one of your students uncovered it. It was just a paragraph someplace in some paperwork that they found.

That paragraph actually refers to something else. I did find a paragraph, but I think it's a different issue, so there may be something else.

Oh, is it? There may be something else that the attorney, apparently they have hired an attorney, and apparently he has it. You'd have to ask Ms. Chipman about this but—

I don't know about that document. I showed her a paragraph about who was actually considered an atomic vet. There had been some confusion about what that nomenclature meant, and I found a correction to an original summary, a legislative history that clarified that. I gave that to her a couple of weeks ago. But this, she hadn't told me about, so I'll have to ask her about that.

Well, we talked about it last night. Now I may be incorrect. This is third-hand.

I know. That's all right.

Anyway, we went through the shots, did all of the—which you've probably already heard we were all exposed. We all either turned our backs to the detonation and covered our eyes. Even though we had high-density goggles on, you could still see through your arm and see your bones. It's pretty bright. And then once that was done, then you could lift your head up and look and watch the mushroom forming. Very amazing, very concerning, and I think that really affected some people psychologically. When you think that you really don't have control over something like that, it's just, you know. It has bothered me.

Let me ask you a little bit about the background, and then we can talk about the impact. But can you give me a sense of the kind of preparation you had for what you would actually see? Was there a discussion of that? None. No, you're shaking your head no.

No, they just told us what we were to do and what we weren't to do, and that we could look up after the blast. That's all. Matter of fact, I don't think they really knew what they were going to be experiencing.

Your commanding officers, you mean?

Right. And at that time, it was my understanding that what the scientists had measured, their calculations were not correct. We had some charges where the detonations were much more powerful than what they had anticipated.

Yeah, that was certainly true, I know, of the Bravo shot, which was on Castle, but you're saying that you weren't involved in Bravo?

No, I was not, but we were, like I said, with Redwing and Wigwam. And there was one or two that went beyond the perimeters that they had anticipated.

OK, on Redwing and/or Wigwam. Yes, I should just, for my own curiosity, I'm going to get the book [DOE/NV—209-REV 15 December 2000] and look at the size of those things. So you're obviously told and prepared for the shot itself. Just so I can orient us to what we're talking about here.

[00:15:00] I believe it was Wigwam.

Wigwam was an underwater weapons effects test, so we're probably talking about Redwing, which had a ton of tests.

OK, then it was Redwing.

And one of them, Cherokee, was 3.8 megatons. Zuni was 3.5. These are big. And Dakota. Yeah, these are big megaton tests, at least [turning page], oh, and there was a huge one, 4.5 megatons [Navajo].

One of them or two of them were out of the parameters of what the scientists said they'd anticipated.

Those are big. And what I can do is look in the records and see, look closely at those tests and see when that was the case.

So when it goes off, you're on deck?

Yes, we're on the forward deck, and we're either with our backs to it and then we can turn around and look, or we're facing it and we're all sitting down, squatting down on the deck. Then we have the goggles on, we cover our eyes and put them over our face like this [demonstrating] with our hand. And you could see through your arm, there was that much light, and it was kind of a trip, kind of reminded you of a Halloween ghost story.

It affected me psychologically more than what I anticipated. I'm presently going through therapy with the VA [Veterans Administration]. I just thought that I've always been kind of a rough-and-tough kind of guy, the soccer-player-type person, and I always thought that my mood was just testosterone-type of thing. My wife one time made the comment, that *you're scary, you know, you scare me*, because I have the tendency of blowing up, and then I just kind of drop it like nothing happened. Well, what happens is [that] you've pooped all over everybody around your environment and it really bothers them, and particularly a female. And she said, you know, *You really need to go see somebody*. So I went in to the VA and I'm working with Dr. Bateman now out of Anchorage [Alaska]. She asked me the questions, went through it, and just said, *Man, you are way up there, you know, we need to work with you and bring you down. Can you go to therapy?* I guess they have post-traumatic stress therapy groups that meet every week. Well, since I live six hours away by driving or an hour-and-a-half away by plane, I couldn't do it, so I meet with her once a month. She's been working through

some things with me. I'm very diligent in what I do and I'm really heeding what she has to say. I'm on medication, which has helped calm me down a little bit. They had me on one medication which gave me seizures at night and I was biting my tongue and I'd wake up with blood all over my mouth, so they took me off that. That's the psychiatrist that did that, Dr. Gomez. And then they now have me on a medication which is better, and what it does is it just takes the edge off, because as you know, post-traumatic stress is not mental; it's a physical reaction. It's that combat, flight-or-fight-type thing. Dr. Bateman and I have been working through an area and I'm trying to understand what it is, and a lot of it has to do with the fact that there's nothing you can do. You're looking at something that, it's instinct, you're gone, you're history, you're mist. And I think that really affected me as a child. And I was a kid. I was just nineteen years old. And I came from a fairly protected family, old country family, we were immigrants, my family were immigrants also. So that really bothered me.

The other thing that really upset me was the submarine.

Yes, talk to me about that a little bit.

Well, Robert Mackenzie was the admiral's orderly that night, and I was the orderly on the next deck down, and my job was to protect the crypto room which was, if you were looking down the hall, was to the left, and then the CIC which was straight ahead.

CIC is?

Is Central Intelligence Control or something like that. It's an area where they plot everything.

[Note: on board U.S. Navy ships, the CIC is the Combat Information Center]

[00:20:00] Anyway, I was standing there and all of a sudden Commander Hart came running around the corner and said, *Come with me*, with that I was on alert. So we went into CIC and then there was—I stood at the door. He said, *Block the door*, and I blocked the door. And it

was one of those combination doors in those days. And I saw him talking with an officer, with the officer in command of the CIC at the time, or duty officer, I guess is what you call him, and then they were really—I could tell they were really stressed about something. Then a chief electronics mate had taken the young man off of the board and they were looking at the board and plotting on the board something, and he got on the phone to the bridge. I immediately felt the ship changing course, and we immediately started into a zigzag situation. And then I could tell, this man was stressed, and I'd never seen him stressed like that before. This way, that way.

Everything was very staccato. So went back up to the bridge and Mackenzie and the Admiral were already there. And as a young man, you're looking at their body language and their facial features and we knew that there was something wrong. Well then, I heard the conversation, and they wanted to know, in profanity, how the son-of-a-bitch got there. How did it get there? How did it get through the perimeter? So then they were communicating with the vessels that were on the perimeter, there were destroyers out there and everything else, and they couldn't figure it out. Admiral Wellings said, I believe that's he's probably been sitting here waiting for us. He probably plotted our course and just dropped to the bottom and waited till we came by, and then he came up underneath us. And he just followed us, and it was just a Russian sub, is what we anticipated.

And they figured that they knew it was a Russian sub.

Yeah. And it did. It stayed with us. And then what really became scary is that I remember the admiral telling the captain, We don't have to worry if he's directly under us. If he drops back into firing range, then we have to worry. By then, the other ships were doing crisscrosses in front and in back of us. These are the little destroyers. And sure enough, he did, he dropped back, I don't know how far, I remember they had it plotted, and he was within firing range. And so then I just, I don't know, something really bothered me and really happened

to me mentally, because I just said [to myself], this whole thing's over now, we're through, we're done with. And I guess I kind of convinced myself that that was going to happen.

And this is prior to arriving in the Pacific.

Yeah, we were on our way.

So, just to get a sense of it, you're well aware of what you've got on board?

Oh yeah, because I'd already been down in the hole and they'd told us what it was.

Yeah, and then you've got a—

Got this sub, and believe it or not, not very many people knew about it. I mean surprisingly, people were telling Bob [Robert W. Mackenzie] he was crazy. You don't know what you're talking about. There was no submarine. Well, I know there was. And when I mentioned it to Bob last year he said, Thank God somebody else knows. And what we're trying to do is find a third Marine who was on the bridge, but there may not have been a Marine on the bridge.

Right. Did you know Bob at the time?

I think so. We were all in the same unit but I wasn't really that close to a lot of the people.

I'm just asking so that you would recall that it was actually—that you saw him on the bridge.

Yeah. Oh yeah. All right, then—

So but talk to me a little—that's interesting, it's really good that you're getting your therapy, and obviously oral history isn't therapy, so you tell me if something moves too much into the feelings side—

No, that's fine.

But it's interesting what you say, that already with this first incident, that had shaken you up.

Yes. And I didn't know it. And I've just kind of been, I hate to say, just a toughie. I've always been a toughie.

But had you also been, as a child, were you kind of—

Actually, yes. When I went to school as a child, people talk about discrimination, if [00:25:00] you were a Jew or German, a Slavic, any of those. Americans were too stupid, they couldn't tell the difference, so everybody got the same "Heimy" thing—kicked in the butt, putting swastikas on their lockers. And I had really good Jewish friends, they'd break down and cry because here's this thing that killed their grandparents or their parents. And so yeah, we were kind of—that group kind of hung together because we were foreigners. We took English for foreign students in A period, is what I'm trying to say. Got a little emotional there. And so we were all together in that. And they knew. I mean the foreigners would all come up from the first floor to go to school. And so we had to fight. And I don't know why. This is when I was actually removed from public school and had to go to a private school, because it was just getting to be too much.

Now when you say "the English," did you speak—but you spoke English in the home or you spoke another language with your parents?

I spoke Austrian. Austrian and French are more my native languages, but my grandfather said, In America, you speak American. Otherwise, you're not going to make it. So we had private classes at home and we had a tutor that came. I came from a very comfortable family of immigrants. Plus English at school. Did very well.

So what kind of—we're moving back chronologically but that's OK. I'm curious, what kind of business or whatever was your family in that you could have this comfortable—?

My dad was in the finance business. He was the vice-president of a finance company and he also had an automobile agency and used-car lots. So he did very well. And he also was in surplus.

When the ships came back from World War II, he had some property in Emeryville, California that they used for storing when they were stripping these troop ships down; so he had PT [Motor

Torpedo] boats on there and air-sea rescue vessels and all of those twenty-one-man steel life rafts. As a kid, we used to climb all over them and have fun. And he did very well in that area, he and my uncle.

But your first language was?

Austrian. And I've lost it. I was injured one time. I separated my kidney, which is pretty painful, and when I was kind of in a state of shock, my wife said all I did was talk in German. And fortunately, the doctor was German, so I guess we talked. And she said, *My gosh, I didn't know that.* And I didn't know that I was speaking it myself till afterward.

That's interesting how the brain does that when you're injured.

So anyway, yeah, that's my background. My parents belonged to the Claremont Country Club and I played a lot of tennis. I didn't like golf. Went to Cal [University of California, Berkeley] and then moved on, and then I got another degree from University of Alaska in organizational management. And out of the Marine Corps, I went to work for an international company that supplied contracting work for the government, and I worked for them for years.

Before we get there, let's go back to the Pacific. So if you're on Redwing, then there were a lot of shots on that. Tell me a little bit about what the day-to-day procedure would be once you get there. The ship stopped somewhere and you said depending on whether the shot was a barge shot or where it was, there would be different procedures, tower shots or whatever.

[00:30:00] Everything was dispensed from the vessel on small like jitneys or small personnel carriers because they're not that big. On one of the shots, we brought a McDonnell Douglas airplane over, one of their sweep-back-wing planes, and it was triced up on the aft of the ship; we brought it back to the P.P.G. with us with the McDonnell mechanic, the pilot was flown over ahead of us. I was talking with them about the plane because I'm really interested in engineering

at the time—they apparently made additional intakes to the jet intake system forward so it wouldn't be contaminated; it would go into a filtering system which they put in the bottom part of the plane. The pilot's job was to fly over or through these shots and take radiation samples. It was interesting, talking with the mechanic. He was a pretty nice fellow, a little bit too talkative but, I got to get some pretty good information from him.

So he flew through the shots for samples—

Not the mechanic, the pilot.

The pilot. And then you actually brought that plane back?

No, we didn't bring the plane back. We just took it over. I think they destroyed it over there, I never saw it again.

But you say you brought the samples back to the States?

I believe the samples were put in containers and brought back, yes. And I don't think we brought it back. I think that there was a ship that was part of the group that came back before we did. I think they transferred the scientists, the arming and disarming [firing] team is what they're called, onto that vessel and brought them back after the shots. Then we had to stay there for a while to go through decontamination. We had a new device that was put on our ship where it would put a spray up, and we'd move the ship along and it basically washed the ship down, and then they'd go out and take readings to see how hot it was. And it was kind of a decontamination system which was pretty good. We had to go through decontamination ourselves downstairs, inside the vessel, if we'd gone outside and it was too hot. They were pretty cautious about that. They did take our dosimeters and I think they read those once a week. As a matter of fact, I brought a set back and am going to donate them to the [Atomic Testing] museum, because it has

the medical tag on the chain, I don't know if you've seen it or not, but it has a medical strip on it, it has my dog tags, and then it has one of the old black, round dosimeters.

I want to see that before we go, yeah.

OK, I'll show that to you. The little pencil [sized/shaped] jobs, they would take those every day, and those would go to the science lab.

So did you have a sense, then, from what you're saying, that there was systematic concern about exposure?

Yes. I was very concerned about it but you know, being enlisted, you don't say anything. And particularly after one of the shots, they said, oh well, we can go swimming now, on the island. And that island was hotter than Hades. There were places that you couldn't go. You know they told you you couldn't eat the coconuts, they told you you couldn't eat the fish, and they kept telling you all these things you couldn't do, yet you could go swimming in the water. And in my mind, I knew that it wasn't right. And I discussed it with a friend of mine who was also a member of the detachment, and he said, If I were you, I wouldn't let anybody hear you say that. So I didn't.

I didn't get along too well with our commanding officer, and there was a reason for it. It was brought on by myself. I didn't even think about it at the time, but afterwards I did. Geez, it's been a long time. My commanding officer was making out with a lady in a car at the bottom of the gangplank, and I was standing guard duty at the time. And so I was standing there, and behind the car, looking around, and I really wasn't looking at them, I wasn't paying any [00:35:00] attention to them. I knew they were making out but I didn't pay any attention to it, I'd walk back and forth and then I'd stop at the bottom of the gangplank because I didn't want to be too far from it, particularly with my commanding officer there. And he really got mad and turned

around and kept going like this [demonstrating], like he wanted me to go away, because I guess he thought I was spying on him. From that time on, it kind of went downhill as far as our relationship was concerned, which was unfortunate but that's just the way it was.

And this was in California?

No, this was, I believe—yeah, it may have been California. Yeah, it may have been. I think it was San Diego, Pier 7, Pier 7 on the island. Yes, I'm pretty sure it was. And that was between operations, I think. We were back for—getting ready to go put that flight deck on. They put a helicopter deck on the bow of that ship, and it was just kind of a flat deck. But that was very uncomfortable, and then I know that he wasn't very keen on me from that time on. But you know I did my job and I did what I was supposed to do.

So just a sense of how many of these shots, I'm going to look at the book again because I want to get a sense of timing here. Wigwam is in May of '55.

I think I'm going to have to write some of this down so I can remember and try and put it together.

Yeah, let's piece this together. And that's one where it says that there was an underwater weapons effects test, only one, that they exploded underground [underwater]?

One shot, right.

One shot. So you went out with the device on that one, you're saying. That would look like it would have to be the first one.

Right.

And then May of '56, a year later, begins the big Redwing operation.

Right. There were multiples on that.

Yes, many, many. Let's see, [counts through seventeen shots] from May till July, so in a little over two months, maybe, let's say ten weeks, there are all those shots. So you must've come back after Wigwam—

Yes, we came back after Wigwam, and it was during this period of time that they did the retrofit.

That's what I was going to ask you.

That's when they did the retrofit. OK, then we went—I don't remember going into the hole on this one.

"Into the hole" where the device—

You know, where they stored the devices. I don't remember going into the hole for this one.

Wigwam.

Wigwam. I do remember it here, OK? And I know that they had those racks triced up, I just remember because I saw them.

And that would explain the multiple devices.

Right. And this is basically what it looked like [drawing on paper].

Oh, so there's more than one device on the rack?

Yeah, there's four of them.

I see what you're saying.

And then the rack looked like this [drawing on paper]. The canisters hung like that. And then these just, as the ship moved, it just kept them stable.

I never thought about that. Amazing.

Yeah. So you're looking at it this way [drawing on paper], and then there was a reinforcement here and a reinforcement here.

Yeah. And about how big are those canisters, would you say?

I don't know if I should reveal that, because I don't know.

All right. All right. That's fine. That's fine.

OK. But anyway, that's what they looked like, and there was a series of them in this room. And there was a hatch right here [drawing on paper], and the guard usually stood right here, and then there was a bulkhead here, and then of course it went like that. I don't know how far back it went. But whatever it was we had to read was right here [indicating on diagram]. And I'm thinking that it looked like that [drawing on paper].

Oh, the heat or the radiation or whatever it was that you had to read was a dial of some kind.

[00:40:00] Right, it was a dial, and it stuck out about that far [indicating distance] because you had to turn this light on right here [indicating on diagram] to look at it. You'd look at it, come back out, and there was a board, one of those clipboards, sitting right here [indicating on diagram] and then you'd just put the time down and what the number was. And I remember that there was something at the bottom of this paper here and it said if that number was above or below, I can't remember what it was, then we had to call the science officer. And that's what we did. Then we just dogged this hatch back down again and then these little guys would sit there comfortably.

So you would rotate guard duty on that?

Yes, I think we rotated every four hours. We also rotated captain and admiral and exec [executive officer] and the crypto every four hours. So we were constantly moving.

So you had to guard the captain—

The captain—well, there was also an executive officer and he had an orderly also, so it was the captain, the exec, the admiral. And the admiral was a guest because it was the flag for the [U.S.]

Atomic Energy Commission [AEC]. And you know that the ship was assigned to the Atomic Energy Commission but was operated by the [U.S.] Navy. OK, you all know that.

Right. And Curtiss was the flagship.

Curtiss was the flagship.

Because there was a question, was it the [USNS Fred C.] Ainsworth [AP-181], was it the Curtiss. I forget.

It was the *Curtiss* because the admiral was always on the *Curtiss*.

OK. And you're carrying the device, too.

Yes. And I want to say it was Admiral [Joseph] Wellings but I may be—I think it was.

We can look that up.

We also had the Secretary of Defense on there one time, and I think he was there for an observation of one of the shots. But he came aboard from an aircraft carrier and then left again. He was only there for one shot. And I think that time they pulled the *Curtiss* back a little bit. But we were normally right up front. We were always the front ship. I believe. You can check that. There's a map. I have a map also of where the vessels were placed during the shots.

Yes, I'd like to see that, too.

I don't have it with me. I think you have it in your book.

I might. In this book [referring to DOE/NV—209-REV 15 December 2000]?

I think so. Isn't there a diagram of where the ships were placed?

I have a book that has it. I don't think it's this book. I was just curious if it was the—

Yeah, and it just says—it also gives the radiation. But we all believe that those radiation readings were incorrect, or were altered.

OK. Were altered?

Yes.

Tell me about that.

Well, we just believe that there was more than what they're willing to tell, and I think it had to do with finance, with money. I think it had to do with not being able—that the government was put in a position where they couldn't just replace us like they wanted to or they had anticipated. They didn't realize that clearances took so long, and they couldn't just replace us when they wanted to. We had a young man by the name of Clinton Akers who was out diving with us one time and was bit by a shark and lost the back of his buttocks and part of his leg, and he was evacuated [evacuated] out, medivac-ed out. Never replaced him. They could not replace him. I think that they anticipated using us to the end, but then the government said, oh, my gosh, they've got more exposure than what they're supposed to have; we need to pull them out of there. And we believe, most of us that have talked about it, particularly the engineers, we believe that we went to our limit on the radiation as personnel, and then the government made the decision that, well, the best thing we can do and the easiest thing we can do for the least buck is to just double their exposure. And we think that's what's happened. And then, once they realized what they had done, then they had to kibosh the whole thing because they knew that they were going to have some problems financially later on down the road, which is what's happening. These guys are dying with the weirdest type of cancers you've laid your eyes on. I've had a couple of melanomas removed. I've got another one growing. I'm on a melanoma watch with my doctor. I have to go in once a year. And I call it "slicing and dicing." They just go in and cut it out. I've been fortunate I haven't had any internal cancers that I know of. I take a lot of [00:45:00] vitamins and things. I don't have prostate problems like some of these other people do. Of course, my lifestyle is a lot different, too. I'm pretty much, I don't want to say a vegetarian, but I'm kind of a green guy. You too?

Yes.

Yeah, we use super greens when we're on the road and special water. We used distilled water or something like that. And I believe that's contributed to the fact that I'm not ill.

So help me understand this, when you say "they thought we could be rotated out," you're thinking of the AEC, of the government, I mean—

I'm thinking it was the government. AEC had its own thing going. Even though the government was mixed in there, they needed that mix, they needed that security mix, they needed a military vessel that they could use, and so what they did was they supplied the vessel with its crew to the AEC. Well, the Navy, they needed security, so they used the Marines. I think they basically just went down and said, OK, this class of so-and-so, we'll do a preliminary check on them. Those that can make it for a clearance will go; those that can't, won't.

The Sea School class?

Right. I think that's what happened, because I know that some of the people in our Sea School did not make it. They had to go on to other things. And those of us that had clearances did. So I believe that's how that started. But there were basically two different agendas altogether. The scientists—I talked to a couple of the scientists and they were really nice guys. A lot of people didn't like them because they were kind of walking around with the soft shoes, the tennis shoes and a suit on; but, they're in their own world and they have their own thing to do. But I enjoyed talking with them. As a matter of fact, one guy used to smoke a pipe, and he was an older gentleman, and he was—I wish I could remember his name because he was a delightful fellow. But he was the gentleman who designed—and he was from here [Las Vegas, NTS], but he designed—he said, well, I designed part of the triggering mechanism. And I can't remember his name, but he smoked a pipe, had big round glasses on, and had kind of salt-and-

pepper hair, funnier than a hoot owl, bright. And we would stand at the rail and chitchat until—I know my commanding officer saw me talking to him one time and got very upset, said, You know, you're breaching security here. You're not supposed to talk to him. But we would meet and chitchat, and it was nothing about the devices, it was nothing about the combat or anything that was going on. He was just down home stuff; he was nice, and he was lonely, so we talked. But I was reprimanded for that and so it got kind of dicey and I just kind of—and I told him, I was just right up front and I said, Doctor—and I can't remember what his name was, I said, My commanding officer doesn't want me to talk to you because he thinks we're breaching contract. I think his thing was, Hog wattles. He made some funny European comment. I think it was "hog wattles."

Was he European?

Yes. So anyway, real nice guy, so it was entertaining for me there. And I'm kind of a—I'm very quiet, I don't usually talk to people, but when somebody befriends me, then I'll chitchat.

That's interesting that it was that. So are you allowed to talk to the Navy guys even, or are you pretty much supposed to keep to yourself?

We couldn't tell them what we were doing. They saw us, they would see us going over the side to go to the barge or stand our duty over there, or on the island, whatever.

So let's talk about that a little bit. Once you get there, you've given me a good summary of it, but what were the kinds of things that you'd be doing? Your still primary mission is to guard this device, is that right?

Yes.

So how would that work, say, on a barge shot? What would—?

Well, the body was already there. The body of the device is already there. What you're really doing is you're going over there with the scientists on the arming and disarming [firing] team, and they're the ones that'll remove the detonating device and insert it and then do the wiring and what needs to be done to put it together and prepare it for detonation. Then once that's done, then the team—he's kind of a team captain, whoever the head honcho is, they back out, would secure everything, make sure everything's OK, make sure all the doors are locked, and [00:50:00] then we back out and lock the door and get on the boats and then go. I would venture to say that had there been an intrusion, there would've been gunfire, which would've been our job to do, to protect those people. I felt that's what my job was. My job was to protect the person that I was assigned to, and it would've been done at any cost. All of our weapons were in B classification, which means no rounds in the chamber but a loaded magazine in the weapon, and we had .45s.

So are you, then, experiencing a heightened state of readiness this whole time as a—?

Yes, you're on adrenalin.

You are. That's my question really.

Right. And I didn't drink a lot of coffee primarily because I would just go over the top. I was pretty hyper most of the time. I didn't smoke. I did drink, like the rest of the kids.

Do you sense any concern about—once you've seen one of these things go off, do you have any concern being around them before they're detonated, that there would be any danger?

Today I would because it could be done electronically. If you were to have one in this room today, I would be very, very, very uneasy.

But in those days?

In those days, I didn't think that much about it, but I did know that if it went off, if there was an accident, or the wires were crossed or something got charged, you're history.

Right. Right. So you've talked generally about witnessing a detonation, but do you have a specific memory of the first time? It sounds like you saw quite a few.

I think the one that bothered me the most was in Wigwam It was a big one. It was bigger than what they anticipated and the blast actually moved us back. It threw us all back, and that was very surprising and was much more than what they had anticipated, I can't tell you what because I wasn't there to hear the men talking.

Right, but did you sense any immediate concern among the people around you about that? Were you told [to] do something different than you'd been trained to do?

Yes, there was one shot that we were told to get inside, and I can't remember which one that was. Somebody's probably already told you about what shot that was, and I don't remember, but we were told to immediately get inside, and I think that's the one that was a little out of control.

Right, and if that's on Redwing, I have to look it up. Most of the famous stories about that that I've heard was Bravo, so I'm going to look now at the Redwing tests.

I think it was the—there was one big one, one real big one.

Yes. There was one that was nearly 5 megatons [Navajo] and I just need to look at some of the documentation on those things and see what happened, because I have spoken to people about what happened on Bravo, but not so much on Redwing, so this is good for me to look at this. But it was a huge operation. That's the most amazing thing about that. And a couple of airdrops, it looks like, but they were small. Oh, there was a huge airdrop [Cherokee].

Yes, we did have an airdrop.

3.8 megatons. That's gigantic.

I don't think that was the one—

No, there was one that was larger.

Anyway, there's one that they made us go inside immediately. It was all hands, go in and secure the deck. And that thing was still rising when they made the decision. And I don't even remember the blast. I think some of us were already in before the blast hit us. I'm sorry, I don't remember. [Possibly referring to Wigwam.]

No, that's all right. It was a long time ago. But there was a barge shot of 5 megatons [Tewa] and there was a barge shot of 4.5 megatons [Navajo].

I think it may've been the five.

Yeah. And some of these numbers, I've been told, are scrubbed anyway. These yield numbers are not exact. The classification officer told me that. So there may have been something even larger. I don't know how close they are.

Well, I know that it was large enough, the front end of the ship went up like this [demonstrating] **[00:55:00]** when that wave hit us, so it was pretty good. And I know that they had the sprinklers on because I had to go to the bridge.

I don't know what else to say. I think that they did our group a misjustice by the supposed, quote, misinterpretation of what classifies an Atomic Marine or veteran. I think they did a misjustice by doubling the amount of radiation that we could receive. I'm sure that it's affected our children. I know that there are some of the people who have children—well, look at Kari [Chipman]. She's a child of one of those, and I don't know what's wrong with her, whether it's natural and would've come on anyway or whether it's brought on by this issue. I don't know. I've been fortunate, and I think a lot of it has to do with diet. As a vegetarian, you know that cancer isn't a single sickness or illness, and there is a lot of residual to that. There's all kinds of things that can happen from it. And I think that if you keep your body alkaline, that's my thing is that the acid doesn't take over, because our body is basically alkaline.

Right. So do you consciously do this—let me put it a different way. Is the fact that you have these concerns about the exposures, does that impact the way you take care of yourself now?

Yes, it does. Absolutely.

In what kinds of ways? The diet part and—?

The diet's a big thing. My hearing. You know, they didn't give us earplugs, and our hearing, I know most of the guys I know, our hearing is bad. I'm filing a claim with the VA now because the lady told me to at the VA. She said, you know, No sense in me giving you all this stuff and you having to pay for it. She says, You have a legitimate complaint here. And I've had hearing problems ever since I can—even when I was still in the Marine Corps and we came off ship, I had a little bit of a hearing problem, ringing in my ears. My eyesight did not start changing really, though, until, oh, about four years ago, so the tops are plain and the bottom are reading glasses, because I'm on a computer a lot.

Now, speaking of hearing, do you have, with the experience of a nuclear detonation, is there a sound component that you recall as part of the experience? I'm just curious.

Yes, there is. There's a, I think it's an energy crack, there's a cracking sound that's inside that muffled *bu-bu-bu-bu-boom* type thing, and there's a very sharp crack in there. And I think it has to do with—as a matter of fact, when you watch that thing go up, you'll see the lightning, the energy inside of it, and that resonates and you can hear that, and that was pretty sharp. I think people are more at awe at what's going on, what's developing in front of them than they are listening to the energy.

Right. Now I'm going to stop this for a second to make my track.

[00:58:45] End Track 2, Disc 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 2.

Am I helping you?

You are. This is very good information. I really want to understand the experience, both now and then. But to what degree can you talk to your fellow Marines about this, with all the security stuff going on, just the shocking experience of witnessing something like this?

I think a lot of the guys, including myself, don't talk about it much.

At the time.

At the time? Didn't talk about it at all. All we talked about was duties, what we're doing, where we're going, when the duty roster would come down, who was assigned to go in the hole or who was to go over to the barge or who was to go up on the bridge, we just basically talked about that. We did not talk about the threat of it. When somebody had to go down, if they were a little hot and they had to take a shower, had to decontaminate, why, we kind of razzed them about it.

But you'll hear some of the guys going, yeah, I decontaminated and then I put my same clothes back on.

But as far as just being able to talk about what you've witnessed, would there be any, "wow, that was big," or?

No, we don't talk about it. Even today, we don't. A couple of the guys went into the simulator over at the museum when we opened the museum two years ago, and they were very, very upset when they came out [simulation of atomic blast in the Atomic Testing Museum "Ground Zero Theater"]. I was one of them, but I didn't realize it until afterwards, till I came back to my room. It shook me up a little bit. It's fairly realistic. If they still have it, I want my wife to go through it this time so she can kind of experience it. I don't know if I'll go through it again. My psychologist said, You know, if you get too uptight, I can double my medication and then just—she said, Do something else, because I'm so anal I always have things I have to

do. Go do something else, if I can do that. And then I guess one of the things—I know I'm just kind of just flying over here, it's like I'm tesseracting but—

You're what?

Tesseract. I'm going between dimensions.

Oh, that's a great word. And let me assure you that that's how oral history works. We're not stuck on chronology. We like association.

When we opened the museum and the people were outside demonstrating against it—

Yes. I was here.

I was very, very angry.

Why?

I was the one that took all the pictures of them.

Why were you angry?

It's like they're willing to just give up everything they have to somebody else because we can't protect ourselves. We can't have these things. These are bad for our children. Yeah, they're bad, but what are you going to do when North Korea sends one over into our lap? Or what are you going to do when Russia send a dozen of them into our main cities? Are you just going to sit back and go, oh well, it wasn't me? You don't understand. You can't focus on the real issue of this. These scientists, they don't want to make those things. I've talked to several of them, and every one of them go, God forgive me, I'm sorry that this had to happen but it had to be done to protect my homeland. I'm sorry that I had to do what I had to do, but we are the land of the free, and if it wasn't for this, we wouldn't be free. And there's a saying that I have that I have at the bottom of my e-mails, and it says, "If you can read this, thank a teacher. If you can read this in English, thank a veteran." And that's the way I believe it. And I

get very, very emotional about that. We don't ask these kids to go to Iran or Iraq or Afghanistan because they want to go, or because we want them to go. We're doing it to protect our country. Yes, [George W.] Bush is getting a bad rap, and I agree, the press, all they can do is take a very liberal view and I have a real hard time with that. They don't talk about the good things. They don't talk about the schools that are being built by the Marines, or the hospitals that are being refurbished by the Seabees [U.S. Navy Construction Battalions]. They don't talk about all of the stuff that's being done that's good. All they're talking about is the bad stuff. Well, I'll tell you, I'd sure in hell rather be fighting them over there rather than fighting them in our country. And these people are here to kill us. They're going to kill us, one way or another, and that's what they're working on. It's amazing, 9/11 wasn't that long ago [00:05:00] and people have forgotten about it already. The Democrats are already going ape in the Senate and the House [of Representatives]. How quickly we forget. We are so spoiled. We've never had combat on our soil, other than a little bit of skirmish up in Alaska, and what, one or two shots by a Japanese submarine down in Long Beach, California that hit a couple of oil tanks or something. Americans don't understand. Talk to any European immigrant here today. Why are they here? They're here because it's a better land, a better place to be. I just have a real challenge with it. *Yes. I think what's interesting from someone standing outside or even historically would be the assumption that because you have some real beefs with the government, that that would somehow influence the larger picture of what veterans do and the sacrifices they make. But you don't. You have a beef with the government and yet you feel very strongly still about what you did.*

Right.

So you felt that it was a necessary thing to do, the testing in the Pacific?

Correct.

But you're critical of what, the way it was carried out or—?

I'm critical of what they did, and when I say "they," unfortunately we use the word "they" for that ghost, if you will.

Yes, I agree.

Some department or some division of the government decided that it'd be cheaper, and you take and measure human lives by the dollar. Americans are notorious for that. And so rather than worry about having replacements and thinking about it in terms of, we can keep these young men out there, Marines and sailors, we can keep those teams out there for this period of time, and then we need to replace them for this period of time, instead they said, we'll do this, they didn't have the foresight to see what else needed to be done, and so they said, we'll just double their exposure. There's no problem. And then, when it comes time to say, well, there may be some ramification here, [they said], Oh, well, no, they don't qualify. I do have an issue with that, and I would like to see the little fat slob, and I'll guarantee you who it was, it was a little fat slob sat behind his desk and said, No, we'll just do it this way. He has no, no idea what happened. And I have a real hard time with that. That's heartburn to me. So, anyway.

Now, I've talked to other atomic veterans who've said that they really do consider the kind of service that they gave equivalent to combat or of a similar kind of importance. Do you see it that way?

I do, yes, because even though it was a non-shooting confrontation, we did have confrontations.

We had confrontations with Russians, a Russian submarine, we had confrontations with the unknown fishing boat which—has anybody talked to you about that?

The Japanese fishing boat Yes.

The Japanese fishing boat which, when we finally got to it, all of the devices had been unscrewed, all of the recording devices had been unscrewed from the deck and jettisoned.

Oh, tell me more about that, but you weren't personally there, no, this is—?

I wasn't personally on the Japanese vessel. All of the devices had been jettisoned into the water.

So the Curtiss went to get that vessel?

No, no, I think the destroyers did, because it was on the perimeter. But it was recording everything that was going on, in the fleet there. And so yes, I believe that was a combat situation. I mean that could've ended up being a shooting situation.

We had an issue in California. It was a drunk or—I think the man was drinking and he drove his car into a compound that he shouldn't have been in, and we were on alert. We were ready to go. We had all of our men out, we were in a perimeter all ready to protect that vessel. The MPs [Military Police] or whoever it was up there at Port [00:10:00] Chicago went and got the guy and arrested him and took him to jail. But he'd run into—did something stupid, but I mean it was instant, and to me that's combat alert.

Like I said, the submarine was. There were several different occasions when situations were very hairy, and there was enough stress there and emotion to consider it combat. And of course, the emotion of knowing that you're instantly dead. I think applies more to a person than does combat, because combat you can run and hide and shoot back or not shoot or relax or rest a minute. Here, you can't. You're on red alert constantly, from the time you put those devices on the vessel until the time you come home. And that's why I think a lot of these people drink so much. I drank because everybody else did, but you know I don't drink anymore, I never smoked. But I think that was part of the nerve-wracking—yes, I consider it combat.

That's very interesting, thank you for that, because it's this new kind of weapon that's never before existed in the history of mankind, and the ways in which it impacts military troops, I think, is important to understand, and so thank you for explaining that to me.

You're welcome.

So you come back for—the last trip is the Redwing trip, is that right, the last trip to the Pacific?

Yes.

And then what happens?

Then we all went ashore and we were assigned to different divisions in the First Marine Detachment. I went up to become a training aids NCO [Noncommissioned Officer]. That was for the balance of my tour. I was responsible for the training aids using Marine Corps films and different types of devices and equipment that they use, weapons and that sort of thing so that they could train the recruits or the newcoming people.

Did any of that involve training in nuclear issues?

No. That was dead. When we left the ship, they just said, what you saw and hear stays here and you'll never repeat it again. And then—

They said that to you.

Yes. And the one thing that I found interesting, and I think it's probably because of my prior knowledge of the Rosenbergs, it meant a lot to me when they said, well, you know that it's execution. You divulge any of this information, you're executed. Period, end of conversation. I live by that today. People laugh at me. Right now, later on in life here, I'm an officer with the Alaska State Defense Force, and we are part of the Veterans Administration and [U.S. Department of] Homeland Security. So we have a gentleman who is on the—he's on a—it's called a Field Intelligence Security Team, and his name is Rosenberg. Well, when we

were talking about clearances, I said, Well, I had an FTS Queen clearance, and I said, We were assigned under the Rosenberg Act. And his name is Rosenberg, and so we kind of laughed at him and said, Hey, is it true you have that much power over these guys? And he just kind of—he doesn't even know what it meant. But I think we all had Final Top Secret Q clearances.

That's what FTS means, Final Top Secret.

Right. And then Q, it has to do with the operations. Now, every operation you're on or what you do has a different ending. It could be Wiggy or—

So you think Q has to do with nuclear stuff?

I think Q had to do with the highest clearance you could have in those days.

Right. That's what I understood.

Yeah. Today I think there's some higher.

Some higher. I'm sure.

There's some for pink paper, which is Pentagon paper. There's another one that's higher, and I can't remember what it is.

Yeah. OK. So you leave and this goes—you just, what, you're twenty, twenty-two years old now or twenty-one years old?

Yes.

[00:15:00] *But when you're told not to talk about it, then you just don't talk about it. So did you think about it at all as you move on in your career?*

No. You'd think about it, yes, but just glad that it doesn't happen. During the Cold War, there were a few things that were pretty, pretty exciting to—exciting. They kind of concerned me. I just kept saying people don't understand the devastation here, they just don't understand. And

when we started rattling sabers with Russia and now we've got Iran going at it and we've got North Korea, I am concerned. I'm very concerned. People don't understand. And we are vulnerable. The United States is probably the most vulnerable country in the world, I don't care what you have to say, because of our mentality and our attitude.

So there were times during the Cold War, if I'm understanding you correctly, that because you had this first-hand experience, you were concerned.

Very.

Now I know you said there's certain things that you can't talk about, but just give me a sense of the timeline of when you reach that. When do you leave the Marines about and what happens next?

I leave the Marines in about '60, finished school.

Is this when you went to Cal?

Yes.

And what did you study?

Engineering. I started out as a psychobiology major and then I ended up in industrial engineering. My parents lived in Piedmont, so Berkeley was just down the road.

Then I was contacted by an old acquaintance from San Diego and he's with the Eleventh DIO in San Diego, Eleventh Naval District Intelligence Office, and he and I were kind of drinking buddies years and years and years ago. I did not know what his position was. I knew what his outside position was but I didn't know what his inside position was. And he contacted me one day and asked if we could have coffee and chitchat, and we did. Then of course I was recruited at that time to go to work for this company. And I did, and I did contract work for years. Then I was married, and that marriage went on the rocks. Internal Affairs called me in,

because I was doing international work at the time and said that they would put me in domestic operations. I told them I wasn't interested because I liked being out, and so I was severed from that particular employment.

And then I went to work for Harrah's Hotel Casinos, and I started out as a bodyguard on Bill Harrah's personal bodyguard team. He had several Special Forces guys on that group and I was one of them. And I didn't watch Bill as much as I watched his wife and kids. I was more assigned to his wife and kids. And then I was on one detail where we had to go out and—Bill and Howard Hughes were really good friends, you know that, and I had to go on a detail when we tried to find Howard Hughes. He had wandered out into the desert, and they found him over by Nellis [Air Force Base].

So did you find him or—

No, I didn't find him, but we were on the detail looking for him.

So just because this is such a great story, what do you do? You just fan out across the desert?

Yes, they flew us down. We took the jet down. I think Bill had a Fokker then. And they flew about four of us down, and it was a volunteer thing. We flew down to Vegas where we met up with some of the Hughes security people then we just kind of fanned out and started looking for him. We were looking, and he had different haunts that he used to like to go to.

Were you driving? Were you flying?

We were driving. Then they found him and we came back to the office there, the Hughes office at the time; they fixed a very, very nice meal for us, and we flew back, and we just went back to do our own assignments.

[00:20:00] Then when Bill Harrah passed away, then I went to [Lake] Tahoe [Nevada] and I was security there for a while, it was floor security. And then after that, then I went into the pit and I

was one of the oldest guys to go through their dealing school, so I dealt, which was kind of cool. I started out as a dealer and then I didn't last long because they wanted me as a pit boss due to my background. So then I became a pit boss and really enjoyed that. Because I was a good card counter due to my math, they would take me up into the attic and I would count down games for them, if we had somebody that we thought was using Thorpe or Bally one-two-three or one of those. I would do the countdowns and we would photograph it and then we would take the person off the table. Of course, some of them get charges pressed against them, or they just get kicked out of the casino and put in the Black Book.

Well, at that time I met my wife, my current wife, and we got married. It was right after that, that they [Harrah's] were starting, really trying to curb their spending. They were realizing that they were spending an awful lot of money and they really needed to rein in their spending, so they decided that they would start an engineering department, and I was one of the first industrial engineers in their department.

Where?

At Tahoe. We started putting dealers on standards. We did time-and-motion studies there. Because cocktail waitresses have the tendency of serving their table and then quickly going through the slot areas and hobnobbing, and doing their thing, we put them on standards also.

Then we were transferred down to Reno where my senior project engineer was George Wackenheim [sp], who is now working for the Golden Nugget, actually he's in management now, back in New Jersey. So then we completed all of the standards for Harrah's. And I redesigned and did the standards for the soft count and the hard count rooms, which is where they count the money, and redesigned that and the vault area. And Jim King and I did the food studies, which I gained about twenty-two pounds. We had to go around and do a comparative

analysis of all of our competitors in town. Jim and I would just come out, we're just bloated. We're sitting there doing the study as to the service and the quality of the food and everything. I had to take Flynn [Stuparich, wife] with me a couple of times because Jim said, *If I eat another meal at another restaurant, I'm going to throw up.*

So anyway, I was in the engineering department there, we did all the standards, and then after that I became a property manager for Harrah's Hotel Casinos in Idaho, at Bill Harrah's personal lodge; "Harrah's Middle Fork Lodge." I was interviewed by the vice president and he told me that I had to bring it up to a five-star property and get it as close to five-star, five-diamond as possible because what they were going to do is they were going to sell it off. And I brought it from a three-star to a five-star and a three-diamond to a five-diamond. Once we got it up there, then it was put up for sale and the McCall brothers bought it for McCall Communication.

And the name is again Middle Fork?

Harrah's Middle Fork Lodge.

Just give me a sense, what are the kinds of things that you do to make that kind of shift up? The quality of the food, the service, all those things?

Oh, you mean the studies?

To get it from a three-star to five-star.

Oh, OK, it was food service, guide service. We had guides, we had aircraft. I was responsible for three airplanes. And these people are paying a thousand dollars a day, so they're a high-end customer. The food service was the big thing. Amenities, very big thing. The people didn't realize, because they're backcountry people—I don't mean to say that. That's kind of a social downgrade. What I mean to say is that they're raised in the country and they don't understand [00:25:00] amenities for people from the city. So we had to change the amenities, and the first

amenities I could get a hold of that would give me a—company give me a decent amenity was Neutrogena, and they were very nice. They sent a gal out there and she really knew her products, and I said OK, this is what I have, this is what I want. I met her in Reno, and we chitchatted, and she said, Look, this is what I can give you. And I only had so much space on the countertop for an amenity package, so I couldn't go bananas. But she was just super helpful with me, and we came up with a real nice package, and I thought it was excellent. It had all of the amenities in it that a female would want, of that caliber.

So anyway, I [they] sold that, and once that happened, then I was to go to Las Vegas to go into the engineering department in Las Vegas at Harrah's. I chose not to because I knew that the Vegas property, what I would end up doing is I would come to the Vegas property, which was the old Harrah's, and then they were going to send me down to Laughlin [Nevada]. I knew that that was in the wind and I did not want to go to Laughlin. I mean you talk about a pit. And that was in the wind, and so I chose not to and I resigned at that time. And this is, I had fifteen years in, I guess, ten to fifteen years in.

Then Flynn and I went to Europe, and I had to do an additional contract, and we were stationed in Greece at the time, at the American Embassy there. She stayed there with the rest of the wives. My team did a lot of preparation for Desert Storm relief, and we were going in the back door of Adana in Turkey and going and doing what we needed to do, and then came back out. And then once that was done, we came back to the States and they said, well, now you can come back to work for us, go into domestic operations, and we'll get a place for you down in San Diego and you can work down there, or San Francisco, and I said no, thank you. But what happened was, then we came back, as we were leaving Greece, Flynn said, Let's go to Alaska. I said, Let's just kind of go through Alaska. I've always wanted to see Alaska and I've never been to Alaska.

And she said, Oh, well, that'd be nice, you know, let's do that.

So we went to Alaska, and I had a stayover because they had allowed me x-amount of travel time and allowance. We went to Alaska and we rented a car for, I don't know, a week or ten days, and went to Fairbanks. Beautiful university at Fairbanks. I really, really love that university.

I know. I have friends there, yeah.

Oh, do you really?

I've never been but I have friends there.

Oh, just gorgeous. And I hooked up with a fellow at the museum there and he and his wife were just lovely. They told Flynn and I where to go and what to see, and so we went all over. And then we came back down to Anchorage, and then we went down on the Kenai, came back up. During this period of time, Flynn had seen live eagles for the first time, I mean as close as the two of us, and saw a moose, a mama moose and her babies, and that really impressed her; then we saw, it was in the fall, I believe, because there were wolves working the side of a mountain and we got to see a pair of wolves. And then we went down to the water and we saw beluga whales, both the mature ones who are white and the babies are gray. And she says, I love it here. Let's see if we can get a job.

So Flynn went to work for Key Bank and then I went to work for FedEx. I just went right into management. They said I was the first man to walk in there with a decent résumé and presented myself without spitting or carrying on. And I went into management, and then I went into international management, which at that time was very, very exciting because FedEx was just opening Asia.

And about what era is this? What years are we talking about that you make it to Alaska?

Oh, made it to Alaska about fifteen years ago. I think that's about right.

OK. So the late eighties, maybe.

Yeah. Nineties, maybe, 1991.

Maybe early nineties. OK.

Yeah, early nineties, right around 1991, I think. And then I worked for FedEx and then I was [00:30:00] on the Asia One Team and we opened Taipei, and I had a flat in Taipei just down from the MTC, which is the Mandarin Training Center, and had I stayed—would have applied for a full-time job there, but they were having some problems with their expatriates so they eliminated that program and started putting all domestics in, which was fine. I was going to go into their security department there. But I had an opportunity—I spent a lot of time at the university, a lot of time at the museum and MTC, and I was starting to take Mandarin. I took the first class in Mandarin. And I just loved it. And I love the people over there. They're so nice and their lifestyle is very nice.

I was called back from that. I was there for—I can't remember how long but anyway, long enough. I had a contact while I was over there to go to South Korea, and so my previous employment asked me if I would go over and talk to some people in Seoul. So I worked it out with FedEx to go over to Seoul, and went over and stayed at the Hilton Hotel, which is just below a big mountain there and there's a beautiful temple with a pagoda up at the top. Then I met these people and I helped them complete an operation that they needed done. I was in a position to do it, which was kind of nice. And then I came back, and then I went back again when my buddy who was working for that company passed away. His wife, her name was Ione, and Ione I think still works for the federal government or she may be very close to retirement now. But Keith passed away and he's buried over there, so I went over. And Ione's parents are

very wealthy merchants so I was treated very well. I really enjoyed that. And then—Flynn didn't go on those operations with me or go over there with me at the time.

Anyway, I came back and finished working with FedEx and I left FedEx about two-and-a-half years ago. They set up a retirement package, and there was a magic number of 70, so my number of years and my age added to 70, it was about 75 or 76, and so I took the package and retired. I came to Valdez [Alaska] and I'm now working for the school district part-time.

What do you do?

I'm just a substitute. I was going to go to work over at the junior college. Prince William Sound Junior College, but the gal that was running it at the time was really, really, really political and very, very—not very nice at all. Her faculty really disliked her, and adjuncts were just absolutely dirt to her.

That's a problem.

Yes, I just decided not to do it.

How big of a school system is Valdez?

Valdez only has three schools. I think there's about a thousand students.

OK. Total.

Total. And they're mostly [U.S.] Coast Guard and Alaska students, or children. And that's about it.

Thank you. You've had a very interesting life, and varied. But let's sort of circle around to finish this up with how and in what ways you did or did not keep touch with the Curtiss guys or you hook back into this group that's having this reunion here this week. How did that come about?

I did not hook back up with them until last year. I really wanted to stay away from it. I just wasn't comfortable. It was the year before last. I'm sorry.

But had you heard, had you been contacted, did you—?

Oh yes. And I just wasn't ready to—I feared that they would sit around and drink and tell stories, and I'm not a storyteller. I'm kind of a bottom-line guy, and there's another guy here who's also a retired engineer. We talk. But it's very cut-and-dried. I don't like all the glib. And when the museum opened, they asked if I would be interested in coming down, and then—

This is Kari [Chipman] and her group [Curtiss Atomic Marines (CAM)]

Yes.

They found you on a list or something, is that how it works?

Right.

And you get invited.

[00:35:00] I'm also a member of the Navy Nuclear Weapons Association, and I don't know if she found me on that or if one of the gentlemen knew where I lived. But anyway, they contacted me and said that they really would like to have some representation at the museum when they opened up. I think I set some parameters and I said, as long as we're not telling stories and we're not drinking and carrying on, I said, that's fine with me. So I decided to come down.

Now give me a sense, without denigrating your fellow Marines, but what do you mean when you say that, that there's just a certain cultural thing that you don't relate to or—which, as a non-military person, what do you mean?

It's kind of the, you know, "Once-a-Marine-always-a-Marine" type of thing. I understand that and I realize it, and I am that way. I don't appreciate hashing over things over and over and over and over again. Very similar to I've had to go to one of those therapy sessions at the VA, and these people would say, well, you know, I was in combat and it's bang-bang-bang-bang-bang, twing-twing-twing-twing-twing-twing, and oh yeah, man, I felt the sweat running down my arms

and, you know, and I was really upset and my eyes were blurred and all that. I don't give a big fat rat's rip, you know. I really don't. I was over there, yeah, my eyes were watering, I was blurry-eyed a lot. I went through that, but why go through it all the time? Why keep talking about it? That's just something you have to live with.

OK. I understand.

I have a very, very good friend of mine. His name is Irving Kornfield [sp]. He actually has pictures of his parents being mutilated by the Nazis. And he said, You know, I can't live this every day. I can't carry this with me every day. He said, I have to move on with my life. And when his kids talk to him, Irving will say, It's history. Let it be. We're not going to forget it. No one will ever forget it. But let it be. And I am the same way. It's history. Let it be. I'm telling you this because you're asking for it and it's something to build a history database. Otherwise I'd never discuss it. That's where I come from.

Thanks for that. So the museum visit was the first time you'd made contact with this group?

Correct.

And what was that like? Did you find the opening interesting or the—

I found I was very apprehensive and a little uptight. When we were out in the tent and we had the different speakers, one of the speakers I recognized, I can't remember his name, he was from—I want to say I saw him at Los Alamos [National Laboratory]. I don't think I saw him here because I wasn't here, but I'm saying I saw him at 55.

“At 55.”

Alamos used to be called 55, Area 55.

Oh, I didn't know that.

Yeah, because this is 51; that's 55. I think it was called 55. Anyway, I recognized him, and I wanted to talk to him, but I couldn't. He was inundated with people taking his pictures and all of that. But he was sitting up on the front left side of the tent. All right. And he's a scientist of some sort. I know I saw him at 55.

Talking with the guys, it was pretty guarded. Most of us were all apprehensive, you know, except for Bob Mackenzie, he was just born a people person, and I'm not. I'll sit back. And I was really pleased with the museum. I was pleased with what's going on. I'm pleased enough that I'll tell you that I'm going to be leaving some money to the museum when I pass on. It won't be much but it'll be a few dollars. I like the displays. Some of it's pretty interesting. I don't remember seeing the real old stuff. I thought our Geiger counters were newer but, and then I was thinking about it, well, maybe they were the same. I can't remember. I was disappointed that there wasn't a little display for the *Curtiss*, [00:40:00] because I feel the *Curtiss* played just as much of a role as the desert did. We had some pretty big tests over there, and Holmes and Narver was involved with that, and I thought that there should've been a little something there. This is more local right now, and that's fine, I mean that's where your money's coming from, Wackenhut and those people. I was going to talk to, what's the gal's name, the gal that's responsible down at the museum?

Well, there's Maggie [Smith] and then there's Vanya [Scott], who collects the [artifacts, documents, photographs]—

No, it must be Maggie.

Maggie's the woman sort of in the front office there and stuff there.

Yes. I was going to talk to her about a display, and then if she needed some funds in advance for it or something, I would be willing to do that. I'm comfortable financially. My wife and I made some good investments.

And what about the whole—so you're here for this other reunion now, so what's your sort of—and you've—I'm interrupting myself. Let me back up. You've also talked about some of the issues that you have jointly, which are the health issues. So what makes you sort of overcome your concerns about these kinds of groups and be involved again?

Well, last year I was concerned because I thought that they would just sit around and blab, and they did not, which was fine. This year, I'm here primarily because my wife wants to understand more of what I went through. So it's basically for her. I want her to go through the simulator [Atomic Testing Museum' "Ground Zero Theater"], and I'm hoping memory is as good as I think it is, but it'll give her a good sense of what it was like. I couldn't remember if the blast of air was warm or not in the simulator.

You know, I don't remember.

It should be hot. It should be about 120 degrees when it goes through there, at least, so somebody goes, gosh, that's different than my temperature in my body. But I want her to see that because she doesn't understand. I still have nightmares.

Do you?

Oh yes. I wake up and sweat and I have nightmares, and sometimes when I'm extremely tired, I have kind of a little relapse and what happens is that—and it usually happens when I'm in a crowd or in a restaurant and I'm very tired, my face starts to twitch. I don't know why. And she will immediately know that it's time to go, and she takes complete command. And it's an understanding. And she'll say, Nicholas, snap out of it. It's time to go. And when

she says it in the way that she says it, it's very commanding and I know that I have to go, because I don't know it. I don't realize that I'm going there. As far as waking up is concerned, she knows that she can't touch me, so what she does is she shakes the bed and it wakes me up. And then she walks me through a scenario of going someplace else, so I don't go back and get into it again. But most of my bad dreams are about the devices. About the submarine is the big thing. That really freaked me, I think.

Other than that, I can't think of anything else. You were going to mention something else and I had something I was going to tell you and I can't remember what it was. You had another question you were asking. Oh, why I'm here. OK. I wanted her to see that. I wanted her to experience it first-hand so she'll understand. She's a pretty bright gal. She's the administrative assistant to the superintendent of schools and also the school board. She's a very, very busy woman. Talk about organized.

Good. That's great. So you want her—it's for her to—?

Right.

And what about the interaction with the guys? Is that in any way interesting to you or—

I don't know yet. I'll have to wait and see. I'm still a little apprehensive. You know, I guess we've lost one, and Bob's [Mackenzie] about ready to go. I guess he had a heart attack or a seizure or an incident just before he came up here, so I don't know if he'll make the next one or not. But see, you and I can relate to this because our living standards are different. But you sit here and there's a man taking glycerin and drinking coffee and eating T-bone steak.

Oh, I see what you're saying.

You know, and I'm going, Bob, it's everything that you shouldn't be doing.

Now have you been out to the [Nevada] test site before?

Years and years and years go. But we didn't go out into the field. We were only down at the offices there.

[00:45:00] *At Mercury.*

At Mercury. I can't remember what it was. I was in the Marine Corps then and they flew us up here.

For real?

Yeah, and they took us to—we landed at Nellis [Air Force Base], I believe, and there were four Marines, and two of us were with the *Curtiss* group and I can't remember who the other fellows—I want to say it was Frank Powell but I don't know for sure. It was myself and Frank Powell, I think, and then there was a sailor, he was a master chief [Master Chief Petty Officer, pay grade E-9], and then the other fellow was in civilian clothes, and I don't remember, but we had to come up here. We were armed. And we had to do something. Gosh, that's a long time. I can't remember that. And they gave us a clearance badge of some sort. And we didn't go very far. We were inside the gate and we went in and then over to those buildings over there. Do you remember?

Let's see, which side are you talking about? You go in the gate. You going left or right?

I think we're going to the left. There were one, two—two or three buildings together.

Well, there's [Camp] Desert Rock, which was the camp there, but then once you go through the gate to the left, I couldn't tell you what the buildings were. And things have changed there, so I don't know well enough to say.

OK. Anyway, and we picked something up and put it on the vehicle that we were in. I think we were in like a—I want to say like a big Jeep, one of those big Jeep Chieftain Cherokees in those days. The item wasn't very big, took two of us to carry it, it was just about like this [indicating

size]. And we brought that out, went right to the plane, got on the plane, went to San Diego, landed at San Diego, and met with somebody there from Convair, I believe. And then it was transported to them. We turned our weapons in. I was sent back to Camp Pendleton, and the other Marine, which I think was Frank, he went to wherever he was, and then we just [makes sound like slapping palms together] gone.

How interesting is that!

It was only like a day thing.

And you're saying that this thing, can you say it was, say, three by—

Oh, I'd say three by three by, what's that, a foot?

Yeah, a foot, eighteen inches.

It was just a silver aluminum container with about eight locks on it, two on each side. Anyway, I was very surprised because my CO [Commanding Officer]—no, it was my XO [Executive Officer], my XO came out with a gentleman from the Provost Marshal's Office and said, You're going on a special assignment this morning. And I said OK, and off I went.

And so this would've been after you're back from the Pacific.

Oh yeah. It was.

How interesting! Well, I'm glad I asked you about whether you'd been out to the test site.

So, and that's all I remember there. There was something else I was going to tell you that I thought might be of interest but I lost my—if I think about it, I'll tell you.

Thank you.

I can't remember. OK, we were talking about—I guess that's about it. I can't really think of it. There was something about the Marine Corps that I was going to tell you about and I can't remember.

Oh, I think the people that I talk to today, I think they're really bitter. We are all bitter, including the wives. Atomic veterans have not been acknowledged by the V.A. We should not have to fight for every benefit. These benefits should be available to us. Many of my peers have passed away from cancer or other ailments related to cancer. So that's about it.

Well, great. Thank you so much.

[00:50:00] Thank you.

[00:50:10] End of Track 2, Disc 2.

[End of interview]