

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Program Director: Dr. Paul Ortiz
Office Manager: Tamarra Jenkins
Technology Coordinator: Deborah Hendrix



241 Pugh Hall
PO Box 115215
Gainesville, FL 32611
352-392-7168 Phone
352-846-1983 Fax

The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (SPOHP) was founded by Dr. Samuel Proctor at the University of Florida in 1967. Its original projects were collections centered around Florida history with the purpose of preserving eyewitness accounts of economic, social, political, religious and intellectual life in Florida and the South. In the 45 years since its inception, SPOHP has collected over 5,000 interviews in its archives.

Transcribed interviews are available through SPOHP for use by research scholars, students, journalists, and other interested groups. Material is frequently used for theses, dissertations, articles, books, documentaries, museum displays, and a variety of other public uses. As standard oral history practice dictates, SPOHP recommends that researchers refer to both the transcript and audio of an interview when conducting their work. A selection of interviews are available online here through the UF Digital Collections and the UF Smathers Library system.

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PCM-042

Interviewee: Skip Rowly

Interviewer: Sarah Blanc

Date of Interview: July 7, 2011

B: Hello. Today is July 7, 2011. I'm Sarah Blanc and I'm here with Mr. Skip Rowly, and we're doing an interview on the Panama Canal Zone. Mr. Rowly, can you start just by telling me some basic information about where you were born and when you were born?

R: I was born in Colón, Republic of Panama which was an American hospital in the Republic of Panama right on the beach, December the 14th, 1939. I'd have been twenty-one minutes earlier, my sister and I would share the same birthday. Hers is the 13th. I grew up on the Atlantic side, went to grade school there and part of junior high. Then my father got transferred—well, actually, he quit the Panama Canal and went to work for the navy. My dad was a sea captain and he had a chance to go back to sea again. So he wanted to keep his experience levels up. So he did that. So then we moved to the Pacific side, and when he worked at Rodman Naval Station we lived in the town of Cocoli, and we lived there for probably three years *más o menos*. My mother finally got tired of him going to sea and being away, so he decided to quit the navy and come back to the canal. So he got a job as captain of the **Cibola** which is a salvage tub in the Gamboa region. They go all over the Central America replacing buoys and things like that, navigational aids. We lived in Gamboa for several years and because the high school was so far away and everything we moved into Balboa—actually into Los Rios—and that's where they stayed until they retired. Of course, I graduated from

high school in [19]59. That's a whole other story, but I left it on a yacht. I never did graduate from high school on stage. I took all my tests early because I got hired by a man from Washington State to be a crew member on a yacht, which was every boy's dream in the Canal Zone: to go to exotic places on a yacht as a crew member. My dream came true and we got as far as Caño Island in Costa Rica and got shipwrecked. I spent five days marooned on a rock. Nobody knew where we were. Nobody even knew we were there.

B: All right, I'm slowing you down. Okay, hold on, hold on.

R: Okay, want me to start over again? [Laughter]

B: [Laughter] Okay, well, first of all you have to help me with geography. You said that your father stopped working for the Panama Canal Company, correct?

R: Mm-hm .

B: So does that mean that you had to move out of their sanctioned—

R: Canal Zone housing. Yes.

B: So you didn't actually live in the Zone after that point. You moved around in the—

R: No. Actually we lived in New Cristobal and due to seniority, you'll get a better house with the more service that you have. So when my dad first started out, all they could get was a twelve family or a four family, something like that. And you didn't have finished walls like you have here. They were just built with two by

fours and then diagonal wood and siding. In the early days we had no air conditioning, had all screen windows, and you'd just open the windows—had glass windows too to keep the rain out—but you open the windows all the way and just let the breeze blow in. Everybody had oscillating fans and there wasn't too many ceiling fans. They weren't, at that stage, in popularity. They were in taverns and bars and things downtown but not in houses. So everybody had oscillating fans. In earlier years, I can remember we had an ice man come around and he'd chop off a block of ice and we'd put it in our refrigerators. So you could always here him coming down the street banging on his **crate** drum that he had mounted on the back of his car. He'd make a metal rod: DONG! DONG! DONG! DONG! And you'd know he's coming, so we'd go out and get ready for our ice.

B: So you originally went to schools in the Zone right? So those were U.S schools?

R: Yes.

B: And then when you're father stopped working for the company did you go to Panama schools?

R: No.

B: You continued going to the U.S schools?

R: Yeah, but when you work for the military you have all the privileges of the Canal Zone plus military privileges. So we had them both at that time.

B: Obviously your education was different than Panamanian education. How would you say that it differed?

R: Well, I had never went to a Panamanian school but I know there's an awful lot of Panamanians who were very wealthy, who would pay to have their children come to the American schools because they thought they were better. They teach English better, there's not a lot rabble rousing like there is in the Panama schools. They're a hotbed for –

B: And school's taught in English?

R: In the Canal Zone?

B: Mm-hm.

R: Oh, yes, but they also taught Spanish. You can take a French class if you want. You can take a German class if you want. You can speak German. They had various languages you could speak. Everybody normally spoke Spanish. That was kind of the native language there. I didn't do too well in Spanish class. I learned most of my Spanish on the street. To this day, I am not bilingual. I don't speak Spanish now at all because I lived Tallahassee for the last twenty-two years and I've forgotten a lot of my Spanish, but when I was still working down

there I was pretty good at it. I wasn't totally bilingual but I could carry on a conversation with anybody, no problem.

B: Okay, so, now you have to tell me how you got this job on the ship.

R: Well...that was my second job on a boat. My first one was a tuna boat and I shipped out on it for the summer.

B: Did you work when you were in school?

R: Oh yeah, every summer I worked. Oh you tell 'em. My dad made me get a job

B: [Laughter]

R: Don't stand around and sleep all day, son. You get out there and hustle a job. So ever since I was thirteen or so I had a shoeshine stand, a car wash stand. One summer, I was a lifeguard at the pool. Then I shipped out on a tuna boat for the whole summer; then I had another lifeguard job the next year. I worked for a contractor putting Celotex tile in and floor tiles and like that, just during the summer times. My senior year, I was getting ready to graduate. I came home from church one day and there was a gentleman sitting with my mom in the house there, along with Jerry **Derrer**, another Zonian. Jerry was an electronic technician and this yacht had some electric problems with the radios and whatnot. So they got Jerry to fix it. While he was doing that they says, do you happen to know any young boys that would like to fill in for a crew? Because we

lost one of our crew members; he had to go back to work in the States. And Jerry said, I know just the person you're looking for. So he came over my house on Sunday and when my dad and I came home from church, this man was there and he was from Washington State. He says, I'm here to offer you a job. How soon can you be ready to go? And I was caught off guard and I was, Uh-uh-uh-uh-uh. Looked at my mom and dad and say, you know, is it okay with you? Of course, Dad was the first one to remind me, you haven't finished school yet. I says, well, let me call Mr. **Holtz**. He was the principal. So I called him and talked to him at home and he said to come in on Monday morning; he would arrange to have all my tests taken in the library that day. So I did. I took all except one test, which I had to take Tuesday morning bright and early. My dad, in the meantime, went around and got all the paperwork ready. All my visas and departure cards, all that stuff I had needed to get in and out of the countries. Mr. Holtz handed me my diploma at noontime, as they say, under the table 'cause I never graduated on stage. I had graduated from high school, and by Tuesday afternoon I was sailing down the channel on a yacht and headed for Astoria, Oregon. That's where the boat was going to be housed. It came from St. Petersburg to the canal and it was going up to Astoria. Well, needless to say, we spent the first night in **Port Armuelles**, refueled and whatnot. And the next day, we completely went around the peninsula down there in Panama, headed for Puntarenas, Costa Rica. We pulled in to anchor at Caño Island which is a really neat little island twelve miles off the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica. A storm came up while we

were down eating dinner and, I mean, it just blew up all of a sudden and parted the anchor line and we didn't know it.

B: And how many days had you been working on this –

R: This was my probably my third or maybe my fourth day on the yacht and we got shipwrecked. The yacht was drifting now and it went into the rocks and the very first thing the captain of boat heard was, zing, like that when the propeller hit the reef. He'd come bounding across the table, stepped in the food and jumped up there, got the engine started, found out he'd already lost the port engine. That was all bent and busted up. So now we had to use the starboard engine and it was bent a little bit, it had some blades bent but it was still useable, but we didn't have the power. So we backed off the reef the best we could, turned it around the best we could and start heading for the mainland, which was twelve miles away. We found out very short order that we were taking on water fast. So we were sawing off pegs from broom handles and everything else and stuffing into little holes with rags trying to stop the water flow. But we didn't realize at that time, underneath the engine that had been busted, there was a hole there about a foot in diameter and water was pouring into the engine room. We had no choice but to turn around. We headed for the island now. We didn't know where to go because it was just nothing but lava rock all around the island. So they sent me up the topside and I manned the spotlight. By now it's getting dark and I put the spotlight on, searched around. I found a piece of white sand up there—a little

speck of sand—and I yelled down to the captain below. I says, there it is, captain! The white spot is a sand bank. Let's try to get in that. So we did that. But on the one engine, only about half power, we had we very little maneuverability and not a lot of power. The waves were kind of coming off our port quarter, which is kind of the stern on the port side. We just bounced and bounced around and finally we just lifted up and the next time we sat down, we were square on top of a rock. There it is: it stowed the hole in the bottom of the boat right through the keel, and the boat wasn't going nowhere now. But it was just still bouncing up and down with the waves because the storm had come up and the waves were real big. So now we're trying to figure out how to get off the boat onto the island. They drew straws, and I think it was automatically I was going to be chosen because I was the youngest. I was nineteen and I could swim. I was a swimmer from Panama. So they put rope around my waist and made me swim through the surf and through the rocks and tie this line around a big tree that we saw on the bank. So I did that. I decided, thank goodness, to swim breast stroke, 'cause if I'd have swam freestyle I'd have ripped my hands open on the coral that was just below me and I didn't know it. I didn't know how deep it was. And I wasn't gonna be sticking my hands down there; I wasn't purposely looking for it. I was just waiting 'till I hit sand and that was it. And so I did that. So we got a line tied to the tree and tightened it up between the boat and we, hand-over-hand, brought ourselves to shore. And then we also had to bring the lifeboat, all our cargo and everything. So we went back and put everything on the lifeboat that was now bouncing

around on water, and hand-over-hand took that into the beach too and brought all we could. Cushions and whatnot. And that's all we could get. It was too rough to do anything else. My mom and dad had given me a brand spanking new thirty-five millimeter camera and I hadn't taken it out of the box yet 'cause I was waiting till I had some time while I was traveling. I was gonna read the instructions, how to work it and all that stuff. Well, it got dumped in the water. And it didn't get submerged real hard but it got wet. So I go that out and I dried it the best I could with whatever we had available to dry it with. I just fumbled around with it. I loaded the film in it and I started taking slides. I took a whole roll of slides of this whole incident which I have in a slideshow at home. I did that several years later on a cruise when I was a lecturer on a cruise ship, and they thoroughly enjoyed it. But, yeah, I had whole pictures of the yacht breaking up from the sides. It started out being—till it was only 'bout twelve feet long at the most. We spent five days on there watching this boat break up. We had one of the fuel containers for that. We had a fifty-five gallon drum. We broke the top off, and it took a long time but finally got a fire started on a diesel drum, which is hard to do. Diesel fuel does not light like gasoline. So we finally got it lit and started smoking which is what we wanted it to do. We had a big black smoke going up there hoping that we'd get some attention. A couple airplanes flew over that were in route someplace else and they were kind of high. But if you've ever seen a movie where people yell there's an airplane and everybody goes crazy waving at it. We're over here, we're over here! And you say, oh, how dumb that is. We did it.

B: [Laughter] why wouldn't you do it?

R: Well, we were yelling and screaming and they couldn't hear us.

B: Was it dark?

R: No it was broad daylight then.

B: It was daylight?

R: Oh, yeah. We just smoked it going 'round the clock.

B: Did the rain stop by the time you got the fire started?

R: Well, it rained every day. No, well, it didn't put the fire out, but it rained every day. Once that diesel fire got going the rain didn't stop it. But, oh man, between the no-see-ums—we nicknamed no-see-um plenty-bite-um—and the mosquitos, the next morning we just spent the night on the rock, is all we did. We were freezing, shaking; we're all huddled together trying to stay warm. And the suitcase and everything was all dripping water out of 'em. So we couldn't do anything in the dark, didn't have any lights at the time. So the next morning when the sun came up, we noticed that the foredeck of the yacht had broken off. It was just kind of in on the beach. Well the four of us managed to horse it around and set it up on some rocks. These men had bought five cases of Johnny Walker Black scotch when they were in Panama. I was too young to drink, so we had these five cases of scotch propped up on one corner we put this deck on. We had the other corner

deck in the rock and another one on a limb of a tree. We just had this thing perched there. When the tide came in it would come in actually under our floor. When it would go out, we would have fifty foot of beach. And [laughter] we had a lot of tide there, big tide in the Pacific there. But that's where we stayed. We brought some cushions in from the deck chairs and things like that and started sleeping in them. We slug a tarpaulin over a branch that happened to be hanging out. So we had a little bit of a roof that was still leaking when it rained hard, but at least it kept the sun off us and everything else. Then we just started looking around. Every day we'd start looking around for salvageable items that we could use. We found all kinds of cans, no labels.

B: On this beach?

R: No, from the boat.

B: Oh, from the boat?

R: Broke out of the boat, all the canned goods. The only one I could recognize was a tunafish can. The rest of the cans you'd open up, you'd get the peas, you'd get the carrots, you're getting something. You don't even know what you're opening 'cause there's no label on it.

B: Did you have a can opener? [Laughter]

R: No, we had these little ones that the military uses, those kind of things like that. But we managed to just eat out of cans. We managed to make a little bit of a fork-type thing out of a branch and hang it close to the fire, so it at least would heat cans up a little bit. It wouldn't cook the food, but it was just warm it up a little bit. We could do that. Every one of the dishes—believe it or not—from the yacht never got broken. They were all laying down in the sand under the rocks under the keel. When the bottom broke through, everything just fell out the bottom. Also, then the next night, the stern of the boat started to break off. It had V-drive engines 'cause it used to be – originally when it was built it was an air sea rescue like a P.T. boat something like that. It had a planing hull with the Allison engines in it. It could go fast when it was designed, but then it had been reconverted into a civilian yacht. They'd taken those Allisons out and put just regular diesels in so it was a slower boat now. But it had V-drives: the engines were mounted facing forward and then it went into a gear box and the props came out of that. So the props sat right under the engines. Well it had the bottles of CO₂ up there for engine room fires, had this great big, probably four-foot high bottles. The second night when the engine room broke off—the whole stern of the boat broke off—the head broke off the bottle of CO₂ and it just looked like a rocket “shrew!” going straight up. We were asleep when it happened and we woke up, we didn't know what was happening, saw this thing going up here. Holy smokes! What a beautiful sight that was. It was gonna come up down where? [Laughter] So it fell

down into water, we never did find it. But we found things for several days.

Finally on the last day –

B: How many days has this been now?

R: Five days. We spent five days on the rock.

B: And how many of you were there?

R: Four. I was the youngest. A *cayuco* came around on the island on the fourth day. This guy didn't speak any English, and no one spoke Spanish except me, so I was able to converse with him and tell him that we were shipwrecked. Of course, it was obvious. There was the boat all wrecked in front of us. I told him you can have anything you want, just get us off this island. So he took us. We had our lifeboat with a lot more motors. So we were able to get with him; he pulled his *cayuco* to the beach and he told us to come on, get in the boat. He took us around the island to the lighthouse, which we didn't even know was there. I mean, it was a lighthouse on the other side of the island. What we had done is walked—well, I walked one way and another guy walked another way, but we didn't both go around the far side of the island, which is where the lighthouse was. We got so far, I said, well there's nothing here; we came back again. So we never found the lighthouse. So he took us over there, and he's there with his lady and they lived there raising pigs and chickens and things like that. So we started going back and getting all the stuff we had, the scotch and all that stuff, what

radio gear that we could use, salvage and all that. Started bringing it back and forth. He wanted to ride with us all the time, and he was helping us load the boat and all that stuff. So every time you'd go there everybody started drinking a little bit of scotch. This little native guy got absolutely drunk. He was standing up on the bow of the boat with a painter in his hand—painter is the bow rope—and he's standing there just with the breeze in his face. Another guy who's kind of half-looped, too, who's driving the boat with the outboard engine, he's zooming along and coming up to the beach. [Laughter] I'm sitting there looking and my eyes are getting bigger and bigger. Slow down, slow down, slow down! Ran right up on the beach. When that boat come to a kind of a sudden stop, that little native guy went, shrew! like a rocket right off the front. He hit the deck and sand and rocks and beaches and start tumbling. He got all cut up and beat up with the sand and everything. His lady—little woman there—came down with a broom handle and start beating him to death and yelling at him in Spanish and cussing him out and everything like that. He's like, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. He's running up trying to get away from her. We're sitting there laughing and she turned around and looked at us. Whelp, we're getting out of here! [Laughter]. But we got that settled, taken care of and everything. But then that night, there was another yacht came out and anchored in front of the lighthouse. He paddled out in his *cayuco* to find it and see what's on it and brought the owner ashore, which happened to be Grant Foster, the builder of the Pan American highway. He was out there for a weekend of fishing. He brought him ashore and he met us and he said, I'll take

you back to Golfito on my way back, but I'm out here for a weekend of fishing so I'm going to do that. You guys relax, I'll pick you up on the way back. So then on the way back, he pulled in there close and we all got on and went back to Golfito. We were put up at the United Fruit Company's headquarters as stranded survivors, so we didn't have to pay anything. They paid for that. Then he flew us to San Jose. It took us three weeks in San Jose to get all our paperwork, visas, passports, and all that stuff back. So we just stayed at the Europa Hotel courtesy of the American Embassy as stranded survivors. They gave us clothes to wear and everything else. That was kind of neat. San Jose is a beautiful place for a young man.

B: [Laughter]. So through the whole ordeal, you were pretty sure that whole time that you were gonna be okay?

R: No.

B: No? So did you –

R: Well, I have to admit, as a nineteen year-old boy I was in tears a couple times thinking, my life is over! I'll never see my mother and father again. Of course being nineteen, I was missing my girlfriend. I'll never see my girl again! And this and that and these guys were saying, boy, it's great to be away from your old lady, huh? [Laughter].

B: Right, right. So one of the stranded people was the owner of the yacht?

R: Nope.

B: No, the owner wasn't there?

R: Nope.

B: So, it was just the crew?

R: I had met the owner later on. The guy that hired me called me up after we got back to Panama. Now, in the Canal Zone you have summer jobs for American citizens, but you have to put your application in before school's out and all that stuff and get a job. You also have summer college; it starts the summer semester...That's basically it. Apprentice program: if you're going to be an apprentice, you take the test and you can get an apprenticeship. Well, being that I was away, I couldn't do any of this. So when I got back, all the jobs were taken for the summer. The school had already started, the apprentice program had already started, so I couldn't do anything. I just sat there twiddling my thumbs. I didn't have a job, couldn't get a job, had nothing to do. I was just a drag on my parents' economy. So Neil called me from Washington State and he says, what are you doing? I said, absolutely nothing. He says, you don't have a job? I says, nope, can't get a job. He says, well, how would you like to come work up here in Washington State? Well, I perked up like Garfield the Cat and says, yes. So I told my dad, Neil just offered me a job. So I'm on the phone I says, doing what? He says, well it'll be a labor type thing but it'd be working from sun up to sun down.

Of course in Panama the sun comes up at six and goes down at 6:30 plus or minus twenty minutes all during the year depending where the sun is, north or south of the equator. I thought, well, all right, that's not too bad. I didn't realize that up in Washington State the sun comes up at 4:30 in the morning and goes down at 10:30 at night. That's a long day, and so I didn't know until I got there. Of course Washington State is beautiful. Oh, that's God's country. I loved it up there. But that job was driving a truck for a wheat farmer that was harvesting wheat. I worked twenty-one days total and I drove a truck for a while and then he put me in the combine. I drove an eighteen-foot swath combine. Didn't have air conditioning and all that chaff was going down your back and throat, making you itch and all that stuff during the day. Then I asked him if I can go back on a truck because driving that combine was a bit much, for me anyhow. So I went back driving the truck. What we do is take all the wheat from the combine and load it in the truck and I take the truck down to the silo, dump it in the silo, come back up. Then I drive right alongside the combine as it's unloading. That way you never stop; you just keep on going. They had two trucks to catch these and thing like that. Well after twenty-one days of brutal hot sun, working all day, long hours, getting little sleep, I was tired. I wasn't used to it. I was a spoiled Canal Zone brat as they call us. I asked John for a day off. I says, I'd like to have Sunday off to go to church. I really hadn't planned on going to church; I just wanted to stay home and sleep. Well, he saw through my little lie there and so he fired me. I didn't even know I was fired: he said, well that's alright, we're almost done. You

probably won't have to come back again, real nice about it. So I slept on Sunday morning and Neil's wife came down to wake me up. I was laying in the basement in their house. I said, I don't have to go to work today, Billie. She says, you don't have to go to work on Sunday? I says, we're almost done and I don't have to go back to work at all. She knew that wasn't right because she had been born and raised there and she knows the cycle of wheat harvesting. So she called John on the phone, and John says, I fired the kid. He doesn't want to work, he's lazy. I wasn't lazy. I just wanted a day off. So Billie came back and says, do you know that you just got fired? Of course, my jaw dropped. I'm fired, no income, I have no job, I'm in a strange place, I'm five to seven thousand miles away from home, no money, no car, nothing. [Laughter]. What am I gonna do?

B: At least you're not stranded on an island though [laughter].

R: Oh no, I wasn't. But I mean now I'm scared again. Now I'm by myself. So Neil gave me a job. He had ordered a swimming pool to be built and I worked as a swimming pool helper. I helped dig the ditch and the hole and all that stuff. Put the lining in. When that job finished, there was no more pools being ordered because you're getting late into the summer; in Washington State, there's no need for a swimming pool in the fall or in the winter. So then he says, well, come on down to my place. He owned the largest mobile crane construction company in the Pacific Northwest. This is Neil Lampson Construction. You can look it up in the dictionary or in the encyclopedia. He said, come on down. I can put you to

work down there doing something. So I went down there and my first job was to sort out nuts and bolts and screws from this big, long cabinet there and just get them all straightened out. I got that all done. Then I was kind of the guy that passed the tool to a mechanic. I wasn't even a helper. He would just say, go get me a big old crescent wrench. I'd run over there and get a big old crescent wrench, bring it back to him. We were working on the diesel trucks, the cranes, and things like that, the big eighteen-wheelers. I wasn't used to that either. That was kind of hard labor, heavy labor. I was spoiled rotten, but I was getting used to it and getting with the program. They let me operate the crane a little bit around the backyards there, lifting pallets of this, pallets of that and everything. I figured this is going to work out for me if I stay here. I got to start out at the bottom and do the digger work. Then I could go on and start raising up and get a nice job sometime. I saw it in my dream coming, but I didn't see it in actuality. I'm working there and I had no money to buy clothes. I was still paying back my airplane ticket to Neil. He said he'll send me money for the airplane ticket and I'd have to pay him back. So out of every paycheck, I'm paying him back. I had now moved out of his house and I was in the back room of some elderly couple's house. I had one shelf in the refrigerator to put my milk, my cereal, my peanut butter and jelly, stuff like that. I'd have to walk to work a mile, and it started getting cold up there. I was freezing and these guys were loaning me their jackets and everything. I looked like sad sack because these guys were six foot tall and I'm five foot five. When I put their coat on, you couldn't even see my

hands coming through the sleeves. I looked like sad sack walking up and down the street, like a homeless guy. I walked to work and every now and then on Friday, the guys would get paid. They'd go right next door to the bar and buy themselves a couple of Olympia or Rainier beers; Rainier is what they normally got. I was too young to go in a bar; I was nineteen. They would come out: here, here's a beer kid. So I would sit out there in the corner and drink a beer [Laughter] and then one of them would probably take me home that day. I got done paying my rent and paying back Neil, and I bought a few groceries every week. I'd walk to the store and buy some more cereal, milk, and butter and a few things like that, bread for lunch. I had five dollars left to last me 'till next week. I met a guy up there that ultimately joined the navy with me. He had a car and we used to double date to the theater and we'd all pile in the trunk except him. His brother-in-law would buy him a case of beer and give it to him. So we'd go in the drive-in and he'd pay to get in and then we'd split up the money and have beer, split the prices up. Then we could watch a drive-in movie. That's the only way we could do it and that was my entertainment. Then I was walking down the street one day and I was with my friend and saw a sign flipping in the breeze, says, join the navy and go south for the winter. I says, that sounds like a darn good idea. I walked in and asked the recruiter, what I gotta do and he told me. He gave me some books to look at over the weekend and whatnot. I went home, back to the house, and I read em. Decide I'd join the navy. Up until that day, I'm not anti-

military, never have been, but I was never going to be in the military. Just wasn't for me. All of a sudden, that's the best option I can see.

B: And what year was this?

R: 1959. Same year I graduated. So on October the 14th I joined the navy and got sent to San Diego boot camp. That started a whole new venture in my life. I mean, my life has been one adventure after another. I have had more adventures—I've had a great life, I really have. I've done everything I've ever dreamed of doing...well, I still have two things to dream about. I want to go around the Horn on a sailing ship like my dad did, my grandfather, and my great grandfather. They're all sea captains, which is why my name is Skip: Skipper. My dad thought I was going to become a sea captain, too. Then they're always called Skipper so he named me Skipper. Well I didn't go to sea for a living. I became a commercial pilot flying.

B: You had a pretty bad first run-in with going to sea.

R: Yeah. No, well, I don't get seasick. The tuna boat was neat. That was nice. But I don't get sea sick. I love boats. I still, to this day, love boats. I love airplanes. I'm a commercial pilot.

B: Oh what was your second thing? Before –

R: Okay, the second thing is to go down to Cape Town or Australia, either one, and go down in a shark cage and confront a great white shark.

B: [Laughter] that is a good one.

R: Those two. When I get those two I will figure I could die. I've had everything I wanted to do. I already flew a P-51 Mustang, which was my dream plane. I loved that plane, and all my life I wanted to fly a Mustang and I finally got to do it. So that was one of my dreams.

B: Well that's cool. So you actually had a list and you checked a lot off of it then?

R: Well, my bucket list only got two things remaining in it now.

B: [Laughter.] So how did training go?

R: Boot camp? Oh boot camp didn't go to bad. I'd had been in ROTC in high school so I was...that's why I didn't want to be in the army because I [laughter] didn't want to be having to march all day doing that stuff. But I got done with boot camp and most everybody out of boot camp winds up going to a ship in a fleet. That's it. You get out of boot camp and you report to some ship somewhere. My whole company got schools. When they asked me, I had been up to here with high school. I really wasn't a great high school student, scholastic wise. I said, I don't want to go to school. I want to just join the navy and go to sea, see the world. Well, they sent to me to school. At first I kind of resented it, but then I got over to

Jacksonville and I had to go to aviation electrician school. I went there. I went to school and graduated from there. Then my class all went to anti-submarine warfare school. They had to study up in Norfolk. So I had to report there to learn how to operate all the equipment that airplanes use to find submarines. Then I was transferred back to Jacksonville again, the VP-30 which is a rag program they call it, a flight training program for the P2V Neptunes, which is a submarine hunter. They always tell us, "two turning, two burning," because they have two jets mounted outside of the main recips on the wings, with wing tips and searchlight and all that on the starboard wing. But then I joined my squadron VP-26 up in Brunswick, Maine and from then on I'm glad. I was so happy to go to school and get what I did. I didn't have to go near a ship, and it was a great life being an Airedale in the navy. I got, actually, flight crew. I logged seventeen hundred hours of flight time on a P2V looking for submarines and I found a lot of Russian submarines. We tracked 'em.

B: How did you feel the first time you actually got to fly a plane?

R: The first time that I flew one?

B: Yeah.

R: Nervous. No that's not – I didn't fly the plane in the navy. I was the –

B: You had to learn how to, right?

R: No, no

B: Oh, you didn't have to learn how to?

R: No, I didn't fly the plane, I wasn't a pilot. I was a crew member.

B: So you just had to learn how to operate the submarine-finding—

R: I did get to fly a P2V. We were in Puerto Rico on...I don't even remember what the operation is called anymore, it's a common operation. Yeah, we were there and our pilot was a very nice guy. He said, I want every one of you guys to know how to fly this plane and bring it home should the pilot and co-pilot get sick, and the navigator or we get shot at and get wounded or something like that. So he let us all fly the plane. Just straight and level, make some turns and banks on different sites. I got to make an approach into Rosy Roads to make a landing and I was very, very nervous. I mean I was extremely nervous. Of course I had to co-pilot on my side, he was helping me out. He was doing half the flying but I was actually—he was just following me through but he could stop me anytime and he'll correct me. But I bounced so hard that I swear I popped the roof inside of that airplane 'cause I just hit that deck so hard and bounced.

B: They let you land it?

R: Yeah. Then he took over. As soon I bounced the ground, he took over to recover 'cause he didn't want to stall and crash. So he took over and I never got to fly it

again. I mean, none of us did. That was the only time we ever had a shot at it.

But I got a taste in my mouth of flying. I said, darn that was—that's super, man I love that! I want to do this. So I had saved all my money. I had a lot, going home all the time. I was in the service. When I got home I started my apprenticeship. I went to college for a year. I was gonna be an electrical engineer.

B: Where?

R: In Canal Zone, Canal Zone College. I went there for a year and I woke up finally. I was in my second year, actually, and I told my dad. I said, Dad I'm wasting your money and my time. I says, I'm not enjoying college. It's just not for me. I want to fly. I want to work with my hands. I was an electrician, I fixed a lot of airplanes, keep them going. I want to do that. So I dropped out of college just before my second year ended. I didn't get my associate degree. I dropped out of college and took the apprenticeship exam and passed it and became an electrical apprentice on the locks. I started there, and one day I was walking down the wall in Gatún Locks, which is exactly north and south, and I heard this aircraft coming behind me down the **center** wall, heading from the south going back to the States. I knew, that's a darn P2V 'cause I could tell by the sound of those engines, having had so many years of having those things droning in my ears. I turned around, and sure enough it was P2V. It just got my heart stirred up again. I said, dog gon' it I miss flying. So I started taking flying lessons out at the little airport. I soloed in eight hours, got my private pilot in forty hours. I kept flying and

building some time but I wanted to become a commercial pilot by now. So I did. I quit the Panama Canal just before my apprenticeship ended again. I went to the States, went to flight school and got my commercial, multiengine, and my instrument rating. I was all set to become an airline pilot. I went to interviews and the guy says, how tall are you son? And I says I'm five-five. He says, sorry about that. We require a hardcore five foot seven. You don't qualify. You talk about the biggest disappointment of my life. I quit my apprenticeship to do this and now I've got all these hours. I've got over 250 hours of flight time under my belt and the airlines were hiring with two hundred hours with a multiengine and instrument rating, which I had. But I was competing, with Vietnam unwinding and things like that, and there was just more people coming back with multi-turbine time. I didn't have any turbine time. That's a jet engine. I had reciprocating engines, propeller-driven airplanes. That's all I had flown, was propeller-driven. So I had no jet time and these guys all had multi jet time so I couldn't compete with them either. They had thousands of hours by now being in the military. So I was barking up a bad tree. So I went out, got a job at Honeywell; I was a repairman for all the electrical stuff and I got ruffed from that job. When Vietnam was winding down, all the things were starting to dry up a little bit so I had no seniority, I got ruffed. I took the test to become an air traffic controller, passed it and got hired, and I became an air traffic controller in Jacksonville Center. My commercial license and my instrument rating got me that job, 'cause you needed that or four years in college. So I had the license. So I worked as an air traffic controller for

four years: four years in Jax Center, one year in Puerto Rico. I transferred down to a tower and we were in Puerto Rico and my wife hated Puerto Rico.

B: You lived in Jacksonville?

R: Well no. We were in Jacksonville and got transferred to Puerto Rico and down to Ponce in the south coast, small little airport.

B: That's where my grandma's from.

R: Is that? Oh, okay, I was in Mercedita Airport. Are you familiar with that one? Mercedita?

B: I'm not familiar with the airport but I've only been back once. She goes all the time.

R: Well I was an air traffic controller there and my wife hated Puerto Rico so bad. We were living in the trailers out there at Fort Allen which were beat up and rat-infested and everything like that. My wife couldn't take it. We had one three-year-old girl, she was pregnant when she went down, and she had to go back to States and have the baby because she refused to have it in Puerto Rico. So then she brought the baby back after it was born and still was miserable. I asked my boss for a transfer back to the States and he says, you're on a two-year contract, son, you can't do that. So I went home and told Bev. I said, Bev we can't leave. I'm on a two-year contract and we're here now for one year. We got a year to go.

She says, okay, I'm leaving with or without you. That's it, packing her bags. Well, I went back and saw my boss again. I said, this is getting serious, boss. My wife has got her bags packed and she's leaving me. I'm gonna lose my happy home for this job. I need to get back to the States. He says you can't go back to the States for another year. With that I took my name badge off and threw it down on his desk and I says, I quit! Now you got to send me home and I kind of had stuck my chest out. I guess I told him-type of thing. Well, they came and packed me up and I had my date to get on that airplane. I finally got on the airplane and we're all leaving Puerto Rico, and I just broke down like a little baby and cried. I said, what in God's name have I just done? I gave up the best job in the world for a girl, for a woman. I says, jiminy Christmas, why? Here I am, I'm going back to States. I got two kids, a wife, no home, no job. The only thing I got is money in the bank. I just cried all the way back to Miami. I was miserable. If I had a gun I had probably shot myself, I was so miserable.

B: That was a pretty extreme ultimatum.

R: It was. I mean that was a bad day. So then I got back to Jacksonville and I had to start hustling, trying to find a job. Well, I couldn't find one in Jacksonville, so we moved to St. Petersburg and I moved in with my mom and dad again.

[Laughter] Again. I moved in with them. I was living at home when I got married and they didn't like that so much. I moved in with them and they liked the grandkids, so that's the only thing that kept them going. But then I got a job

working at Sears selling hardware and that was a do-nothing job. No pay hardly to speak of, and I didn't like that at all. So I put my application in to go back to the Panama Canal as an electrician on the locks. All the experience I had working at Honeywell and General Telephone I had worked for a while all qualified for time. I went back and got hired in the Gatún, started my apprenticeship, and got done with that, and came to the States and few other odds and ends. Here I am. I stayed there 'till I retired. I worked on the locks. I promoted up the line from electrician to electrical leader to junior control house to junior lockmaster, senior control house, senior lockmaster slot. Though I wasn't a permanent senior lockmaster; I didn't want to do it because I have a bad hip. I didn't want to walk the wall all that much. But I retired as that and my **high three** was in that. So when the treaty went through, I finally had had enough of what's going in Panama. I didn't like the treaty. I was against the treaty. That's one of the questions you have here. I was just against it. So I figured, I stayed there ten years after the treaty went into effect. It had a twenty-year transition period. I stayed ten years and decided that was enough for me. I'd had a long one. So that gave me almost twenty-seven years of government service and I could take the retirement on an early retirement due to the treaty. So I took that option, moved to Tallahassee. My wife was working for the army; she had priority placement transfer rights which I did not have. I was either early retirement or, if I transferred to a stateside thing, I'd have to stay and work my full thirty-five years or whatever it was.

B: So her job transferred her to Tallahassee?

R: Mm-hm. And I just retired then and—

B: It's your turn. [Laughter]

R: And I've been retired ever since. I've had some part time jobs but you know just a little odds and ends. Now my wife just retired a month ago, so she has over thirty-one years' service. She was working with the government.

B: And your wife is from Panama too?

R: No. Well see when I was going to flight school. Right after I got out of flight school, waiting for the FAA to hire me, I went to work at Honeywell as a maintenance man. I met my wife at Honeywell, we started dating and got married. Then we moved to Jacksonville when I became an air traffic controller; then we went to Puerto Rico. We've been married now forty-three years now.

B: So do you go back very often?

R: Oh, I've been back to Panama many times since I retired. For twelve years, I didn't go back because I had been thrown in jail. Going to work one day in the *QE2*, that's a ship. The *Queen Elizabeth II* was coming through, and when that ship comes through, there's always a lot of tourists go out there to see it because it's a fabulous, big ship and close quarters and everything else. They like to see it. So I put in to work and I was working the afternoon shift. I was in Miraflores

Lake heading south. I was trying to find a parking place, because the parking lot was full, and I had a big red pickup truck. I pulled in to the parking lot and I saw everything was full so I kind of just poked along hoping I'd see someone coming out, getting relieved already, getting in their car and going. And finally a guy came up here and he's going to get out. He pointed to me, I could get his parking space. So he was trying to pull out and I was in his way, so I'm trying to back up and there was a BMW behind me with a guy wearing a pink leisure suit and Ray Ban glasses and driving gloves. I'll never forget that. Had his hand on his wheel and he's just glaring at me. I signaled outside of the car. I said, back up. He wouldn't back up. I says, back up! He wouldn't back up so I put it in reverse and lit up the backup lights and I started to backup and he wouldn't move so I kept backing up real slow. I must've came within a paint job of hitting his front bumper but I never hit him. Then this guy was able to get his car out and he went about his business and I was able to get my car into the parking lot, and he zoomed on down the end. By that time another person had just walked down there and he was getting in his car, so he parked way down there. Came running down the parking lot, turned around and was walking backwards but he was bouncing me in the chest when I'm working. I'm walking this way. He was trying to pick a fight with me and he was yelling at me in Spanish that this is no longer American territory. I'm a gringo get out of here. Get out! This is my home now not yours. And I'm answering him in English. I knew what he said but I didn't want to speak back to him in Spanish. I said, I'm an American. I was born here. I'm as much

Panamanian as you are too. I'm a dual citizen. I work here. This is still Canal Zone. Still American territory, blah blah blah blah. I finally got to the gate. He wanted me to hit him and I wouldn't hit him. I finally got to the gate and I told the American security guard, get this so-and-so off my tail end. Well he immediately reached over, picked up the phone and called the Carcel Modelo and notified them to come get me and arrest me. He was a Guardia major for Noriega and...

B: I was about to say, who the hell was this?

R: Just a pompous person and he thought he's the big shot around here. So, because I insulted his mother, by calling him an S.O.B., I was arrested for insulting his mother. So they arrested me and took me out of the control house in handcuffs, took me down to the Carcel Modelo and I spent the night down there. There's another man I just saw here, we call him **Vio Andy Rivera**. He's here this weekend. He came and sat with me in the jail all night just to make sure that he was a witness that they weren't gonna beat me with rubber hoses and things like that. Then my brother-in-law, whose also here this week, Colonel Stevenson, he came in and also spent some time with me and just kept me cool, calm, and collected and everything, 'cause I was nervous and upset and ticked off and ready to tear the world apart. They pulled my passport and I was under house arrest. I got out of jail and got home and I couldn't go to work. I had to call in sick every night, lost a whole week of work. I had to go to night court every night and I would get dismissed before my case got brought up. The very last night, the

Guardia shows up in his uniform with all kinds of epaulets; he's got all kinds of doo-dads on. He was a big shot in the Guardia Nacional. So, he shows up there and they call me up for the case. Up to then the judge had never spoke a word of English. All the cases that were there in front of him were all in Spanish.

Suddenly he speaks to me in English and he speaks better English than I do. He was absolutely perfectly spoken. He was educated in Yale, I think. So, he dressed me down a little bit, told me I have a big mouth and I shouldn't have lose my temper so quickly and this and that and everything else. I said, yes sir, yes sir yes sir. Then he looked at the Guardia Nacional who was standing there like, oh man, I just won this war. He dressed him down worse than me: just because a Guardia and a major and a national guard does not give you the right to go picking on people and doing what you did. If you hadn't started all of this ruckus with him, he probably would never have talked to you. He would've never insulted your mother blah, blah, blah, blah. You can see this guy just collapsing within himself. I just knew, oh my God, I'm a marked man. From now on this guy is going to be out for blood now. So when I got home that night I told my wife, you take my truck to work every day, I'm taking your Honda to work, because they don't bother women. All the woman has to do is start crying and then they'll go [inaudible 49:38]. So I didn't want to be caught in my red truck because I knew there was going to be guys looking for that red truck. I took my wife's car. They didn't know who I was. It just so happened that a week or two later thereabouts, his brother got killed on a bridge, going across the isthmus. His attention now

was to find the bus driver who ran his brother off the road. So I'm off the hook now completely. But if I fly out of here and fly back I'm probably going to be on a want list or hit list in the airport to go to jail. I didn't feel safe anymore. My family, I didn't feel safe for them either. So, I said, the only thing to do is put in for a priority placement check, Bev, and I can't do that. The only thing that I can do is retire. So, she did and boom, almost instantly, had a job for her in Tallahassee as a secretary for the entire southeast district of the air force. So, she took that and had to be up there right away. So, I put in my retirement papers—this was in September. She put in for hers in September. She had to report the day after Thanksgiving and I retired New Year's Eve.

B: Of which year?

R: Of [19]88 and I moved to Tallahassee, sight unseen. Although, I knew Tallahassee from the air because when I was an air traffic controller, Tallahassee was one of my sectors. So, I knew all the holding positions, the radios, the airways, all blah blah blah. I didn't know street name one. I was kind of a babe in the woods there. We've been there twenty-two years and we kinda like it.

B: Yeah, it's a really warm place. Not just temperature wise but—

R: It's the hottest place in the state of Florida, I think, in the summer. And it gets cold there in the winter. The first year we were there, it has never snowed since. We moved up—I retired the end of [19]88, so I was there for all of [19]89.

Christmas of [19]89 was a white Christmas, in Tallahassee. Hasn't snowed there since and my kids had never seen snow before, so they were going out making snow angels and everything else.

B: So you moved back to Panama when Noriega was ruling?

R: Well, Noriega wasn't really—no , Noriega wasn't even up to talk about it yet. It was the guy who talked about the treaty, and right now I can't even think of his name. The general who was the dictator of the time—

B: It starts with a T right? I'm blanking.

R: Who?

B: It starts with a T right- his name? I think, but I'm blanking on it.

R: I'll think about it a while, I can't think of it now. Now, he and Carter got together, did this treaty, and Jimmy Carter in his wisdom gave the Panama Canal away. A multi-trillion dollar enterprise, gave it away lock, stock, and barrel. I've never been happy about that. That was a big mistake I think. The United States is gonna be paying for it.

B: Still, you think? In what way?

R: In order to give it away—it was custom United States—we already bought new locomotives and new all sorts of things so they would get a nice brand new canal. Now, the only thing they don't have new is the locks itself. Now, they're

building that new canal and the United States didn't get one contract in there. If you go down to Panama now, they built the new museum at the Mira Flores locks. Basically, you walk in there and you say the French started to build the Panama Canal back in the 1800s. Ultimately, Panama owns it. Nothing about the United States built it and ran it for ninety years. No way! United States is forgotten, we're history. Get outta here!

B: So how many years have you been coming to this reunion?

R: Oh, this is—I've lost track now—probably my fortieth consecutive reunion.

B: Wow. Okay [laughter].

R: I come every year.

B: In my last interview, the gentleman I spoke to has the complete opposite view of you about the treaty. So, is that really a contentious issue?

R: Yes, it was. Down there, there was those that were for the treaty and those that were against the treaty.

B: What about at these reunions? Does that come up?

R: Oh, that's history now. It's not like Democrats and Republicans. We all get along together now. But, no, even my brother-in-law is pro-treaty. He thought it was a good idea and I will admit that if we were gonna keep the Panama Canal, we would have to spend a lot of money on it, because concrete hardens to a certain

point and it becomes brittle. There's always concrete maintenance going on there. Ships hit the wall daily and you see a cloud of smoke where the concrete goes into dust. Locomotives had to be maintained. The rising sim valves are all worn and they would have to be repaired and overhauled and all this stuff. So, it's a constant maintenance, an expensive maintenance program. But, the Panama Canal actually paid for itself, and every year would put minimum of twenty million dollars in the U.S. Treasury. And they were self-insured. If they had an accident on the ship, Panama Canal paid the tab or whatever the case was, if it was our fault. And they would still do that, and the tolls were cheap. I don't even remember the tolls now. It was two dollars and ninety cents for a long ton or something like that. Nowadays, Panama has raised the toll so much that a lot of ships are thinking maybe it's cheaper to go around the Horn or do that around North America up through the Northwest Passage, in the summertime when you can do that, because it's getting outrageous. Well, it got to the point where they're also building bigger ships and some of those big ships like that. The *Valdez*, the one that had the oil wreck—

B: Barges?

R: No, that big tanker up in Alaska that hit the reef here many years ago? *Exxon-Valdez*. Those ships cannot go through the canal; they're too big. So, they anchor way offshore—sixty miles offshore—and then use overseas tankers to go through the canal. They go southbound and ballast, which is empty, fill up tap

alongside that tanker out there, fill up with oil, come back through the canal northbound full and go up to the seaports in Louisiana or wherever there's refineries. And then they go back down. They shuttle back and forth between the canal. Well, now they're building that new locks and the new canal. It's not a canal so much, but they're dredging out the existing canal, building a brand-new set of locks—which are the monster locks. We'll see how that works. Technology, I think, is there today, but...we'll see. But, a lot of us now, we lost our happy home. By giving away the canal, a lot of us called us people like Hong Kong residents. They had a 99-year lease and they had their own little communities and everything. We didn't have a 99-year lease. We had a treaty that was in perpetuity, which means forever. Jimmy Carter disregarded that and says, we'll give it away lock, stock, and barrel. Lock, stock, and new barrel! New stock! But that was it.

B: Did you get to witness any of the riots when the treaty was passed?

R: Yes, in [19]64, I was involved, kinda partly on that one there. I was trying to defend a flag in Coco Solo, but I was working in Gatún Locks at that time. And that didn't work out too well; we got overtaken. Some of us got beat up by the Panamanians. Same thing happened in Balboa, a little bit. They don't talk about it in the newspapers, but there was a lot of young kids. In fact, that's all there was in Panama. The kids were rabble rousers in the colleges. Not the big adults, no the fifty year-old adults. It was the kids. And when somebody got hurt, the adults

would come down there and complain more. But, yeah, that riot was something else. You didn't drive across the isthmus. You didn't feel safe. The cops would get in your house, stay there. You couldn't go out. You could stay in the Canal Zone, but you had to be careful where you went because you never knew who came across the border. There was no fences; anybody could drive in and out of Panama and the Canal Zone. The Panamanians always said we were a foreign country right in the middle of their country. Well, it's true, but there was never anything that says they couldn't drive across the isthmus to get from one part of Panama to the other part of Panama. There was no problem with that. We had maid service. A lot Panamanians worked in the Canal Zone. They came in every day. They drove their cars in there and parked there. They didn't have commissary privileges, because it was like the military—they have P.X. privileges—we didn't have P.X. privileges until the treaty went through. And then it was one of those deals that if I worked for the Canal Zone government, I got free rent and electricity and my next door neighbor stayed at a duplex house. They worked for the military, they would get P.X. privilege. They have to pay the rent and electricity, but they get P.X. privileges and all that stuff. So it was a big joke around there. I'll run an extension cord around if you could run you washer-dryer off of my electricity since its free, and you go to buy all my food at P.X., the commissary. So it's kinda one of those stupid things. Some of that happened, but not quite as often as people think.

B: I would definitely take advantage of that. [Laughter]

R: But then, yeah, those are the kinds of things we had to put up with in the Canal Zone. And then, of course, during the treating, they says that anybody that started working as of today does not have U.S. repatriation rights. If you got hired from the States, your free home leave took you back to that state. Well a lot of us—when I started out, I was born and raised in Panama. I didn't have that anyhow. It wasn't until I quit and went to the States and I came back that I had that. Now, I had Florida for home of hire. I was born and raised there and all that stuff so... So, any other people that came out of the military, they'd go down there in the military and say, man, this Panama Canal is great, I'm gonna put in for a job and when my time's up here, get outta the army, I'm gonna get out and be a policeman or something like that. They didn't have repatriation rights now because they weren't born there. They were local hire. So...

B: That's complicated.

R: Yeah, It's a lot of technicalities that went on there. But as a child growing up in the Canal Zone, there was no better place. I don't care where you go. We had a perfect paradise. No winters, you know? You didn't have to buy winter clothes, so it's cheap. We had great schools. Great sporting events: I was a swimmer and a shooter. I excelled in both of those. I didn't play football because I have a bad hip. I was treated in the Shriner's Hospital for several years as a little kid, which is why I'm a Shriner today.

B: Oh, I see! [Laughter] Very cool.

R: But it was great. Raising your kids, they didn't get in trouble, there was no drugs down there, back in my days. Our biggest thing was...I can't even remember what. There was no real big thing. Have a party and play the stereo late at night or something. There wasn't even stereo in those days. I had a beer party occasionally out on the cut, on Contractor's Hill. You'd drive out there and the kids would have a beer party. Well, of course, the cops pretty well knew it was out there, but they'd say as long as nobody was doing anything reckless—and they'd check you on the way home make sure you weren't drunk, make sure whoever was—

[Break in interview]

B: [Laughter] You know, that's the one other thing that I keep hearing is that while life in the Canal Zone was really nice and cushy and tropical paradise—

R: Oh, it was.

B: If you messed up, you were gone.

R: That's true. If you did something really bad—I'm talking you kill somebody or you got drunk and wrecked a car and hurt somebody bad or you stole something out of the commissary, big time—you were caught doing it, your dad's job was at jeopardy. You would get sent home. You'd be out of the Canal Zone yourself, but maybe your parents would get booted out, too. So yeah, that's why the kids were

always kinda well-behaved, because parents would instill in them, don't you dare do that or—

B: Or no Christmas presents.

R: Or we don't exist here in the Canal Zone anymore, basically. I think one year, one of the hot pranks we did is, [laughter] there was a guy down there that some of the kids didn't like too much. He had a little Crozly car. It's a small little car. And he went to the movies one night. We all got together and lifted his car up and propped it up against the wall by the bowling alley. Just stood it on its bumper, that's how small the car was and nothing's **skizit**. And he come out of the movie looking for his car, so he reported the cops his car's gone! Someone stole his car! Well, he got to looking around and, is that your car? How'd it get up there? Nobody knew, but it's there. And we're all sitting around going, pfft, laughing.

B: That's awesome!

R: And we did stupid little things like that. Of course, later on, well I'll help you take it down, if you want. He didn't know I was involved in putting it up there, but I'll help you take it down. So a couple of others volunteered to help take it down for him—

B: You're so nice! [Laughter]

R: But he got the word, he got the message anyhow. That's how we did it. And we'd take people's garbage cans, sometimes, and haul them up the flagpole in the middle of the night. They come out the next morning look for garbage cans and they'd be hanging up in the flagpole. When they get ready to put the American flag up in the morning, there's a big garbage can hanging up there. Little things like that.

B: Yeah, so you could get away with that kind of thing.

R: Yeah. Oh, another one was putting soap in the monument- the Goethals Monument. Take a box of Tide—

B: Is that his name?

R: Halloween...I didn't do that. You wake up the day after Halloween and, soap suds. You can't hardly see the monument for all the soap suds in it. You put a box in there and it's got the locks as waterfalls, so it stirs it up all the time. It's being pumped around and around and getting bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. Those are the kind of things we did for pranks. Nothing ever seriously damaged. It cost money to empty it out and clean it up and do it again, but nothing major, you know?

B: Right. Innocent.

R: But you could go waterskiing on Christmas day in the lake, no problem. There was waterskiing everywhere. People who lived in Panama were generally pretty good skiers and pretty good swimmers. The contests we used to have: how many places can you swim in in one day? And we'd take a count. You drive to the Atlantic side, which is fifty miles away. You go swimming in the Atlantic Ocean. Then, you'd get out and you'd swim in Gatún Lake. Then, you go to Gulick Pool, you go to Davis Pool, you go to Washington Hotel pool, and you go to Coco Solo Pool. Then you drive across the isthmus to Gamboa, you go swimming in Gamboa Pool, the Chagres River, and the lake right there in front of Gamboa. Then you go into Balboa, stop off at Clayton and go to Clayton Pool. You go to Albrook Pool, you go to Balboa Pool. Then you drive across, you go to Roden Pool. Well, you can swim in Pedro Miguel Lake, also. And then you go swimming off the end of the locks there- in the south end of Mira Flores locks. And you go out to the causeway and go swimming in Amador Beach. And you count all those, how many times you did that, and you did it in one day.

B: And when you say pool, are these natural water formations?

R: Yeah. There was a couple of ponds around there too, the Gamboa Waterfall. You could swim there, too, if you want. I mean, these places you could actually go in, and dive in and swim around, come out, get in your car, go someplace else and do the same thing. And so, it became kind of an event on Saturdays, how many you could do in day—

B: You could marathon it.

R: Depending on how fast your car was or how well you traverse the isthmus.

Driving across the isthmus—even though it was only fifty miles—it was always a, oh my god, I gotta go to Balboa tomorrow, or Cristobal, as if it was a major job. Here, people drive a hundred miles and think nothing of it. But, you're going through all the little tiny towns. At nighttime you never know if there's cow sitting in the middle of the road, or whatever. I tell you what. If I had to do my life over again, I would opt to do it exactly what I did. I had a great life in the Canal Zone. I was sorry to see it end. I know the rest of us here, that's why we have so much at this reunion because we're all buddies from day one. We don't see each other but maybe once a year now because some of us live in Washington State, or Oregon, or Texas, something like that. So, we don't always see each other. And not everybody comes every year. So, if you come every year, you see all your buddies, all your friends, all the parents you used to know, and all the girls that you used to date. You try to meet them when you don't have your wife with you [laughter]. She doesn't go for that too much. But it's just a fantastic place to be born and raised and grow up in, and I wouldn't trade it for the world. You were born in the States right?

B: Yeah, I was born in south Florida.

R: South Florida, see.

B: Sort of similar climate, but it definitely wasn't relaxed or exciting.

R: But you can't say I was born in the Canal Zone. Man that's a special deal.

B: Right. I was born and raised in God's waiting room [laughter].

R: Well, both my daughters are born in Florida: one in Jacksonville, one in St. Pete. But, I took them back to the Canal Zone when they were babies, so they grew up in—

B: Where in Jacksonville did you live?

R: I lived in San Mateo, when I was an air traffic controller. Then, I lived in Clearwater and my wife lived in St. Pete when we got married. Then, we bought a house in Seminole. We moved to Jacksonville, then went to school in Oklahoma. Go to air traffic control school out there and back to Jacksonville. Then, Puerto Rico. We travelled around; we've lived in a lot of different places. The Canal Zone is always a place I loved the most. And if it hadn't been to where it is right now, in Panama hands, I probably would've stayed there instead of moving to the States when I retired. I'd have just bought a place right there and stayed 'cause it was beautiful. I just loved the country. The people up in the country—up in the interior—they're the nicest people you ever want to meet. They really are. They'll work all day for you and they'll joke with you and they have all the respect for you. And you go to city, and you're a gringo. And gringo go home. Leave your money. But, I loved Panama. I go back. I've done several

tours on cruise ships as a lecturer because of my experience living down there and working on the locks. I can go through the locks and tell them. They always put a man on board from the canal company and he's on a P.A. system, but you can't hear it too out to ship. But I'll stand myself up on top of the ship there and have a bunch of people around me. I'll just tell them, because the tour guide that comes aboard doesn't tell you what you're seeing out there and this and that and everything else. He just gives a history of Panama, which I do when we're at sea: I give them the history of Panama. I give the history of the San Blas Indians, and that's a very neat culture they have there. Then, I give a tour of the locks. I have slides, do all the slide presentations for everything I do. It's a fantastic lecture. It's a fantastic thing to talk about and I could ad-lib on Panama hour after hour after hour. And they only give me so much time to do my lecture, and then I'm done for that day. Then, I walk the decks and people come up to me and says, that was interesting this morning. Can you tell me more about the so and so blah blah blah blah? So, then, I'll sit down there and just spend the rest of my day talking about Panama and what it's like.

B: That's a nice job.

R: Oh yeah! I mean, I'm so proud of the place when I would live there. I love it! It was a great place, it was. The old Canal Zone, it was unbeatable. If you hang around and talk to some of these people, you'll find that they're all pretty much the same way. The treaty was probably pro and con on a lot of people.

B: Yeah. No matter how much people are going to disagree on that, everyone always seems to agree that it's pretty much the most spectacular place to grow up.

R: Yeah. Prior to that, yeah, and that's what this is all about. Even the old people—I say old people. I'm seventy now, so I'm kinda old. The parents of a lot of us kids here, they used to come all the time. And even when we came here and I was in my fifties and I would see some parent, I would call them Mister and Missus so-and-so because that's the way I was raised. And they finally would tell me, don't you think it's time to call me Frank? Yeah, but I don't feel comfortable calling you Frank. You're just Mister so-and-so to me or whatever. My godmother, finally she just died last year. But I think the year before last, I called her Marian to her face. I felt funny doing it. I said Marian, you're looking great for an elderly woman. She was in her eighties or older, I guess. She was probably close to ninety. She just died and it's just the kind of things that I was taught by my parents. You don't ever call an adult by their first name. Never, that's taboo. And most of us grew up that way. Today we're still Mr. and Mrs. Deacons or Mister and Missus so-and-so, you know. Whoever. Mr. and Mrs. Wood.

B: They can still ground you [laughter].

R: Yeah. Until they tell me otherwise, I call them by Mister and Missus.

B: Yeah! No, I definitely agree. It definitely evolves into something that's beyond formality. It's like, that's who it is! That's the relationship you have with that person.

R: Unlike where I live right now, in Tallahassee. I have two little girls living next door to me. One's about three and a half, I guess. And they call me Skip. I said, if you insist on calling me Skip, call me Mr. Skip. So, then, one day she came out and said, Skippy! And I didn't answer her and she come up, Skippy! Starts tugging on my pants, Skippy! I said, my name is not Skippy, to you. Never. You call me Mr. Skip or Mr. Rowly and that's all I'm gonna answer you to. And now she hasn't talked to me in the last week [laughter].

B: Well, is there anything that we haven't covered?

R: Oh, yeah, how my mom and dad started out down there. My grandmother on my mother's side lived in Alabama. My mother was born in Birmingham, but my grandfather had died. So, my grandmother went to Panama because her sister was down there. She called her—this is before the canal even opened—and, did you want to come down to get a job. My grandmother didn't have a job in Alabama, so she says yes. So, she farmed my mother off to another lady and she went down there to Panama and got a job as a telephone operator. Telephones were brand new, switchboard operator type of stuff. She had four years of service. She finally came back to the States and got my mother and took her back down there along with her sister and brother. They stayed there and, of

course, they grew up there. Our mom was a champion swimmer. She beat Johnny Weissmuller swimming and he was an Olympic gold medalist. My mother belonged to the Red, White, and Blue Troop, which is a very famous swimming group in Panama, with Henry Grieser. They used to dive and swim off the locks all the time. Well, she grew up there and went to high school down there. Just a normal, regular life, Zonians. My dad had been born out in Quahog, Long Island. He'd come from a seagoing family. His dad was a sea captain and his grandfather was a sea captain, and his great uncle was a sea captain and everything like that. They were all in whaling ships and all that stuff out of New England, New Bedford, and Martha's Vineyard and things like that. So, my dad was marked to go to sea. He went to maritime school in New York, where his school was on Bedloe's Island, which is the Statue of Liberty Island. So, every morning, before breakfast, they'd have to climb to the top of the Statue of Liberty and go back down again and they could go eat breakfast. That was their exercise for the morning. And they'd go to class and they went to sea on a wooden sailing ship, a square rigger in Newport. And they went around the world on that ship, during their summer's time doing all their lessons. And he learned, he come up and he said he used to go to sea when it was iron men and wooden ships. Went around the Horn on that ship, foul weather and everything else. Well, he came through a little bit later on as he got a job as a third mate, second mate, and then first mate, and he eventually got a job as captain. He came through the canal a couple of times. One particular time, the engineer on the ship he was at had

been here before, had dated my aunt, my mother's sister. It was one of those things he says, I got to go to port. And my dad says, hey, does she have a sister? She just happens to have a sister. My dad, he was introduced to my mother and my mother used to tell me that they'd go dancing. My dad was a good dancer and my mother was a great dancer. And they'd go down to the **strangest** club dancing like that and they'd ride around in a horse-drawn bugging. She says my dad always had roving fingers, and so she took her brother with her the next time—my uncle Landon—just to make sure my dad didn't have roving fingers. He was always wanting to put his hand on her leg and she didn't like that. So, they kind of dated on and off a little bit there. Of course, he was going to sea and back and forth a couple times over a couple years. He got down to Australia and he finally says, that's it. I'm gonna marry her. So he calls her on the phone and says, I'm coming back, will you marry me now? So he got off the ship down there and got another ship that took him to Los Angeles, and then got off that ship in Los Angeles as an officer, and got on the ship coming through the canal. And he got off the ship and he came to the canal here and stayed here and married my mom. He couldn't get a job at first, so he worked in the abattoir, which is a slaughterhouse. And he was a sea captain, with a captain's license, working in the slaughterhouse. Then, he got a job from there—because there wasn't any jobs being vacant at the time. Then a job came open for the signal stations in the cut. In those days, before radios and everything, ships had no communication with one another except they could see

what was hanging in the cones or the balls hanging in the signal stations up in the hills. And they could tell you which way you're going and what time you're supposed to be, whether the cone pointed down or pointed up, or whether there's three cones in a line or two cones or one cone or balls. Same thing. Black balls or white balls, either one, had a code. So, you could read those and tell you where you're supposed to be at what time, more or less. Well, he did that for a couple years, and then a tugboat job came open. And he got on the tugs and worked his way up the line and became senior captain of the tugs in the Atlantic side. That's when he quit and went to the navy and became captain of a ship. Then, he came back and he was captain of a [inaudible 1:17:21]. He stayed there, was the captain of another tug until he retired. My dad was senior captain on the tugs in the Canal Zone for many years. He was one of the very few tugboat pilots down there, captains. He actually went on the pilot force for like a year and a half. One of his good friends was a pilot and he brought him on board and recruited him. But my dad didn't like the way they worked the shifts. On the tugboats he worked around the clock; four to twelve, eight to four, and twelve to eight. But, he could look at his calendar and say, okay, on this date I'm gonna be working four to twelve shift, I can't do what I want to do, okay. He could swap with someone at like a Shrine function or a Masonic function or a picnicker or something like that that was supposed to go on. Whereas a pilot you couldn't do that, because you never knew when you were gonna work. You take a ship to and you get eight hours off, maybe sixteen hours off. Maybe there's no ships.

Maybe there's too big of ships coming through and they need bigger senior pilots. So, you get called in on short notice and this and that and everything else and so on and so forth. He didn't like that too much. He wanted a schedule. So, he went back on the tugs and stayed there. Besides that, back in those days, the difference in pay between a senior tugboat captain and a pilot was peanuts. Later on, when I retired, the pay differential between a tugboat captain and a pilot was [whistles] night and day. Everyone wanted to be a pilot because the money was fantastic and the ships were getting bigger and bigger and bigger and tougher to put through. Sometimes it takes four pilots to put 'em through. The operation of the locks—you gotta go see it to believe it. It's an unbelievable thing. It works like clockwork, it does. It's so neat. I could go on for hours talking about the locks because they are a fantastic place. My first day of my apprenticeship, I walked in there and I went—and I had seen the locks all my life, but I'd never been down in the bowels of them before. And I walked in there and took me down in the tunnels. I didn't know those tunnels were—I knew they were there, but I didn't know what they looked like or what they did. And I walked in and I went, I can't believe all this, man. And then they took me up in the control house where they operated and opened all the gates and everything like that. And my jaw dropped. I don't think I could ever do this job. This is complicated. I was just as much in the state of awe the day I retired as I was the day I went there because that place just never failed to amaze me. It worked like clockwork. Just so neat. As long as those things went fine, they went fine. Of course, when they didn't go fine, things

went haywire. You know, you slam a gate, bend a strut arm, or something like that. Then, you gotta take this chamber out of service, take the whole lane out of service, while you repair that strut arm. Put a new one in, all that stuff. You gotta equalize the water so you could move the gates. It's a lot of things.

B: Someone figured it out.

R: Oh yeah. I mean, I did it. I was at work in overhauls. I had to drain the chamber many times. I had to fill the chamber back up from scratch, which is very delicate. When the chamber is empty—totally empty—you can't just open the valve helter skelter. You gotta open it just a couple inches because you've got thousands and thousands and thousands of pounds of pressure coming through there. And if you let it all go through at one time, it'll blow the bottom right out of the locks. It really will. So, you gotta let it go in until you get enough water in there to put some weight on that floor. Then, you can open it some more and get some more weight on it. Finally, you get it where you can open up all the valves. And so you can do that. It's technical. You gotta know what you're doing. When you're a control house operator, that's when you learn that stuff. To be there, I had to be an electrician first and fix all the equipment. Then you ultimately become a leader. I'm working on the locomotives as well. Then, if I **fix it** I get put in the control house as an operator. And then from there, you go to a lockmaster junior, then senior control house, senior lockmaster, and you're in charge of the locks

during the daytime or the nighttime. Weekends, nights you're in charge. And it's a lot of responsibility. It's a neat place to work. Oh, it's a fantastic place.

B: And how many years did you actually work in the Canal Zone? Because you had a lot of work abroad.

R: In the Canal Zone itself, I had five years of air traffic control, I had four years of military, and then the rest of it was on the canal. Oh and I had just under twenty-seven years' service.

B: Excellent. Is there anything else that we should have on the record?

R: I read through this here. The condition, like, on housing? I already told about that. They were not much in the way of housing. You had to have seniority to get a better house. High school, college, best place in the world to grow up. Swimming and skiing. Hobbies. Honeywell?

B: I got these from—there was a little convention earlier and that was filled out. I don't even know.

R: We worked in aerospace, Honeywell, over in St. Petersburg.

B: Right. That's where you met your wife.

R: Right. Yeah. And World War II, I was in the Cuban blockade when I was flying, so I got veteran status for that. Yeah, flying in the navy got me interested in flying, and that was my new career I was trying to be as a pilot. Right now, I've

got several thousand hours of flying time. I don't fly anymore. I just don't fly anymore. I don't own an airplane anymore. I owned an airplane when I was in Puerto Rico as an air traffic controller, but I sold it when I left. Flew the islands, things like that. Now, I just putts around in my yard. Do light woodworking, light little electrical stuff around the house, fix things. I don't throw things away. My wife says, throw it in the garbage. I said, I'll fix it! I can fix it. I'll putts around with it. Other than that, I've had a great life. I'll tell you that. I think most of these kids that wound up growing up there, a lot of them you'll find got out of high school, went to college in the States, got a job in the States, never went back. And they come to the reunions and, boy I sure wish I'd have come back to the Zone. Just didn't think there was anything there for me. Mm-hm, there was. But, they all love it. I don't think you'll find anybody you're gonna talk that says it wasn't a great place to grow up and live.

B: Yeah. I'm starting to get that feeling. I'm also getting very jealous.

R: Yeah. It was paradise. I feel sorry for you people in the States who don't know what it's like to live in a perfect place. Almost like a Shangri La. [Laughter] Not quite. It really wasn't that good, but I don't know of any place else that I would ever want to live if I was a young kid. I wish to hell it'd never been given away because I would've stayed there, raised my kids. My kids would've been married down there. We're such a close-knit family, all of us people. Even if I don't know who you are in the Zone, other than the fact that you're there—you might be

three or four years behind me in school and I didn't necessarily know you—might have known your older brother or someone, but I didn't know you—we can sit there and talk all day about things that went on there and you're familiar with what I'm talking about, I'm familiar to what you're talking about.

B: Same places, same people. Yeah. Well, thank you for doing this interview. You were full of information.

R: Been my pleasure.

B: And we will definitely send you over a copy of it for your personal enjoyment.

R: Are you going to edit it out or is it just—

B: We just get it all transcribed and then we send you a copy in case you want to check for factual information.

R: Yeah, I skipped around a lot there so...

B: Okay. One more time. This is Sarah Blanc and I'm here with Mr. Skip Rowly and it's July 7, 2011.

Transcribed by: Austyn Szempruch and Raina Shipman, January 31, 2014

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