

Thomas Oxendine

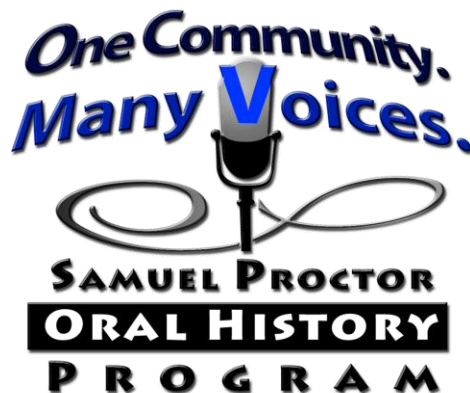
Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)

UL-031

Interview by:

Lew Barton

November 6, 1974



University of Florida • Samuel Proctor Oral History Program • Paul Ortiz, Director
P.O. Box 115215, 241 Pugh Hall, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-5215
(352) 392-7168 www.clas.ufl.edu/history/oral

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Program Director: Dr. Paul Ortiz

241 Pugh Hall
PO Box 115215
Gainesville, FL 32611
(352) 392-7168
<https://oral.history.ufl.edu>

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Abstract: Mr. Thomas Oxendine, a department head in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, talks about his life—from growing up Lumbee in Robeson County, to serving in World War II, to finding himself in a position of influence in Washington D.C. Mr. Oxendine lists his education and the degrees he obtained, and talks about how war interrupted his education. He began his military service as the first American Indian to go through Navy flight training, and this achievement resulted in him being chosen for special missions. Mr. Oxendine details the importance of sports in his and his children’s lives, and how he supported his home community through athletic instruction. He then goes on to describe what his job entails in the Bureau of Indian Affairs and how Congress has built a relationship with American Indian groups and modified it for the changing social climate in the United States.

Keywords: [Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina; Washington (D.C.); Military participation; Politics and government]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
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UL 031

Interviewee: Thomas Oxendine

Interviewer: Lew Barton

Date: November 6, 1974

B: This is November 6, 1974. I'm Lew Barton recording for the University of Florida's History Department, American Indian Oral History program. This morning, we are favored to be in Washington D.C. in the office of the Department of the Interior. And with me, and kindly consenting to give us an interview, is Mr. Thomas Oxendine, who is head of the Department of Information, Bureau of Indian Affairs—and of course, the Bureau of Indian Affairs is a part of the United States Department of the Interior. Is that right, Mr. Oxendine?

O: That is correct, it's a real pleasure, Lew.

B: Oh, you are so gracious to give us this interview, and I've been looking forward to it, and we want you to tell us all about yourself in your own sort of way or any kinds of comments that you would like to make in your own way. And I'll just sit here and mostly listen because you know you and I are both pretty good talkers.
[Laughter]

O: Well, it's a real pleasure, as I said. Probably a little background that I might add is, first, I am a Lumbee Indian from North Carolina. I was born in December 23, 1922. Son of Thomas H. and Georgia R. Maynor. My father was a schoolteacher and was born in a small Indian village about two miles west of Pembroke, which is kind of the center of Lumbee affairs in that part as you are well aware. I first started school in a little small two-room school in **Hokes**, which is about in the area where I was born, in which I started to school when I was five. Having, as I said, been the oldest of eight children, I could read and write before I started to school. And since the teacher had three grades in the one room, I could read the

second-grade books, so it wasn't very long in that first year that I got elevated to the second grade, and consequently when I was—

B: I always considered you to be a brain.

O: No, I wouldn't say that, but I just got an early start, and wound up at six years of age in the third grade. And so, we only had eleven grades in school in those days, but I finally graduated at the age of fifteen from Cherokee Indian Normal High School over there in Pembroke. From there, I continued my schooling at Cherokee Indian Normal College up until—as that school progressed, I was in my fourth year when the World War II came along, and I immediately enlisted into the Navy. But while at Pembroke, as you are quite familiar Lew, you and I attended many courses together, and I remember well—

B: Very enjoyable ones.

O: And I remember well in our days in journalism, although you pursued that and I went elsewhere, but the last twelve years, though, I have moved back into public affairs, the last eight years, of course, in the Navy. But kind of just sketching out where I've been since we were together. I, of course, in 1942, as World War—well, let me back up a little. I did the normal kind of pursuits at Pembroke. Going through seeking a Bachelor of Arts in the liberal arts side of teaching, and that's what I was pursuing. I participated in all the athletic programs at Pembroke—

B: Right, you've always been a great athlete.

O: Well, I was fortunate enough to make the teams in each of the sports, and I participated in all of those normally. I participated in the class activities that were normally done. And I know that I enjoyed very much, and I have very fond

memories, of my days at Pembroke. But the next event, as I said—in 1942, the war broke out. I had prior taken flight training at Pembroke in an academic course that was run through a civilian pilot training course at Lumberton, which was about eight miles away, and I obtained a private license under a program there. And then of course the war came along, and I spent the World War II—well, let me back up again. I entered into the Navy, or sought to enlist into the Navy, and found that the Navy only accepted Caucasians, and I had a little problem there for a while until I got a ruling out of Washington, and of course I then received extensive press coverage as the first American Indian to go through Navy flight training.

B: Hey, that's great. How about the first American Indian to enter the Navy?

O: Well, I don't know about that part, but I was the first to enter Navy flight training, and I was commissioned an ensign at the completion of that course in December of 1942. I enlisted in the Navy in January, and after clearing the hurdles that were there mainly because of the policies of government dealing with segregation, when that was cleared, when I was permitted to go through—and had a very enjoyable time going through, and had a—it's just something in flying Lew, if you know—

B: You're a great flyer, Tom.

O: Well, I don't know. It's something that not many people get an opportunity to do, something that they feel that they do well. But this is something that came very easy to me, and I had no particular prior interest in flying. I never built model airplanes or did any of those sort of things. But I got an opportunity—as you

know, it was a volunteer thing and they took ten Indian students. And this program was kind of designed as a “pilot program,” to teach ten Indians, see how well they’d do in flying. And I don’t know how many people signed up, but they took them based on an academic background, et cetera, and I was one of those people, but right from the—

B: You’re being modest. [Laughter]

O: No, but right from the beginning it’s something I could do extremely well, and I never got a damn check. I, you know, entered into the Navy, and went through without any problem whatsoever. I never had any of the normal kind of difficulties that I find out later in, as I taught to people to fly, there’s just certain people who have a knack of doing, and as I said I had no problem. But I then spent all of World War II, of course in varying capacities in the Navy. I left the Navy in 1947, returned to Pembroke to complete my education. In 1948 I received my Bachelor from Pembroke. And then the fall of [19]48, I matriculated to the University of Southern California, where I majored in physical education. Returned to Pembroke in [19]50, and reentered to get my teaching credentials, and then the—that was, I’m sorry, in the fall of [19]49. And then, in 1950 I joined the staff at Pembroke High School as the director of athletics, and then was recalled to Korea in April of 1951, and remained in the Navy as a pilot, the last eight years in public affairs. Retired from the Navy in 1970, at which time I joined the Bureau of Indian Affairs in my present capacity, as the public affairs officer for the Bureau of Indian Affairs here in Washington. I have had an extreme variety of assignments, Lew. I would like—

B: I bet it's been interesting.

O: Well, it certainly has. I kind of don't know where to hit at any particular areas, but maybe we might talk a little about the role as an Indian in these which is a little bit different than most. And there are some kind of things that are pertinent maybe in that area. Going back a little bit, as I said, I entered in Charlotte, North Carolina at the recruiting there, and they had, as I said, to get a ruling. Because the rules for being an officer in the Navy were that you had to be a Caucasian. Well, that leaves us out, you know. So, I still think it was probably the rules of the Black-White thing of which the Indians are kind of caught in the middle—

B: **In the middle.**

O: Right. So, when that was clarified, I then went down to Atlanta, went through elimination flight training. And the first thing, Mr. Ted Mann, who headed the Duke University publicity department, was the public information officer there at Atlanta. Of course, he found out he had an Indian in, and he did the normal kinds of things of getting a lot of publicity. As you can remember, I received tremendous, all through no particular discrimination, not any that I could see. It was exactly the reverse.

B: Maybe it worked as an asset rather than a liability.

O: Well, you know one of the things though that was kind of confusing, I of course had read the same books that everyone else does that distorts Indian history completely.

B: Right.

O: But in entering in the number of people that you met, why they kind of had the romantic side of Indians and pointed out that you certainly must be very proud of your Indian ancestry, et cetera. But then they would relate real quickly to Indian leaders which I only had varying degrees of knowledge. Naturally Jim Thorpe, big hero among non-Indians.

B: Well, you know about him.

O: Well of course, he's a great, you know, I'm a great admirer of him. Crazy Horse, Tecumseh, all of the great Indian leaders were kind of brought up to me as people that I should kind of relate to. But I had problems with that Lew, because they were not necessarily other than known people. The people that I admired were those Lumbees who I could identify with as Indians that were not well known, such as you know Reverend **L.W.** Moore, who helped get our schools started, Mr. O.R. Sampson. I take great pride in the Lumbee Indians who helped get that thing turned around in 1887 because I know now well the history that dealt in the policies of government that caused a lot of the changes in 1835. We have a pretty sad history between 1835 and 1887, as you are quite well aware. It was a case of being caught between, of course, the federal government whose policies were only as a trustee to Indians, and the states who took the point that Indians are the responsibility of the federal government. So, you know, we were caught in the middle of that. And it must have taxed well. The Lumbee Indian leadership at that time, and I really am very proud of their persistence, and really having the view that education is the way, and of finally, and I'm sure they had many, many problems in getting it started, but it's now beginning to pay off.

B: Right, exactly.

O: As I said, I hope that something can be done to recognize the deep debt of gratitude that Lumbee Indians owe to those people who were able to kind of turn that bad situation around during that period. But their struggles must have been tremendous.

B: Oh, yes. They sort of pulled us up by our bootstraps. We had nothing [inaudible 15:36].

O: I'm sure you have this recorded in other areas, but for those who are not quite familiar with it as I understand it, of course we were Croatans, well identified up through the early part of 1900. And then, about 1911 or so, we were made at least Cherokee Indians of Robeson County. That's how I entered the Navy, as a Cherokee Indian of Robeson County. The laws pertaining to Indians mainly, partly of it was due to segregation.

B: [inaudible 16:15]

O: Oh, yeah of course. My birth certificate lists my mother and father as Indians. The laws, I was only permitted, say, to go to Indian schools. There were laws against intermarriage between—I was not eligible to go to a Black or White school, I could only go to the Indian schools. But you know I look back on that at the time, I don't think I really had any great interest in going to any of the other schools anyway, 'cause I was completely happy in my own environment. We had our own schools, our own churches. I guess maybe that personally I accepted that well, and I think one's real ability in life to kind of mesh is that ability to adjust to ever what you have to adjust to, anyway. But I remember my father told me

once that, you know, you're going to—in life, when you leave, and especially from around Pembroke, where we did not have discrimination—certainly in Pembroke, not openly, anyway.

B: That was the Lumbee town, our town.

O: That's right, that was our town. And Uncle **Sonny** was the mayor, and we had our own chief of police, city council and so forth, but there was none there. It's only when you kind of tended to leave your own area. As long as you kind of stayed in your place, you know, no problem. But he told me that you're going to run into problems with certain people, just because you're an Indian. But that's kind of based on the fact that they did not like maybe the Indians they had met or for some reason they've come up with that. But this system of government, and they won't want anything to do with you just because you're an Indian, nothing else. I mean it's not you per se, it's just you're an Indian and they would not care to have anything to do with you. But this system of government also permits him that right to exclude, based on any particular reason he might want. But you can also do the same thing. You can exclude those people that you don't, it's just the way that it is, and I kind of never forgot that. So, I always kind of took the position that people who would not want to have anything to do with me, you know, they have that right. But it's too bad that their communication is such that they have come up with those kinds of views. I have had a very interesting life.

B: Oh, you certainly have. [inaudible 19:09]

O: I first, as I said went through, getting back a little bit into a time frame in 1942, I went down to Atlanta. Colonel Earl Lowery, who was at that time over at the

hospital there was very helpful, also a Lumbee, who had gone to school with my Uncle Clifton, one of the early people who received a master's degree. I'm sure you have him on tape—if not, you ought to. But anyway, Colonel Lowry was very helpful in my adjustment in Atlanta. I then moved down to Jacksonville, Florida where I completed the remaining time to get my commission. I entered into the Navy operational part in what was called VOVCS, scout observation training, flying, and joined the USS Mobile where I spent the next two years in the Pacific going through some thirty-plus fleet engagements in that capacity as a scout observation pilot, submarine search, and went through first battle was at Wake, and I participated in the bombing of that, neutralizing a lot of these areas up through the second battle of the Philippines, where I returned and then went into fighters—at the later part qualifying in the Native F6F Hellcat. I then became—

B: That was one of the great machines.

O: That was a fine airplane. And then started flying the Navy's F4U Corsair, became a test pilot in **Grovefield**, or in Detroit, Michigan, returned to the sea planes for a two-year assignment on the USS Saint Paul, which took into the area, and I was head of the St. Paul's aviation detachment. We served over in China. Very interesting tour and the follow-up at the end of World War II. We were anchored in the Huangpu River in Shanghai for six months. So, I got to return to a little of my athletic wishes in that I coached the Saint Paul baseball team which won that China district over there.

B: Oh, that's great.

O: So I really had a lot of fond memories about that particular thing. But at that time the Chinese, the Communists would not move into that area because the U.S. was in there at that time, but by then, that's when I left in November of 1947 and returned to Pembroke to enter school, as I've mentioned before. I'd like to just kind of mention a little bit my—one of the real, few of the real highlights I consider in my life. One was my year as a coach there at Pembroke, under Mr. **Elmer Lowery** who sought in my senior year there as I was getting my teaching credentials, asked me if I would be willing to do that. And of course, that's exactly what I wanted to do. I can remember well moving in after Pembroke had had some problems in winning championships over in Magnolia, and Prospect, and Fairmont had kind of dominated that league for quite some time. But I was fortunate enough to have Union Chapel, one of the other high schools, merge with Pembroke the year that I took over. So, I herded a few pretty good ballplayers, and I was the coach of both the girls' and boys' basketball teams, and went through and had a great amount of luck in that capacity in that we won, had a season each, the boys and girls having nineteen wins and one loss, and then went through and won the county championship. And the Monday after that, Lew, the Monday after that high school tournament there at Pembroke, after we'd won on a Saturday night, on Monday morning there was a package of information to return to the Navy for Korea. So, I discussed it, took a leave of absence—

B: You were of course in the naval reserve, right?

O: I was in the naval reserve, as all people who had been in World War II, there was a commitment to that, and of course that was not an option, it was just that if you had gone through you were—actually when you leave the Navy you released inactive duty. You were still eligible for those assignments. But I went back in and immediately went into jets. And that was a real rewarding experience, and I went through the normal, oh, the USS Midway and three tours over in Europe. In the Mediterranean I served as the Administrative and Operations officer for Command Air Group Six, later becoming the executive officer of Fighter Squadron 21 on the USS Midway. I then was reassigned in 1951 to, as the officer in charge of the Navy's gunnery unit at Pensacola, Florida, where we trained students in basic gunnery at Pensacola there. I'm sorry, let me back up. In 1953 I went to Pensacola, instead of 1951, and served that tour as the CO of the gunnery unit. I then, 1956, met a Navy nurse there at Barin Field, and after a short period of time we were married. I got orders in July of [19]56 and moved on to a new assignment as the officer in charge of the Navy's fleet jet training squadron unit at Moffett Field, California. This was a very interesting assignment in that we taught all of the fleet pilots to sharpen up on their ability to fly in all-weather squadrons, these were the jet pilots who operate on the carrier, had to renew their instrument ratings, et cetera. So, I remained in that until that squadron was absorbed in VF124, and then I moved into the Navy's—became a combat flight instructor, and the executive officer of 124, which is a big replacement air group squadron there at Moffett. I continued to participate in the squadron athletics up through as exec on the basketball team. I was on the

baseball team, et cetera, continued to do that, and as I had in all of the other squadrons. 1960, I left as executive officer 124 and moved to Pensacola as the commanding officer of the Navy's largest basic training squadron, training squadron two at North Whiting Field at Pensacola. That squadron had 198 airplanes and had 165 **pure** flight instructors. I had an administrative staff of about seventeen officers, eight hundred enlisted personnel, and we trained at any one time four to six hundred Navy flight students through transition, precision, acrobatics, basic instruments, and night flying. So that was a tremendous operation that we had going there. In fact, the students for the squadron operated from six o'clock in the morning until eleven at night, so we had a kind of around-the-clock, you know with night flying and that kind of operation. But it was one of the real highlights, you know commanding a squadron of that capacity. Now at that point in [19]60 to [19]62, I had that. In October [19]62, I then was offered an assignment as the Deputy Fleet Information Officer on the staff of Commander-in-Chief of Pacific Fleet. Now, this gets us back to the public information—

B: Why this enters another phase of your interest of your life, journalism.

O: That's right. Well, you know, I'd been sports editor when you were the editor of the college newspaper there. I was on your staff as the sports editor, and even though I had not pursued it a great deal after that, why, I did get a chance to return, and of course accepted that. I moved to Hawaii on the staff and served for three years in that capacity as the Deputy Fleet Information Officer for Pacific Fleet which actually put out all the releases for Pacific Fleet all over the Pacific.

The fleet hometown news, and the news releases, the interviews, the normal guest tours, et cetera. They're a very interesting assignments, not a great deal involved in Indian affairs, but a very rewarding assignment. In 1965, when the Navy became involved with the war in Vietnam, I was detached to head the initial information program for the Navy's involvement in the Gulf of Tonkin. So, I was sent out from Hawaii to head that on the USS Independence on the staff of the party of commanders. I operated there during the later part of 1965 to set up that program, and then was assigned to the Office of Information in Washington on the Secretary of the Navy's staff in the Office of Plans. I directed the Office of Aviation Plans, that dealing with building of aircraft, the rollouts, the programs involved around anything doing with aviations and carriers and so forth. I headed that part within the information office of the secretary. I then directed the entire office later on. And then, in 1968, I was assigned to head the Public Affairs Office for the Naval Air Systems Command. This was an operation that dealt with all weapon systems that deal with aircraft et cetera. And then I had that for two years here in Washington, had remained since 19—or moved to Washington from Hawaii in 1965. And so in 1970, as I'm leaving the Navy, I was asked to join the Bureau in this present capacity. So if you'd like we can discuss that, or what have you. But of course, I've been here during the reorganization, the implementation of the self-determination policy, I was here. It's kind of strange but two years ago today in this office this building was completely engulfed with six hundred people who took it over. So, two years ago today this office was—

B: You really have something to report on. [Laughter]

O: Oh, you're absolutely right, but I was in and out as the liaison between the Indians who had this building and the government both the White House—

B: It was the B.I. Takeover of 1972.

O: Right the B.I., 1972, November 2 through 8 and today is the sixth and of course this is one of—I remember that very well. I also, in the capacity, handled the press at Wounded Knee, South Dakota during that takeover. The large number of newsmen who—but that's part of the job that I presently have now. So, I am familiar basically with all of those kind of things. I do think I understand the Lumbee history fairly well in its relationship to the government. And I think that if others understood it as well then they can accept...

B: You'd be very happy about it wouldn't you?

O: Well, no, I don't know that they may be happy. But the thing is—I believe, and I'm sure you do, that truth is good no matter what it is. Truth has got to be good, and it's better that we know and seek truth, because you make too many mistakes when you think you're dealing with truth and you really aren't.

B: You didn't seem to have this problem that so many of our people have, which is related to exactly what you're saying. That is an inferiority complex, you know, our people have been told that they were nobody and nothing so long that they have begun to believe this. You can't say that about anybody, really, can you?

O: Well, you know, again, I kind of was fortunate, Lew. If it hadn't been in the sequence that it was, you know, I would not know. But you know as I said, I was at Pembroke, I was going through pursuing a teaching field. I'm not sure that that

would've been exactly something I would have aspired to at that particular time or not. But the big key, I think—and I've certainly seen it after I've come into the Bureau—is that a lot of people don't have that opportunity to bridge that gap into the right set of circumstances, and I think I did.

B: Somehow you were able to rise above it, you know.

O: Well, I think in going from an Indian culture into the mainstream. We have for instance in the Bureau of Indian Affairs—last year, I was out on the Navajo reservation having lunch with retired Chief Justice Lincoln of the Navajo Supreme Court, and we were discussing Indian affairs. He's now retired, he lives back in his hogan under the most primitive type of—but you know, he's had the affluence and he's gone back to this. But we were discussing the Bureau's Employment Assistance Program. This is a relocation program where Indians sign up for various job training, and then they, the bureau, has a program where we train the Indians in a vocation, and then assist them in job placement. Now we were discussing that program, and he said to me, "Mr. Oxendine," he said, "it's not the eight hours at work in Los Angeles, for instance, as a welder, that defeats our Navajos, that's not what defeats them." He says, "It's that other sixteen hours you're not training them for." And that's exactly what maybe you're talking about here, and how do you bridge that and not have it. Well, moving out of Pembroke, and I'd never been to school, as you know, with a Black or White until I went into Navy flight training. So, you don't really know how well you are going to do or not, but you certainly wouldn't be in there unless you had certain—

B: Certain [inaudible 37:31].

O: Well, the thing is, you find pretty early that you dictate a lot of your future by your own initiatives and motivation, and desires and what have you. And I learned I think fairly early that you can take average intelligence and do anything with it you want if you're willing to, you know, put the time and effort to it. But I went into the Navy, even as I said with my background of never having been to school with a Black or White, into an all-Caucasian background. But a couple of things is, the mesh was pretty good for me in that everyone got up at the same time when reveille was sounded. Everyone went through a process of sameness. You went to the mess hall for meals, you took the calisthenics, you went to ground school, you went to the flight line for your flight training. You went through, you went down and signed up for insurance, you took physicals. Pretty soon you can start seeing some of the validity in this total programming, whereas you would not have had in a program whereas, say for instance you're only taking welding or you're only taking carpentry. These other things are not being taken care of. But I guarantee you your time is taken care of in the Navy flight training program, from the time you get up in the morning until you complete your class studies, into the night, in preparation of the next day's events. As I said, it was really compact during World War II, because you only had every eighth day off, and consequently there isn't much free time, and therefore it's totally programmed, and it doesn't make any difference you were an Indian or whether you know, in there were students from Harvard, Princeton, you know the most affluent part of our country.

B: What really makes the difference is whether or not you can perform, right?

O: Well, I guess that's exactly it. You know, you have to carry your own level but I think probably my weakest area had to be mathematics. But I again, am fortunate in the fact that my roommate, Lew, had majored in mathematics at the University of Illinois, and as I said I had a private pilot's license, and I had no problem with flying and aerodynamics and what have you. So, we matched pretty well because he had problems in that area, and I had to really put it out, because we went through a half-inch book of calculus in what, about three weeks, you know. And I had only gone through Dr. **Brown's** college math course, you know, and that wasn't a great background. But at least it was the basics. But the mathematics part really was my only problem academically, but as I said it took extra time, but I also had a roommate who was very helpful.

[Break in recording]

B: Might be of interest to others. There are so many things about you we need to say, and we don't want to miss them.

O: Be happy to, Lew. I guess maybe the best way to do this would be to add the personal education experience awards, et cetera. I had mentioned before some of that earlier in the tape, but I'll condense it somewhat. As I said, I was born in December 23, 1922. I'm presently married to the former Elizabeth Moody who is from Tampa, Florida. We have three sons, Thomas, now age seventeen, who is a senior at Washington Lee High School. He currently is active on the varsity football, varsity wrestling, and varsity baseball teams. He's active in classwork and hopes to be entering the university next year to study law, or pre-law at that point. I have a son, Bill, who is also active in three sports in Swanson Junior High

School here in Arlington. We live at 1141 North Harrison in Arlington and have purchased a home there and have resided in that locale since 1965. Youngest son Robert is in junior high in the eighth grade, also very active in athletics, so we are blessed with three fine well-adjusted youngsters who make honor rolls and are active year-round in three sports. As I said before, I'm a member of the Lumbee tribe of North Carolina, member of the National Congress of American Indians, the National Aviation Club here in Washington, and of course the National Press Club, and I was one of the earliest Indians, of course, admitted to the National Press Club here in Washington. My education—

B: Weren't you an officer in that at one time?

O: Not in the National Press Club, no. My education kind of basically outlined, I graduated from Cherokee Indian Normal High School in Pembroke in 1934. I entered Pembroke State—I'm sorry, I graduated from the Cherokee Normal High School in Pembroke in 1938, I entered in [19]34, graduated in [19]38. I then entered Cherokee Indian Normal College which later changed to Pembroke State College for Indians, now Pembroke State University, in 1938 and continued until I left in 1942 after the first semester as I've already outlined to enter into Navy flight training. I returned to Pembroke at the end of World War II, and received my bachelor degree in social science with a minor in physical education. I then entered the University of Southern California where I completed, in 1949 and [19]50, and completed undergraduate physical education courses to pursue a coaching athletic career. I returned to Pembroke State College in 1950 to complete courses required for teaching certification which I had not included in

my earlier academic work. And I'm also a graduate of the Armed Forces Information School in Fort Benjamin Harrison, and I did that in 1966. And that's where the public information officers in the military attain their journalism or courses designed for public information. My basic experiences kind of center around outside of school. I was in the Navy from 1942 to 1947. I was commissioned as a naval aviator in December of 1942. I participated during World War II in the Pacific on the USS Mobile, as I've stated before some thirty fleet engagements. I returned after [inaudible 46:13] as a member of the faculty at Pembroke High School from 1950 until April [19]51 as the athletic director and coach of all of the athletic programs there, both boys and girls in the physical education capacity. I was a Navy jet fighter pilot in various squadrons from 1951 to 1960, including positions as the commanding officer of training Squadron 2 in the Naval Basic Training Command from January 1960 to November 1962 when I was assigned as the Deputy Fleet Information Officer on the staff of the commander-in-Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet from November [19]62 to July of [19]65, at which time I was assigned as the Public affairs officer for Commander Task Force 77, which was in the Gulf of Tonkin, which was the initial part of the war in Vietnam. In those duties they were fairly much the same as any other public affairs assignment, in that you work with newsmen covering the war either on the USS Independence, and also participating in Saigon, in the release of information to newsmen regarding the military operations in Vietnam of the Navy. From there I returned to the continental United States as the aviation plans Officer, later director of that plans division in the Office of Information, secretary

of the Navy's Office of Information in the Pentagon. I was in that assignment from [19]65 to [19]68, at which time I became the public affairs officer or head of that office for the Naval Air Systems Command here in Washington until I left the Navy in 1970 to the present assignment as Public Information Officer for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, of where I have been since. On the bio you mentioned the awards, well—

B: Right, and the medals, and the combat experience.

O: Well, in 1967—you were part of that, Lew—you know I'm very honored to have been awarded Pembroke State University's first Annual Distinguished Alumnus Award. Many have, since 1967—they have made a yearly award of that particular honor. I was designated as a Navy public information specialist as a result of having attended the—when I graduated from the Armed Forces Information School at Fort Benjamin Harrison. Of course, as long as you are the only one—you can be the first in a lot of things. So that of course was the first Indian to do a lot of things in the Navy. I had mentioned that I received extensive flight coverage or press coverage as a result of going through Navy flight training as the first American Indian. I remember getting as many as three hundred and fifty letters a week, you know, just normally—

B: You needed a fan club. [Laughter]

O: Just normally, you know, of people just interested in how I was doing, and some of my various views on things. Then, in 1972—and I've been listed since in "Who's Who in Government" here in Washington, and of course, all of those are a matter of record. Related to World War II, I received many medals and honors

of which one of them was Distinguished Flying Cross, and I'm very, very proud of, and I know that you have written about that assignment. But again, for the record it was awarded for, as I said, I was in a scout observation assignment at that time in which it was a single engine float plane that landed near a ship and was hoisted aboard, you know, under **wet** what have you. It was a kingfisher. Well, this is also used in rescue work during the war. Well, while on assignment in 1944, June, right off the coast of Yap, a TBM crew had been shot down, and as you may or may not know, normally the rescue operations were done by submarine. What would happen is when the fleet went into an island, or one of the operations, we had a rescue submarine. What would happen is that submarine would be off the coast underwater, and then recover pilots who then went in and what have you by periscope, and take them out to where they could be then the submarine could surface and take them aboard, or could transfer them—

B: That was smart, wasn't it?

O: Oh yes, very, very smart. But in this particular case, off Yap, this pilot was shot down right near the beach, and therefore the submarine could not stay submerged and go in there and recover him. So, it was decided to try to make a rescue of this crew by sending me in to see if I could get it. And I remember very well landing, or attempting to land, near this beach. It was in kind of a half-moon there at Yap.

B: What were you flying?

O: An OS2U Kingfisher built by Vought Sikorsky, single engine, and I landed and I had to zig-zag on the landing, but there was Navy fighters at that time strafing the beach, and strafing the gun emplacements which were firing at my plane. And they were hitting, and even splashing water with shells, you know, but the thing is you are involved in an operation, you have a chance to rescue a crew of people, and so that means a lot you know because if you don't, they're going to be captured. So, it was as I said right near the beach and I was caught kind of in crossfire, but I went in and was able to get them onto the wing of the plane and zigzag out to the area where I could take them on board, two in the back seat, and then take off and fly back to the ship.

B: You taxied out with them on the wing of the plane.

O: Taxied out then, zigzagging at high speed—

B: They were hanging on for dear life.

O: Right, that's right. And then, until I could get them out to where I can safely take off outside of the range of gunfire. Well, of course, that was a Distinguished Flying Cross I was awarded for that having been observed by the air group commander who had watched it. But you know as I went in there, and I can remember this very well, that when, you know, they were trying to neutralize the gunfire on the beach, and when I went into, it took some time to spot them in the water you know, that's not an easy thing to do. First of all, they're shooting at you while you're doing this, but then you go in to make this landing, and as, you know, you have to slow down to speeds and so forth, and then they decided to call it off. But I really was determined at that point to do what I could, even to take

some hits in the plane, because you know, lives were at stake—although they figured, you know, that it was a little bit too dangerous to do. But I elected to kind of overrule that and went ahead and, as if, you know, and they were telling me not to land, but went ahead and landed anyway and brought them out. But anyway, that was the Distinguished Flying Cross. I brought back planes from [inaudible 55:37] that were, picked up the bullet holes, et cetera. Participated in a lot of very interesting kind of things. I was shot down in a crossfire at [inaudible 55:49] with an OS2U, but fortunately was able to get back to the ship. I know that came back and I was kind of surprised to find that within six inches of my head you know a bullet had sailed through armor piercing had gone all the way through the airplane. So that was about the closest I think I came to not being around any longer. But again Lew, you know we were talking earlier I think I have been extremely fortunate, lucky in having had the opportunity to have taken advantage of a lot of the things that have happened to me. I was in the Pentagon; I was asked to head another particular thing that I remember well and will always cherish will be the press officer for an official state visit to Australia and New Zealand. This is one where you meet all the heads of the various provinces and what have you in Australia. We were in there for a month. Visited all over Australia in a very state official kind of capacity that normally is reserved to those who travel with the president. Because you meet—you're into the full gamut of the real exposure of that diplomatic core. I had never really had an opportunity to participate in it. Have participated in Medal of Honor presentations in the White House in my capacity as a public Information and out of the

Pentagon, I have had the opportunity of doing that, and the opportunity of many meetings with cabinet members along with the commissioner, you know, in my present capacity as Public Information officer here in the Bureau. I travel with the commissioner, and I have visited probably as many Indian reservations as most people. It's kind of hard for me to visit—to feel that in four years that there's very few that I have not visited. I've done extensive travel throughout the lower forty-eight—in fact, all the states. And then, of course, my background in the Navy permitted me to visit all of the continents—less Antarctica, I never went there, but all the others. So, I've had a chance to see various cultures, lifestyles. It's been very rewarding to match the two together. If time permits, and I know I'm doing most of the talking, and you probably do have—

B: Oh, I'm fascinated.

O: Have some questions, but I would like to clarify a point about the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and if I could just take a few minutes and do that.

B: Oh, I hope you will.

O: I would just like to have your—I know you're a historian of Indian affairs, and I'm a leader of it, but maybe we'll see if we mesh on how we think it is, because—

B: You're not only a historian, you're a maker of history, Thomas. A lot of history.
[Laughter]

O: Well, I guess maybe when the settlers first came to this country, there wasn't much of a problem, you know, not initially. But at some point in time later the two cultures became no longer compatible. The settler's way of division of land, et cetera, and the Indian culture or use of land—the ownership and what have you

by the settlers, and the use the native way, were diametrically opposed. These two could not jell any better maybe than Indian preference in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Civil Service Merit Promotion System. You know you can't have a happy marriage of either of these, because they are diametrically opposed. But anyway, no particular problem initially, but at a point later these were no longer compatible, which eventually led to restricting the Indian to reservations or restricting his ability to do those things that he had done before. Now, the justification, I guess, on the other side is kind of contained in Thomas Jefferson's teachings, in that we are an oppressed people coming to this country, but we're bringing to this country an advanced civilization over what we find here. That was kind of his interpretation. So therefore, the solution of the problem would be to educate, civilize, and train the Indian over to our way, and then there's plenty of land and natural resources for everyone. Now, the only problem with that is it had varying degrees of acceptance by the Indians, you know there—

B: Which is understandable.

O: Oh absolutely, very. You know, some did and some didn't. I think the Lumbees probably adjusted pretty well to that. Anyway, they didn't get removed in the Indian Removal Act, you know when the decision was made to remove all the Indians from—they learned to farm and till the soil and not be a particular big problem, anyway they did not get moved. But the Bureau of Indian Affairs was then formed in 1824 under the War Department. It operates under—and then in 1849 it was transferred to the Department of the Interior where it, you know it's

one of the oldest agencies of government. It operates under the legislative authority of the Snyder Act, and you're familiar with that, and it states that basically the, it's a general authorization act of the Congress, in that the Congress will appropriate monies for the general administration, welfare, health, protection, et cetera, for Indians "throughout the land." Well, if you look at that authorization, and that you have a bureau charged with the advocacy for Indians, why has the Indian kind of fallen to all of the lowest levels of all of your sociological economic measurements that you can have? He's gone to the bottom of it. How can that happen with a bureau charged with responsibility? Certainly, that Snyder Act does not limit us in performing the duties that we want. Well, now first of all, the Bureau of Indian Affairs is an agency of government that administers a policy. In this particular case it's the Federal Indian Policy. They have to go back and look at that Federal Indian Policy, and see if the policies have always, really and truly, been in the best interest of the Indians. See, that's kind of the key. Our policies over the years—at least up until 1970—was a policy to train and educate the Indian to take his rightful place in society. You know, the old melting pot, the assimilation thing. Well, the administration by the bureau was a trustee relationship. The Federal Indian Policy is one in which is attained through treaty and executive orders. It's a trustee relationship. If we, as the federal government—

B: And the treaty is necessary, isn't it?

O: Absolutely.

B: The treaty is a legal necessity.

O: Well, the main thing is the role between the government and Indians is a trustee one, so if we don't hold anything in trust for a tribe, then there is no relationship between the federal government—

B: No grounds for it.

O: No, because it's a trustee. It's not a guardian of Indian people. The bureau is not a guardian of the people. It's got nothing to do with whether an individual is four-fourths or what have you. Our policy in the bureau is this: it is a relationship between two hundred sixty-four tribes, bands, and groups in the lower forty-eight plus an additional two hundred villages in Alaska, the Alaskan natives. Now, in order to be eligible for services in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, an individual must be an enrolled member of one of these two hundred sixty-four tribes that has this treaty executive order relationship that we hold part of over fifty million acres of land in trust for. If you're an enrolled member of that living on or near the reservation—and for most of all of our programs, of one-fourth blood quantum—then that is the establishment of that relationship. So, if the Indian who—he can be four-fourths, moves off into the urban area, then as I said that relationship is not, you know, the trustee thing is not with an Indian living in Raleigh, North Carolina for instance. I mean he can four-fourths Navajo, move to Raleigh, and the program thing is back in Navajo, you know, we have our relationship with the Navajo tribe. He's an enrolled member but our programs are back at Navajo for this particular individual. So that's kind of misunderstood sometimes in—

B: And people are—some newsmen have said if you're off reservation, you're no longer an Indian.

- O: Well, you know, that's their interpretation. There is no legal definition for an Indian as you're quite well aware. I think most general is an Indian is a person of Indian ancestry, kind of known to his peers as an Indian, who self-identifies himself as an Indian and is known as an Indian by his peers. That's generally, basically it. And then, of course, if you look at the history of the census it was an Indian is a person who regards himself or identifies himself as an Indian.
- B: So, the criteria differs depending on the particular branch of the federal government, doesn't it?
- O: Well, I'm really only speaking of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Now of course, we have two tribes right here in Virginia that are state reservations. We have no relationship from the federal government to those reservations. Got nothing to do with again—
- B: [inaudible 1:07:52]
- O: That's correct. And we have other state—
- B: The Mattaponis and the Pamunkeys.
- O: Right, Pamunkeys and the Mattaponis, but we have other state reservations on the east that have no relationship because their relationship is within the state that they reside. In other words, the federal government does not hold their land in trust. It's held by either themselves or it's held by the state. So, I think that one must understand that relationship in order to understand the federal government's role.
- B: This is a legal working basis.

O: That is correct. It's as I said a trustee. If the United State government held, say all or most of Robeson County in trust for Lumbees then you would have that relationship. If you don't, then it is not there. Now, what about the thing of whether it should be that way or not is not for us to decide. That's the way it is, you know. That's the fact in it.

B: It's the government's problem.

O: If somebody wants to change it, then there are mechanisms to seek changes. Senate Joint Resolution 133 is going to study that, and to look at whether the relationship that the government has had with Indians is the true and right and correct one. Now really on the other side, or defensible for the government's position on this is when an Indian leaves this federal Indian relationship or leaves the reservation, you know since 1924 he was given full citizenship and the right to vote. The government, or our position is this, that when an Indian leaves the federal Indian relationship or leaves the reservation, moves into an urban or rural area, he's entitled to all the rights, benefits, privileges, et cetera as any other citizen. Therefore, the government has taken the position that an Indian has those rights and therefore it is the state, city, county, or what have you's responsibility.

B: It's their responsibility.

O: To provide him every what thing is necessary in order that he has the full rights as anyone else. The bigger question is when an Indian leaves should he be treated any differently than any other ethnic group. Well, the Congress has not decided to change that at this time. Whether it should be different, you know, we

don't know. But you remember the president kind of reversed all that federal Indian policy in 1970.

B: President Richard M. Nixon.

O: Right, you know he came out with that historic message of July 8, in which basically were three parts. One, we're gonna—you know, that the present or that past policy of dealing across the board with Indians is now the most deprived, depressed group of people in the United States, under a policy that was supposed to benefit him. You know, I think there's no question that this was the finest policy that has ever been established in Indian affairs. Because one of the, you know you can look at it, Lew, real quickly that for instance the Miccosukees in Florida, they have very little relationship with the San Carlos Apaches in Arizona. What do they have really in common, these two hundred sixty-four different groups, any more than all the Caucasians in Europe would agree on priority? It's very hard to get a conformant, or a unified position among Indians because they are just like anyone else. They have different priorities, different viewpoints on things, and what have you. So, this self-determination without termination was a very good, sound policy. It was one in which there were three points to it, self-determination without termination, it was going to change the Bureau of Indian Affairs from a management organization to a technical service organization, and then third, involve Indians in the decision-making processes of government. These three key items were the points within that thing. Now what does that really mean. Well, the self-determination would be for instance that say since the Seminoles or say the Mississippi Choctaw tribe would come up with

long range plans to solve Mississippi Choctaw problems. The Bureau of Indian Affairs agency there at Choctaw would support that tribe in solution of those problems within the funding of that agency. They would involve the tribe in the budgeting process to determine those priorities, and it would not be contingent on what's going on at the other two hundred sixty-three. Because Navajos may want to go a different direction. Now, as I said, the tribes would determine the future and direction that they should go, and not have it contingent on the others. The consultation and bringing of Indians into the bureau, you know I was a recipient of that policy. I was asked to come into the bureau in that it was changing to be more responsive to Indians. You know, we had more awareness, the legislative proposals were submitted to the Congress, and there have been monumental changes. But there's been another thing. You know, in that message, it well-defined the bureau's role and the eligibility for services out of the bureau. It stated something else. It stated that, at that time, half the Indians in the United States lived under the umbrella of the bureau and half do not. [inaudible 1:14:27] The Lumbees are a good example. There's a lot of Indians outside of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Now, the president's message stated that OEO would be the lead agency in coordinating other departments in providing or seeing that other Indians outside of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, their assistance is put together. That office is now in the office of Native American Programs in HEW. Now they are charged with the off-reservation or those Indians who fall outside the purview of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. But I thought that that would be helpful to distinguish what is that federal Indian relationship, why it is that

way—and as I said, I'm not defending it one way or the other, I'm just saying that's the way it is. It was established through treaty and executive order. If we hold these sources in trust, then we have it, if not then it's outside the bureau.

B: Well, I certainly am glad you explained that relationship between the government these two distinctly different groups legally. But inasmuch as the tape is running short, I want to ask you, there's so many other things that I'd like to ask you, and we just don't have the time. You don't have the time, the tape's running out. For example, what are you going to do the rest of the day? I know how busy you are, tell us something about it.

O: Well, Lew, this is a very exciting kind of an office. I run inquiries for newsmen to briefings for various people, including this afternoon I have the pleasant assignment of spending two hours with the wife of the Prime Minister of Luxemburg—

B: Oh, great.

O: Who has a very much of an interest in Indian affairs, and I will be spending as I said that time briefing her on general, those things that she has a great deal of interest in. For your information, she is also a journalist, which you'll have an interest in.

B: You have a lot in common then.

O: I'll mention you to her—

B: Oh, you're [inaudible 1:17:07]

O: —and maybe you'll have some communication with her if she has an interest in pursuing that. But her name is Mrs. Liliane Thorn-Petit, and I will spend about

two hours—she’s having lunch today with the ambassador and state department people that flew into New York yesterday, and said high on her list, of course, is learning more about American Indians. But next week I’ll be going out to a National Indian Education meeting in Phoenix, Arizona on the thirteenth, then on the fourteenth, Scottsdale for a National Indian Housing conference. On the twenty-fifth I’ll be going up to Bismarck, North Dakota to meet with the United Tribes in discussion of an Aberdeen area office. They have some things with the commissioner of Indian Affairs. I look very much forward to an early return down to Pembroke, of course my—

B: We’re looking for you.

O: I’ll be down there you know during at least the Christmas time. I don’t know whether I’ll be able to make it for Thanksgiving or not, but you know you can move the people the Lumbees especially out of there, but home’s still in Robeson County to me. And although I am very happy with my assignment here Lew, I have a very exciting one, and I run into things from, “Why would you work the Bureau of Indian Affairs with all the past histories of what has happened Indians?” “How do you defend going in with the calvary, and moving out the Chickasaws in 1835?”

B: You don’t have to do that, do you?

O: Well, you know I got a call just recently saying, “How could you as an official spokesman of the government defend morally, legally, or any other way, having dealt with the particular treaty, and then going in there later, and **routing** the people out you know, and taking their land?” And of course, then you have to put

things in perspective. You've got to understand the system of government, that no Congress can bind the future Congress. The Congress negotiates a treaty, negotiated them with the Indians, but the thing is a future Congress may re-negotiate that treaty and, in most cases, they did under the thing, "It's considered in the best interest of the United States." So really, to understand it, you must take a position that we have treaties with other countries now. Fifty years from now it may be decided that "in the interest of the best United States" it might need to be altered. But again, I'd just like to tell you how happy I am to have seen you and participate in this, and maybe we can do it again when we have more time. My best to your son, Lew. I'm a great admirer of his efforts on behalf of the *Carolina Indian Voice*, and again I hope something can be done to memorialize all of our people that I have great admiration for as I've said, especially the Indian leadership, **Paul Sampson**, a coach who had a great influence on my life, through athletics and continuation in school. Of course, my parents and all of the ones who helped encourage me to continue in education. But as I said, if that permits you to take the advantage of the other, you know. My grandfather who could see just dividing, continuing to divide up the land, it's gonna run out pretty soon, because you can't do it that way. But Lew again, thanks a lot and I wish you well, and please stay in touch.

B: We'll certainly do that, and we want to thank you so much. This is such a valuable and enlightening interview. Your explanations as always are so clear, your heart is in the right place, and your brain too. Always Tom, you're always there at the right time doing the right thing. And we are so honored to have this

interview with you, and you are so kind to take this time off from your very busy schedule and sit down and talk with us. And I want to wish you Godspeed in all that you attempt to do, because you do everything so well, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

O: Thank you very much, Lew.

[End of interview]

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