

Transcription: Roy Shank

Today is August 8th, 2012. My name is James Crabtree and this afternoon I'll be interviewing Mr. Roy Shank. This interview is being conducted at the Tyler Veterans Home in Tyler, Texas, and it's in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today about your time in the service.

Roy Shank: I appreciate you for doing this.

Sir, and we've got Ray Preston joining us. We've got Roy Enray, and Roy Enray is sitting in to just kind of see how some of these interviews are done because he's going to do some of these eventually as well.

Roy Shank: He has the correct Navy.

Yeah, he's got the right head gear. Well sir, the first question I always start off with is tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Roy Shank: Born and raised in Jacksonville, Texas. Went to two colleges, one of them was in Jacksonville, Texas, and my first university so to speak was Flon Morris. Have you ever heard of that?

No, I haven't.

Roy Shank: That's where I started out, and my girlfriend and I went to Texas and then later, I decided that I didn't like Texas, and I finally got to where I wanted to go, and that was SMU.

When were you at the University of Texas, what years?

Roy Shank: '61 I guess, somewhere in there.

What was it that you didn't like about UT?

Roy Shank: Too big. Yeah, and I was a Sigma Nu, and they were chasing me all the time to become a snake, and again, too big.

And so you went to SMU and graduated from there?

Roy Shank: Right.

When was it that the military appeared as something that you were thinking about doing? Was that while you were at SMU?

Roy Shank: I had always been willing to go to the military, and I actually, I've always been Navy, and I never wanted to be a Marine or anything like that, and slop around in the mud and stuff like that, and but anyway, to go on, I went to, you know what brown shoes are?

Mm-hmm.

Roy Shank: The officers and that kind of thing, and the whole time I was in there, and I was there for six years, I always wore the brown shoes, but I went, but I was always on the east coast, the Med, and that kind of place, but most of my time was on aircraft carriers.

Were you in ROTC when you were at SMU?

Roy Shank: No.

So how did you earn your commission?

Roy Shank: I went to Pensacola.

After graduating?

Roy Shank: Mm-hmm. I'd enlisted, they didn't have to find me or any of that kind of thing, and so I was gonna go in to fly jet planes. That was my to do, and like some of those up there, and I had one little problem and that was that I had terrible vertigo, and I had a concussion playing basketball when I was 18, and so that's the reason that I was not able to fly or to be Tommy Cruise.

So did they find that out when you got to flight school you had vertigo?

Roy Shank: Well yeah, and the vertigo was, I actually went DOR, drop on request, and I had to do that because my instructor was fussing about the fact that he was having to fly with me, and he told me a couple of times, you're scaring the crap out of me. So at the end of every, in the end of the day, I guess was once a week or something like that, we'd go to what we called the Pack Rat, and had some beers and things like that, and when he finally said I'm not going to fly with you anymore, and he said I ain't gonna fly with you anymore, you scare the hell out of me, Shank.

How did that make you feel at that point?

Roy Shank: Oh, I was so ready and willing, and it broke my heart when I couldn't fly.

Was the vertigo something that only affected you when you were in an aircraft and not so much on the ground?

Roy Shank: Vertigo, well I mean it was a problem, but again, the concussion changed my life in a lot of different ways.

So when you finally decided to give up the goal of becoming a pilot, the Navy then decided it was going to make you a surface officer or something of that sort?

Roy Shank: Always on carriers.

So where did you go to next when you left Pensacola?

Roy Shank: I went to the east coast and spent a lot of time in the Caribbean. You probably have known the Boxers? You've heard that?

The U.S.S. Boxer? Yes.

Roy Shank: And I was there for 18 months, something like that.

What was your role?

Roy Shank: Communications for the most part.

So they sent you to a communications school? Where was that held?

Roy Shank: I don't even remember. Most of mine was done on the run. Mine was used most of all to communicate to, I was in communications, and so we would, or I would be the one that get to the guys enlisted down there, and to do all the codes and all that kind of thing, and I always during that time, my job is top secret. And then when I got out of the Navy, I did not retire. I had enough, or I'd done mine, and so the last two years I was in the Pentagon.

OK, tell us about that.

Roy Shank: Disneyland East.

And what years were you in the Pentagon?

Roy Shank: Back in '62, '63 I think, maybe, I don't remember exactly.

So you did a tour then as a communications officer, and then you were assigned to the Pentagon for a couple of years. How was it that you got assigned to the Pentagon? Was that something you put in for?

Roy Shank: I don't know how that happened.

You don't know how you got assigned to the Pentagon?

Roy Shank: No, I was always in communications except the times that earlier when I was afloat in the Caribbean. Then we'd go into St. Thomas, Jamaica, all of those places down there. It was really just kind of a vacation in the Navy.

You said you were aboard the Boxer?

Roy Shank: Yes sir.

That was the one ship you were on for about 18 months?

Roy Shank: Well yeah, I think that was it, yeah.

This early 60s, I know the Cuban missile crisis took place, were you in the Navy at that point or were you still at SMU?

Roy Shank: I was in Pensacola, I was just about to fly, and of course again, I couldn't fly, but anyway, I woke up one night in my barracks, and I woke up and there was a horrendous noise, and so I got up and went down and walked down towards the flight line, and I was walking down

there and all of a sudden this enlisted guy said stop. I said first of all, what's going on? He said you don't need to know that. I said well, I'm just curious. He said Mr. Shank, if you go any further, I'll have to kill you. So they were very, very serious about that and that was the Cuban crisis.

Did you ever figure out or find out what they were doing?

Roy Shank: Oh, they had military airplanes coming in to Pensacola. They had several airports and all that in there, and some outlying airports, but anyway, the funny thing was that that was, what was the time that the Cuban crisis, but anyway -

Those are your memories of the Cuban missile crisis then to be exposed a little bit to it. When you were aboard the Boxer, you said you did a deployment or a float to the Mediterranean?

Roy Shank: No, all in the Caribbean.

OK, what was day to day life like aboard a large ship like that?

Roy Shank: I loved it.

Loved it. Why?

Roy Shank: Well again, I wanted to be a Navy jockey. High fly, hot thing, and so I ___ when they were gonna do that, but anyway, I enjoyed being in the Caribbean, and we'd go into ports like St. Thomas and Jamaica and all those places down there, so it was really for me and the guys with me was just a tour, like a passenger ship.

What was your job like at the Pentagon? What was it you did?

Roy Shank: Communications.

So you were handling a lot of different message traffic and that sort of thing? Was it a pretty stressful environment though being at the Pentagon? I've heard you said it was kind of like Disneyland East.

Roy Shank: Oh yeah, it's something else. The things that stand out for me during that time was every day I had to, well McNamara was going one way and I was going the other way -

The Secretary of Defense -

Roy Shank: Yeah, and I'd keep thinking, I need to figure out a way to get a handgun in there and pop him because he killed 58,000 kids for nothing, and somebody told me one time that if he had gone ahead and bombed North Vietnam, that the war would have been over in 9 years, and probably the numbers – but it would have been very, very quick.

This is something you think today, but that wasn't a thought you had at the time was it, when you were serving at the Pentagon, the thought that you needed to assassinate him?

Roy Shank: Well I didn't, I mean I wasn't stupid enough to do, it was in my head that he's -

I guess my question is, because this would have been '64? Or '65?

Roy Shank: '73, I don't remember. '63 I think.

So in the early 60s, but at that time you already were pretty much opposed to Secretary McNamara even then? Because from what I've read, the Vietnam War kind of escalated in a lot of peoples' minds in '65, 66, into that time period, and you think of '68 and '69 being really bad, but you were saying even then you had a lot of animosity towards McNamara?

Roy Shank: Absolutely. As I said before, who was the general – Westmoreland, and the guy we were talking about, the defense -

McNamara?

Roy Shank: If they had gone ahead and done, had bombed Hanoi, and cut off all of the, they had, that's how they got their munitions in was from the sea, and if we had been allowed to bomb Hanoi again, the whole thing would have been over in six months or so.

Was your last duty assignment at the Pentagon? Did you leave active duty from the Pentagon? When did you get out of the Navy?

Roy Shank: '66.

Were you at the Pentagon when you left the Navy or did they rotate you somewhere else?

Roy Shank: I'd had enough.

And at that point, so there wasn't any risk they were going to call you up and send you to Vietnam, because they never did activate the reserves –

Roy Shank: Well, what really happened about that was when I quit flying, after I had DOR'd, and so they had to send me somewhere, and what I really wanted to do, first of all I wanted to go to Dallas, and the Navy said probably not gonna happen.

There's a Naval air station there?

Roy Shank: Yeah. Probably not gonna happen. So until I got to the Caribbean to the east, I was, anyway, when I got out of the Pentagon, we're talking what happened right after that?

You left active duty in '66, so then at that point you were just back in the civilian world. What did you do after you got out of the Navy?

Roy Shank: I have always been interested or had been interested with real estate.

Did you come back to Texas or did you stay up there in Virginia? Came back to Texas and settled in Dallas? Were you married when you were in the Navy?

Roy Shank: Once.

I know you said when you were at UT, you had a girlfriend and I guess she went to SMU.

Roy Shank: Well actually the girl that I married lived and we got married, and she was in Jacksonville, Texas.

OK, that's your home town, right?

Roy Shank: Yeah, and so we got married in Jacksonville, and then we had trailers of chairs and things like that, and we had this enormous trailer with all our stuff in there, and the night that we started out, went to Shreveport and went on to Hattiesburg, but one of my sisters, I had told people I didn't want any tin cans stringing on out there and all like that, and I said I'll kill ya, every one of you, if you do something like that. They said not gonna happen, not gonna happen. Well I think my dad did it, but anyway when we were in the warehouse and he opened the doors, and then, and I don't know how they got in, but anyway, came over that hill and you could see this huge, bright pink trailer on our -

Attached to your car?

Roy Shank: [laughing].

Where is the Boxer home ported?

Roy Shank: Norfolk.

So that's where you went after you, I guess you were married, you left Pensacola after your Naval flight training and went to Norfolk. Tell us about your memories of Norfolk at that time in the early 60s.

Roy Shank: I always like Norfolk. Again, I love boats and things like that, and Hampton is in that area, and I really, really liked it. At the time, I was kind of brain dead, but right there was Virginia Beach. Never went there. Went to Rehoboth one weekend with a couple of guys.

Do you think part of the reason you left the Navy when you did was because you were burned out having been at the Pentagon?

Roy Shank: Oh no.

You were just ready in general to get out of the Navy and go back in the civilian world at that time?

Roy Shank: Yeah.

Any regrets you didn't stay in longer or do you think you made the right move getting out when you did?

Roy Shank: I think I did the right thing. The bad thing was that the young lady from Jacksonville that I married was – never mind – so anyway, she didn't work out very well. So ultimately I ended up with a younger wife, my second wife.

And you came back to Texas to go into real estate?

Roy Shank: Mm-hmm.

How did you end up here in Tyler? I guess kind of close to Jacksonville and family?

Roy Shank: Right.

That's great.

Roy Shank: But my family is scattered everywhere. My oldest sister is in Big Bend. My youngest sister, Barbara, is in Boston, and my younger brother who is 14 years younger than I, a surprise, and so but anyway, I tried, and my son, too, I tried as I got to age and that kind of thing, you've got to get in the military, and I know if you want to, I can probably get you to get in the Navy or anything like that. That was one of the things about being in the Pentagon that had some leeway to get some things done that kind of helped me a lot.

Did either one of them go into the military?

Roy Shank: No.

What was it going back to your childhood, what was it that attracted you to the Navy? I know you said you didn't want to get in the mud like the Marines, but -

Roy Shank: I always, everything for me has been the Navy.

Did you have any family that was in the Navy? Your father or grandfather or that sort of thing? Was it family?

Roy Shank: The only flyer in our life was my oldest uncle, Uncle Earl, flew parachuters in World War II.

Did you have a chance to talk to him?

Roy Shank: Yes.

So I imagine that made a bit of an impression upon you.

Roy Shank: I was very, very young at that time. But I talked with him a lot.

That's great.

Had you seen the Blue Angels somewhere along the line that inspired you to want to be a flyer? I see you've got a bunch of Blue Angels everywhere, photos.

These are a bunch of Blue Angels DVD's. I've seen them numerous times as a kid. They made a definite impression upon me.

Roy Shank: Do you have six hours and we can just -

I've got another veteran to interview. Did you see them as a kid at any point, the Blue Angels, or saw them later in your life?

Roy Shank: It was later. They were -

I know they're based out of Pensacola.

Roy Shank: That's where they practiced on the runway there, and when I got into the Navy and we would be out marching and the Marine drill sergeants and he said don't look up there and watch those airplanes. Just look straight ahead and don't even do anything like this or anything like that, and if somebody did, he'd start screaming and yelling at that drill instructor, but the nice thing about it, the Marines didn't have to go as much of a tenuous program like the Navy did.

Oh, you're talking about pilots? Because they'd already gone through officer candidate school and basic school, so by the time they got to flight school, they'd already probably been through all that I think.

Roy Shank: Yeah. I don't like Marines.

Oh really.

Roy Shank: I've never met a Marine I like.

Well we've got to stop the interview right now! Turn it off!

Roy Shank: I'm sorry for you, but some people have no taste in weapons and things like that, and mud and all that kind of stuff, yeah.

Well, you know the Marine Corps is a department of the Navy.

Roy Shank: I don't want to hear this!

It's the men's department! I had to throw that in. Well sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today.

Roy Shank: I enjoyed it.

Letting Mr. Preston here sit in.

Roy Shank: When you get me started, you need to, I guess you do a switch to cut me on and off.

Well we're still recording right now.

I had the same problem. I told him I was quite impressed with his ability to shut me off in mid-sentence because I could just babble on forever.

Roy Shank: Well I can't do that. I've got diarrhea of the mouth.

Well I tell you, I appreciate it and I want to thank you on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everybody at the Land Office for letting us interview you, and thank you especially for your service to our country.

Roy Shank: Mr. Patterson and my -

He was a Marine by the way.

Roy Shank: Really?

Yes sir.

Roy Shank: I'm stunned. Bless your heart.

He's got a son that's a Marine, too, flies helicopter, flies the Cobra helicopter. So there's a bunch of Marines that work at the Land Office. The joke is it's the Marine mafia there.

Roy Shank: When I put my right arm up like this and do that kind of thing and the paperwork and all of that, and the Navy gave us an opportunity to find out what chance to fly, with an instructor, just go up for a little while and you could pick a helicopter or a P-34 or something like that. But that day, the P-34 was down and the guy said the only thing we have is a helicopter, do you mind? I said no, I've never been in a helicopter and all of that, and I made the mistake of asking him how do you stop it? How do you get it rotate so you can get back down to the ground? And so he said I'll show you. And so in the bubble down there and I was looking down and the ground got like that and I said oh my God, we're going to crash. And he said I'll show you how you stop that. And he said, and pulled up the collective and bounced about 35 feet or something like that.

Wow, that's a good story. And that was at Pensacola?

Roy Shank: No, that was Naval Aviation Dallas.

OK, Dallas, that's great. Well sir again, thank you very much and I'll go ahead and turn the recorder off.

[End of recording]