

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

JOHN OLSON

Coast Guard Reserve, Operation Desert Shield, Operation Uphold Democracy

2006

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Olson, John. (b. 1935). Oral History Interview, 2006.

Approximate length: 1 hour 18 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, John Olson discusses his service with the Coast Guard reserve from 1959 to 1995, training at Camp Perry (Ohio) and Key West (Florida), serving as port security harbor defense in the Persian Gulf and in Haiti, and his views of the military. Olson first served in the Navy from 1955 until 1961, joining the Coast Guard reserve in 1959. He discusses rising through the ranks from an E5 in 1959 until he was commissioned in 1963. He discusses training for domestic emergency, search and rescue, and law enforcement with a Madison unit throughout the 1970s. He describes being given command of his own unit in 1983 and being deployed to Key West to begin training as port security harbor defense. He outlines the training done in Key West with the new equipment they were obtaining. He explains how rising tensions in the Middle East affected his training exercises in the late '80s and learning about Iraq invading Kuwait. Olson discusses his duties in Kuwait and his mission to do escort service for Kuwaiti tankers. He also discusses his duties in Haiti in 1994. He details what traits he thinks a good leader in the military should have, as well as his feelings about his time in the Coast Guard.

Biographical Sketch:

Olson (b.1935) served with the United States Navy from 1955 to 1961 and joined the Coast Guard reserve in 1959, serving in Operation Desert Shield, and Operation Uphold Democracy. Olson retired as captain from the Coast Guard reserve in 1995. Olson was also a football coach at Madison Central High School and Madison Memorial High School.

Interviewed by John Weingandt, 2006.

Draft transcript by Shiela Trago, 2007.

Given to Katy Marty to correct format, 2009.

Reviewed by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Abstract written by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Transcribed Interview

Weingandt: We're here at the Veteran's Museum with John Olson, retired, Coast Guard, and you were a captain in the Coast Guard, so I should call you sir. It's September twenty-sixth. John, why don't you just tell me a little bit about where you're from and your early years and that sort of thing?

Olson: I am a lifelong resident of Madison, Wisconsin. My family has been here since 1863 when my great-grandfather immigrated to Wisconsin to join the first Norwegian regiment under Colonel Heg, and he served in the Civil War to earn his citizenship. He was wounded in Georgia, and the family settled after his medical rehabilitation here at Camp Randall on Blair Street. He became kind of the Norwegian emissary for any other Norwegians who came by way of rail from Chicago or the other centers and he helped a lot of them get jobs at the Gisholt [A machine tool manufacturer in Madison] or in the local corporations and so forth. So he was the first of what would be, to this point in our family life, of five generations of Olsons in the military. It's been a tradition and it's been something that is the right thing to do for our family. He was in the Army, his son Martin Olson, my grandfather, was in the 32nd division, and served in the Mexican Border War. My dad—

Weingandt: 1917?

Olson: Yes. My dad was in the Army transportation corps and interestingly enough served onboard vessels throughout the Pacific delivering Army supplies to the various ports of operations, and he rose to the rank of captain as chief engineer on the vessel and he had been trained as an engineer working in various factories here in Madison and in Milwaukee. His brother Charles Olson was a corporal in World War I and fought at Verdun and some of the other large battles and was wounded and then was very active as a leader in the local American Legion until the time he passed in 1970. And then in my own case I served in the United States Navy from 1955 to '61, and interestingly enough I was also trained as a teacher, as a coach, so when my active duty in reserve service for the Navy ended, I was employed here in Madison for the Madison school district and was a teacher and also a coach at the junior high school level at Central High School. One afternoon—

Weingandt: My wife just graduated, not just, but graduated, we just had her 50th class reunion.

Olson: Oh, marvelous.

Weingandt: From Central High. She'll be interested to know I had an interview today with a Central High classmate, what year did you graduate?

John Olson: I graduated from East in '53, and then went in the Navy and finished college and when I got out of the Navy and then my first employment was at Central High School with the Madison School District in 1959. So at any rate—

Weingandt: Just missed her.

Olson: At any rate, I'm coaching football one afternoon, and as the game ended one of the officials came over and he asked who I was, and he said, "You were in the Navy, isn't that right?" I said, "Yes." and he said, "I'm the Coast Guard recruiter; I'd like to talk to you." So I went down some time the following weekend and we talked about it.

Weingandt: This is what year now?

Olson: 1959. And he indicated that I'd have to come in as an enlisted member and I had achieved the rate of Second Class Yeomen, while I was in the Navy, E5, and so he came and he said you'll come in as an E5, and so I did, and subsequently wrote the competitive exams for six and seven and finally was rated as a Chief Petty Officer, and then took the test for direct commission in the Coast Guard and passed it and was—because I, at that point I had a Master's Degree and six years of prior experience, actually at that time eight years counting the reserve time that I had in, they commissioned me as an O2, which would be First Lieutenant—

Weingandt: You skipped.

Olson: Yes, I went right to Lieutenant, Junior Grade. And from—that would have been well by the time I had gotten to E7, another three or four years had gone by, that would have been '63 when I got the commission, and at that point in time Madison had a Coast Guard reserve unit down on East Washington where the Navy and Marine Corps center was in the Quonset huts down there and we drove there, in the summers we did most of our training by going to either the Great Lakes ports or to various schools out of Yorktown, Virginia where the Coast Guard maintained a Coast Guard reserve training center, a major one. And so I did that from '63 until '74, at which time the Madison unit was closed and I was transferred to start going in Milwaukee, and I did that in Milwaukee and rose to various positions in rank and in responsibility in the Coast Guard reserve, still always in the area of training for domestic emergency, search and rescue, accident prevention, law enforcement, inspection of facilities and vessels and cargos and equipment in the ports. We are of course the marine law enforcement agency for the federal government and now a much broader responsibility now that they moved into the Department of the Homeland Defense. At that point in time then you know, it was a matter of sending our reservists over to the active duty side and having them train on the small craft or do the marine inspections with the marine inspection office in the facilities and ports, and we had responsibility for everything from the Michigan-Indiana border, all the way up to Lake Superior in terms of facilities and vessel inspection particularly in the spring when the lakers

would start up or when the recreation and fishing boats would become active. And that went on until 1983, and at that point in time I was given command of a Coast Guard reserve unit in Green Bay, so I started to train there and my rank then was Lieutenant Commander, and at that time we began to hear that the Coast Guard reserve was going to be tasked with dual responsibilities, on the one side we would continue to train for domestic emergencies, but on the other, we would prepare for rapid deployment as port security harbor defense units, in foreign ports defending the logistics assets. The intake of all of the equipment, personnel, food, supplies, material, and of course a major concern—the offload of munitions and fuel. And so we began to train initially by deploying with other services. We sent representatives to Egypt and other Red Sea ports just to see how joint military operations would work. Interestingly enough, one of the units with which we affiliated was the transportation corps of the Army which my dad served in during World War II, and I was amazed to see, I mean they have heavy lift capabilities. They had the large mobile cranes that could take tanks off of vessels and so forth. Or helicopters. And they had stevedores who are well trained. They do the work of the port, including cleaning up the port if it's a mess. When they went into Mogadishu for example, they just had to clean up the port because it was never maintained. When we went into Haiti in '94, it was just a mess, and we had to clean it up and sanitize it, and you know, the Army brings in their water sanitizing units, and you think, "I'm not going to drink that stuff," 'cause they're pulling it right out of the port, you know, and then you see the guy who runs it take a drink of water and you say "Well, I guess maybe." The interesting part is that you don't have to brush your teeth for the next several days because it's so chlorinated.

Weingandt: [Laughs] You get a chlorine fix.

Olson: Absolutely. So at any rate, we began to train for that kind of thing and in '84, we were brought together as a large unit from joining forces with a Cleveland unit of about a hundred people and our Milwaukee, Green Bay, Kenosha contingent of about a hundred people, and we deployed to Key West, Florida. Now at that point in time we had no specialized equipment for port security and harbor defense.

Weingandt: Give me a year here.

Olson: 1984.

Weingandt: '84. Okay.

Olson: We had no—right at Truman annex, by the way, right where the President used to have his quarters.

Weingandt: Key West?

Olson: Yep. We had no special equipment, we had no special bullets, we had no automatic weapons, no one had fired an automatic weapon other than the M16 on full automatic—

Weingandt: Now wait a minute, you're training to be port security—

Olson: Harbor defense—

Weingandt: You don't have any weapons?

Olson: Correct.

Weingandt: You gonna throw rocks?

Olson: We had the M16s, which we could requisition on a need basis and so they issued us just enough to go to the range to train, and enough ammunition, so I think each of us got something like seventy-five rounds, there's fifteen in a magazine—maybe eighty-five or something like that—and of course the idea was that you should try to at least qualify on the weapon. Oh and they also gave us at that time the .45, and then later the M9 to qualify, so it was very basic training, but you see the Coast Guard, the active service side, had accepted this responsibility from the Navy, who didn't have the assets to do it. Well we didn't either, so we had—

Weingandt: I'll just stop you for a second here, I want to make sure we're on the right track here. You are in the reserve at this point?

Olson: Yes.

Weingandt: But the active duty Coast Guard has already accepted the mission for port security.

Olson: And handed it off to the reserves.

Weingandt: All right. That's important. All right. So in a sense there was no security.

Olson: And the idea, correct, the idea was that they would go on a training mission basis, and learn what kind of assets they needed from the lessons learned taken from each exercise and the interface with other military services who had maritime missions. For example the Navy had explosive ordinance detachments which would go out and defuse mines or search the bottom, for you know the sonic mines etc., and so we learned what kind of equipment they had and how they could be set up within six to eight hours and have hot food come down for the troops and they had tents which were state-of-the-art and as a matter of fact they even had an air conditioned tent for medical purposes. So you saw the way people had prepared for that kind of deployment if they needed to do that. So we

kept taking that information back and each year we would get some more assets, and we were so proud, as a matter of fact the active service people were a little out of joint when the Coast Guard reserve in Milwaukee were issued two twenty-five foot Boston whalers equipped with twin seventy-five outboard motors and gun mounts fore and aft, so—

Weingandt: Now we're starting to get some place. Where did you fit in on this whole thing?

Olson: Well I was Commander—

Weingandt: You were a lieutenant, you were a commander now?

Olson: Lieutenant Commander at Green Bay, and then assigned to Milwaukee with a larger responsibility of coordinating the units at Green Bay, Kenosha, and Milwaukee, training for port security harbor defense. Well the first thing I did was to find out who all the cops and firefighters were because I knew they would have the capability to at least have the foundations for military security weapon handling safely, setting up security perimeters, handling hazardous cargo or identifying hazardous cargo, would know how to fight a fire, would know how to deal with insurrection and riots. And so I went to them first and I said, "I'm going to have you folks start to train with other services." So I had some of them go down and train with the 440th.

Weingandt: How many people did you have?

Olson: Well, I had the three units, about 130. I sent some of them down to the 440th to deal with JP5 and the other kinds of jet fuels that are extremely explosive in the ports, you know if you're off loading, and how to set security zones on large open facilities like an airport where you would have five, six acres to the fence line and what we found out was they had motion detectors which we didn't have, and they had night goggles which we didn't have, so I mean these were lessons learned, and we would send that out to the Coast Guard, and pretty soon we started getting one set of night vision goggles for the exercise. So in '84 we deployed to Key West, and Opposition Four, OP 4, as it's known in the lingo of the exercise was the U.S. Navy seals and the U.S. Army Rangers. The commanding officer for the U.S. Army Rangers Brigade was Brigadier General John Shalikashvili, eventually Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and we trained for about ten days and then went into three days of exercise against the Seals and against the Rangers. Prior to that we were given boats that were leaking, we repaired the leaks, we were given engines that had blown gaskets and headers; my guys from OMC in Milwaukee and Harley Davidson in Milwaukee fixed the engines—

Weingandt: Invaluable people, yeah.

Olson: And they went out and bought parts out of their own pocket and put in the gaskets, and you know, by the time the exercise started we weren't great but we

were set up to do perimeters. We were issued on loan a piece of equipment I had never seen before: a Marconi Side Scan Sonar. And we deployed that on a Coast Guard vessel that was in port to act as the decoy. It was the thing that the Rangers and the Seals were to attack. It was the vessel of opportunity, the valued asset—and our job was to protect it. Well instead of bouncing signals down and back up the side scan sends it sideways, we could pick up those underwater swimmers the moment they came through the harbor mouth and deploy our boats right on ‘em, and we dropped cherry bombs in the water.

Weingandt: [laughter] I bet you did.

Olson: The normal technique is a concussion grenade.

Weingandt: Cherry bombs got to be pretty close.

Olson: Yeah, well, it’s enough so that it doesn't concuss your ears or blow your mask off, you know, the fact is we can say that we deployed into the geographic facility. We know that the concussion grenade has a kill radius of twenty-five feet under water, and will cause concussion to the ears at fifty feet, and possibly displace the mask.

Weingandt: We’re not gonna do that to our people.

Olson: Yeah. And so, we just felt that we could play “gotcha.” Well then they tried to come in with a three man submersible, and we stopped it.

Weingandt: You could have picked that up, I'm sure.

Olson: Right away. And of course it has to keep moving in order to vent the water, as soon as we stopped it, it started taking on water. So we did not have happy Navy campers that evening. Then the next day we picked up what we thought was an aerial surveillance. And sure enough within two hours we saw the Rangers parachute onto an island off Key West, uninhabited island, and they set up camp up there.

Weingandt: You had radar?

Olson: Well we just saw a visual.

Weingandt: Oh, okay.

Olson: And so this wasn't in any military protocol, and it clearly wasn't harbor defense, but we sent an expeditionary boat out to see what we can find and see. We stood off offshore and used, you know, binoculars and we could see that they had set up a camp. Well then I had gotten word back again that an unofficial beach party had gone ashore and raided the raiders, and you know had thrown in cans

representative of that, and then sat in the boat and if they had charged, the idea was that they were charging into a 50 caliber machine gun. So, Shalikashvili came to the debrief and said “You were a formidable opponent.”

Weingandt: Excellent.

Olson: Which for guys that had had no formal training and had to kind of make it up, I thought was a real indication of the quality of the individual. The one thing I can say that differed after 1959 is we were all volunteers, and we mostly were prior service, so they brought with them the discipline of the regimen and then the desire to affiliate.

Weingandt: Age? You must have had a little jump on every body else too that way.

Olson: Oh, gosh, the mean age—

Weingandt: I mean these weren't, these aren't kids anymore.

Olson: No, no, as a matter of fact there was some concern about deploying them into high humidity or high temperature environments and the conditioning that would be required. So they instituted a training regimen, a physical training regimen and a physical testing regimen that you had to pass in order to stay in the dual mission of port security and domestic emergency. We had to do annual testing with that particularly before we went on an exercise. So we continued to train with increasing frequency and the problem then became how to get enough hours into a year to keep them qualified on both the domestic emergency requirements and the port security harbor defense.

Weingandt: You're back in Wisconsin now.

Olson: Yes.

Weingandt: These guys are reservists; this is all part time work.

Olson: Right. And so when you sent the guy on his weekend duty to base Milwaukee or base Green Bay, or station Kenosha, I mean the chief in charge of the station wanted them doing search and rescue, or wanted them doing—wanted them out on that twenty-five-footer doing high speed interdiction or, you know, and we had no weapons to train with on the vessel, so it became very clear that we could not be locked in on forty-eight drills in two weeks a year, and we sent that message up from '84 on, year after year after year we sent that message on, and just store that for now, 'cause I'll come back to that after Desert Storm. So, we continued to train that way, and then finally they began to say “Well the port security units will no longer go for two weeks at station Kenosha, Green Bay, or Milwaukee and the units over in the Cleveland and Buffalo area will no longer go to their respective domestic emergency sites, now instead they will go to Camp

Perry Ohio” which is the former U.S. Army tank corps training center but also sited on the shores of Lake Erie, and they have a Marine firing range there, it's sector'd off and you know the domestic boaters all know they're not to come within a mile of that and we set out—

Weingandt: Is this the first time you're getting into automatic weapons?

Olson: Yes.

Weingandt: Wow.

Olson: It was funny; the first time we did it they set a target out in the water about 500 yards, and because we didn't want to take the chance of firing off of a vessel moving up and down with the swells, we pulled the vessel on its trailer along the shoreline and fired the vessel, the 50 caliber weapon from the twenty-five-footer on its trailer at the target. Well, of course that's a pretty stable platform, even though it's moving, we chewed that target up in about five minutes. So then the following year we started doing underway firing. And we began to learn small boat tactics; whenever we would patrol, there would always be two vessels on patrol. One would control the harbor mouth and the other would do a perimeter security around any import vessels that are offloading or were waiting to get underway to go to some other port. If there was any kind of an incursion on the port—oh and then a third could be deployed if there was an anchorage offshore. And that typically was our early warning. They were all equipped with radar, they all had sonar. They had fish detectors is what they had [laughs].

Weingandt: No, Lowrance fish detectors! [Laughs]

Olson: And if there was any indication of anything then immediately we would go into—

Weingandt: Are you serious? They used fish det—

Olson: Oh, yeah, I'm serious. Later on we got underwater scanners, but yeah, it was just, the Coast Guard, well the Coast Guard is only 40,000 people.

Weingandt: That's active duty.

Olson: Yes, 8,000 of those are committed to the reserve program.

Weingandt: Oh, I see. 32,000 active and 8,000 reserve. That's not really, how, and here we're in Lake Michigan now, or in Lake Erie, at Camp Perry, how many other reserve units are there around at this point, this is 1998, right?

Olson: The reserve unit had Cleveland, Buffalo, and the greater Milwaukee area—to mean Green Bay and Kenosha—deployed as three units to do port security 3-0-3. And it had a rapid deployment mission. All, probably 285 to 300 reservists in that

larger unit. Well then, as we continued our training it was determined that a port security unit could probably operate a three-section watch, underway or in port with about 125 people so they subdivided 303 into 301—Buffalo, and the New York area—302, Cleveland, and 303, the greater Milwaukee area.

Weingandt: Tell me something here on a more strategic level, John, who did you visualize by 1998 the Cold War starting to wind down? Who were the bad guys at that point in time? I truly don't remember.

Olson: We envisioned that Persian Gulf at that point in time might be a strategic area, we could see an increasingly militant posture, of course the Iraq - Iran war was going on during that period of time, we could see that they had more than just you know, small arms.

Weingandt: And we had oil interests and have, of course—

Olson: Of course in '88 we had the Kuwaiti attacks, the attacks by the Iranians on the Kuwaiti oil tankers.

Weingandt: That's right, they were sending out patrol boats.

Olson: Oh, yeah, well the same thing we had. And one of the missions, we actually went on alert in '88, one of the missions and one of the flexibilities of the port security units is they could be deployed in the rear end of a Navy LSD, the dock landing ship where they open the back end, and you deployed, and of course the Iranians were firing missiles, shoulder mounted missiles at the tankers. Well our job would of course be to see that, and immediately interdict, prevent, and we would have had the 50 caliber which of course can reach out and touch you from a significant, and we would have fired warning shots, and the first indication of any militant response would have been lock and load, you know we would have had rules of engagement. So, we're—

Weingandt: So we're sneaking up on Desert Storm, are we not?

Olson: Yes we are.

Weingandt: Which is 1990?

Olson: Yes.

Weingandt: Okay.

Olson: So we continued to deploy and train now more regularly with two-week periods at Camp Perry as port security much to the chagrin of the domestic emergency side of the Coast Guard. We were really under pressure from both sides to be ready to do all things at all times. Every time we came back from a summer exercise we

would say we need this kind of equipment additional to what we have, we need this kind of training additional to what we have, and they would file that but we wouldn't necessarily see a response because candidly, at that point, the Coast Guard was under the Department of Transportation. And it did not, well it had gone from Treasury to Transportation, because Transportation looked at the larger global transportation definition up to include the ports, thinking mostly of them as commercial ports, for safety and prevention of injury and accident and of course search and rescue from there. So, we continued to train and continued to identify asset shortfall and deficits and eventually, we began to get indications that the Persian Gulf might be, we started actually getting intelligence and saw aerial photographs of, stop that for just a minute.

[Break in recording][00:26:41]

Olson: So to continue we actually had military photos and maps of a particular Persian Gulf port, which at that time was clearly the center for hostile aggressive activity on the domestic oil carriers transiting all the way up to Kuwait and into Saudi Arabia. So we were given the mission for rapid deployment to take our boats at that point, the six boats that we had and to deploy to a Navy dock landing ship, LSD, and be ready to go to the Persian gulf and do escort service for the Kuwaiti tankers that were transiting past the hostile port and to provide security for them. Well then you may recall that the Navy frigate hit a mine and almost sank it, and then right after that the Navy shot down—

Weingandt: The Iranian passenger plane.

Olson: —and there was a lot of domestic and international negotiations to calm things down, the U.N. got involved and that all kind of just settled down, but at the same time Iran and Iraq were fighting a land war, a nasty land war—

Weingandt: A very nasty one, yes.

Olson: And very clearly had equipment well beyond small arms, and raised to our consciousness level that any units deployment to the Persian Gulf would also have to be trained in chemical, biological, and radiologic warfare, which we had had in basic measure as it related to security of ports and the kinds of chemicals that might be stored in a hazardous mode but not the kinds of things like serine and some of the other nasty ones that one might occur by way of rocket-fired missile. In addition to that we began to see that the Iraqis had some missile capability that they had gotten from Russia, long range missile capabilities: three, four hundred miles, not necessarily real accurate but nevertheless could deliver massive amounts of high explosive or radiologic or the biologicals and the CVR elements. So that had to enter into the training, we began to get some crash training at Camp Perry on how to put the gas mask on and the hood and how to use your buddy to inspect and tighten it down and all those things. Just, I mean, you get a box with a gas mask in it. Just putting it together properly, fitting the goggles, fitting all of

the things that go into those really tight gaskets and then doing the test: totally foreign to us. We had no background. So we had to force feed that from 1988 forward. Well I remember going to my two weeks and in '89, late '89, we began to hear Saddam rattle the sword about the nineteenth province of Iraq.

Weingandt: Kuwait?

Olson: Kuwait. And of course that was a major oil partner for us, the United States, and as such for the National Security Agency—which is the Joint Chiefs, the President, the Vice President, the Department of Defense secretary—raises to a higher level U.S. national interest, which of course as you know is one of the rationales for going to war. You have to have threat in national interest before the Congress is ever gonna let you do it. You have to convince the Congress you gotta have a threat in national interest. So we began to hear that an accelerated training mile. So in two weeks they gave us two additional weeks. So we had a month of training in Camp Perry starting in '89 and we began to undergo what were called the Flame River exercises. Flame River happens to dump into Lake Erie right there, and so we were patrolling—

Weingandt: Yeah, I fish that area.

Olson: Yeah, it was a marvelous recreation area. We began to patrol the mouth of the Flame River as our theoretical port and to simulate what we would have to defend. We were—

Weingandt: Must have scared the willies out of some fishermen around there.

Olson: Well, it did, and they were asking questions and the Senators and the Congressmen had to be brought into the classified loop as to what we were preparing for. And we actually had them visit with our admirals and you know, with the highest ranking we had was a deputy Department of Defense secretary, I can't recall the name right now, it wasn't Weinberger or anything, but it was that level. So, in August of 1990, the first week of August 1990, I had gone to Grand Haven, Michigan to attend what is called the annual Coast Guard Festival. Grand Haven, Michigan is called Coast Guard City, USA. It trained all of the shore patrol personnel, I'm talking the actual coastal shore patrol personnel for World War II, because they have the high sand dunes there and they could simulate North Carolina and some of these other places where they were on horse patrol and foot patrol and night patrol, jeep patrol, so on. And actually had a vessel—

[Break in recording] [End of Tape 1, Side A]

Olson: —we were there and we were attending the ceremonies and they honor the World War II dead, and there was a vessel that trained personnel for the Coast Guard at Grand Haven, and it was sunk during one of the convoys that carried ammunition from the east coast over to Europe. Only one guy survived, and annually he

comes back and he's part of the ceremony. So we were there and we were sitting at the water front, all of a sudden there was kind of a flutter through the crowd and the announcement came that Iraq had invaded Kuwait.

Weingandt: Oh, and here you were there.

Olson: Yeah, and—

Weingandt: All of a sudden all this training started to make a lot of sense—

Olson: Well, as soon as I got back Sunday night I had a phone call, and put people into alert status one, so we did, which means pack your sea bag, and within two weeks we were back in Camp Perry, preparing for rapid deployment, and we got all the other equipment, and all of the ammunition and all the CVR gear, and we took over, I don't know, 200-gallons of bottled water and—

Weingandt: So things that were hard to get—

Olson: Well, you didn't know. I mean we were gonna be deployed to a joint military theater, and the idea was that the larger military entities would provide for you when you got there but you had to sustain yourself for at least seventy-two hours, so we had maybe a half a ton of MREs that we took with us, and some tents.

Weingandt: How many people?

Olson: 135 from Milwaukee went into Ad-Amman, Saudi Arabia, 135 from Buffalo went into Al Jubayl, Saudi Arabia, and 135 went into the city of Manama in Bahrain, the island of Bahrain, seventeen miles off the coast of Saudi Arabia. Those were the three logistics ports to take in the supplies and munitions to defend various ports, oil assets, pumping assets that are on the coast. And as importantly, to keep people away from the water purification plants which of course could've shut you down in a hurry if they had bombed one of those. We didn't have people in the short perimeter area, but we wanted to make sure that no vessel that could fire a missile could get close enough to do that kind of thing in those three ports. So we were deployed as three different units. Port security unit 301 was at Al Jubayl, Saudi Arabia which was seventy-five miles south of Kuwait. Port security 303 was at Ad Dammam, Saudi Arabia which is just ten miles from the Khobar Towers which were bombed in 1994 or '5, and then port security 302 from Cleveland was at Manama, Bahrain, and operated there from August of 1990 until April of 1991 which was about two months after the war started to wind down. It actually ended 21 days after it started, but they kept people there just in case there were insurrections or guerilla forces or diehards etcetera, until it was clear that the Saudi frontier force or the Bahrain defense force could take over the port and secure it.

Weingandt: Were you training those people too?

Olson: Yes. And that was interesting because there was some language barriers and the nationals had to have time off to pray five times a day, face the east and do that, whether they believed or not, I'm not sure they had a time off, and if they were a little late, and we were scheduled to get underway at 0400, and they'd get there at 0430 in challa [??], God be willing, and I'd have been here, and you know. And it was difficult, I mean we didn't have any military authority over them, I mean, normal guy would have been peeling potatoes or something, but we didn't have any military authority so we would go to their commander and they'd say "Yes, we'll handle it." Never sure it was handled. So it was really challenging, yet, having said that, I don't know how we'd have gotten along when it came to boarding the fishing vessels, so we were boarding the local nationals, 'cause we couldn't speak, and right away, unless there was somebody that said in relatively peaceful tones we were coming aboard, we would have had some confrontations. Now, they could speak it, they had on the local uniforms, the national uniform and they were armed as we were, but they were our boarding officers for us and they knew, we had trained them what to look for, where to look for things or to tell people they had to take a different route and not come into the port. So in that regard it was helpful, but you know there were some rough edges in the same way you are seeing it today in Iraq. Accepting the mission. It's a whole different lifestyle and a whole different culture—

Weingandt: Afghanistan as well—

Olson: Oh, yeah.

Weingandt: There's culture, there's big problems.

Olson: 5,000-year-old culture. You survive by making deals, and that's probably not politically correct, but.

Weingandt: No, it's, that's, troubling here—

Olson: So at any rate, that was one of the barriers that we had to deal with, but, to their credit, again the median age probably was thirty-three, thirty-four for guys—

Weingandt: Of your guys.

Olson: Yeah. They could stand back and having been through all of the things in Korea or Vietnam, they could say, "You know, this isn't as bad as that and you know, we'll deal with this," and then to fall back on our police training, knowing that they knew what to do if it really degraded. So I mean again in the maturity and the civilian training that transferred into the military scenario was invaluable at that point in time. All three units were given presidential unit citations because of the way we kept [unintelligible].

Weingandt: Speaks highly about it.

Olson: Well you don't get those. Those are pretty—that's the equivalent of the Bronze Star. So all commanding officers received accommodations from the Nation Defense Force, and they got wonderful plaques and even a medal from the nation for the kind of work that they did, and of course there was special campaign medals that were designed for that, like there were for Vietnam, and Korea, etcetera, so everybody got their palm tree, [laughs].

Weingandt: That's great.

Olson: They got their Southwest Asian defense ribbon, etcetera. So we came back and immediately we urgently requested for the 9th Coast Guard district command in Cleveland—

Weingandt: You were back to Camp Perry?

Olson: Let me precede that. While we were there, about Thanksgiving of 1990, the Atlantic area commander came over because we were having some start-up problems; we were having some difficulty interfacing with the Army in Al Jubayl, or the Marine Corps in—I'm sorry, the Army in Ad Amman, or the Marine Corps in Al Jubayl, or the Navy in Bahrain, on things like, who controls the boats? They're Coast Guard vessels, but you see, they wanted to tactically deploy them and we said "No, no, those are our vessels, and you know, we'll communicate with you, we'll make a recommendation to whoever is the on-duty officer" But we want our officers rotating through the duty command as well. We don't want to be taking orders from somebody else who doesn't know our protocol, who doesn't know how we'll react. We might see a vessel inbound and say we need to interject, and you'll say no escort, well if you escort a vessel who has a missile hidden, you know—

Weingandt: You're the dummy.

Olson: Well, the conflagration in the port [??].

Weingandt: Sure.

Olson: So that goes with the conjoined military things. And then we would get things like "Well, our rations are for our people," and of course that's not what we were told before we deployed, well as you know, who fixes the problems between the services? It's the E7s and the E8s; it's not the O-whatevers. It's, you know, we had, to—

Weingandt: They make it work.

Olson: Well, yeah, I mean, they know how to do the mission and they make their deals, they make their arrangements. We had a guy, a simple thing, and he's over there, he's a guy who is a hydraulic specialist, worked for OMC in Milwaukee, well we had an Army vessel going down on the port side because the bilge pump wasn't working. Well he went down fixed it, brought it right back up within two hours. Guess what happened the next morning? All of a sudden a case of steak shows up in the galley. Another simple one: one of the Army warrants broke his glasses, the screw came out. One of our guys had the little "do-it yourself," went over, fixed it for him. You know, they were buddies like that forever.

Weingandt: Sure.

Olson: And you know, when you cross that barrier, when you as human being talking to human being, magic happened. And it did in every port. But I mean, it's the reason why officers, Officer 101 needs to be—trust your E7s, 8s, and your warrants, and listen to them. Listen to them.

Weingandt: They're the ones that make it work.

Olson: Absolutely. They are the mission specialists.

Weingandt: I don't care what service you're talking about, Navy, Army, whatever.

Olson: Well, it was interesting to watch it work between different services at that level to make it work. Same thing in Haiti, in '94 when we got sent down there. You know, I had to work with an Army O6 who was just going to run his port and gonna tell my boats, and we would work on his communication frequencies, until the E7s and 8s said, "come on, let's—"

Weingandt: Let's make this work.

Olson: "Let's make this work." Yeah. C'mon, you know, and our guys started standing watches with him. You know, all of a sudden, it was working smoothly, and so the guy said "See what happens when you do it the right way?" and I said "yes sir, I see."

Weingandt: Yeah [laughs].

Olson: But you don't.

Weingandt: He didn't get it.

Olson: At any rate, we trained for that, we deployed for that, came back, brought lessons learned. And after having had the Atlantic area commander come to the theater of operations and open the floodgates for supplies and materials everything got wonderfully well.

Weingandt: Is he the one that you referred to in your notes that said “These people don't need to be disciplined, they need help”?

Olson: That's Vice Admiral Howard Thorsen. He's an operations guy. I mean here's a guy, fifty-eight years old, he's going up and down ladders just like a young guy and running around sweating, his desert cammies soaked through, but you know, “by God I'm gonna see this. I'm going to find out.”

Weingandt: Good for him.

Olson: Yeah, it was. I mean. It's no question why he wore three stars. He earned them. He hustled. Well they went back, and he said to give them what they need. So I was the liaison to the supply doubles in the states and then to the service. The inner service liaison, and you know, I would just be able to create; I had to filter the wish list. I started getting requests for bayonets, and I'd say, “come on, wait a minute, we're not hand-to-hand here.” [both laugh] So at any rate, we had to do a little selective filter. To their credit, the Coast Guard let us keep all the automatic weapons and all the special ammunition, all the equipment—

Weingandt: When you're going back to your reserve status.

Olson: And Camp Perry and the Army gave us a separate warehouse, and so we were able to secure storage there. That meant we had to have Coast Guard personnel assigned full time and it was a combination of reserve and active service detailed of about ten people there who were store keepers and, you know, cooks and then security people to keep watch on that, but that became our site for training. Each summer thereafter we had the Atlantic area commander from New York and the ninth district commander from Cleveland come out to observe the training. Oh it was really something, you'd see the helicopter coming, and you'd know, here comes the stars. And each year we would say we're getting—at this benchmark or the next benchmark, in terms of quality and response capability, self-sustained on our side, on our logistics.

Weingandt: Time wise, this is about what, 1990—

Olson: We're now 1991, '92. And then we began to deploy for summer exercises as port security 301, 302, and 303, as yet still not full commissioned service entities of the Coast Guard. Still reserve units in what was called notional status. It's a concept. Not meaning, we haven't commissioned you, we have not commissioned you like a vessel, or you're not like Coast Guard station Milwaukee, you're not like Coast Guard station, you exist as reservists and we'll deploy you from Cleveland, rather than to say you train and operate as a port security unit with your own commanding officer who reports to the Cleveland—instead you're ours and we'll deploy you. We kept saying, you need to have more port security units and you need to have them on the Atlantic, Pacific, and gulf coasts so they can be

nearest to those ports and train in those ports, they might have to defend in case we're under attack, or deploy rapidly through those ports or through the local Air Force assets to get to another port. Well what helped us was the Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs said they need to be ready for as many as eight scenarios at once, and they laid out a whole range of, I mean all the way from Korea to the Philippines to, at that point the Cold War was just about over, but, for example, the Baltic, and all the things with Kosovo [??], and all those other places were a possibility. Well at that point in time the United States Coast Guard and the commandant went to the Congress and said "We need to have authority to commission three full-time port security units." And to their credit they put one in Camp Perry, they put one at Williamsburg, Virginia, with the Army 7th transportation corps, with the idea they would deploy with them wherever, and of course they were right there on the James River which dumps into the ocean within a few miles —

Weingandt: Is there a port there at Williamsburg?

Olson: Well from there you go right on down to Norfolk. Fifteen, twenty minutes by truck. But you can do your training on the river which is, I mean, in some cases, it's a lot of water. So, and train with the Army and of course down there, they kept their stuff with the Army, so they had massive, massive access to weapons and munitions, and very clearly, the joint military mission opened up those, those pipelines of supply. If we were out of green cammies, or sand cammies, we could go to the Army and get them, and have the stuff sewed on - you could have it that afternoon in size. They had warehouses. When I deployed, I'm about as big then as I am now. And I was in uniform in the double XL. You know, I'd turn and the collar—

Weingandt: [Laughs] You had a lot of room to play around in there.

Olson: I had my uniforms tailored when I got there so I didn't look like I was a clown, and you know, now you would get sized, personally fitted uniforms, and one pair of boots when you deployed. Well you know what happens to boots. And so we would get three and four sets.

Weingandt: What is your rank at this point?

Olson: When I got deployed I was an O6. I was too senior to command a unit. But they needed a liaison to the other services and who also had enough rank to talk back into the logistics supply centers into where you—

Weingandt: It sounds like a good fit for you.

Olson: Well it was because of the background and knowing the Coast Guard missions, knowing the Coast Guard domestic emergency assets, and yet having done some of the exploratory training with the other services from '84 on, it was one I was

comfortable with, and of course, one of the reasons that they tell the O6 to place your eagles so that they face forward is 'cause you never have to look over your shoulder anymore.

Weingandt: [laughs]

Olson: What it says is, you can talk with authority to another O6. And you know, I've had on the—kind of got up out of the chair and postured, and I mirrored that and was able to do that. Now in Desert Storm and in Uphold Democracy in Haiti, I saw that same thing happen between O6 and O4, O4s were sent to make coffee. I mean, it can be very degrading, very quickly. And you have to understand that politic. So fortunately the Coast Guard did understand the politic. Admiral Thorson brought me into a room with him and shut the door and said, "Tell me the truth. What do you need?" So I mean, there was that level of trust and I appreciated that immensely. And you know, he took, here's an O9 taking notes from an O6. And I'm thinking, oh, my gosh.

Weingandt: What reason he's an O9.

Olson: Well, right. He listens to his people. And you know, he walked out the door, and his supply guy was there, he says—

Weingandt: Take care of it.

Olson: Take care of this. And he got on the helicopter and, you know, I think it's quite a compliment when a senior officer calls you by name, he said, "John, you're doing a great job, we'll take care of you, you take care of my people." My people.

Weingandt: I like that.

Olson: So, we did. To the best of our ability, and we were successful, I think. So we came back and we continued the Flame River series training getting more equipment, getting ready, and then the Coast Guard commissions 301, 302, and I'm sorry, 303, 305, and 307, and the 05 and the 07 recognizes that 05 is in the fifth Coast Guard district which is at Williamsburg and down in that area in the Norfolk area. 07's on the Gulf, and so you can get to Jacksonville, you can get to Tallaha—or to the other, well the major Navy offload port is at Jacksonville. I mean that's where the carriers go.

Weingandt: I've been there. It's huge.

Olson: Yeah. And so you can practice there, and you can also deploy from there because there are air assets right near there. And one of the things we found was when we loaded our boats, and all of our gear, and all of our people, you could operate domestically on a couple of C130s but if you were going overseas as a unit you

had to have a C5 or a C141 minimum because, you know, you would take three boats, I'm sorry, you would take six boats. You would have to have three underway, two were always in maintenance, and one was in stand by. And then you had to have all the personnel, and their gear, and their supplies. So that were, that came out of lessons learned. We continued to train, continued exercise and in 1994 of course we began to hear that there was an overthrow of the government imminent in Port au Prince, Haiti. And—

Weingandt: Outfit of the Caribbean.

Olson: Yes. Yes, exactly. What could have been with any investment at all, one of the paradises of the Caribbean. This deep water port surrounded by—

Weingandt: Beautiful.

Olson: —which had been denuded with the harvesting of mahogany. I mean, there was nothing, they didn't replant. And so there's massive erosion in the port, massive erosion. People drink and urinate into the same body of water, so typhoid is very common. So, when the government overthrow is imminent, and of course there was negotiation going on, "step down peaceably or—" It didn't happen until October of '94 at which time I was at Fort Eustis in Virginia training with a potential, and at 2:00 in the afternoon, you know I can't remember the October day, we were told to proceed to Langley Air Force Base that was 20 miles down the road and be prepared for rapid deployment. We did, and while underway to Port au Prince ready to go, armed, locked and loaded, we got off the plane, we saw the lead plane turn back. Which was filled with Rangers, and the word came that the general in charge had—Duvalier and his henchmen and the guy who was his prime minister—decided to step down, and of course with them they took millions and millions of dollars out of the treasury and went someplace safe.

Weingandt: So the poor country got poorer.

Olson: Yeah. And so we landed in the middle of the night, and it was so late we couldn't go into town, the port was shut down, we didn't know where to go, what to do. So we just stayed out in the field that night and of course we had a torrential downpour.

Weingandt: [laughter] You're in the tropics.

Olson: You know we didn't have any time to set up tents so you just got wet. The next morning, we loaded our trucks went into town, and there was no resistance. Actually there wasn't really much of a military threat it was much more about damage to the port, vandalism, threats, theft —

Weingandt: So more gangsters than anything else really.

Olson: Yeah, exactly. Yes. They were armed. You know, who—

Weingandt: They had AK-47s, right?

Olson: Yeah. Not much ammunition. There was no military presence whatsoever of any consequence, and if there were, they were on the take with the government. Right away we neutralized the small craft that they had in port and just said stay in port or you know, you'll come under fire. And they did. And then we found out most of them didn't run because they had no maintenance.

Weingandt: [Laughs]

Olson: So basically we went in into Port au Prince and then Cap-Haïtien which is up on the northern end of the island. You have this marvelous contrast on the southern end, you know Port au Prince is formed by two arms that project out into the Caribbean, that's why it's a deep water port. But down here on the southern arm you have beaches like the Mediterranean. Then you have a deep water port with the mountains and then up on the north edge you have rocky terrain, and it's some of the greatest deep sea fishing in the world. Well as we flew up to Cap-Haïtien, again I was the liaison to all the services, we would fly over these mountain plateaus and I'm thinking, golf course.

Weingandt: [laughter]

Olson: I mean the potential for —

Weingandt: Deep sea fishing, beaches—

Olson: The people who would work, they would be delighted with minimum U.S. wage. You know, we could have recreation, we could have a deep water port. We could have hotels, you know, fishing, etc. But no one is encouraged to do that because you extend your resources down there and they could be taken over by the government and then how do you get them back, short of a military—and we don't want to get into fighting over hotels and things like that. We'll protect people obviously, but. So anyway, we were there from October to shortly after Thanksgiving and in the process our main accomplishment was we made Port au Prince a first class operating port. Couple of interesting experiences. I speak French and that's one of the reasons I was —

Weingandt: I was gonna ask if there was a language barrier, it is French isn't it—

Olson: Yeah, but they could speak enough English, when they want to make a deal they could figure it out, they got translators. They don't speak Parisian French, they have their own patois. So you have to get somebody who's been formally educated to speak and about the second day the government officials came to the port as we were bringing in Red Cross vessels filled with food and water and

clothing and bedding and so forth and they said “Well, when can we collect the \$5,000 duty?” And we said, “There will be no duty. This is now a military port under U.S. military control. This is a military situation, and you no longer have control.” “Well then you can't come into our port.” And it was—very quietly I had to translate the general's indication is, “We'll be in port, sir, or you will be in jail this afternoon, which one is your choice?” Just very quickly it was a military law enforcement circumstance and we worked with the Army MPs at that point in time to secure the perimeter while we secured all of the port assets and the offloads.

So in '94 then we completed that mission and then came back and continued training. The 303 would have had Lake Erie, Camp Perry continued to be the support unit for all the others. They had still a lot of our guys from OMC and Harley Davidson who were machine specialists and yet at the same time could train for small craft interdiction and land site security responsibilities. Well 303 was deployed twice more to the Persian Gulf, largely to protect the off shore oil assets when the most recent Uphold Democra—or, uh, Iraqi freedom evolutions occurred. And then 305 and 307 were deployed. Coast Guard actually had a guy killed in off shore deployment with a missile attack, their boat went out to stop the small craft from getting closer, they fired a missile at him and blew the boat apart, the kid was killed. He got the Bronze Star, Purple Heart for his valor. That's the highest award that was given to a Coast Guard guy for Desert Storm, Uphold Democracy or Iraqi Freedom. Lots of them during World War II and of course the Coast Guard's only Medal of Honor winner was a fellow after whom they named a vessel, who—he made a call to the Coast Guard, took the landing ships ashore during any of the amphibious operations during World War II. And he had taken his troops ashore at Guadalcanal, and they were pinned down, so they were told pull back off the shore, and of course there's a time in which you're getting back on the vessel when you're vulnerable, he manned one of the 50 calibers up front and was trying to provide protective cover and almost had the vessel ready to go underway and was killed just as it started to pull away. And he was our only Medal of Honor winner. So they named a vessel after him and he is considered a Coast Guard hero of the first order. So this fellow that was killed during Iraqi Freedom was the highest level. We continued to send our deployable units, and we now have a total of eight, counting the west coast units which are all commissioned units. So I feel, a sense of I guess pride of having been there at the outset.

Weingandt: Absolutely.

Olson: Having had to do it out of my hide and my troop's hide while we were responsible for both missions in domestic or —

Weingandt: And you're still reservists, technically, you're not —

Olson: I was never in the service.

Weingandt: —active duty.

Olson: Well, you were, you got a green card when you were called up. But the rest of the time you had a pink card. I never was in service when the units were commissioned. And when it came time for my selection for—or my potential selection for Rear Admiral, there are two Coast Guard Reserve Rear Admirals, I was not selected and I don't have any hard feelings 'cause the guy who was was really good, but I said to my District Commander at the time, "You've got to lobby and do all you can to have the next Coast Guard Rear Admiral, have been deployed." I had been passed over for that and so I had to retire. I was coming up on age sixty anyway and I couldn't stay.

Weingandt: I see.

Olson: You've got to have somebody who understands and can operate at the policy development level.

Weingandt: Yes.

Olson: The guy who replaced me was a fellow by name of Tim Riker, R-I-K-E-R, from Cincinnati. Lawyer, but well trained in Coast Guard operations. And just a marvelous, marvelous individual. And I said, "If it ain't me, it's got to be Riker." And he was selected at the next iteration. And actually had to give up his law practice and go on active duty for a full year at Coast Guard headquarters in Washington, D.C., and there probably was where concrete was laid down for the foundation of port security harbor defense training. He is thought of as the godfather of port security and harbor defense. I think I am the great grandfather.

Weingandt: Yeah, I think you fit in there too.

Olson: But you know, I don't, it's about—

Weingandt: Great grandfather.

Olson: No, it's about what you need to do properly and you know, if we had to carve out niches here and there to get it done properly, then I'm glad I got dirt under my fingernails. That it's done today, properly, makes me feel awfully good.

Weingandt: And you should.

Olson: And I guess, you know I thought maybe it would cost me, but I said in closing at one of the Flame Rivers after we came back, "Admiral, I know we embarrassed you when we first went over there, because we weren't ready. But sir, we weren't ready because A, we weren't equipped and B, we weren't trained. We will

embarrass you again and worse, we'll get somebody killed unless you do it right sir.”

Weingandt: Good for you.

Olson: And I thought, you know, I'll be selling Avon products and—

Weingandt: [Laughter] But somebody's listening—

Olson: Well, he did, and it was later I told the District Command you've got to lobby for somebody who's been to Desert Storm. To do this right. You've got to be able to talk with stars on the collar in order to get somebody's attention.

Weingandt: Get things done, sure.

Olson: So, I mean, he, he appeared before Congress at one point in time, well, one of the subcommittees.

[Break in recording][End of tape 1, side B]

Olson: So, I constantly emphasize to the District Command they needed to find someone who had been in Desert Storm, and I said “There's nobody better than Riker.” You know, if it can't be me it's gotta be Riker, because you got increasingly younger reservists—I mean, the thirty-five year olds started—

Weingandt: Yeah they're starting to mature and graduate, so to speak.

Olson: You know, at fifty-five, they're starting to think about getting out of the military even though they stayed in, after they came back from Desert Storm, they were just invaluable as trainers. So let's capitalize on that institutional knowledge and get these new units trained by people who have been there and have done it and know what the requirement is.

Weingandt: These are what, E6s, E7s?

Olson: Yeah, yeah. And a few JOs. There were a few JOs that got back and said “Oh, that's enough for me.” I said, “No, it isn't enough for you. You owe these younger officers—they don't know how to do this. Figure those that are direct commission and haven't been through an academy or haven't been through OCS, they don't know how to do this. You've got to help us.” I said “Not only that, get your pencil out and do the arithmetic for what the retirement is in O6 and O5.” So a lot of JOs finally stayed, and I'm happy to report, John, that all of them that stayed have achieved my rank. They're all captains now.

Weingandt: Wow.

Olson: And I'm so pleased with that. I'm just so delighted for that, and now they're retired. How do you know you're old? When your JOs retire.

Weingandt: [laughs] You must still communicate with some of these people.

Olson: Yeah, as a matter of fact one of them, who I first met as a boatswain mate second class, has a reservist who ran the station up at Two Rivers, Wisconsin. He's now an O6, he is the deputy commander for Pacific area reserve training. And he is a bona fide candidate for selection as a REM [??]. And if he makes—you know, continue this idea that—there'll be strong support. There has to be, I mean, eight units—that's nearly 1,000 people who are ready for rapid deployment from any of the Pacific or Atlantic or Gulf ports. They have to be—

Weingandt: 1,000?

Olson: Well, 8 times 135.

Weingandt: Yeah but you were doing 3 times 135, right?

Olson: Yes. So they have these mullable [??] missions, mullable radius level [??], and to Rikar's credit, he got, instead of forty-eight drills a year, seventy-two drills a year; instead of two weeks a year, thirty days and more if anything is imminent. Now, that means that the reservist who's in the port security unit has to make a strong commitment, and candidly, it filtered out a lot of the guys who just simply didn't have that time.

Weingandt: Couldn't leave their civilian time.

Olson: Right, as a matter of fact there were guys who were self-employed during desert storm, their businesses went belly-up.

Weingandt: Yeah.

Olson: I mean, the wife at home was just putting incredible pressure on getting back. So, I mean, that became part of the filtration when you took these guys in. This is jazzy, and this is slick, and this is neat. Yeah you're one of the Coast Guard elite, but here's the downside: you have to have a family that can operate without you up to six months a year and if you go it's probably a year commitment that you can see in today's paper, it can be extended. As a matter of fact, 303 thought they would go in September of '90 and be back by Thanksgiving. Day before Thanksgiving they were extended indefinitely. I was father confessor, arm around the shoulder, pass out Kleenex that day. Thanksgiving came and one of the things I picked up from the other services was get out of the chow line as an O6 and serve the troops. That's just a tradition. I was out there sloppin' hash for people.

Weingandt: Good for you.

Olson: Out there, you know, doing what I could to cheerlead.

Weingandt: Dirty fingernails.

Olson: Well you had to, you know, that was it. And I was down in the villages, and I was down in the engine room, seeing what these guys did. I went out on the boat at four in the morning when it was cold and wet. Everybody said “Oh it must have been awful in the port.” I said “It was awful during the day, it was worse at night when it got cold.” You know, in both cases in the port, humidity was incredible. So, humidity plus cold or humidity plus heat, just makes it awful. So at any rate, looking back on it all, I went in in 1955 as an A1 and I came out in ’95 kicking and screaming, would have stayed as long as I could as an O6, but Uncle Sam made me get out. I feel like we’ve made some contributions to the Coast Guard and to military preparedness. I’m happy to have had a role in defining what the port security and harbor defense units are and how they integrate with other services. I think we’re beginning to see less inter-service frictions and competition. There’s a greater comfort level, particularly if you train with them and are co-located with them in a peace-time scenario.

Weingandt: And trust your E6s and 7s.

Olson: Right, get them together as soon as you can. And if you’re fortunate enough to have somebody up on top who can talk to each other in some civil, rational and is not this military posturing that goes on, it goes very smoothly, very quickly. The CO for Army 7th Trans Corps that I was with in Ad-Amman during Desert Storm was a prince. Just a marvelous guy, couldn’t help enough. And we had set that ground work, you know he was in contact with his people and he said “I’m hearing awfully good things about your people from my people.”

Weingandt: What was his rank?

Olson: He was an O6. And later he became the two-star in charge of all Army logistics. I mean, Colin Powell appointed him. And he is a marvelous guy; again he’s with the troops—

Weingandt: I like that, I really do.

Olson: So I had that chance. When I went to Haiti, as I suggested, it wasn’t quite as smooth. We had a guy who was buckin’ for rank and would do that at any expense. Would hold ten o’clock meetings after a twelve-hour workday. Ten p.m. meetings after a twelve-hour workday, in helmet, in flak jacket, in full uniform with cuffs pulled out, in a tropic climate. And they would go on until 2400 and of course you were expected to be up either for a four a.m. watch or 0600 reveille. So, you know, no sense of what were the troops having [inaudible]. His motto?

“Work, sleep, and eat.” I don’t hear anything about bathroom in there; I don’t hear anything about showers. I don’t think we get any downtime.

Weingandt: Or R&R.

Olson: Yeah. I mean, the only thing that was really helpful was, we were able to get huge fans brought in. And the troops were located in a large warehouse so you’d open the doors on both ends and you would put the six or eight large fans in strategic locations. You had to have mosquito netting over your cots, or you’d just be—you could be sick. We didn’t know what the mosquitos had down there. So, that’s the only way we made it work. But you know for the first ten days we were on MREs. I mean, do you have any idea what MREs does to your digestive system and to your elimination habits?

Weingandt: Cleans you out.

Olson: Well, or not.

Weingandt: Or binds you up.

Olson: MRE sometimes is translated to mean Meals Resistant to Exit. And because it’s so concentrated it ties up all the water in your system, and unless you’re flooding the system in a parallel fashion—

Weingandt: With contaminated water.

Olson: Yeah, and of course at first we had bottled water, but then later we got the triple chlorinated stuff and they issued us Gatorade so you’d fill your canteen with triple chlorinated and the Gatorade and then you could get through the day. And very quickly the E7s and the E8s really had to indoctrinate the lower grade guys about “You must drink water when you’re not thirsty. Every twenty minutes I want to see that canteen up to your mouth, or you’re gonna go down. I’m telling you, you’re going down.” And so all of that had to enter into the learning experience that is part of port security harbor defense. When Mogadishu occurred, we sent one guy over and he was pretty much deployed onto a Navy vessel, he was the harbor master. He would determine in conjunction with the stevedores when the next vessels could come in. There was no danger of waterside attacks, so we really didn’t need to deploy our vessels but we did need to have somebody who understood port control and the ingress and egress of vessels who stayed at the anchorage. In Haiti, we didn’t know for sure. So we did have an anchorage, mostly because you couldn’t put more than two or three vessels alongside the pier, and there would be six or seven waiting to come in out there. So initially, we put our small craft around later on once we could see that mostly it was, [laughing] it was sailing vessels who wanted to come along and sell you souvenirs.

Weingandt: Sell you something, sure. You are in the Caribbean.

Olson: Yeah, well absolutely. And at any rate, it worked out well that the training began transfer, there became some residual knowledge that people could take back and train new people. And candidly, the Coast Guard reserve has train—we now have very little activity on the Great Lakes with the exception of right in the cities that abut with the places where there are stations. And you have to be ready to go in on a Wednesday instead of a weekend. You'll actually train and stay on the duty watch with the boat crews or with the marine inspection teams. So you're getting now lots and lots of people who are firefighters and cops who have days off that can integrate that, or you might be fortunate enough to get someone who is ex-military who has a flex schedule, insurance, or something like that where they can take a day out and go in and stay on the watches and things like that. For that reason, we've had trouble filling the billet structure with the Coast Guard port security requirements as I said there's about 800 to 1,000 people—well, and the Coast Guard reserve has been authorized to go from 8,000 to 12,000. And we haven't been able to do it. We just can't get the people. The reason for the expansion is, using the same model of port security harbor defense, domestic teams have now been created that are called Maritime Security Teams, MSTs, and they basically set up security zones in the ports and as it goes from the various colors: yellow, orange, red, more people are called up. Well those are—

Weingandt: Red alert, you're gonna be—

Olson: Oh, you're on active duty. You're up. You're no longer in reserve, in drilling status. To their credit, all the port security units get green cards. They're thought of as commissioned service units. So there's no transition other than draw your weapons, draw your—

Weingandt: You're on or off.

Olson: What's the intelligence, yeah. One day you can be drilling, the next day, you're extended. And so in New York harbor, Jacksonville, Galveston, San Francisco, Oakland, all have port security units in proximity that can be called up. Some of the deep water ports up in Maine require it, because they take in the high-pressure, liquid portal-pane [??] gas. And, you know, that would just create a city conflict ration. Not just a port. So I feel good about the fact that we were kind of there, whacking away the trees, you know, like the original pioneers, and it is what it is today. You know they talk about the Marines being a few good men. Well there's few good men and women in every service. And I'm privileged to have been with one of the smallest that wouldn't survive if it didn't have a few good men and women. And I'm also privileged to say I served with others who had people who understood what we do, valued what we do and for the most part, supported what we do. We talk about a purple-suit military, meaning joint military, has no separate colors, they're all one color blended. We're seeing more evidence of that today; the egos of a few people still stand in the way of that but

the old adage about how they too shall fall on their sword, you see that happen. What goes around comes around. So, I guess, that's what John Olson's idea is of the military, why I'm there and I guess I also have pride in the fact that I've been able to carry on—the Olson tradition.

Weingandt: Excellent. Thank you, John.

[END OF INTERVIEW]