Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

ERIC K. OXENDORF

Aviation Electrician's Mate, United States Navy

2019

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Oxendorf, Eric K. (1948–). Oral History Interview, 2019.
Approximate length: 2 hours 18 minutes
Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Summary:

In this oral history interview, Eric K. Oxendorf discusses his service in the United States Navy from June 1967 to May 1971 as an aviation electrician's mate. Oxendorf was born the oldest of three children, he and his younger sisters grew up with their parents in the inner city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1957, his family moved to the suburbs, and he graduated in 1966 from the present-day Brown Deer High School. He states that in the late fifties and to the mid-sixties his awareness of World War II was ever present. Many of his teachers and his friends' parents served in that war and his knowledge of their service and distinctions permeated his consciousness. The veterans themselves bore silent witness and commanded respect thereby. His father had been a American bombardier navigator in World War II but the Oxendorf family name drew anti-German harassment.

Research on an eighth-grade term paper gave him knowledge of the situation in Vietnam and a desire not to be an infantryman reflected five years later in his enlistment in the Navy. Oxendorf recounts a trip to the South took when he was ten years old that reinforced family sentiments and informed his interaction in the military. Stationed at a helicopter base on the Mexican border, he worked with Mexican nationals and learned to speak better Spanish and developed a love for the Mexican people. Similarly, stationing in Japan, the Philippines, and Hawaii further inculcated cultural appreciation.

Oxendorf discusses the factors influencing his choice of the Navy and his boot camp at Great Lakes Naval Training Station outside of Chicago, Illinois. There he participated in weekend graduation ceremonies. Upon his own graduation, following the preference stated on his "dream sheet," he went to Jacksonville, Florida, a school for primary training as an aviation electrician's mate. Oxendorf feels he was well-positioned for the job, citing his experience as a Boy Scout and amateur radio operator, and talks of his work in Jacksonville. Knowledge of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) awaited the future.

In late 1967, Oxendorf reported to Naval Air Station Imperial Beach, San Diego, California. At Ream Field he joined a "rag" outfit: HS-10 before going to sea duty. He studied specific systems and types of aircraft, specifically training on the SH-3 Alpha Sea King helicopter used for anti-submarine warfare. He learned all the systems that made a 15, 000-piece helicopter viable.

He was temporarily attached to Helicopter Antisubmarine Squadron Six (HS-6) the second oldest squadron in the Navy. He trained as aircrew. Oxendorf points out that HS-6s' mission was transitioning from ASW to spacecraft retrieval. He describes a typical workday with HS-6 and his duties. After five months, Oxendorf and HS-6 (four fixed

wing aircraft and 16 helicopters) were aboard USS *Kearsarge* on its return to Vietnam. The *Kearsarge* docked in Yokosuka, Japan. He mentions other aircraft onboard, and how antisubmarine calls would be responded to. After five days in the Philippines, Oxendorf was in the Gulf of Tonkin at Yankee Station, off the coast of Vietnam north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). From this floating station, airstrikes were sent out primarily against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and ships monitored entering its port at Haiphong. Oxendorf speaks of his first rescue mission and the protocol for rescues. Oxendorf also found himself taking part in rescues in Cambodia as the South Vietnamese army had invaded the country. The June 3, 1969, collision of the Australian aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* and the destroyer USS *Frank E. Evans* made an indelible impression upon him as did allied cooperation in this SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) operation.

President Nixon, Oxendorf states, wished to wind down the war and there was to be a military stand down. The change in policy meant for Oxendorf and the ship an early return to the United States. The return, by way of R&R in Hong Kong, was not uneventful with an early-jarring start, a typhoon, and a race between USS *Kearsarge* and USS *Constellation* to California. Back at home base in Imperial Beach Oxendorf was restricted by requirements of the peace talks from flying more than ten hours weekly. He served as a Navy policeman on the Mexican border. That duty lasted three months due to Oxendorf's desire for action.

At Naval Station San Diego he volunteered to return to Vietnam and indicated a preference for assignment to "Big Mother," Detachment 110, Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Seven with a nomadic reputation and first in line for combat rescue. He talks of how the antisubmarine hunter was retrofitted and why the men of Det 110 were simultaneously lauded and avoided. Writing the rules for combat search and rescue as they went along, a four-man crew responded to pilots in distress. Oxendorf paints the scene on these emergency calls with the ships involved, the planned exit points, the rescue, and the exit.

Oxendorf expresses pride that Detachment 110 was known as the "Orphans of the Seventh Fleet" and explains that appellation, mentioning its composition, its activities, and its relations with other Navy men. Responsible for all things an electrician needs to attend to on the H-3, he also details his routine in the detachment. Detachment 110 was at sea until the end of the war. With a mission that changed day to day, he found himself one day acting as a medic. He relates that he was on eleven aircraft carriers during his four years in the Navy, along with an ammunition ship, and a light cruiser. Oxendorf, while motivated by the thought of survival, felt excitement every day with a job that changed and challenged him daily. He states that his squadron has the highest number of medals and that in seven years of flying they lost only two men and one aircraft. He talks of stressed sailors and of a US moon-landing while he was on *Kearsarge* in July 1969. He also mentions is an incident involving his attempt to procure a part for his unit. A suspicious radar contact, for which he volunteered to be on the air crew from the *Evans*, led to a too-close-for-comfort encounter with a Chinese ship.

Oxendorf left the service in May 1971. He states that a deep depression ensued. The reception at the San Diego airport was anything but a welcoming one, but, moreover, he felt he had abandoned the men whom he considered family. He speaks of dealing for years with issues of sociability and attitude. He credits the arts and launching a successful career in photography with saving him from alcoholism and homelessness. There was belated national recognition in the early 2000s of the stress endured by the Vietnam veteran.

Oxendorf, after twenty-five years of denial and with the aid of an "intuitive" Veterans Administration, recognized his PTSD and gained dominance over it. PTSD caused the loss of two marriages and some friends. Obtaining a pilot's license, the former flight crewman bought a cargo plane and took passengers all around Wisconsin.

Speaking of his old Navy compatriots and keeping in touch through newsletter, website, and Facebook, he notes the passage of time. He states that most of them bear some effect from exposure to Agent Orange. Their last reunion is scheduled for April 2020. Accounting military life a good teacher of discipline, respect for people and what they do, and also helping him emotionally to grow, Oxendorf sees the service as a guide to good living. He also feels that the dangers of his service encouraged him to take risks, whether skydiving or piloting, and gave him a circumspection towards the vicissitudes of life. Young men and women, ages seventeen to twenty-four, could benefit as he did in navigating the mental dilemmas that might present themselves. He credits his parents with instilling in him an appreciation for an artistic sensibility and an adherence to discipline that was furthered in the Navy. Both influences opened his eyes to the world, the planet, and his fellow men.

Biographical Sketch:

Eric K. Oxendorf was raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and environs. In 1967, he joined the United States Navy becoming an electrician's mate. Involved in combat search and rescue in Vietnam, one of his assignments was with the decorated Detachment 110 of Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Seven (HS-7). He left the military in 1971. Returning to Wisconsin, he pursued a dual career as a photographer and a pilot.

Archivist's notes:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. It is strongly suggested that researchers directly engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript.

Interviewed by Luke Sprague, 2019.
Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2020.
Reviewed by Jeff Javid, 2020.
Summary written by Jeff Javid, 2020.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2180.Oxendorf_file1]

Sprague: Today is December 5, 2019. This is an interview with Eric K. Oxendorf who served in the United States Navy from June 1967 to May 1971 as an aviation electronics mate 2. This interview is being conducted by Luke Sprague at the Central Madison Public Library for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program. No one else is present in the room. Well good morning Eric, how are you?

Oxendorf: Morning. I was aviation electrician.

Sprague: Oh electrician, sorry. You are correct. I made a typo there, electrician's mate. Thank you for that correction.

Oxendorf: Sure.

Sprague: To start off with and to get a little background on you, when and where were you born?

Oxendorf: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at a little hospital called Mercy Hospital on Second and North Avenue. I'm the oldest child of three of us in the family.

Sprague: Okay, so brothers or sisters?

Oxendorf: I have two younger sisters.

Sprague: And where did you grow up?

Oxendorf: I grew up in the inner city of Milwaukee until I was in fourth grade and then our family moved out to the suburbs in 1957 and I went to public schools at that time.

Sprague: And out in the burbs which public schools did you attend?

Oxendorf: Well actually the first one I went to was Granville Grade School on Good Hope Road. It's no longer there. Then I went to Algonquin Grade School through eighth grade and then I went to Granville High School and I was the last class to graduate from there. It's now called Brown Deer High School. And I graduated in 1966.

Sprague: And any particular memories from grade school or high school that you remember?

Oxendorf: Well friendships were really important to me and I had some good friends. And those friends are still in my life and we get together all the time even fifty years later.

Sprague: And what—so getting into high school, what made you want to join the military?

Oxendorf: At the time, in the late fifties, early to mid-sixties, most every adult that I knew had somehow served in World War II. And having a name like mine that's solid German I got harassed a lot and I didn't understand why. I got teased for it and called various names, but I didn't know why I was called those names. And that's a little side note. But many of my teachers and friends' parents were involved in World War II. I just talked to an old high school mate whose dad flew P-38s in Germany. And my father was in B-17s as a bombardier navigator. And my algebra teacher was in the Navy in the Pacific and not only was he wounded in that service but he also was the Pacific Fleet boxing champion. [Laughs] So he was a pretty tough guy and a really nice guy. Let's see, a number of my teachers were in World War II in active duty. One of my math teachers was one of four survivors on a ship that was sank in the Pacific theater. So he would give us hints of what they did. And we knew how to respect these guys and they demanded respect in a silent way and things just weren't ever talked about. We knew that they were doing their duty for their country.

Sprague: That must've been really quite an interesting buildup to have that as a background, to have that as maybe your male mentors or peers and looking up to them growing up. So you're going through that, what finally made that transition? You're in high school, you have these male mentors who are strong military or had been in World War II. What was the transition to either joining or being drafted into the military? How did that happen?

[**00:05:36**]

Oxendorf: Quite frankly, I did not want to be drafted into the Army. When I was in eighth grade getting ready for high school my eighth-grade teacher had us do a term paper, which was a high school and college project. But in eighth grade they had us do a simple term paper, so we knew what to expect. And I selected a little-known news fact—we had to take something out of the news—about the overthrow of the governments in Cambodia and what was going on in the government of Vietnam. And oddly enough I had that background in my head when I went there five years later. So I knew about Vietnam and I really did not want to be in the Army as an infantrymen. I had higher aspirations of actually flying. I've always wanted to fly. And I joined the Navy and got into the Aviation Division of naval aviation and I figured that would be a good way to learn to fly.

Sprague: Yeah, and you had mentioned before the interview an experience about Florida. Can you tell me more about that? Was that tied to your wanting to—or is that—

Oxendorf: Yes, my family was very liberal, and they were very open about things, especially in society. We did not use any derogatory racial slurs, names, or anything. Everybody was equal. As a child I had several friends that were black guys and they were great friends and I still talk to one of them. When our family went on a trip to visit some friends in Alabama we took a side trip to an airbase—to the location of an airbase that my dad was at in World War II where he had a side job on weekends of picking cotton with the sharecroppers. And in this little village there was a restaurant and my dad wanted to reminisce, so we went back there as a family of five. I was about ten years old, maybe eight to ten years old. And when we went in this scruffy little café there were white people and African Americans in there. I didn't really notice that there were two sides to the restaurant. Well I told my father I had to go to the bathroom and he just pointed where the door was. And I walked up to the door and I remember seeing something that said something only and something only. It said men something and men something else. I thought, "There's two mens' rooms," [Sprague laughs] so I just walked into this one. And there was a huge roar in the restaurant. I had gone into the colored only labeled room. Our family ended up leaving because it was just a very tense moment that I had created that I didn't understand. Of course, when I got older and I realized what segregation was, I always remember that event and I never understood it.

Sprague: So how do you think later—further ahead in the future, how do you think that experience and your upbringing shaped your relations with people of different races within the Navy?

Oxendorf: That's a good question because I was in the—when I was in the Navy I was stationed on the Mexican border so I got to work with Mexican nationals. And our helicopter base was right on the border outside Tijuana.

[**00:10:02**]

And I got to speak Spanish a little more fluently and I would go to Tijuana instead of going to San Diego because it was only three miles away. So I got to learn and love the Mexican people. And when I got on my first deployment aboard an aircraft carrier with my first squadron HS-6, let's see, we stopped in Hawaii. I saw my first nuclear weapon. Went to Japan and I got to know the Japanese people after being there for several weeks. Then we went to the Philippines. I learned about the Philippines, I learned about Americans. I'm really into history. I was not a sailor that hung out at

a bar. I went out and discovered things. I figured I'd never be back at this place again. And the same with just about everywhere I traveled.

Sprague: Okay so hopping back in the chronological sequence here, you joined the Navy. What was that like? Tell me about that.

Oxendorf: Well all I remember about when I joined the Navy, my father said, "You know I wanted to join the Navy too, but I was too tall for submarines." [Sprague laughs] So he joined the Army Air Force and that—the decision to join the Navy really was multiple reasons. My mother was very sick at the time. As young as she was, she was in a terminal state and I didn't want to get too far from home because I knew I'd be coming home for a funeral. So, I went to Great Lakes Naval Station, a naval training center. And I was there for standard boot camp. I was not treated any different than anyone else. I was allowed to be in a special group that marched with state flags at every graduation on every weekend. So I actually got off of the base just to march with our company in the ceremony—the graduation ceremony for boot camp. And when I left there, I went home for I believe five or six days and then I went to my first duty station which was aviation electrician mate A school, Class A School. And I was there for twenty-two weeks in Jacksonville, Florida.

Sprague: How did you get down to Jacksonville at the time?

Oxendorf: That was my first airplane ride, actually in a large airplane. I did get a ride in a Piper Cub one day. I paid a farmer five dollars [Sprague laughs] to take me up in northern Wisconsin. And I found out years later that Butch, the guy that was flying it, never had his pilot's license. He just flew off his farm and landed on his farm. He never went anywhere else. But I'm still alive.

Sprague: So you get down to Jacksonville, what's that like coming from Wisconsin?

Oxendorf: It was hot and muggy, and I had been to Florida on our family vacations. I arrived at night carrying my sea bag wearing dress blues and it was ninety-degree weather. They put me into a barracks and let me sleep and I checked in the next day and got into the process of the military life of what you do. Just the regular Navy not the boot camp Navy.

Sprague: What was the aviation electricians training like?

Oxendorf: We went to class I believe at 8:15 every morning after breakfast. We took a forty-five minute lunch. We were in—and then we went until I believe 4:30 in the afternoon. These were serious classes talking to our class of I believe there are forty of us in a class. And I was in class 741 if I remember right. And we learned theory then we went to equipment,

current equipment, past equipment, how that equipment worked with the theories that we were taught.

[**00:15:09**]

Learned about AC/DC, and interestingly for me I had gotten my electricity merit badge as a boy scout. So, I knew some of this. And, also, in high school I was an amateur radio operator. I had my ham license. So I knew about radios. I was perfectly tailored for doing this job. The school classrooms were just four long narrow buildings that we went—started on the first room of the first building and when we graduated it was the last room of the last building. We also worked on aircraft for practical purposes. These are obsolete aircraft that were in a small hangar. And we weren't going to mess anything up, but we learned how to do practical things like splice wires, troubleshoot, use test equipment, et cetera.

Sprague: When you entered the Navy, were you thinking about becoming an electrician's mate or how did that work?

Oxendorf: You know they give you what they call a dream sheet. You're in boot camp, you're getting close maybe two-thirds of the way through I believe, and you're given a paper and some counseling with a career counselor, Navy career counselor, as to what jobs are available. And my first choice was aviation electrician. I also wanted to be a crewman and they told me there's no rating for crewmen. You get this main job and then you become a crewman later on your specific aircraft. So, I had aviation electrician's mate as first, photographer's mate as second, and an electrician's mate, the shipboard electrician's mate as third. Then they also wanted to know what ship you would like to be attached to and I just wrote helicopters. I knew I could probably fly in a helicopter and not be restricted because I wear eyeglasses. I really didn't know what was going on in Vietnam at the time. I didn't know anything about ASW, anti-submarine warfare. I didn't know any of that stuff. I had no idea where I would go as an aviation electrician or even as a shipboard electrician's mate.

Sprague: So, following your training in Jacksonville, Florida, what was your next posting after that?

Oxendorf: I got my orders out of aviation electrician's mate A school in Jacksonville, was taken to the airport in Jacksonville, and flew all the way to the other side of the country to San Diego, stood on the corner in San Diego at the bus terminal, an earthquake ensued—

Sprague: Oh really?

Oxendorf: —popping windows out, and I thought, "Nice welcome to California." [Sprague laughs]

Sprague: Do you happen to remember the date or approximately?

Oxendorf: No I don't, but it was a shaker and it didn't pull buildings down but glass popped out of windows.

Sprague: Might've been in sixty-eight maybe?

Oxendorf: It was in—

Sprague: Or sixty-seven late?

Oxendorf: —end of sixty-seven. So I went to NAS, naval air station, Imperial Beach, which is also called Ream Field, that's R-E-A-M. And I took the bus after the buses arrived [laughs] and I took the bus down to the base, went into HS-10, which is called a rag outfit. A rag outfit is where you learn specific systems and types of aircraft. And I was to be trained on the SH-3 Alpha Sea King helicopter with HS-10 to be used for anti-submarine warfare. And I was with them for about eight weeks, which was another school. I learned about autopilots in the aircraft. I learned about the radio systems, the lighting systems, the electrical systems, the fuel systems, everything in the helicopter. And what it all came down to was a helicopter is fifteen thousand pieces of machinery moving in formation. [Sprague laughs]

[**00:20:45**]

Sprague: So you called it a rag outfit. Do you happen to know what that maybe stands for at all? Or it's just what the Navy calls it?

Oxendorf: Navy is full of acronyms and abbreviations like anything aviation. So, no, I don't know. That's just the training squadron before you go to your sea duty squadron.

Sprague: Okay, so you get done with the training squadron. Where do you go next?

Oxendorf: My ultimate orders said temporary duty to—temporary attached duty, TAD, to HS-10 for further transfer to HS-6, helicopter anti-submarine warfare squadron 6. This is the second oldest squadron in the Navy.

Sprague: Oh really?

Oxendorf: Yeah. A helicopter squadron.

Sprague: Wow.

Oxendorf: And they had—when I had finished at HS-10 I had to wait for three weeks for HS-6 to come back from their WestPac deployment. That's Western Pacific. And when they arrived, I then checked into the squadron and went to the electric shop and then I went into training for aircrew. But the mission of the squadron was changing. Yes, we did some anti-submarine warfare because submarines were still quite active in the whole planet. But our main mission had changed to spacecraft pickup and combat rescue. We rescued the—or we picked up Friendship 7, and this happened before I got to the squadron. While I was still in high school, they picked up Friendship 7. And we were slated to pick up an Apollo unit eventually but that changed on the line. So, I was with HS-6 for about five months and we were called back to Vietnam aboard the USS *Kearsarge*. The *Kearsarge* carried our air wing, which was four fixed-wing aircraft and one helicopter squadron.

Sprague: How many helicopters were in the squadron?

Oxendorf: We had, I believe, sixteen aircraft.

Sprague: Okay, and what was a typical day working for HS-6?

Oxendorf: You know it was like anything military. It was mundane, it was boring, it was rote. You just went out, you did the job, but there was always something every day that was a little interesting, a new problem to solve and troubleshooting the aircraft. Or one night we caught several Mexican nationals hitchhiking down our runway when I was [Sprague laughs] the watch commander. And that was the first time I had to put a bullet in a gun. So I was in charge of my two watches and we just called security and they picked up these two guys that were waiting for traffic to take them to Los Angeles on our runway. [Laughs]

Sprague: So your naval unit was assigned—well it was somehow involved in border security issues?

Oxendorf: No, we were—our location was on the border. It was actually about an eighth of a mile north of the fence between California and Tijuana. The funny thing is you could walk on the beach, which was about a half a mile from our base. You could get on the beach, start walking south, and just walk to Mexico and vice versa. [Sprague laughs] There was no fence there.

[**00:25:16**]

Sprague: So, any particular—you're in HS-6, any particular detachment that you remember within it that you were assigned to?

Oxendorf: No, it was a regular job. I went there from 7:30 until 4:30 every day. Sometimes we'd just sit around. We did a lot of training, reviewing paperwork, how to fill out paperwork properly, and how to troubleshoot a job and just safety things, a lot of safety which is really important if you're going aboard the most dangerous spot on the planet, namely an aircraft carrier flight deck. I worked in the shop but then I gradually would become a flight deck troubleshooter and repairman and as well as I was training to be a second crewman.

Sprague: And HS-6 was also at Imperial Beach did you say?

Oxendorf: Correct. There were about six squadrons there.

Sprague: What did you guys do in your off time? Did you have any off time?

Oxendorf: Well I didn't have a car, but I bought a bicycle. And for the most part I just hung around the barracks. One of my friends had a Volkswagen. We would go to a restaurant once-in-a-while or we'd go to Tijuana. There was a bar that our squadron hung out at so I would go there once-in-a-while because I wasn't old enough to drink in America, but I could drink in Mexico. [Sprague laughs] And that just included beer.

Sprague: So, any experiences that you'd like to share from your time at HS-6?

Oxendorf: A lot of things I could share with you. I saw some very disturbing things. I saw some crashes. I saw four men get killed in a crash. I witnessed it and remember it well to this day. It was a small base that had a lot of awards because it was beautifully landscaped and great chow hall. It was just a nice little personal base and we were out of the way of everybody else. We did work with SEALs [Sea, Air, and Land Teams] quite a bit. They were just up the road in Coronado, California. And the naval air station North Island is also up there. One of the things I liked doing was being the duty driver and driving around and discovering things. And because I was in a Navy truck and in a Navy work uniform, I could go anywhere I wanted to on any naval base. And I would—I remember seeing some antique aircraft because I like airplanes. I went to flight deck firefighting school, which was pretty dangerous and really exciting, getting ready for going on my first deployment. Learned to shoot automatic weapons, AK-47s, M60s. You didn't get that in boot camp.

Sprague: Yeah I wouldn't imagine you would've. Yeah, so where did you go next?

Oxendorf: Well we went to—the squadron went to get aboard the USS *Kearsarge* CVS-33. It was a World War II ship that was five years older than I was. And we took buses—the personnel took buses up to Long Beach, got on

board the ship. The ship pulled out of port and went down towards San Diego where our squadron pilots flew the aircraft as well as the S2Fs that were aboard, our aircraft Grumman S2Fs, as well as other aircraft. And so the air wing was now aboard the ship and we headed for Hawaii. We got armament and weapons there and then we went to Japan to Yokosuka. And that was rather interesting. The berthing spot we pulled into in the aircraft carrier was the same berthing spot that the battleship Yamato was parked in during World War II.

[**00:30:30**]

Sprague: Wow.

Oxendorf: So I got to see Japan and I ran into an old high school friend.

Sprague: Let's turn the mic a little more towards centered with your mouth there. Even better so we get—get this up. There we go. So tell me about—I'm not familiar with it—the SF2S aircraft?

Oxendorf: S2F.

Sprague: S2F okay.

Oxendorf: Yeah, they call them Stoofs.

Sprague: Okay, and what—tell me about that a little bit or what does it do?

Oxendorf: It's an anti-submarine warfare aircraft that had a MAD gear on it. That's magnetic aerial detection. It was a pole that extended out the back of the aircraft that was used for sensing anomalies in the water, namely large metal objects like a submarine or an armor-plated whale. [Sprague laughs] And we did pick up whales in our helicopters. But the Stoofs would—it was a triangulation-type attack. We would get a read—a ship would get a reading on a submarine. They'd bring in two destroyers. The Stoofs would probably have been the first one to find them. They'd fly overhead. They'd get a bearing on it. Then we'd bring in the helicopters because they were more mobile, and quick. The helicopters would triangulate the submarine and follow it and bring in a destroyer or two that would do the kill. In between there, the Stoofs, the helicopters, and the destroyers were, actually, all able to do the kill. We had standard, conventional torpedoes and nuclear torpedoes on our helicopters as well as the Stoofs had mines and other weapons. I don't know a lot about the Stoof. It was a twin-engine reciprocating aircraft with folding wings. And I think it had a crew of six jammed into that airframe.

Sprague: So, for our listeners who are post-Cold War, who would you have been going after with your anti-submarine device? [Laughs]

Oxendorf: Generally, the Russians. We'd hang out from Vladivostok of the sub base. The North Koreans supposedly had submarines. Let's see who else? Pretty much Russian. [Laughs]

Sprague: I got to get—some of our listeners are a little bit younger. That's why we have to go there.

Oxendorf: And I'm going to say Soviet Navy not Russian. They were Soviet Russians. The Soviet government, which actually collapsed, but at this time there was a Cold War. It was a cat and mouse game with submarines and tracking each other. And they did the same thing for our aircraft—with their aircraft on our submarines.

Sprague: Yep I lived through the end of the Cold War and I served. Yep I'm with you. I understand it. The distinction is important. Yeah, the Soviet versus Russian, absolutely.

Oxendorf: Correct.

Sprague: So you're with HS-6 and then what happens? You're in Japan?

Oxendorf: Well we went down to the Philippines and I don't know what we did there. I bought a camera [laughs] and we were there about five or six days. And then we headed down to the Tonkin Gulf and we were on what's called Yankee Station, which is north of the DMZ [demilitarized zone] at the time but south of the city of Hai Phong, North Vietnam, which was a seaport. And we monitored ships that went in and out of that North Vietnamese port. They were generally Russian and Chinese ships, supply ships. We also were the backup for airstrikes to hit desired sites in the conflict. I did my first rescue there, actually my only rescue, and participated in that.

[**00:35:22**]

Sprague: Tell me a little bit about that rescue, that first rescue and what that was like.

Oxendorf: Well an aircraft went down about fifteen miles—he ran out of fuel. And I don't remember why the pilot punched out at this point. It was an Air Force pilot. And he had—I believe he had some antiaircraft hits and was just trying to get out over the water so we could rescue him instead of being—landing in a parachute in North Vietnam where they undoubtedly would beat you to death once you landed. Or you go to Hanoi Hilton, the

POW [prisoner of war] prison. So it was a rather simple pickup. He was waiting for us, waving and—

Sprague: So, for our listeners, if you could kind of walk us through the process because they may not know how that rescue happened, in layman's terms.

Oxendorf: Okay, whenever there was to be a strike, an airstrike, no matter Air Force, Navy, Marines, we had a rotating exit point along the coast of North Vietnam and South Vietnam. And it changed every day. And the pilots all knew where this point was because there was always either a Jolly Green from the Air Force or a Navy Big Mother waiting, H3 waiting, near the shore or within ten minutes of flying time to any crash site. So the pilots were encouraged to get to that exit point. That's just about it. Up near North Vietnam near Hai Phong were a bunch of small islands. And it was very dangerous because they had gun emplacements there and surface-to-air missiles as well. One of our sister squadrons, HS-2, did lose an aircraft and crew to a SAM [surface-to-air missile] missile hit. You don't hear about missiles hitting helicopters, but this did happen. I went to their service at Arlington about ten years ago when the crew was repatriated.

Sprague: Do you remember the crew's name or call sign or any details?

Oxendorf: I don't. They were a different squadron but the way I saw it was that could've been me. So I went to Washington and went to the service.

Sprague: So at some point—you're in HS-6, at some point you get to your next—you get into your next unit. How does that happen?

Oxendorf: Well let's see, President Nixon—or Vietnam was a political war run by politicians not by military minds. So President Nixon was trying to find an honorable exit. So he wound down the war physically and visibly. And I think that was in 1968. The war also shifted, I believe, at the time we invaded—or South Vietnamese Army invaded Cambodia. Historically Cambodia and Vietnam are two tribes like the Sioux and the Apache. And these two tribes, the Cambodians and the Vietnamese, did not like each other. And here they were going to dig up a thousand-year old vendetta and they had this side war going on in South Vietnam and Cambodia. And we participated in doing rescues there and that was a very confusing time for me to figure out what was going on, although it wasn't my concern really.

[**00:40:06**]

One other thing I should mention, I was a witness to the collision of the USS *Evans*, a destroyer that was struck by the HMAS Australian aircraft carrier, *Melbourne*. It happened in the middle of the night. We were on a

SEATO exercise. That's Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. And during the night, the *Evans* turned in front. There were missed signals. Evans turned in front or the Melbourne turned to port, something happened. And the aircraft carrier just sliced that ship in half while most of the crew was sleeping. And we were the first ones on site. And there were many bodies in the water, living and deceased. And the Gulf of Tonkin is not a very deep body of water. Submarines could travel through there, but it wasn't like the deep ocean. So, it was a rather good feeding area for sharks and predatory fish. And it was really a terrible sight. And I guess I'll just never forget that, seeing the ship, seeing bodies like I'd never seen. That was probably the most memorable thing of that deployment with HS-6.

Sprague: The Australian aircraft carrier was there. Tell me about—for allied support. Tell me about that, what they were doing there.

Oxendorf: Let's see, this was an exercise that involved the Thai Navy, the Philippine Navy, the Japanese Navy, the Korean Navy, the American Navy, and the Australians. And I believe there were some New Zealanders there too. Just before the *Evans*- *Melbourne* incident, we were in Subic Bay, Philippines, a large naval facility. And that's where I got to meet Thai sailors, Korean sailors, Australian sailors. That poor town. [Laughter] They had about fifteen thousand various nationality Navy men hit that town. And I got to know a couple of Thai sailors really well that could speak English and Australians. And after the *Evans* incident we went back to Subic Bay and the *Melbourne* was there getting repaired. And the two halves of the *Evans* were dragged back to Subic, so everybody saw what the disaster was. And I'm very proud of what I saw. There was no animosity. No anger about it. It was an accident. So that was good to see that we were able to rise above that.

Sprague: Was there a lot of allies assisting the Navy or—in that area in addition to the Australians regularly or not? Or was it pretty much a US operation at Yankee Station?

Oxendorf: It was pretty much our US deployment. South of the DMZ was called Dixie Station. And that was smaller ships and support ships. There was also a Navy helicopter squadron, the only Huey attack squadron in the Navy, called HA(L)-3, Helicopter Attack Light 3. And they were kind of our sister squadron. We had different missions, but they would operate as troop support for the Marines or any other Army or whoever needed them. But they generally stuck around on LSTs [Landing Ship, Tank] and other smaller gunboats going in and out of the Delta, South Vietnam's Delta and waterways.

[**00:45:24**]

Sprague: So, do you happen to remember—some of the documents show a Yankee Station further south and one further to the north? Do you happen to remember?

Oxendorf: Yeah, let's see what was the name of that? Up north, is it PIRAZ [Positive Identification Advisory Zone]? I think it was called PIRAZ. That is really where you had to be on full alert all the time because you were very close to the enemy. They could reach you with their guns or aircraft and they occasionally did. Yankee Station kind of floated up and down the coast. And we always stayed just out of view—on the aircraft carriers, we would stay just out of view of the land, generally twenty-one to twenty-five miles.

Sprague: So, you're with HS-6, how do you get to HC-7?

Oxendorf: Well as I was saying, President Nixon was winding the war down. The captain came aboard and told everybody on the ship and the air wing that due to policy changes we'll be going back to the States three months early and we're going to stop in Hong Kong for an R&R [Rest and Recuperation] for five or seven days, which is really a great city. And we went to Hong Kong. Headed out of Hong Kong there was a typhoon in the Pacific, so we took shelter between Taiwan and China and I forgot. It's the straits of something. I don't remember the name of it. The captain told us we were going there. And even though we were hiding from a typhoon, it was pretty rough. You really got your sea legs on that one. For three days the waves were higher than the flight deck of the ship. You didn't even go out on the weather decks. It was so bad. And if you said you didn't get seasick you were lying. [Laughter] It was really pretty wicked.

Anyways, we got to the Philippines and downloaded a lot of armament and munitions. And the USS *Constellation* was also in port and being called back. So the two carriers and their carrier group were going to travel. We were going to travel together across the Pacific to go home to California. And the captain came on board. I don't know why I remember this but the captain of the *Kearsarge* came on the radio one morning on 1MC [1 Main Circuit] and announced to the ship that we had been challenged to a drag race across the Pacific with the *Constellation*. So, the *Constellation* is a brand new carrier and we're in a carrier that is at least twenty years old [Sprague laughs] running on diesel fuel. And I remember those two carriers pulled next to each other, like they got to the start line and they hit it. [Laughter] And us ships just shook. I mean just shattering, just vibrating, until they got up to speed which took probably an hour. And we drag raced all the way back to California and we got there about an hour ahead of them. I don't know if they were being nice, but the whole ship shook for four thousand miles. That was wicked. [Laughs] So the ship actually got—eventually got decommissioned. And we went back aboard

our home base at Imperial Beach. And because it was a big stand down for the whole military, as required by the attempted peace meetings, we did not fly. I think we were allowed ten flight hours a week, and an aircraft that sits is an aircraft that breaks. They got to be flown all the time.

[**00:50:16**]

Well, not that I was mister goody two-shoes but I really never went out drinking or any of that with the boys, so they put me on shore patrol. So I was a Navy policeman for three months on the Mexican border at the Tijuana gate and I handled military situations. At the two-and-a-half month point, I really had had just—had it with just sitting around. I wanted—I joined the Navy for action actually, something exciting. So I went to the naval station in San Diego to EPDO PAC, which was Enlisted Personnel Disbursing Office. And I went up to the second floor. I remember walking in this large room full of desks and there were all Navy personnel sitting in there and their reception guy said, "What unit are you—ship or squadron are you with?" "I'm with HS-6." "Go and see that guy right over there, desk ten," or something. And I told him what I wanted to do. I wanted to go back. I wanted to volunteer for Vietnam, go back, and I wanted to be with *Big Mother*. And he asked me how I knew about *Big Mother* and I said, "Well they were—the detachment was aboard the *Kearsarge* for a week." And they were like gypsies. They were living in the flight deck and they're living in the hangar deck, living out of cruise boxes. And they had serious rescue work being done. They were the first in line for combat rescue.

Sprague: So for the listener, explain to them the term Big Mother. What is—who is that and what does that mean?

Oxendorf: Okay, I'd like to finish that—

Sprague: Oh sorry.

Oxendorf: —about the EPDO PAC. He gave me my IBM card and told me to go over to the guy across the room. And I said, "I want to go to HC-7 or Ha(L)-3. He said, "Well HC-7 is just forming. They're getting going. You sure you want to go there? They've already got a medal of honor winner." "Yeah I want to go to HC-7." I wasn't looking for glory. I was just looking for something to do all the time. So two days later I got called to the duty office at HS-6 and they said, "I don't know how this happened but Eric you're going to HC-7." [Laughter] How did they figure that out? Gee I don't really know. You know you have to kind of take destiny in your own hands sometimes. So, I went there.

Big Mother was just a nickname that squadrons—the fixed wing squadrons gave us because we were flying an aircraft that the Army and the Navy—or the Army and the Air Force and Marines did not have, the Sikorsky H-3. It had a different mission. It was meant for submarine tracking. It had Doppler equipment on it for doing that. Well when you pull all that anti-submarine equipment off it you can put a big gas tank in it. You can put a mini gun, Gatling gun on it, a Gau, G-A-U, gun, and four thousand rounds of ammunition. You can put armored plating all around it, armored plating on the seats for the pilots and paint them midnight gray. That's who Detachment 110 was. Five aircraft that were hard to see day or night if you're flying low along the water with high-speed hoists, four M-60s, four M-16s, and eventually the Gau mini gun. There are several stories about where the word Big Mother and also the patch, the Detachment patch Big Mother, came from that would not be socially acceptable at this time.

[**00:55:13**]

Sprague: Yeah, so we'll skip ahead here a little bit. [Oxendorf laughs] So for the listeners we're looking at Wisconsin Veterans Museum object Victor 2019.023.3 patch military. And we're looking at the patch, and the question that I have for Eric is out of curiosity, do you happen to know what—if that right arm band—it looks like an arm band there, what that says or what that is?

Oxendorf: Well she's—let's see what does that say? I don't know what that says.

Sprague: Okay no problem. I thought I'd ask. So that was Big Mother?

Oxendorf: Yes. That was Detachment 110 was called Big Mother. Our other detachments that flew H-2 Kaman aircraft were called Clementine.

Sprague: Okay and I heard it referred to as Clem.

Oxendorf: Or Clem.

Sprague: Yeah okay. Good to know. Anything else for the listener that we're looking at, this patch, that you can tell me about it that—any reason why she has a Viking helmet?

Oxendorf: [Laughs] We were kind of free thinkers. We didn't really wear Navy uniforms. Everybody in the ship would wear dungarees. We'd have cutoffs. We'd wear camouflage. We would go around with our shirt off getting sun. The ship's company and the ship's squadrons really avoided us, I mean physically. They would walk around like we had the plague until we would bring back one of their pilots that got shot down and then

they loved us. That didn't happen very often thank you. But we were actually the physical war that came to the ships. As far as Big Mother's patch, I just found this out a few days ago through the continued communication that many of us in HC-7 still adore talking to each other and reliving things. There was apparently a very obese stripper in a club in Japan, which was the home base of HC-7. And someone took a picture of her one day. She was also apparently a very good singer. I did not have the joy of experiencing this person or ever meeting her. But this picture somewhat resembles what the patch is, topless Viking woman carrying a .50 caliber machine gun [Sprague laughs] and wearing combat boots. Now because we were a small detachment that had a mission that was really unknown to how to operate, there were no written rules. We were writing the rules for combat search and rescue.

Sprague: So tell me more about that—I'll put this away for a minute—your mission as you defined it.

Oxendorf: The mission was to respond to emergency calls made by an emergency radio carried by pilots in distress on their flight suit. And that signal was also used for tracking, finding that signal and getting to its origin, namely the pilot. And we all had training of some level or another at SERE [Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape] school, which was survival, escape—gee I don't remember, S-E-A-R. And so we knew we could get captured but you never really thought about it. We just went in with our helicopter, a crew of five—or four: two pilots, pilot and copilot, and a first and second crewman. We were also swimmers. [**01:00:02**] One of the crewmen would jump in the water and assist the pilot if needed. The high-speed hoist would jerk them out of the water rapidly to get out of the way. One of the things that I've—talking to other guys and reading about rescues that our detachment and our squadron did was quite often North Vietnamese gunboats would come out and try to get the pilot first if they were in the water. So, we had to be fast. And that's why we always waited just offshore just out of gun range. So, if a pilot did make it to the water he could jump out of his aircraft, eject, and we would be there quickly to rescue him. We actually rescued one pilot twice. His name was Duke Cunningham who later became a congressman. And quite often at our reunions there's always at least one if not more pilots that we rescued that join us.

Sprague: So, the pilots are trying to hit the exit point, the Navy is offshore. Did you have to move the ships around to get closer to particular exit points or were the transit times from your ships via the helicopter about the same to those exit points or how did that work?

Oxendorf: Well I'm glad you brought me back to that. There was a place called North SAR [Search and Rescue]. And North SAR was where a landing

deck equipped ship would wait just offshore with one of our helicopters on it. It would only hold one of our helicopters. So, we would go there usually for two to three days and up to five days depending on how long the ship was to be there. These ships were generally destroyer escorts, destroyers, frigates, never—well I'm not going to say never—occasionally a light cruiser. The Oklahoma was a cruiser. But the aircraft carriers were like home base and that's where the personnel were, that we were. We could rotate, we could rearm, do major repairs et cetera. The North SAR was the last pivot point for the searching aircraft. And when the call came out, the ship would pick it up. They'd say, "Launch the SAR aircraft." And within three minutes they were in the air, blades turning, and would get a vector to the rescue site and do their duty.

Now there were so many odd jobs that we did. There was one mission that I just found about. Finally it was declassified. I never knew about it at the time. I knew we were going out with two aircraft that had virtually everything stripped out of it because they were going to pick up a bunch of personnel. Where are they going to get them? Well I found out at a reunion a couple years ago that we were picking up a South Vietnamese SEAL team that was doing reconnaissance and destruction in Hai Phong on land. And they're—I think they were dropped off by a submarine, went in and did their duty, and then we picked them up. The mission partially failed because some of them were captured but we did rescue some of the guys. That was just one of the many jobs. We also delivered the mail to other ships. It wasn't all guts and glory stuff.

Sprague: One of the things that they talk about in the documentation about the H3 it is?

Oxendorf: Mm-hm.

Sprague: About its ability to be almost amphibious or very cl—tell me about that if you can.

Oxendorf: It had two sponsons, large hard-shell aluminum casings that were on the left and right of the fuselage where the landing gear retracted into. And on the side of those sponsons was a tightly packed like a parachute airbag, frankly just like a car. And if you pulled the lever the bags would pop out and could help the aircraft float if it was disabled. It generally would float best with rotors turning lifting some of the weight off of the bags and the sponsons. And they're perfectly placed on the aircraft so they balanced, but if there were mild to rough seas and the blades were not turning the aircraft would not last very long. Long enough to get out to wait for rescue, maybe anywhere from three to fifteen minutes.

[**01:05:53**]

Sprague: Tell me a little bit more about—you had kind of mentioned it in passing—the Orphans of the Seventh Fleet. Tell me about that.

Oxendorf: [Laughs] We were proud of that. We would go aboard a ship, generally an aircraft carrier. And we'd stay anywhere from three days to fourteen days. It depended how long they stayed on station. And then we would do what was called a cross-deck. Another aircraft carrier would get five miles away and that carrier group would pass the carrier group we were with. And we would just load up our helicopters, our duffel bags, and fly over to the other ship and it was business as usual. The new ship had to find a spot for us to sleep and a place to work and they also had to find a place to shove five helicopters. [Sprague laughs] Let's see, I think I'm sliding away from—oh, the orphans. Because our Detachment 110, I believe, was at sea for seven years. Long after I left they stayed out there. It was just always at sea until the end of the war. And we were not beholding to the captain of any ship or any of the heavies over in Saigon. Our boss was—well, actually, General Westmoreland was the big boss but the guy underneath us—under him, I'm sorry, was the admiral in charge of Naval Air [Force] [US] Pacific Fleet in Atsugi, Japan. He paid our bills. He was our boss. And we had total preference over parts, fuel, ammunition, restocking. No ship could keep us from getting anything that we needed. They couldn't keep it for their own aircraft. They had to give it to us first because our mission was the most important, to save a pilot that the government spent a hundred thousand dollars on to fly a five-million dollar aircraft. That was kind of generally well known that we were under that kind of command structure. Just the same, we lived like gypsies. We just didn't conform. And that was because our mission was so nebulous. It changed all the time. One day I found myself being a medic and I knew nothing about what I was doing to this guy except stopping the blood. We just really had to learn all new techniques of survival. And every ship was different. None of them are laid out the same. The oldest ship I was on was the [USS] *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Hancock*, the *Kearsarge*. I was on eleven aircraft carriers during my four years in the Navy, an ammunition ship, light cruiser.

Sprague: So what—obviously a unit like this what were your relations like with other sailors in the regular Navy that were on those ships?

[**01:10:03**]

Oxendorf: A lot of guys would come up to our aircraft and just want to look in and they wanted to see what an M60 looked like. You know we were all interested in each other's jobs. I know I went over and climbed up on an F-4 Phantom cockpit and talked to the pilot, the ready pilot, that was sitting in it loaded with bombs and—he was a five-minute takeoff bird.

And I talked to him for twenty minutes about the aircraft, everything. So we all learned each other's jobs in a very slight way. But the other sailors kind of just looked at us with curiosity. I guess that would be a good word. We weren't boisterous or rowdy. We just did our job and—

Sprague: You mentioned a thing about the uniforms. And your relaxed uniform standards. That kind of identified you and kind of said what you needed to say?

Oxendorf: It did. Now on an aircraft carrier the air boss is king. And he's in a high perch and he's looking down at everything on the flight deck. We did conform to safety standards of course. We wore flotation gear. We wore headgear with sound suppressors and long pants. But during the non-flight hours we just wore whatever we wanted to. We also called our pilots by first name. We all know each other by first name. We still do at reunions. There's never any saluting going on on a ship, so we didn't worry about that. Yeah, we were the Orphans of the Seventh Fleet for sure.

Sprague: I bet that's something you wear with pride obviously it sounds like.

Oxendorf: Definitely. Yeah, we were in the US Navy but then we weren't. [Laughs] They were nice enough to let us fly their aircraft and [Sprague laughs] fly around and shoot guns.

Sprague: First of all, what can you tell me about this patch? This is Wisconsin Veterans Museum object V1992.53.2. Was this from during the conflict or post conflict and what is this about?

Oxendorf: No this was a very popular patch. Almost everybody that was in the Navy that served in the Tonkin Gulf, which is right along the whole shore of the Vietnamese Peninsula, had this patch. It was just the Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club.

Sprague: And is it an official patch or an unofficial patch?

Oxendorf: It's as unofficial as Big Mother's patch [laughter] but it's more socially acceptable.

Sprague: Okay, well just curious. And then getting back talking about DET-110, about how many people were in that detachment roughly?

Oxendorf: We had between thirty-five and forty enlisted. We had forty to fifty pilots depending, because there was a pilot and co-pilot, depending if we had four or five aircraft. And then we—one of those pilots would be the officer in charge. And one of the enlisted guys that I'm including is usually a E-7 or E-8 Navy chief. And then we had also in the enlisted guys we had each

of the repair groups, like I was electrician. We had jet mechanic. We had metalsmith for repairing damage and metal damage. We had aviation electronics technician, which is AT. They took care of the radios and navigation gear. Then there was always a supervisor. For instance, I was a supervisor on nights for one of my detachments, cruises. Then we had one supply guy that I still talk to today, Ernie. And he had a paper in his wallet that he would show the supply people on the ship the letter from the admiral in Atsugi that we had priority on everything for parts. If they refused to give us parts, he'd whip out this letter. So we had one parts guy and a personnel man that kept bad records. [Laughter] Because we moved around so much it was hard to keep up with it. So there were about forty guys. And then we had cruise boxes so usually about fifteen cruise boxes, which is a collapsing metal box that carried parts, tools, and supplies. And then we would have our own—it was a parachute bag is what it was with our clothing.

[**01:15:47**]

Sprague: How did—within DET-110, what was that like in terms of working environment and working with each other? What was that like?

Oxendorf: Well we were all between eighteen and twenty-four, so we were not easy to handle. And we all knew better than the other guy, so there were some personality conflicts that aren't even worth mentioning. But as long as everybody followed what the rules were and did a safe job, we got along great. And we actually knew that you could be here today and gone tomorrow so we had a lot of fun. We pulled a lot of pranks, the little pranks. You know the short-sheeting a guy's bed to taping him to his bunk or you know stealing all of his cigarettes while he was sleeping or something. And we also let our voice be heard in a silent way. We had a brass plate that was cut out by one of the metalsmiths that was a stencil of Big Mother. And we would go and spray paint Big Mother on the fighter jets around the flight deck. And we usually did that at night so we wouldn't get caught. We did get caught once. They made us come back on to a ship that was—we were rotating and they had to fly us back. We had to wipe it off about fifteen aircraft. [Laughter]

Sprague: So kind of like—well not really but kind of like vandalism but not really?

Oxendorf: Yeah it was vandalism. [Sprague laughs] But it didn't hurt anything.

Sprague: Tell me a little bit about your particu—to the degree that you can, your role in DET-110.

Oxendorf: Generally, my routine was I would be back in Atsugi, which was my legal home base. I never spent more than two weeks there. I would generally go

to Yokota Air Force Base, get on an airplane, get on a cargo plane or something, fly to the Philippines, and then down to, in country, usually Da Nang. And then one of the helos would come in and get me and sometimes there'd be five or six of us on one set of orders just rotating personnel. And then we'd go out to a carrier and then disperse as required by the orders. My personal job was anything listed for the H-3 aircraft that an electrician was supposed to take care of. That was one job. That was lighting, the autopilot, the fuel system, weapons—the electrical part of weapons—as well as aircraft maintenance, just general cleaning or whatever. I was an E-5 so I was put in charge of one shift at one point. And the secondary job that we had was—that I had was second crew. I did not fly an awful lot of second crew because they had plenty of guys that did that. They apparently—I was more useful—and when I think back, I was more useful as a maintenance guy. Saltwater really tears up metal, especially aluminum so we had to deal with those kind of problems. We had personnel situations that I was in charge with. I myself got into trouble. I got caught stealing an amplifier for the autopilots and auto hover system out of another squadron's aircraft. [Sprague laughs] And I can tell you about that later if you want. [Laughs]

[**01:20:26**]

Sprague: Yeah okay, no problem. Not a worry.

Oxendorf: So that was my job. I was an E-5 so I was like middle rank, middle management.

Sprague: When you're doing that job, what keeps you going from day to day? What are you thinking in the back of your head?

Oxendorf: That's a good question. You'd think that all we're thinking about is the day we go home. I really didn't do a short-timers knots or chain or anything because this was a great job. And it was exciting and different every single day. Even to small degree it was still unique. What kept me going what I would think about, I really would think about just surviving. Not getting hit by an errant bomb that's coming down the flight deck or getting in an overloaded aircraft and having it sink when we're doing a cross-deck, which actually did happen to one of our aircraft. By the way, we only lost two guys and one aircraft in seven years of flying in Vietnam.

Sprague: For all of that?

Oxendorf: For all of that that we did. It wasn't that we were chicken. It's just that we were smart. As soon as you learned what island had gun emplacement, you avoided that island. If you realized that the fuel was contaminated on one particular ship you didn't get fuel from that destroyer or ammunition

ship. We really did a good job. For safety we actually won the Presidential Unit Citation.

Sprague: Wow.

Oxendorf: We are not the most decorated squadron in the Vietnam War, naval squadron, but we have the highest number of medals. Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, Distinguished Flying Cross, and Medal of Honor and Navy Cross especially.

Sprague: Do you happen to remember or are you willing to talk about that loss of that one aircraft with the two men on it?

Oxendorf: That happened right after I'd left the detachment to go back to Japan. I heard about it when I landed in Japan. And I knew the guy that had died in it and it was a cross-decking aircraft that we loaded over—the guys overloaded the heavy cruise boxes. Now these are tools that are for fixing jet engines. It's just not a bunch of screwdrivers and wrenches. There was some heavy-duty equipment. And some of those cruise boxes would weigh 150 pounds. Well the aircraft weight and balance was mismanaged apparently and he was—when the aircraft fell over this—it lifted off and then fell to the side. It almost immediately sank and he was unable to escape. So it wasn't a combat situation.

Sprague: You mentioned in one of your documents, and I don't know if it was with HS-6 or HC-7, about the man landing on the moon?

Oxendorf: Oh that was HS-6.

Sprague: Tell me about that a little.

Oxendorf: I was working night shift out of the electric shop. And the captain came on in the middle of the night. I think it was like 11:30 or 12:30, one o'clock in the morning. They blew the bosun's whistle, woke up the whole ship. Everybody's thinking general quarters, no general quarters. The captain came on and said—and I remember the captain was Captain [Leonard M.] Nearman. He said, "To the men of the *USS Kearsarge*, I want to inform you that America has just landed a man on the moon fifteen minutes ago," or something like that. [Sprague laughs] And at the back of a ship is a fantail. They call it the fantail. It's as low as you can get in the back of the ship to the water. I would say a hundred guys went back there, including me, to look up at the moon and say to ourselves, "There's a guy on the moon right now while we're looking at it." I just thought that was pretty unique.

[**01:25:37**]

Sprague: Yeah pretty incredible. And it sounds like you took a picture of it maybe?

Oxendorf: [Laughs] I did. It's kind of a fuzzy picture because the ship was moving but that picture will always remind me that there was a man standing on the moon looking back at us.

Sprague: What other experiences do you want to share from that, from HS-6?

Oxendorf: HS-6?

Sprague: HC-7 sorry.

Oxendorf: From HC-7?

Sprague: Yeah sorry HC-7.

Oxendorf: I covered six pretty well.

Sprague: Yeah you did.

Oxendorf: I was still learning then. I used all that knowledge when I got to HC-7.

Sprague: Of course.

Oxendorf: So many, many different unique things happened. We were launching an aircraft one day, launched the SAR bird. And just before, the rotors were going, the pilot's waiting for the approval for takeoff. A guy from the ship's company in his navy-blue dungarees, somebody down below decks came up to the flight deck, walked right passed me, and walked right out to our aircraft. It was obvious he had never been on the flight deck before. He just walked up to our aircraft, talked to our crewman who was looking down talking to him, and the guy jumped up into our helicopter. And I walked out there—because this is my launch. I'm in charge of this. I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm going home." "Well this aircraft isn't going home." "It's going to New Jersey. I know it is. You can't fool me." "No, it's not. They're not going to be going anywhere. They're coming back here." "Well I'm staying right here, and I'll go wherever they're going." It was obviously to me that he was very stressed. And the air boss saw this going on. And I don't remember if he said something like get that man out of that aircraft or what. But we coaxed him out of it and two corpsmen from down below in the ship's dispensary came and retrieved him. So that was memorable.

Sprague: And what ship was that on? Or maybe you don't remember.

Oxendorf: That was one of the—I think that was on the [USS] *America* but I can't say.

Sprague: No worries.

Oxendorf: Guys get to a breaking point. We all do somehow somewhere, we just can't handle something one day. And this young man couldn't. Some guys jump overboard. And then we all launch an aircraft and look for them. That happened a number of times. Something else that—

[End of OH2180.Oxendorf_file1]
[Beginning of OH2180.Oxendorf_file2]

Sprague: We are back in the interview with Eric Oxendorf. We had to pause there. There was an interruption by the library. We'll continue the conversation. This is part two of the Eric Oxendorf oral history.

Oxendorf: I think I was talking about interesting or unique situations. I did get caught stealing parts because we were a bunch of rowdy gypsies. And it was in the hangar deck and we needed a module out of an amplifier for the autopilot, which is the automatic stabilization equipment, ASE, on a helicopter. And the ships repair terminal down below couldn't fix ours. So I had my guy give me the bad one and I said, "I'll be right back." [Laughs] And I took the required tools and a flashlight and I went to an HC-1 Angel bird, which is attached to the ship all the time. There's always a helicopter with a ship these days and those days too. So HC-1 had their own detachment of two aircraft and I want to board one of them. And I'm in there stealing this part, this circuit board, and two guys came in and wanted to know what I was doing, and, you HC-7 scum, we'll take care of you. And I thought, "Oh God they're going to throw me overboard and beat me up," or something. [Sprague laughs] They took me down to their chief and they made a show of me, reprimanding me. And then the chief took me over to our officer in charge, one of our, the top pilots, and the chief demanded that I be put on captain's mast for a theft. So, I don't remember what transpired, but I had to go and sit down and the chief and the officer in charge talked. And the chief left and gave me a dirty look. Oh no, he didn't leave. Our officer in charge reprimanded me again right in front of him for doing this, even though we had priority. He did mention that I remember. But we should've gone through channels and do this right and don't endanger other guys. So that HC-1 chief left and our officer in charge waited for the door to close on the ready room and said, "Eric, just don't get caught." [Laughter] So that was—and I see him at reunions all the time. And he knows me and we laugh about it.

I would say the *Evans*, another incident that I was involved in was we had—again, I think we had three SAR birds out. And we had one bird left

and there was a radar contact moving closer to the carrier, but it was over the horizon. So they were sending a destroyer there to intercept it but they launched us to go. And there were not enough crewmen around so—I was a second crewman, so I jumped in the aircraft with another first crewman and a Navy photographer. And we just hit it full speed, three hundred feet above the water, going toward the bearing of where this ship was, or this contact was. And as we approached the crewman and I—the first crewman and I were looking out the side hatch to the direction we were going and sure enough there's a ship on the horizon. And we were there within three or four minutes. We were doing about 140 knots. And as we approached we could see it was a gunship, like maybe—not a destroyer escort size but next size smaller. And it was a gunship and it was painted not in US Navy colors. And as we approached and started to make a turn around it, I saw a Chinese flag on the fantail, the red flag with the gold stars.

[**00:05:07**]

And at the same time as we're passing by the ship, we were going agai—it was going one way, we were going the other and the photographer's taking pictures. And the first crewman said, "The crew is loading the deck guns." That was the first time I thought, "I'm going to get blown out of the water today." And sure enough, hustling all over the deck were sailors, jumping into the turrets. And these were like 40 mm—I believe they're 40 mm twin anti-aircraft guns. And they were fully manned. By the time we came around, they were fully manned, and those guns were trained right on us. And we made another lap, which was the longest lap I have ever had. I thought, "Don't even give these guys a chance." However, it didn't dawn on me that we weren't in hostile situation with China. It was just a gunboat turning their guns on us. The pilot said, "Did the photographer get the pictures?" "Yes, I did." "And we're out of here." [Laughter] And he went right down on the deck and did zigzag all the way back to the aircraft carrier. I really thought that we were going to get shot down that day. And all I did was volunteer to go on that. I wasn't scheduled or anything. So that's probably my other scariest thing.

Sprague: It's interesting that there weren't more encounters like that between the ships of the two Navies there, the North Vietnamese and the United States Navy. What was the—was there an agreement there? What was the situation there?

Oxendorf: Well, I only can relate that to something I learned years later when I actually went to China. In the 1990s I had a job in Hong Kong, and I went up to China for two weeks. And I found out that China and the North Vietnamese government did not like each other. And the island of Hainan, which is a large island in the Tonkin—north part of Tonkin Gulf is Chinese. And they were actually just patrolling. America actually lost an

E-3B surveillance aircraft, Orion, and the crew to that island. They were shot down, I remember, 1990s or so. They were doing their job patrolling their territorial waters and we were curious about what this blip was on the radar, the ship was anyways. We had to get debriefed later on after that flight. But I don't think the communist Chinese military wanted to even shoot at us. They were—we were just practice. And they weren't part of our war, the Vietnam American War.

Sprague: Anything else in terms of HC-7? More experiences?

Oxendorf: After I left in 1971, in May of '71, a couple of things. On a personal note, I felt like I was abandoning my family. I went into a deep depression that I had to leave those guys. How are they going to survive without me? I can fix that fricking airplane in a snap. The other guys, the younger guys, didn't have it figured out yet. So it really bothered me when I got home. It also bothered me when I got home that our society was so down on the Vietnam veteran. I actually did get spit on at San Diego Airport—

Sprague: Oh wow.

Oxendorf: —which totally surprised me. And I was suggested that I don't wear a uniform when I got home. And when I got home to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, my girlfriend, soon to be my wife was going to an antiwar rally. And I thought, "What the fuck?" [Laughter] "I'm going to wear my uniform and I'm going to join you with all my ribbons and everything." Anyways, any other things.

[**00:10:30**]

Sprague: That must have been tough.

Oxendorf: It was. I have a comment about that after I finish your question. After I left in May of '71, the war got really hot again. And I was still writing to the guys and I found out that there were—many rescues happened after I left. So they were really busy right up until 1974. Another personal note, I don't mind being open about this, that I had a lot of problems with society and sociability and attitude after I came back for years. And if it wasn't for the fact that I went into a creative field like photography and the arts, I might've really been lost and just been a homeless drunk on the streets. Finally, in early 2000s the Vietnam veteran was being recognized for the stress that we had to put up with. And when I think back of doing four detachments of a minimum of ninety-one days, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day working in a stressful combat situation being ready to be blown up by one of your own bombs that's on a deck, being sunk by enemy fire, whatever. You don't even think about that anymore. And I also felt sort of naked because every time I went into Da Nang I'd

have a weapon, a sidearm. When I got back to the States, I felt naked that I didn't have a sidearm. [Laughs] So I had a problem readjusting. And finally the VA [Veterans Affairs] helped me quite a bit and I needed the help. It just also took a lot for me to admit that. It was their intuitive training that spotted the problems I was having even though it was twenty-five years later. They could see I was having PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] problems. And it also caused two marriages and lost friends.

Sprague: So, HC-7, looking at a couple more pictures here. We have your [Oxendorf laughs] flight jacket. It's called a G-1 jacket—or exactly?

Oxendorf: Mm-hm.

Sprague: This is—we're looking at one of the objects, for the listener, from the Wisconsin Veterans Museum V2019.32.1. What can you tell me about HC-7 jacket? You've got the patch here. What are the three blue stars about? Do you happen to know by chance? I know that's a pretty esoteric question. Or tell me what you know about that patch.

Oxendorf: Yeah. Well the three-headed monster details the three missions that we had: search and rescue, vertical replenishment, and service delivery. God, I can't remember the name of that beast. It starts with an *M*, but it's a Greek mythology.

Sprague: Three-headed—I think it's dog or dragon—

Oxendorf: It's a dog, yeah three-headed dog.

Sprague: —that guards the gates of Hades.

Oxendorf: That's it.

Sprague: And I don't remember the name off the top of my head.

Oxendorf: And that's what we did. We charged the gates of Hades all the time. So I wore that also when I was in the Navy Reserve with VP-60 at Naval air Station Glenview in the late '70s. I became a P-3 flight engineer and second mechanic. Also, you know my nametag is on it. But one little thing is the leather pull on the zipper has a 50-yen piece that I got the first day I was in Japan back with HS-6. So I gave you my 50 yen piece [Sprague laughs] right there.

[**00:15:40**]

Sprague: So we owe you 50 yen, obviously.

Oxendorf: Yeah. Let's see 50 yen it's probably like thirty cents. [Laughs]

Sprague: Yeah, it's got to be a small amount. I'm just thinking about it.

Oxendorf: It's the last coin, from what I heard, the last coin that they had a hole in.

Sprague: Oh okay, interesting.

Oxendorf: It's minted that way with a hole in it.

Sprague: So, moving ahead—

Oxendorf: And I gave that to you because I don't fit in it anymore.

Sprague: Well I know how that goes. [Oxendorf laughs] And here's your helmet.

Oxendorf: Oh God.

Sprague: V.1992.53.1, helmet from Eric Oxendorf. So tell me about how that works.

Oxendorf: This is a pretty standard crew helmet. Wow I haven't seen this in a long time. Well there's a microphone that is long gone.

Sprague: So there should be a microphone on there somewhere but it's not on there?

Oxendorf: Yes, uh-huh a double-jointed microphone that you put in front of your mouth. I'm—wow.

Sprague: That's okay, just curious.

Oxendorf: Yeah, I just—we were all issued that if you were any close to crew. They basically were fitted for you with the pads inside. And it's not armor-plated. It's really for keeping noise out and the visors would slide down and shield your eyes or help you with increased night vision. Not like the helmets that they're using today with augmented reality and all that.

Sprague: Okay, and then the last one that we're going to look at today is the lighter from the *Kearsarge*. Tell me about that.

Oxendorf: One of the things I did was collect a lighter from every ship that I was attached to. And I have a box of them [Sprague laughs] and I don't smoke. I also have a collection of ashtrays from ports that I was in. The *Kearsarge*, so a lot of action in World—in Korea, the Korean conflict and Vietnam, but I forgot that you had this.

Sprague: Mm-hm we do. And for the listener we're looking at Wisconsin Veterans Museum object V.1992.53.8, a lighter that was donated by Eric. Okay, so let's pick back up again. You're dealing with the return to the States. And you said you actually did have someone spit on you in San Diego?

Oxendorf: I did. There were—when we got to Travis Air Force Base we were basically searched for weapons. They don't want you bringing home an AK-47. [Sprague laughs] Even though I had—

Sprague: Yeah that's okay. That's fine.

Oxendorf: Let's see, they search us and then we waited in the terminal. And there were probably fifty of us on that load. And we waited for an Air Force bus, picked us up, took us to San Francisco International from Travis. That was about a one, little over hour ride, I think.

[**00:20:03**]

And a thing I remember about that ride was the hillsides around San Francisco were green and there were Guernsey cows. And I thought, "I'm finally back in the United States." So there was an officer, lieutenant, or some low-grade officer was with—on the boat—or I'm sorry on the bus. And he stood up just before we arrived at the airport and he said, "You're going to now experience social unrest that's been happening in our country. And you've read about it in the newspapers. There will be demonstrators and they're going to have placards. And they're going to yell insulting things to you. They're going to try to be physical and get you to be physical. You are not allowed to respond in any way. You must maintain decorum and respect of your uniform. And get off the bus and walk directly to the terminal to the military holding area that is just inside the main doors." And he pulled up—the bus pulled up and opened the door and said, "Remember gentlemen, here we go—" There were women on there too and they're nurses. "Here we go. Just walk straight ahead through the doors." And he led and we one by one walked out and I remember a really tall guy with a sign on a stick yelling something at me. And I heard him spit. I don't know if it hit me or not. I didn't stop. I just kept walking. We all just walked single file right into the terminal. And that was that.

Interestingly enough, years later I went to Canada fishing and I met a guy that had a little lodge—fishing lodge in Canada that was a conscientious objector and he left the United States because he did not want to go to Vietnam. And I told him, "You missed a great party." [Laughter] I remember telling him that. And he said he actually regretted it, leaving his country, because he couldn't go back. I think they're absolved now but at that time he couldn't go back.

Sprague: So you get to San Francisco International, what happens after you're in the terminal?

Oxendorf: Oh I got, by now it was late afternoon and I believe the flight was a red-eye. And we are all—we were given I think chits for getting meals in the airport. But I do remember the flight left like 11:30 or midnight or something. And for me I was going to O'Hare to transfer if I so desired. So I called my then girlfriend and my sister who lived in Chicago. She had just gotten married a year before. And my girlfriend drove down from Milwaukee and my sister met her. And when we arrived at O'Hare, it was very early in the morning. The sun was coming up, just starting to come up. But the baggage area at O'Hare was abandoned. There was nobody around. And I didn't know where to meet them. I didn't know this whole process of commercial aviation. You know terminals, gates, and all that. I really never got into that stuff. So I was walking around the baggage area and I found my bag on a carousel and was walking along that long hallway past all those carousels. And there were two girls walking toward me. And as they got closer, I noticed that it was my sister and my girlfriend.

[**00:25:04**]

And they were giggling and talking, and they walked right by me. They walked right by me. I didn't say anything. I just—I was waiting for them to say welcome home or something. They walk right by me. They didn't even recognize me because I had such a dark tan from being near the equator for [laughs] all those months. And I had lost a lot of weight and I just didn't look the way they remembered me. So I went past them and I stopped and turned around and I said something to them like nice greeting or whatever. [Sprague laughs] And they both gave me a hug and went over to my sister and her husband's apartment and spent the day and got to talk and get back to know people.

Sprague: How did that go? You get back home, you're getting—are you leaving the military at that point and active duty? Or bring me up to speed there.

Oxendorf: Let's see, my girlfriend and I went back to Milwaukee and I had—on my orders I had, I don't know, forty-eight hours to return to Great Lakes Naval Station, not the training center but across the tracks at the naval station where the naval hospital is. And I was given a sheet for checking out and I had to go around like to the post office and the various places and check my name off and get me out of the military. And all that time I was wearing that leather jacket and my white hat and my blues.

Sprague: Oh wow.

Oxendorf: And I was all ready to leave, you know this probably took all morning. And I was ready to leave when the personnel chief told me that I'm wearing government material and I have to return it. So, "No I'm not. I was issued this jacket." "No, take the jacket off. You're not leaving here with that jacket. We can't allow that." And this was in a hallway outside of some lieutenant or captain's office and he heard this. And he called that chief in and said, "You let that guy go. He worked for that jacket." So the chief was actually really pretty nasty to me and I said, you know, "Good thing I'm getting out of the Navy." [Laughs]

Sprague: Yeah, this is your almost last day in the Navy?

Oxendorf: It is my last hour in the Navy.

Sprague: Oh my gosh.

Oxendorf: So they signed me out and once I got out to the parking lot I drove away and I felt like a weight was off my shoulders. However, I was still feeling a great deal of depression about the boys I had left just five days earlier. You know what are they up to? What are they doing? What missions are going out? And I think that most of us do that. It's withdrawal. So I went home and the Navy gives you a year—or the military gives you a year to go to your dentist and get your teeth all fixed up and I did that and they paid for it. I went to the VA and did some testing to see what had happened to my personality [laughs] and to see what I should do. And that was a battery of three days of testing. That was really very informative. The final decision was that I should probably be self-employed because I have a problem with authority. No surprise. And then that I should be in a creative field so that I can allow myself the unrestricted growth that maybe a job, an eight to five job, would cause for me. That was about all that there was. They were really very good at the VA at that time. It was actually a separate building.

[**00:30:06**]

And then soon after that I also got married to my girlfriend and for about a year she kept telling me I had to go back to the VA and talk to them because there was something wrong. Something was going on in my head. I was actually fairly violent, and I was drinking heavily. And I did no drugs when I was overseas because a lot of my guys did and I thought, "Well somebody's got to have their head on their shoulders." But when I got back, I started smoking pot and drinking and that was my therapy. Now, years later I find out that that was pretty common for all of us Vietnam veterans. And so I went to the VA Hospital and they had some ridiculous excuse of why I was angry and I left there frustrated. And years later I was asked to come in for an interview and that's when they told me

I should really be going to a PTSD seminar and get some help, which was really excellent.

Sprague: Tell me a little bit about what you did after you leave the military, occupationally what you went on to do.

Oxendorf: I got out in May. I weighed 165 pounds when I got out and in the course of one summer I put on 30 pounds because I was drinking so much and I was eating terrible. It wasn't a regimented high-starch Navy shipboard meal with meat, you know starch and proteins. So I put on a lot of weight and then I enrolled in a technical college just for some pre-college courses. And those were really fairly boring for me, English and simple math. And I thought, "Gee I know all this stuff. I've actually used it in real life." And I found myself being the oldest guy in the class of course at age twenty-three and a half. [Laughs] So in the meantime I had had that VA testing, personality and professional testing. So I decided to enroll in an art school. I did a little research and found out about three really good art schools in the country. And one of them was right in Milwaukee, Layton School of Art. And I submitted an application to all three of these schools: Layton, Rochester Institute of Technology, and something in Pennsylvania or Carolinas.

Anyways, I got accepted to all three of them with a little portfolio that I put together which were mostly pictures I took in Vietnam. So I decided to go to Layton, stay where my family was. I went there and got a degree and became a—well I found out about a job as a medical photographer at a local hospital. I applied and got the job. So I was a medical photographer for a year and it was very high paying and I learned an awful lot about the body and about medicine and about the medical practice and also hospital administration, [laughs] Catholic hospital administration. Well I quit there after a year and two months or so and started my own business and became happily self-employed, the best boss I ever had. And I also got my pilot's license and I started flying people around the state. So I was more of a pilot. I was crew in the Navy. But I actually got my FAA instrument license on my own not even with the GI Bill, just I wanted to fly. Bought an airplane, cargo plane, and was a pilot.

[**00:35:17**]

Sprague: Wow. What kind of cargo plane?

Oxendorf: Cessna 206, six passenger but it could carry a lot of garbage. They say if you can close the doors on it, it's full. [Sprague laughs]

Sprague: So it sounds like to me for you being self-employed and doing more of your own thing, being your own boss, worked better for you?

Oxendorf: It did. I was a paperboy when I was in high school. I liked that. I'm self-disciplined; I'm thoughtful about my actions, generally. I just found that I was self-motivated enough that I could succeed at what I was doing. And, actually I've had—met some great people. I've met presidents. I've met all kinds of people on all walks of life. I've gotten a lot of kudos for my work. And I've flown some interesting people on the plane.

Sprague: Tell me about any of the relationships you continue to have with HC-7 and other veterans.

Oxendorf: We get a monthly newsletter from one of our guys that was a E-4 jet mechanic, name's Ron Milam. He lives in Montana. And he has taken it upon himself since 1974 to coordinate and gather all the information he can about our squadron and the detachments, about the flights, about the logs, about our orders. And he would bring a lot of this information to our reunions which are every other year. Now this is 2019. Two thousand and twenty in April, we're having our last reunion because a lot of guys are dying. Most of us are somewhat in some way are affected by Agent Orange because we were in country all the time. We just weren't on ships. We were in Monkey Mountain, Da Nang, all around the country. So when we get together, he has folders and he'll have—or three-ring binders. One would be just the rescues and the reports for 1968. One would be just cartoons. One would be letters that we wrote back home and then were given back to us and then we'd give it to Ron so it's written text about what we were doing. He's got tons of information about us. And what's going to happen with all of that is it's going to the Naval Air Museum in Pensacola for the archives.

Sprague: Very good. Could you spell his last—Ron's last name for me.

Oxendorf: M-I-L-A-M.

Sprague: Okay, thank you. Very impressive.

Oxendorf: Yeah and we have a website that tells about rescues, all the personnel and all that. Personally, I'm in touch with Ron Milam. Our storekeeper that always appeared at the right time with the right part, Ernie, he lives in Boston. Good friend, Don Flynn who was in a training squadron his first half of his Navy career and one day was thrown into a set of orders that sent him right over to Vietnam to HC-7. And I got called down to the ready room to our chief and chief said, "Eric, we got a new AT coming in," aviation electronics technician. "His name's Flynn and he's never been aboard a ship apparently so would you take care of him for a day or two." [Sprague laughs]

[**00:40:03**]

So I met him at the COD, which is a carrier onboard delivery aircraft that brings parts and personnel. I met him and he got off of that airplane and looked at that flight deck. I think it was on the *USS Constellation*. [Laughs] And his eyes were just popping out and he said, "I don't know what's going on here. Don't walk away from me." [Laughs] And he and I have been close friends ever since. And I showed him all about a ship and a flight deck and about safety and what we were doing and that kind of thing. Let's see is there anybody else? Well a couple of the pilots. Our maintenance officer was really strict. He was my dad in the Navy. He was strict.

Sprague: And do you happen to remember his name?

Oxendorf: Charles Aikens. He actually got out as a full four-board captain. He was a mustanger, you know he enlisted right up, Charlie Aikens. We go to these reunions and don't recognize anybody anymore because we've all filled out. But we all—we talk on our Facebook page. We're all sending in pictures and kind of keep it alive. Although that's sort of dwindling because the two keepers of the Facebook page are not doing well.

Sprague: Before we started the interview, you mentioned off cuff kind of how being in the military and serving, how that changed your life. Can you tell me more about that?

Oxendorf: Yes, if I can put these into a succinct order. I would say that the discipline that the military provides you with is harmless, totally harmless. It's for good living. If you're in the military or not. You make up your bed every night—or every morning. You get a schedule going down. You respect people for their job hoping that they know their job and they'll do their job well. You don't just go into it saying this guy's an idiot. I can tell right by looking at him. You don't do that. I have respect for other veterans, which I always did, but you appreciate them even more. Because that might look like an old man sitting across the table from you, but he probably was in the Battle of the Bulge and saw things that he won't even tell you about. So that's some of the things the military has done. Emotionally it helped me grow up. Not instantly but very directly. I just didn't slug along in life and when I was thirty-five, I thought I'd get married and have kids just because that's what you do. I was thoughtful about what I was doing. On the danger side, I felt like I was Teflon coated. [Laughs] I really took a lot of chances. I went skydiving. I learned to fly. I flew myself four thousand plus hours. I took chances that most normal people wouldn't, just little things. But that also fed my ego and it fed my creative desires to get results that are above ordinary into extraordinary. I just—I liked it.

I think personally that every young man and woman at that very bizarre age of seventeen to twenty-four you don't know what's going on. You think you do but you don't. And no one's going to tell you because you're not to be told anything by anybody at that age. It is a good solution to a lot of mental dilemmas that you might be having at that age so that you learn how to live a good and proper life. And as far as the fear of death, you can get hit by a car going across the street. I had an accident on the way here today. The car I hit did a double u-ey[??], just spun around twice. I could've killed a person. They're okay but you never know. And being in the military is not that dangerous.

[**00:45:55**]

Sprague: And so what motivated you to do this interview today?

Oxendorf: [Laughs] That's a good question and that's probably the first question I asked myself before I even contacted you. I'm getting older and I'm kind of cleaning up my life as physical cleaning, you know like the flight jacket and helmet and things. I'm finding pictures of friends when we were young and I'm mailing it back to them saying, "Remember these days?" I also hear the stories of other veterans that were in other conflicts or even situations or they may not have even left the city, but they were in a Cold War Nike missile site. What was that like? I've done work for the US government to photograph a Nike missile site that is defunct and closed outside of Detroit. That was a big deal in the Cold War. And before they bulldozed it I got hired to photograph it, which I was really complimented by the job. So, you really don't get a good view of the world and of the planet and of your fellow man unless you open your eyes. And that's what the military kind of did to me. Also, with the help of my parents that were very—my mother was an artist, my father was rigid and strict. That was a good combination for me to learn.

Sprague: Did we miss anything today that you'd like to cover? It's a big question I know.

Oxendorf: Well one thing that just popped in my head was I was—I'm no longer married to that woman that I met when I was in the service. But I've married a very good friend's sister who I've known for thirty years. And we just decided, "We always got along. Let's just get together." And she lived in Florida and I went down there and lived with her for a couple of months just before we got married. And I kept seeing Navy planes fly overhead. And it just really got to me one day. I was sixty-four years old and I drove over to NAS Jacksonville where I went to A School. And I told them I want to see the recruiter and the guard said, "Really?" [Laughs] Because I had heard that they're looking for experienced flight engineers on a P-3 aircraft in the reserve unit. So I went to the recruiter at

the reserve squadron. And he said, “Gee we’d love to have you, but you expire in one year. We don’t take you over sixty-four because you’ll be sixty-five and we got to let you go. We don’t want to put you through all of this for one year and then you’re gone.” So, I really tried to get back in after a complete career as a pilot and a photographer.

Sprague: Wow, interesting.

Oxendorf: And my best friend, Greg Randall, who I went to high school with. We joined the Navy within a month of each other. He was a flight engineer on P-3s. And that’s what I used to do on weekends. I would get on a Navy plane from North Island out of San Diego and fly to Moffett Field out of San Francisco. And then I’d go flying with his crew in a P-3 Orion. Not like I had enough flying in helicopters and stuff during the week. I would go up and spend it with my good friend. And he and I [laughs] would fly all over the Pacific and I’d go home on a Sunday afternoon.

[**00:50:18**]

Sprague: Wow.

Oxendorf: And he and I are still good friends and he still flies with me once in a while.

Sprague: Well, unless you have anything else.

Oxendorf: No, I think I’ve talked enough.

Sprague: Okay, well thank you for your time today and thank you for your service.

Oxendorf: Of course.

Sprague: Take care.

[End of OH2180.Oxendorf_file2]

[End of interview]