

Conversation
with
Bill Hembree

at
1547 Harbor Oaks Road
Jacksonville, FL 32207
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Recorded and Transcribed
by
Lyn Corley

TAPE 1 SIDE A

LYN-Today is May 26, 2017 and I am Lyn Corley and we are at my home here on Harbor Oaks and I have the honor today of talking to Bill Hembree. I had heard about Bill. He seems to be a legend locally. He has written a book he has just given me. It's called "A Life of Adventure – Living as an Eagle versus an Oyster". I look forward to reading that.

He attends a group of veterans who meet the first Thursday, every week, for breakfast. I went looking for Bill yesterday and he did not attend. I found his phone number and he agreed to come for an interview today. I thank you Bill for coming over. He lives on the Westside of Jacksonville.

Bill has a career that goes back longer than anyone we have talked to that concerns Cecil. He has a big life to tell I am going to let him tell us about the beginning of his life and the beginning of his Naval career and his first time at Cecil.

So, Bill, you were born where?

BILL-I was born in Hog Jaw Valley, Jackson County in North Alabama.

LYN-What is that near? What's a major city near Hog Jaw?

BILL-There's not one. Chattanooga is about thirty miles away. I joined the Navy the day I was seventeen, on my seventeenth birthday.

LYN-Now where did you join? Did you have to go to Chattanooga?

BILL-I had to go to Memphis because I wanted in the V-5 program.

LYN-Tell us what that was.

BILL-V-5 was the aviation branch of the V-12 program which was a program designed by the Navy to send you to college for two years and then to active duty. In that two years you didn't spend two calendar years. It took about one calendar year because you had to take nineteen subject hours each semester. So, you got it quick. I really grew up in the Navy.

LYN-Now how did you know about the program? Was there a recruiter telling you that? How did you find out?

BILL-No, there weren't any recruiters. I don't know, I knew everything about aviation because I had my first flight when I was twelve years old.

LYN-Tell us about that.

BILL-Well, my uncle Isaac Shiloh knew I was interested in aviation. He talked to a friend of his who was an aerobatics pilot flying the UPF-7 at the airport. He talked him into taking us up, the two of us in an open cockpit with one seat. So, we went up and we did aerobatics and all that stuff and from then on, I was totally sold on that. That was twelve years old. After that just every day I did everything that had to do with aviation if I could arrange it.



UPF-7

LYN-So what did you get to do? Did you find other people that let you fly with them?

BILL-No, I didn't do any real flying.

LYN-You were just waiting on your time in the Navy.

BILL-Until I got to be seventeen and then I took a couple of lessons because I knew I was going to join the Navy when I was seventeen. So, I did. I joined the Navy and it was the best decision I ever made in my whole life. I absolutely can say that. When you join the Navy, you wind up with a commanding officer who takes care of you like you were a child of his.

TAPE 2 SIDE A

LYN-We had a little tape failure. When you joined you said that you had a commanding officer who takes care of you just like you are his child.

BILL-That's his job. The secondary job was to, help the associate, an assistant commanding officer who is called "executive officer" and his job is to take care of the men. Then you have a

division leader whose job is to take care of his men. So, you really wind up with about five or six fathers and mothers.

LYN-I've never heard anyone talk about it that way. That's a wonderful concept.

BILL-That's exactly how it happens. You grow up in the Navy. I stayed in for fourteen years.

LYN-Well, after Memphis, you enlisted in Memphis on the V-5 program. What happened after that?

BILL-I went home and they sent me to Jackson, Mississippi to the University of Mississippi and I was there for a year, like I said, but I got two years college credits for it.

LYN-What year are we talking about?

BILL-We're talking about 1945, '46, and '47.

LYN-So the end of the war.

BILL-Right at the end of the war. In fact, I tell people that I signed up in June of 1945 and the Japs surrendered in August as soon as they heard I had signed up.

LYN-Well, thank you very much. (Laugh)

BILL-So I followed the end of World War II.

LYN-So you go to Jackson, Mississippi and what kind of degree did they give you.

BILL-Scientific. In fact, I majored in mathematics. I have a degree in mathematics and even though I don't know much about it now I sure knew a lot about it then. In fact, I only took one course that really stymied me and that was "the theory of partial equations". (Laugh) That was tough, I tell you.

LYN-So, we had talked about, off tape, you cram a lot, like two years into one year. You take nineteen course credits.

BILL-Nineteen hours.

LYN-So you spent that one year knowing that you were really following a dream that was going to get you where you wanted to be in Naval aviation.

BILL-Oh, yeah. In fact, they used that to eliminate some people because before they sent you to school they sent you to what was known as, I've forgotten the particular word but it was flight training in a ----with four wings and two seats to just see if you could possibly have the ability to become a Naval aviator. They eliminated a lot of people at that point and sent them to the fleet as

a seaman. That's what you were and that's what you stayed as the whole time you were in flight training.

LYN-You had a goal and you were determined you were going to fly.

BILL-Oh, yeah. There were, I think there were three thousand V-5 students.

LYN-Around America?

BILL-Oh, yeah.

LYN-So there were different universities to attend.

BILL-Oh, yeah and if you didn't make it you went to the fleet as I said as a seaman so most people tried to make it but they eliminated something like eighty percent of the people who joined because they knew they had a lot of people coming and they knew they could just take what they called the "cream of the crop".

LYN-You were going to be the "cream". So, you graduated with a college degree.

BILL-No, not until years later. I went in and served during my tour there and I was regular Navy. Then the Navy ran out of money in 1946, right after the war they took a lot of the money. So, I went back to school. I loved flying and I figured out the best way to keep flying was to have a lot of money and own your own airplane. So, I decided to study dentistry which my granddad had been a dentist for years so I became a dentist. I studied undergraduate and then I graduated in 1947.

LYN-Where was that?

BILL-University of Alabama School of Dentistry in Birmingham. I bought and used and co-owned seventeen different airplanes so aviation has really been my whole life almost.

LYN-Tell us about your first airplane. How did you find it and buy it, what was it?

BILL-Well, it was three as a matter of fact.

LYN-Three at one time?

BILL-Yeah, three at one time for crop dusting. There was a Stearman and a Piper Cub and a Aeronca. The Aeronca was not for dusting. It was for looking and you know flying over and evaluating things. The Stearman was for dusting and the other one was for spraying with chemicals. That was the first three airplanes I owned.



Stearman crop-dusting a field

LYN-So you were already a dentist when you bought the planes? Had you already finished dental school and practicing dentistry when you bought the planes?

BILL-Oh, no, no, no. I was in the middle of dental school and that's how I paid for dental school. I was crop dusting and then somewhere along the line there I got married and had a son. I taught him to fly but unfortunately, he did what most young people do, experimented with drugs and wound up being in an automobile accident as a passenger on the right side, no seat belt so he hit the windshield and broke his neck. The other kid managed to survive but he was in pretty bad shape.

LYN-What year was that?

BILL-1951 I believe.

LYN-Tell us your wife's name.

BILL-Janice.

LYN-You were crop dusting and being a student and we had talked off-tape about how dangerous crop dusting can be. Tell us about what made you get into that. Was that because you needed to earn money and you could be flying?

BILL-You've got it. Flying and money. (Laugh) I wanted something I could do with flying but I also had something to make money and crop dusting is very, very lucrative business if you don't get killed. The first year I dusted in Arkansas, sixteen pilots were killed crop dusting. That was

nearly one every day during the crop dusting season. It is a dangerous business because you are overloaded, flying low, a lot of trees, and there's nothing safe about it.

LYN-Was it exhilarating for you?

BILL-I didn't think it was exhilarating but it was challenging because it challenged all of your skills. You are operating off a small grass field which frequently was muddy and you are overloaded and you are really dangerous business.

LYN-So you were contracted to actual farmers?

BILL-Oh, yeah. You went out to see the farmers or they came to see you, one or the other when they had a lot of cotton boll weevils and worms. They needed it and they were willing to pay for it.

LYN-So that was mostly your crop? Cotton?

BILL-Oh, yeah. That's the most thing that you dusted back then.

LYN-So when you finished dental school you still had your planes but you bought different planes it sounds like.

BILL-Well, I didn't have one of them because I crashed one of them. (Laugh)

LYN-Tell us about the crash.

BILL-Well, I hit, I was pulling up over a big cypress tree and you know you see these big cypress, they have these dead limbs sticking up. They aren't dead. They are very much alive. If you hit one you are down. I hit one and it crashed almost head on into the ground and broke my jaw and did some other damage but it just is a very challenging business to say the least.

LYN-But you continued the business even after that.

BILL-Oh, yeah. I was back flying within, probably within two weeks. Yeah because I had the airplanes, the other two airplanes and I needed the money.

LYN-When you finished dental school then you went into practice where?

BILL-The first place I went into practice was, where did I go first? I can't remember where I practiced first in dentistry. Most of my time in dentistry was in Birmingham.

LYN-So the military came back in your life?

BILL-They never really left it.

LYN-How was that?

BILL-Well, I was in the Naval Reserve and I used to fly on the week-ends and I would challenge myself doing aerobatics and taking long trips, planning them, navigating them, and that sort of thing. So, I stayed in the Reserves then during the Korean War they decided to recall that Reserve squadron that I was in in Birmingham.

So, I went in to tell the dean that I was being recalled and he said, “No, don’t worry. We’ll get you deferred and you can finish dental school then you can go in as a dentist.” Well, I looked him in the eye and I said, “Dr. Vulcar, they trained me and spent a lot of money on me and I’ve had a wonderful life doing it and I would not feel comfortable if I didn’t fulfil my duty and go with the squadron to active duty.” He said, “Well, OK.” I said, “I have only one request of you and that is I finish my freshman year in another week and I would like to have you guarantee me that you will admit me to the sophomore class when I get back, if I get back.” He agreed.

So, that was how that worked out so I went to the Korean War. I spent time in two wars and acquired thirteen thousand hours in the air crop dusting and military and all that stuff. That’s a lot of time.

LYN-That’s a lot of time. When you were called back where did you go? When you were called back during the Korean War, where were you.

BILL-Well, the first place I went was Norfolk. Everybody goes to Norfolk it seems in the Navy.

LYN-We did.

BILL-I was assigned to a squadron and transferred into jets, F-9, F-5’s. That’s the straight wing model. But I went into, there’s a little base south of Corpus Christi and I can’t remember the name of it now. I went there and lived there for about a year. I was in two wars and never saw any combat. Never fired in anger. I fired lots of rounds, lots of bullets but not in anger and nobody ever shot at me that I know of. (Laugh)

LYN-You were in Norfolk and you trained in Texas. Were you actually stationed in Norfolk?

BILL-They sent me to Norfolk then they sent me to Jacksonville for training in the F-9F-5. I spent most of...

LYN-What year was that when you got to Jacksonville?

BILL-I’m not sure.

LYN-It would be in the ‘50’s since it was Korean conflict.

BILL-Late ‘50’s yeah.

LYN-Did, I ask this same question of others, “what did you think of Jacksonville when you arrived?”

BILL-I loved Jacksonville because I had a lot of my other flight training here.

LYN-Let's go back to that first then.

BILL-The first thing that comes to mind is that every time I cross the bridges I think of the time I checked out in PVY's here in Jacksonville and landing in the river. We did that time and time again. We have the ramps out at the Naval Air Station and they pushed the airplane into the water, you cranked the engines and then you would take off down the river or up the river depending on where the wind was blowing. There were lots and lots of airplanes in Jacksonville at that time.



Navy PVY

LYN-At that time there were three Naval Air Stations, is that right?

BILL-Well there was Jacksonville Naval Air Station, Cecil Field, and Mayport.

LYN-Mayport was a station at that time?

BILL-Yeah, but it was primarily used for bringing the air craft carriers in. You fly the airplanes into Mayport and then they would load them on with a crane onto the ship. Then you would go to the ship.

LYN-So you arrived in Jacksonville and the first time were you station at Cecil that first time you came?

BILL-No the first time I came I was stationed at NAS.

LYN-What kind of planes were those?

BILL-That's what I was saying, I was flying the PVY's. It was a plane that lands on the water and also on land. It has wheels and the wheels retract so it will land on the water then. It's a very interesting airplane and a lot of fun to fly because the way you landed it out in the river was you would slow it down, slow it down, slow it down and get down about twelve feet above the water and then cut all the power off, pull the stick all the way back as far as you could, and it would stall into the water. The water would go everywhere.

LYN-Oh my goodness. Then how did you get out? You came through the cockpit and into the water to get out of the plane?

BILL-Oh you had to go, you couldn't do it in the cockpit except in an emergency you had to push the emergency door off but that would ruin the airplane.

LYN-How did you get out of the plane when you were on the water?

BILL-You walked back into the back part and there was a door back there that you would get off and they would pick you up with a boat.

LYN-I've never heard of this.

BILL-Oh really. (Laugh) The Navy had lots of amphibian airplanes at that time. They had the PVY, the PVM. PVM's I never flew.

LYN-What was the difference in those?

BILL-The PVM was much bigger and faster and newer and it was, had, well it was just almost all boat but it was really designed quite well. It had a longer range than the PVY. The PVY was the primary one during World War II but the PVM came out late World War II.

LYN-So you were at NAS and on these planes, I've never heard about, I'm fascinated with the PVY's, so you trained in case you were going to be deployed and in case there was a need for your service. If there had been a crisis, what kind of situation would the PVY's be used in you think?

BILL-Well, they were submarine hunters. The interesting thing about it is the Navy, right at the end of World War II, they decided that a Naval aviator should be able to fly every airplane the Navy had. So, they trained us in PVY's and like I said, PVM's I never got to. TBM's, torpedo bombers, dive bombers, and fighter planes. You trained in all of those.

LYN-So was all that training taking place at NAS.

BILL-NAS but Cecil was used quite a bit. They had about four or five different outlying fields that we used for what we called "bonce drill" which was where the landing signal officer was

training you go to aboard the carrier. We had Cecil Field, we had one that was up north of Cecil Field I can't think of it right now.

LYN-Whitehouse?

BILL-Yeah, that's it. How did you know that?

LYN-I've interviewed a few aviators but remember we were stationed at Cecil also.

BILL-Then at Green Cove Springs. We had all these bases that we used to fly in and out of.

LYN-So you were practicing bombing also?

BILL-Dive bombing, torpedo bombing, and fighter tactics. You had to do them all.

LYN-So the first time you came to Jacksonville, what year do you think it was?

BILL-The first time I came to Jacksonville was, let's see, 1946 I guess.

LYN-That was at NAS?

BILL-Yeah.

LYN-So, you are at NAS but Cecil is already open. It opened in the '40's.

BILL-Oh, yeah.

LYN-And Mayport opened in the '40's.

BILL-They were all in big use too.

LYN-So you all used all the bases then. So, can you remember your first impression of Cecil?

BILL-Wonderful because it had two runways that were parallel, north run and south runways and those were real safety factors and speed factors because you can take off, have people taking off and landing at the same time. So, I loved the field from the flying stand-point. I lived out there for a little while. I didn't much like that. It was barracks and you had long walks and all that stuff.

LYN-A very isolated base. That's what I thought the first time I came there was that it was a long way from there.

BILL-That's right, even by automobile it was a long way.

LYN-Yes it was.

BILL-It's quicker now.

LYN-At that time it was not actually part of Jacksonville. I don't know if you know this but it was the town of Otis. They took over the town of Otis to build Cecil Field. Had you ever heard that?

BILL-No, I don't remember the town of Otis to be honest.

LYN-Well, I think it was gone by the time you got there because it was Cecil Field. There were many, many towns in Duval County and now we are one town, one city of Jacksonville. So, you stayed here. You learned every plane out there and how long did you stay in Jacksonville?

BILL-The first time I was here probably six months and the next time I was here was longer because I went in that squadron that was based here.

LYN-So after your six months here that first time what happened then?

BILL-That's when they sent me to Corpus Christi. I flew down there for a long time, a good while.

LYN-What were you flying then?

BILL-We were flying F-8 Bearcats.



Navy F-8 Bearcat

LYN-What were they?

BILL-Fighter planes. In fact, they were the best fighter plane used during World War II. They could climb real well. You could actually dive it beyond the speed of sound but it tended to shake and come apart if you did that so it wasn't a good idea. (Laugh)

LYN-Well, tell me about landing on carriers.

BILL-Well, it requires a tremendous amount of skill and being careful. It's just a wonderfully exciting thing to do because you slow down to what is pretty much the landing speed like in the Bearcat the landing speed was about sixty miles an hour.

So, you slow down to about sixty-five or seventy, just barely above stalling speed, put the landing gear down, put the flaps down, and you come up alongside the carrier like that and then you go across and break in front of it and come in what we call a "downwind leg" because the carrier is going into the wind. Then you come around and here you set it up just about five miles an hour above stalling speed but with power on so you've got a "power approach". It's real cocked up so you have a hard time looking out so you have to have the canopy open.

LYN-Since the nose is so far up.

BILL-Yeah, and then you pick up the landing signal officer and he gives you the signals. Roger means you are OK, if he does it like this it means you're too slow, if he does it like that it means you are too fast, and if he raises them up above his head you're too fast and if things are really hairy and he doesn't want you to land on the carrier he waves them across like that.

LYN-Waves you off.

BILL-Wave off. All those signals, the "wave-off" is mandatory, the landing cut is mandatory, and the others are obligatory. In other words, you would be wise to use the other signals he is giving you but those three are mandatory. You've got to do it when he tells you to.

LYN-Because he knows you are ready to catch that wire.

BILL-He is in charge of your airplane really at that point. That's really what it amounts to. The object is to pick up the number two or three wire maybe even the four and if you get to one you came close to hitting the back of the ship, the stern. If you pick up number eight you're into the barrier so you're got to, each one is spaced about, I would say they are probably twenty feet apart or something like that. They are raised off the deck by a little about eight to ten inches so your tail hook catches that cable across the deck and stops you.

LYN-The first time you landed, scary?

BILL-Yeah, I'd say so. We were flying SNJ's which is the AT-6 in the Air Force. The SNJ is a two-seater plane and they would have an instructor in the front and you're in the back but you're making the whole approach so you make the approach. The instructor only takes over in case of emergency. That's your first carrier landing. You make six carrier landings like that.

LYN-Where were you?

BILL-Pensacola.

LYN-The Lexington? Was that the Lexington that you were landing on?

BILL-No I don't think I ever operated off of the Lexington. I can't remember now. We had a bunch of air craft carriers back then. I operated off ten different ones at one time or another. That included Korea and World War II and in between.

LYN-When you landed were you scared or was that exhilarating?

BILL-Oh, exhilarating plus the fact that it's also physical because you are slammed into shoulder straps when that tail hook catches you. It stops the airplane in roughly fifty feet. So, you can imagine going from close to a hundred miles an hour to zero in fifty feet. You couldn't do it in an automobile, at least I don't think so.

LYN-Well if you hit the wall and lived. You were in Texas and then what happened in your carrier? What happened after Corpus Christi? What did you do next in the Navy.

BILL-I guess I was assigned to one of the squadrons back in Jacksonville, VF-91. It used to be, I think it was VF-9A when I joined but they changed the name to 91 very shortly.

LYN-What were you flying then?

BILL-Bearcats.

LYN-That's at NAS but you're still practicing with Cecil.

BILL-Oh, yeah. We used Cecil to practice landings and take-offs.

LYN-You considered it a great base.

BILL-Oh, yeah, I thought it was just absolutely wonderful. Nobody particularly wanted to be stationed there but they all liked flying there.

LYN-That's kind of the words, I was wondering if anybody was going to say. I think the isolation was part of it.

BILL-Oh yeah, that was a big part of it because the quarters were not that great and it was a long way to everything. The quarters where we lived was a long way down to the flight line and so on. It just was not a good place to be stationed.

LYN-That's what I've been thinking but you are the first one to be honest enough to say that.

BILL-It was wonderful for the flying but other than that it wasn't too good.

LYN-And it didn't disturb the population around because there was no population out there.

BILL-There wasn't anything around it. You're right. Nothing.

LYN-When we came there were a few trailers and some bars and that was about it. It's still pretty isolated. So, after you left Jacksonville, how long did you stay here?

BILL-Let's see, I got, you know I was here two or three or four times so it's kind of hard to keep them all separated. I'd say I probably spent a couple of years in Jacksonville total training.

LYN-Where else did you serve?

BILL-Like I said Texas, Norfolk-everybody spends some time in Norfolk always, and aboard the carriers.

LYN-Tell us what carriers you have been on.

BILL-Well, I was on a, I can't remember all of them. If I had my log book, I should have scratched around and found it.

LYN-That would have been interesting. So, you were on the Saratoga probably at some point.

BILL-I never operated much off the Saratoga, no, the one I operated off of the most times was the Wasp and the Philippine Sea. The Philippine Sea was commissioned in '47 and we were one of the primary flight groups that operated off the Philippine Sea for a good long while. I think, did I? (looking for Wasp ball cap)



USS WASP



USS PHILIPPINE SEA

LYN-Your cap fell off the table.

BILL-I was wondering which one I had. I've got a Philippine Sea and a Wasp. That is the Wasp.

LYN-It's CV-18. Is that right?

BILL-Yeah, CV-18.

LYN-That was a while back. Did you ever serve on the Forrestal?

BILL-Forestall, that was an angled deck wasn't it? I don't think so. I spent a fair amount of time on some CVE's.

LYN-What is that?

BILL-It's an escort carrier and they only had about twenty-five airplanes on them and they were very short deck, straight deck, and you had to really be careful on operating off the CVE's. They were cargo ships originally designed as cargo ships and then put a flight deck over the top of it. They built a ton of them because they were used primarily for anti-submarine patrol for the carriers.

LYN-Well, what did you think about the submarines? You never wanted that duty?

BILL-I went on one or two of them, not long, but when they were in port. I would, I would resign before I would go there. I don't like submarines and I don't much care for helicopters. Helicopters are so dangerous because they have so many moving parts. Everything is moving you know and so I really like the straight wing prop driven fighters. That was my favorite.

LYN-So you were on those carriers and you flew a lot of different planes because you had to train on all the planes and then did you ever get back to dental school?

BILL-Well, not while I was in the Navy except the Reserves.

LYN-How long did you stay active duty? I guess that's the question. Do you remember? After they called you up?

BILL-I was in active duty in June of 1945, June 19th of 1945 and I went back to dental school in '48 I think or '49.

LYN-But you were still in the reserves.

BILL-Oh yeah, I stayed in the reserves and active duty for fourteen years.

LYN-So, you finally graduated from dental school and you were around Birmingham as a dentist and stayed in reserves. When you were in the reserves what was the local base? Where did you report to?

BILL-Birmingham.

LYN-Oh, that's the name of the base?

BILL-Well they had a, Birmingham is a big, big airport and the Navy had a little piece of it.

LYN-At the airport.

BILL-So that was where we were. We were flying F-6's and F-8's.



Navy F-6 Hellcat

LYN-By the time Vietnam came around were you in the reserves?

BILL-Yes.

LYN-Did you think you would be called up?

BILL-I still had my reserve commission but no they didn't call me for that. My brother is a Naval aviator also and I seriously considered volunteering and then going back in but then you know it's so stupid for us to be over there in the first place that I said, "No". I don't want it so I never did spend any time in Vietnam.

LYN-So let's go back to all these planes you owned. You had your first three, your crop dusting. What was your next plane to own?

BILL-Well, I think somewhere along the line there I bought a Super Stearman. The Stearman actually had a two hundred and twenty-five horse engine. The Super Stearman had a six hundred and fifty horse power engine and would carry twice the load of crop dusting material so you could make more money with it. There was also, it required a little longer runway because it was a heavier airplane.

From that I went to, well in the Navy I went from primary trainers, what the Air Force calls AT-6 we called SNJ's. So, then I went from that to Hellcats and I flew the Hellcats for a while and we swapped those out and got Bearcats. I flew mostly the Bearcats but I loved them. Then as I told you they made us train as dive bombers so I flew the Sky Raider which was a big single engine dive bomber that was a superb airplane and would carry almost as much as a B-17. That was really surprising. You could carry a heavy load of bombs with it and then as I said I did various other things with the PVY's and so on. That was about it.



Navy SNJ

LYN-You privately owned four planes or did you continue buying planes?

BILL-Oh, I privately owned seventeen.

LYN-That's what I thought you said earlier. Tell me about your other planes. Were they all for business or were some just for pleasure?

BILL-Some were for pleasure. Most were business but some were for pleasure like the, I owned what is known as "Staggerwing".

LYN-Tell me about Staggerwing.

BILL-I owned two of those. They are the most wonderful airplanes and they were built for just private flying to carry people. They had an eighteen hundred horse power engine and would cruise at about a hundred and sixty miles an hour. It would climb real high if you wanted to go high. It would go up to twenty-five thousand feet. It had a super-charged engine and they made, I can't remember the numbers now but they made a bunch of them that were not quite as fast and they made the last one was the "five". I owned the five for lots of years. I flew it to South America, Central America, all over the Bahamas. I flew it out to California and back. It was just a wonderful airplane because it was fast and it could go high and it had five different fuel tanks, one in each wing, that's four and then the main one. So, it would carry enough fuel, I think you could get twelve hours out of it. But you could keep it up for a long time. It would go a long ways. It was just absolutely more fun than you could even think of. Plus, the fact that you could do aerobatics with it. It was stressed for aerobatics. It had four wings and a cabin door in the back and then the pilot and the co-pilot and three passengers. So, it was a wonderful airplane.

LYN-So you used it for traveling, just for enjoyment?

BILL-Yeah.

LYN-A good way to get around then.

BILL-Yeah, you couldn't have, I never did any work with it but I always owned a Staggerwing even though I had the other crop dusters but I had the Staggerwing for getting around. I used it every once in a while to survey fields and stuff like that.

LYN-You mentioned your son did train to be a pilot. Anyone else in your family? Your brother was an aviator.

BILL-A Naval aviator but he chose patrol bombers instead of fighters so he never operated very much off a carrier but he had to qualify on an air craft carrier and he flew PVY's and PVM's that I told you about earlier. So, I never admired that much of him. (Laugh)

LYN-You had a dental career that lasted a long time. How long was that?

BILL-Almost sixty years.

LYN-That would be a long time. Still your heart was always in being an aviator.

BILL-Oh, yeah, yeah. I only did dentistry, well I like it because I think I was probably the best dentist in the whole business around, in my era because my favorite uncle, one of my mentors that I mentioned earlier Issac Shiloah Hembree, told me "Whatever you do be the best. There's always room at the top." So, with dentistry, I tried to do the absolute best I possibly could." So, I was very successful in dentistry.

LYN-That's a good service. Dentistry is a very good service. It effects your whole body.

BILL-It's not easy to be a good dentist. I'm telling you it's very difficult. You have to know the medicine you have to know the mechanics you know.

LYN-So how did you get back to Jacksonville, Florida where we are today? You were operating in Birmingham but you're living in Jacksonville. What brought you back to Jacksonville?

BILL-Weather. (Laugh)

LYN-So when did you come back to Jacksonville?

BILL-I opened the practice in Jacksonville, I think in the early '60's.

LYN-Where was that?

BILL-Over in Riverside.

LYN-It was a lucrative side of town to be in. Riverside was a nice area of town to be in in Jacksonville.

BILL-It was sort of the best place in Jacksonville at that time. Of course, it has deteriorated now but it was nice.

LYN-It's still considered a nice area. So how long did you stay in business? When did you close your practice?

BILL-I closed the practice in, I can't even remember now but the IRS created the problem. They started taking money. I fought the IRS my whole life and they started taking money from the insurance companies direct. In other words, I did the work, filed with the insurance company, and they would take the money. I practically had to take bankruptcy.

LYN-I'm so sorry.

BILL-Yeah, because I couldn't pay the overhead and everything.

LYN-That is a problem going on with doctors and dentists even today.

BILL-Oh, yeah. I tell you, the government is bad, bad, bad, bad. The worst thing about it is the IRS. They are criminal.

LYN-When you came back to Jacksonville you brought your plane with you? I guess you sold your crop dusters. You didn't crop dust here.

BILL-No I kept the crop dusters in Mississippi and Alabama but I was really never without an airplane to be honest about it. When I came back to Jacksonville, the Staggerwing, I kept it for a long time. I had the first Staggerwing for about four years then I had the last one, I must have had it fifteen years. I loved flying it.

LYN-Where in Jacksonville did you fly out of?

BILL-Herlong, Craig, sometimes. The big problem with Herlong is there is no instrument approach. I started keeping it at Craig because there's a good instrument approach at Craig.

LYN-Herlong is out near Cecil. Actually, when we first came here I lived near Herlong Airport and it is off Normandy Blvd. Then Craig Field is out on the Southside, far from any other airport actually but near houses. There are a lot of houses around. [city has repeatedly rejected requests to extend runway at Craig because there is such a neighborhood encroachment]

So, you stay involved with these guys that are veterans but it is obvious that your military career is still alive in you. It was a big part of my life.

BILL-Oh, the military and flying was my whole life really. Everything else just fed into that to keep that going so to speak. One of the main reasons I went to dental school was to have enough money to have airplanes. (Laugh)

LYN-Well, you did it, you did it. (Laugh) When you were married how did your wife feel about, are you still married?

BILL-No, I've been married two or three times.

LYN-So, how did these women feel about your flying.

BILL-Well, Jan used to fly with me a lot. We flew to Norfolk and back in some right bad weather and stuff. She took lessons for a little bit but she never, ever became a real good pilot. I encouraged all of them to take enough lessons so that if anything happened to me they could at least land the airplane.

LYN-So you live now at the Presbyterian Home on the Westside. Do you fly? Do you get to fly with people? No flying going on.

BILL-No, most the people that flew with me are either dead, not necessarily from flying, or they have moved away or something but they don't do any flying. I don't really know hardly anybody that flies any more. Most of my male friends that I was, that lived along at the same time are all gone. They are all dead. See I will be eighty-nine next month. Not many men make it to eighty-nine.

LYN-I'll take a picture of you before you leave but you look mighty fine for eighty-nine I can tell you that.

BILL-Say again.

LYN-I'm going to take a picture of you before you leave so people can see you but you do not look eighty-nine years old.

BILL-Well, I'm also a nutrition nut so I think that has contributed a lot. In fact, I take a handful of vitamins and not just multi-vitamins, I don't take multi-vitamins. I take what I need and so I think that contributed to my old age and to the fact that I really don't have any health issues other than the fact that the joints are a little. My hearing is awful but that's I know why that happened.

LYN-Why is that?

BILL-Flying on air craft carriers with no protection. They didn't know about it then. They didn't realize they were going to have a whole generation of x-Navy aviators who couldn't hear.

LYN-Did that have to have to do with the pressure on your ears or the actual noise?

BILL-The actual noise, the noise. I don't think it had anything to do with the pressure. But they don't really know why we lose our hearing. My eye sight is good. My hearing is terrible and my joints like I said are a little bad because you can't get around much. Basically, I've been in a lot better health than most of my contemporaries that are still alive.

LYN-So do you ever travel and fly commercial?

BILL-I prefer not to.

LYN-You don't trust those guys?

BILL-No, it's not that it's just, you know when you've got to make the reservation, got to get somebody to drive you to the airport or put the car there, you've got to stand in line to get everything done to get on the airplane. You get on it and you sit there in that aluminum tube with nothing to do for two hours, three hours, whatever. I just don't enjoy it so I don't do it plus the fact, and I'm on Social Security and that eliminates a lot of flying. (Laugh)

LYN-It does. Flying has gotten very expensive. Well, I just figured you would like to be flying those planes rather than sitting on them. What I'm realizing is the people I've talked to that are Naval aviators had from a young age a desire to fly those planes and the Navy provided an opportunity for them and they gave their lives in a career to do that. Sounds like to me you were an aviator body and soul.

BILL-Yeah, I was always ready to go into combat. The squadrons I was in never saw combat. I didn't ever do any.

LYN-We talked about Cecil and I'm going to see if I can jog any memories. You said they had great runways and it was a great place to land. Can you remember anything else about Cecil Field? People didn't want to be stationed there because it was isolated. What all was there when you first went there? There was no chapel probably. Was there a chapel back in those days?

BILL-I really don't know. I was not very religious back in those days.

LYN-Are you now?

BILL-Yeah, I realized you better be otherwise you may end up in a place you don't want to be.

LYN-We all have an eternal home, don't we? We are just passing through. So as far as entertainment, I know over the years they developed pools and bowling alleys for the men. Back in the day you were out at Cecil it was just work and sleep.

BILL-I think that was right. I can't remember. Of course, I've never been a bowler so that would not have interested me. I can't remember any entertainment that I indulged in at Cecil to be honest about it. Main side was a much better place to be than Cecil.

LYN-OK, I want to thank you for sharing your Navy days.

BILL-I'm sorry I couldn't remember any better.

LYN-I think you remembered great and I'm going to read your book and see if I can add.

BILL-Well, they're not many stories about Cecil in it, I looked to see. There are an awful lot of stories about different things that happened flying wise and some of them are out of Cecil but I didn't mention Cecil.

LYN-Well, I'll add notes and we will be sure to put your book in this conversation so people will know there is a book.

BILL-I've never sold hardly any of them. I'm always given them away. I think I printed five hundred or maybe a thousand but I'm having it reprinted so they haven't got it yet but they are going to reprint it. There's not much revision but mostly just reprinting.

LYN-I haven't read it but the guys I met yesterday enjoyed reading it.

BILL-Really?

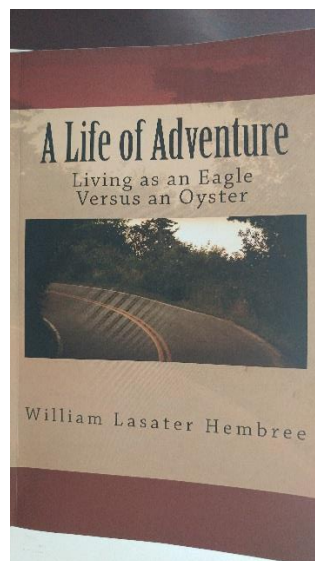
LYN-Yes, see I'm meeting a group of men and I don't even know their names but they said, "Yeah, he wrote a book and his stories, he had good stories so be sure to call him." Thank you for coming over to the Southside from Riverside area and giving us your military memories.

BILL-I've enjoyed the feed-back. In fact, I've had one or two people say, "I started reading that dadgum thing and I couldn't put it down. I stayed up nearly all-night long."

LYN-Then that's a good book. I look forward to reading that. Thank you so much.

BILL-I hope you enjoy.

LYN-I will. Thank you.



From FORWARD TO “A Life of Adventure-Living as an Eagle Versus an Oyster” by William Lasater Hembree

I lived my teenage years during WWII. I was thirteen (13) when the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor-I still remember where I was when I first heard the news (walking through our dining room, as it was being announced on our 6 volt car battery operated radio in our living room). It really jolted me. Living through WWII as a teen was really exciting, seeing my school mates (the older ones) leave for the Army, Navy and Marines gave moments of pride and fear. Some, of course, never came back. Then as I turned 17 the war was still on, Germany had surrendered, but Japan was still a huge threat. Buck, my older brother, and I built model airplanes and read all we could about flying. I had also been given a flight over Chattanooga on my 13th birthday by my Uncle Ike-that really set off sparks for me.

So, I joined the Navy on my 17th birthday and set my sights on becoming a Navy fighter pilot and flying off aircraft carriers. That aimed me in the direction of adventure and sent me toward a great supply of excitement. Dallas and selective flight training-just enough to solo and give the Navy an idea of whether you had “the right stuff” to be a Naval aviator-then it was on to preflight in Iowa (Ottumwa) during the winter season-pretty hard on a southern boy’s blood-living in a pup tent at 8 below zero, just to test our “survival skills” during one weekend of training. From Iowa it was on to southern Texas for primary in SNJ’s. I loved southern Texas even though my instructor said I should be down on the ground picking onions-“It might just suit you better”-he was joking...I think. From south Texas to Pensacola, Florida, home of Naval Aviation. Now that was a thrill! Back then, just after WWII the top brass decided that a Naval Aviator should be able to fly anything-no more “specialists”-so we flew all the basic training in single engine SJN’s including 6 carrier landings-from there to mutli engine training in SNB’s and then PBY seaplanes for eventual check out as plane commander-all this before we got our wings!

Graduation at Pensacola was the ultimate. We could elect carrier based fighters or dive bombers or torpedo bombers or land based patrol bombers-we could even elect to be a Marine pilot. Well, just because you chose didn’t mean you were given your choice (remember “the needs of the service take precedence”), but I got carrier based fighters so it was on to Jacksonville, Florida, for F6F Hellcat advanced fighter training to be carrier based-WOW!!!!

....the exciting life for me had long since begun.