

Conversation
with
Sam N. Houston, Jr.

at
1547 Harbor Oaks Road
Jacksonville, FL

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Recorded and Transcribed
by
Lyn Corley

LYN-Today is May 16, 2017 and we are at Lyn Corley's home on Harbor Oaks Road and I have the honor of introducing on tape Sam Houston. He has had a long career, been involved at Cecil with his Navy career and I was so honored to realize that I knew him already. When he came to my door he said, "I think I know you or my wife knows you." His wife was a beloved teacher at our favorite school, Spring Park Elementary, in our neighborhood. During her last few years there he was so kind to be a volunteer in her classroom. So, we have indeed met before and it is an honor to get to hear about his career. First, tell us your name and about your family and where you were born and how you began a Navy career.

SAM-I am Sam Houston. I was born and raised in the state of Kentucky. I had three brothers, three sisters and grew up on a small farm in Sadieville, Kentucky. I was actually born in Ferris, Kentucky and believe it or not I have never been in a hospital in my life. I was born at home.

I worked hard all my life growing up on the farm. We had cattle, sheep, everything, tobacco, a lot of tobacco. Then I went to Sadieville Grade School and I went to Scott County High there I got into a little bit of trouble of sitting in the back of the class and I was sitting in an Algebra class and Ms. Willy was the algebra teacher and she said, "Houston boy, you get up here and sit in the front seat. You stay up here. That's your seat forever." "Yes ma'am." I ended up getting an "A+" in algebra both years and so that really started me to concentrate on my studies. Then I went the University of Kentucky and majored in engineering and graduated in 1967, December of 1967.

At that time the draft was in effect and I had draft deferred because of being in the university and so it wasn't long after I graduated that I got my induction papers to go into the Army. All the time I had already wanted to go and be a Navy pilot so I contacted the Navy and sure enough I got signed up and the day I reported into the Navy I already had my induction papers for the Army. I handed those to the Navy and the Navy took care of it.

From there I went to flight school and got my wings out in Corpus Christi, Texas and my first assignment was in Patuxent River, Maryland. From there I went to Vietnam in January of 1972 as a Navy advisor in country. I spent a year in Vietnam and came back and went to Quonset Point, Rhode Island and from there, they closed the base at Quonset. I'm used to them closing bases.

I transferred back down to Cecil Field. From there I had my junior officer tour and from there I went back up to Patuxent River and two years there and then back down to Cecil Field, As my department head tour, I joined the Nimitz out in the Indian Ocean. We were involved in the Iranian hostage rescue attempt. From there we came back home and two months later went to the North Atlantic for two months then back home.

Then I finished up my tour with the Nimitz and of course they had the big crash on the Nimitz back in 1980 or '81 where we had an airplane crash into the other airplanes on the flight deck and we had sixteen airplanes destroyed, thirteen people killed. So that slowed us down a bit but then we started moving forward and we went back to sea again.



USS NIMITZ CVN-68

After that tour I came back and was stationed as the Wing, as the Readiness Officer. I was there for roughly a year and I screened for a command. From there I went to XO of VS-30. Spent my year and a half as XO and suited up to CO of VS-30. I spent a year and a half there and then we deployed, as a matter of fact I was gone it was a busy, busy time, with the Saratoga VS-30. Out of, between a twenty-seven-month period I was physically gone from home twenty-two of those twenty-seven months.



USS SARATOGA CV-60

After I completed that tour I went to Washington, D.C. at the Pentagon. I spent two years there. I came back from there and became the Wing Commander of the VS squadron and I spent two years there and after my two years of wing I was sent to Giada, Italy as the Operation's Officer for the Sixth Fleet. I spent my year and a half there and my family went with me. My wife Patti and son Stephen and daughter Breanna and I knew the day the war was going to break out so I sent them back to the states because I knew we were going to be at sea for a long time.

I returned from there and came back to be the CO, Commanding Officer of Cecil Field. I spent the next two years there and went back to the Pentagon for a year and a half and retired out of the Navy after that. So, my life has been Cecil Field.

LYN-You have moved around though. You're going to have to go back and explain some of that career. First of all, I want to know, you said you wanted to be a pilot. What was that inspiration? Was it from a child or what was the inspiration?

SAM-I remember as a child the jets, low-flying jets over our farm. It was fascinating to me you know. They were flying that fast and over low over the ground and I said, "That's something I would like to do."

LYN-So it did come from childhood.

SAM-It did.

LYN-And you never thought, “Wow, that would be something I couldn’t do or you just knew that was something you wanted to do.”

SAM-I had never flown, as a matter of fact I think the first time I flew was when I flew down to join the Navy to get sworn in.

LYN-Where was that?

SAM-That was in Memphis, Tennessee. They flew me from Kentucky down to Memphis and got sworn in down there. From there you go to flight school.

LYN-So what was it like the first time you got in a plane, I guess with someone else, to start your training? Were you scared or were you, was it just a dream and you were following it?

SAM – (Laugh) I think it was the fact that number one I signed up to be in the military and now I’ve got to do the best I can. As a young guy, the first time actually trying to fly the airplane was itself, it’s still scary. You turn the plane upside down and all this other stuff and it’s not the natural thing to do. (Laugh) So I started going through flight school and at some time, in the beginning phase for four weeks we are out on solo. You know you go out and do these practice landings, practice landings, practice landings, practice landings, and doing all these maneuvers and everything else and I was going on my check ride to solo and I made a few touch and go’s and the instructor in the back says, “OK, just make the next one the final stop.” I said, “OK.”

He says, “I’m getting out.” So, he got out and I said, “Oh, Lord. I’ve got to take this thing off by myself with no one with me.” Taking off is easy you know. When I got airborne I said, “Oh, now I’ve got to land this thing.” (Laugh) I looked around and looked around and for some reason, I mean I was having trouble making landings but for some reason everything went perfect and I made three or four touch and go’s and the instructor called me up and said, “OK, pick me up and take me home.” It’s scary but then after you get used to it, after several flights you get used to it. The first few flights you’re up-tight.



LYN-So you did enter the military during a very tumultuous time with Vietnam and you were stationed in Vietnam on the ground. Explain what you did in that duty station.

SAM-I went for six months training out at Viejo, California, Naval Advisor School to be an advisor in country. I arrived in country, I was stationed initially in Danang, Vietnam. I was supposed to go down to be a naval advisor at a little base south of Danang there. At the time a lot of the little bases were getting over-run and so they made the decision to pull all the Naval advisors out.

LYN-Over-run meaning the enemy troops.

SAM-They were over-taking them. They made the decision to pull us out and so from there I went I stayed at the Command and flew the C-1 which is a small cargo plane that goes out and delivers mail to the carrier. I stayed in Vietnam for a year flying back and forth to the carrier. I landed probably on almost every carrier the Navy had. In a year's time most of them were out there.

Navy C-1



LYN-You may have taken my letters to the Forrestal. That's where my man was, was on the Forrestal.

SAM-Probably so.

LYN-Then you were married at that time?

SAM-No.

LYN-You were not married. So, the danger was a big reality being in Vietnam.

SAM-Oh yes. You know, the day I landed there and the first night I was in Danang there was a rocket attack. Being the first day there, I was scared. I don't know what's going on because you are in a war zone and you don't know what's really happening. I remember actually taking my weapon and crawling underneath the bed and staying underneath the bed and waiting to see what was going to happen, you know. It all went away and you get up the next morning and you look around and there's some damage out there but it's OK. As a matter of fact, in Danang, it was called "The Rocket City" because we got hit with something like, during the year we got hit something like four hundred and thirty rockets that came in from the air base there.

LYN-So Operation's Officer of the Fleet Air Support Unit of Danang. What did that entail?

SAM-We are the unit that supports the fleet, ships that are off the coast. We provide a diverter base for them if they have to divert off the carrier. We provide mail, deliver all the mail. All the logistics for the fleet comes through our unit at Danang so we are the fleet support unit.

LYN-So if a plane couldn't land back on a carrier it could land there.

SAM-We fuel it and turn around or they might spend the night at Danang. We put them up and sent them off the next day.

LYN-So you were supporting that carrier. What carriers did you see during that time?

SAM-Oh, almost every one of them. America, Oriskany, Saratoga, Forrestal, Kitty Hawk, Enterprise. You name it, we had them out there.

LYN-Those carriers were making West Pac and East Pac tours. They were not just assigned to one base during that time. Some of them saw long-term duty at sea. They weren't just there for a few months but some for extended periods of time. So, leaving Vietnam must have been a relief.

SAM-It was. (Laugh) As a matter of fact I always thought about it and looked back and I left the states on January 10, 1972 and returned home January 10, 1973. It was a year but '72 happened to be a leap year so I got one day extra.

LYN-That was a hard year.

SAM-It was a hard year. But I did enjoy it. I volunteered for teaching English at the school in downtown Danang. I would go down once a week and work with the, I think it was about a fourth or fifth grade and went down there and tutored the kids. They wanted to learn and they were as friendly as they could be and so it was enjoyable and something to do while you're there.

LYN-So you enjoyed a good relationship in Vietnam.

SAM-I had some Vietnamese language training and so I could speak a little bit of Vietnamese with them so that was, I was a Lieutenant at the time, a Lieutenant in the Vietnamese they called "Dai uy" and they would say, "Dai uy, why you carry gun?" "I have to to protect myself." They said, "OK". But it was interesting.

LYN-So you got back to the states. Did you have a normal rotation of sea duty and shore duty? I don't even know how that worked for you. It was a normal rotation?

SAM-It was. The fact that first as a JO normally is a two to three-year tour and normally go from there to shore duty for two years back to sea duty for two years and it keeps rotating all the way through. That's basically what I did. About every two years we rotated.

Seventeen of our last twenty-two years were at Cecil Field. But I was stationed at Cecil Field but I was not at Cecil Field. I was out on the carrier so people say, "Seventeen years at Cecil Field?" Well, yeah but I was there but out on the carriers all the time. Then when I did come back on shore duty I had the wing over at Cecil Naval Air Station so, "Yes, I was there a long time but I was gone a lot too."

LYN-So the first time you got orders to Cecil, did you know anything about Cecil? Was that considered good duty or not good duty? What was your expectation when you got orders to Cecil?

SAM-Well, my orders were first to Quonset Point, Rhode Island so then they closed Quonset Point and they moved us to Cecil. At that time, we knew we were going to start flying the PS-3 which was a jet where we flew the S-3 which was a prop. So, we felt like we had joined the big boys at Cecil Field Master Jet Base, you know. (Laugh). So, it felt good plus the fact we were moving to Florida and I love Florida. So, we left Quonset Point in the cold north and was moving south which was great for me.



LYN-What was the shock for me was when I saw Cecil. It seemed so isolated from everything. Today it is still a little isolated. It seems in the middle of nowhere. So that didn't bother you.

SAM-Oh, no. As a matter of fact, if you talk about base closure, I was CO when they announced base closure. When that was going on all the folks were saying, "What about Cecil, what about Cecil?" "Cecil Field is safe. It's the best master jet base the Navy has. No way would they ever close Cecil Field. It's just too big of an asset."

Well, when I got the call from Washington to come to Washington, D.C. and "don't tell anybody why you're coming but you're on the closure list." So, that was a shock to me. I mean it really was. I had no idea how in the world they could close a master jet base like this. You know I even worked with Tillie Fowler at the time she was a Junior Freshman, Congresswoman. I said, "You know we need to close NAS Jacksonville and move everything out to Cecil. We have eighteen thousand acres out there. Give the city waterfront property. We've got plenty of room out there to take on everything."

LYN-We are referring to NAS Jacksonville is surrounded by neighborhoods and there are planes flying in over our community where Cecil is a little more isolated from neighborhoods. They have begun to encroach but it has been a very isolated area. So, you are at Cecil and let's go to your first time, so you're assigned to a squadron the first time. What was the name of the squadron?

SAM-VS-32.



LYN-And tell me about your first experience with those jets.

SAM-First they sent us up to Meridian, Mississippi to transition into jets. So, we flew the T-2 up there. It was a lot faster. Things moved a lot quicker. You had to think a little bit quicker but after being in the environment it became routine and it's just like any other airplane now. It's just a plane. (Laugh) Like a bicycle, once you learn to ride the bicycle it's the same with flying. You can fly anything.

LYN-What was your first deployment was on what ship. Do you remember?

SAM-Yeah, Kennedy, CV-67.



USS JOHN F. KENNEDY departing Naval Station Mayport
CV-67

LYN-Which was a fairly new carrier. Was it?

SAM-No. It was, we had 67 was the Kennedy then 68 was the Nimitz. The Enterprise was the first nuclear and then Nimitz was the second one.

LYN-So a good bit newer than the Forrestal and the Saratoga. Do I have them out of order?

SAM-Forrestal was 59 and Saratoga was 60. 61 I think was Independence and it goes on up.

LYN-So, you're out at sea but it was not war time during that first cruise out of Cecil?

SAM-No.

LYN-So you had a Med cruise and had some lovely ports.

SAM-Well, the first cruise we went to the North Atlantic. As a matter of fact, it was September-October time frame and we had two hurricanes come through there. We were fighting forty-foot seas on the carrier. You think about a carrier as big as it is, it coming up and down, rough seas. We pulled into Edinburgh, Scotland and had a little liberty in Scotland and other ports in Germany. Then after we came back from there we went back to the Med. In the Med we toured lots of places. I've probably been to more countries in my Navy career than most people have been in the states. I've been around the world a couple of times.

LYN-Did you go to Malta?

SAM-No, we never got into Malta.

LYN-I've asked everybody else, my husband was in Malta twice but nobody else I've talked to has been in Malta.

SAM-What was he on?

LYN-He was on the Forrestal. That was '71. So, you were seeing the world a long way from Kentucky and enjoying it still.

SAM-Oh yes, yes.

LYN-So flying was definitely in your blood. That was your joy.

SAM-It was. And you know, flying on air craft carriers is dangerous but it's fun. I mean, night time and bad weather not so much fun but it's a challenge because they grade every pass, every landing you make, they grade them. It's a skill to get out there and get the best grade and so I can say that my last tour, my last cruise with the Saratoga I ended up being the number one pilot in the air wing.

LYN-Congratulations.

SAM-It was a feat in itself when you compete with another hundred or two hundred pilots out there you know and end up number one in the air wing. I kept myself safe you know.

LYN-You moved onto the Saratoga and what were you doing then, what was going on in world history?

SAM-If you remember the Achille Lauro incidence. We were there. As a matter of fact, we located the ship that night when they shoved the guy in the wheelchair over the side of the ship. We located the ship and that was on my CO, it was on my CO tour, commanding officer.

October 7, 1985
Italian MS Achille Lauro
Hijacked off coast of
Egypt



After that we went through the Suez Canal into the Indian Ocean and stayed over in the Indian Ocean for quite some time. We pulled actually into Diego Garcia which is a small island in the Indian Ocean. We got orders, as a matter of fact I had gone to the carrier Air Wing Commander and said, “Hey, we’re pulling into Diego Garcia just after Christmas.” We were in Singapore for Christmas and straight after that we went to Diego Garcia. A Navy carrier had never tied up at Diego so we were the first carrier, the Saratoga was the first carrier to tie up in the Indian Ocean at Diego Garcia.

So, we were going to be there for ten days so I said to my Carrier Air Wing Commander and said, “Hey CAG, we are going to be here for a long time. I can go to the Philippines and get some plaques made up and all kind of stuff that we normally get from the Philippines you know and he said, “OK, go for it.” So, I and a couple of my other guys in the squadron went over to the Philippines and were walking around in our flight suits at Cubie Point, Cubie Point Air Base, and somebody saw us in flight suits and, “Hey, you guys from the Saratoga?” We said, “Yeah.”

“Well, they emergency sorties this morning.” (Laugh) So well, “I’m the CO of the squadron and I’ve got to get back to the carrier.” So, I sent word from Cubie Point and said sent a message back to Diego Garcia and the ship to leave one of my airplanes at Diego Garcia so I can fly back my airplane fly back to the carrier.”

When I got back to Diego Garcia there was one plane left and we headed in there they were working on it and stripped, all the paint had been stripped off and primed. We didn't have time so I flew it out to the carrier. (Laugh)

The skipper of the carrier, Captain Redding, a really nice gentleman saw me fly aboard and he had flown with me a lot when the carrier was at Mayport there he was CO and I would take off out at Cecil and land at Mayport and pick him up and we would go out flying together so he knew me really well. He said, my call sign is "Shoebags", he said, "Shoebags, is that you?" "Yes sir." "Get that ugly thing off my flight deck. (Laugh) So it was yellow and black and gray and normally the planes are white you know. It was ugly.

LYN-So go back to the Achille Lauro. You found, your ship found the ship and for those who read this in the future can you go back to that incident and give us a little bit of details of what actually happened?

SAM-Well, the ship was overtaken by I guess you would call them terrorists today, pirates, and so they for some reason, I don't know why, but they picked on this one handicapped individual in a wheelchair and pushed him over the side. We got called, the ship had been taken down by the pirates and so we went out to locate them.

We located them near Alexandria, Egypt. So, there we got the ship back, I think they left the ship there and pulled in. But then for some reason they got on an airplane and I don't remember all the details of it, they got on an airplane and were flying out of Egypt and we knew, we found out they got on the airplane and we knew that. We intercepted that jetliner and forced it to land in Sigonella, Italy. So that is how I remember that story.

LYN-Were you, were you part of the wing that diverted them.? Were you flying with them?

SAM-No. That was the F-14's that made them land in Sigonella.

LYN-That was just a commercial vessel that they had overtaken which became kind of common for a while after that. There were many more pirated. That just shows the Navy was out protecting the seas from more than just military things. They were protecting the commercial vessels. So, let's get some details, you are back at Cecil, were you the first one to know that Cecil was on that BRAC list?

SAM-Yes.

LYN-So what did you do? Can you go back and try to recall that day?

SAM-It was a Friday afternoon. I got a call from Washington, D.C. and they said, "Captain, you are to report to Pentagon on Monday morning, fly up on Sunday, and be there Monday morning. You are on the base closure list and you can't tell a soul." So, I followed orders, flew to Washington, D.C., didn't tell my secretary.

LYN-And by this time you were in love with Cecil.

SAM-Oh, it was my life. I lived there. I mean both my kids were born here in Jacksonville. Both of them born at the Naval Hospital at JAX.

LYN-Mine too.

SAM-This is home for us. We actually in 1980 built a house in Orange Park off Doctor's Lake Drive and that was our house until ten years ago when we moved over to Mandarin but it was a big shock. I fought it.

The Navy said, "You can't fight it." I worked with Tillie Fowler to do anything I could to help fight this thing. She and Susie Wiles, a great friend of mine, so Tillie would actually say, tell everybody in City Hall, Ed Austin was the mayor at the time, she said, "Nothing can leave here unless it's chopped through Sam. He knows Cecil and he knows what's going on and we don't want to say anything unless he's chopped it and he knows the facts and what we're doing.

That went on for the longest, longest time. I was still shocked and am shocked to this day that they actually did that. Later on, after I went back to D.C., as a matter of fact I worked for a three-star Admiral Owens and he was a four star in the Pentagon when I came back from Giada, Italy and he, I asked him, "You know, why did they ever close down Cecil Field?" He says that the real reason they did it is because they wanted to offer up a jewel to Congress to show that they were serious about base closure. So, they offered it up. So, they wouldn't reverse it because what was happening there is the fact that they felt, Congress felt and all the people felt that if they reversed one then the others would start being reversed so they wouldn't back off of reversing even they knew it was not a good decision because you can't put all this in Oceana, Virginia Beach is right there.

LYN-It is. I lived there.

SAM-It's there and so why would you close down a base of eighteen thousand acres that's out in rural woods, the population is thin is out there. It's growing now but still it's thin.

LYN-Our city was shocked and our assumption, this is what I heard over and over, "Well, it's a political move by the Norfolk group, they just want the power."

SAM-It's always political and the military bases and everything else is always political but I feel, and I've always felt to this day had Charlie Bennett still been the Congressman it wouldn't have happened. They saw with Tillie Fowler being a freshman, she was a great lady. [Charles E. Bennet was a congressman from Jacksonville for forty-four years]

LYN-She was a great woman.

SAM-She was a great lady. I admired her very much. I had a great time talking with her all the time and working with her and Susie Wiles both. Had Charlie Bennett still been in office they wouldn't have touched it because he was so strong with the military that they wouldn't have done it.

LYN-Charlie was involved in the Mayport initiation being a base which has the goods and bads of it too because of the take-over of private land but Cecil was just out there. It wasn't forcing anybody off and it wasn't encroaching.

SAM-What I said that the hospital at NAS JAX could still be the hospital there. The commissary could still be there. You just open it up and let it develop as Jacksonville and move everything out to Cecil. You've got so much room out there. We've got long runways and everything else.

LYN-The longest runway.

SAM-Twelve thousand feet.

LYN-It was a sad thing and it greatly affected our Westside of town. Thinking back, you can see how it affected negatively the support of businesses and the growth on that side of town. So, tell me about the actual closure. Were you still there when the base closed?

SAM-No. I took over as commanding officer in '92 and it was a two-year tour so that was June of '92 and then June of '94 I left and went to the Pentagon. There were at least two more CO's after that so it didn't really officially shut the gate until '99. So, all that time period from '92 when they announced the base closure until '99 before they it was actually physically closed. Ken Check was the last one to put the lock on the gate and leave.

LYN-Were you there that day?

SAM-No.

LYN-So what did you do at the Pentagon?

SAM-I was the, the first tour at the Pentagon I was the manager of the S-3 aircraft funding line and procurement and modification of the airplane so I worked closely with NAVAIR which is the aviation side of airplanes for Navy. I was there for two years and saw through the modification of the airplane from the S-3A to the S-3B and got that program all the way through.

My second tour was working for the Office of the Secretary of the Navy and there I was again in charge of aviation side of keeping my boss informed of all the aviation programs including S-3, F-14, F-18, A-2 all the aircraft that we had.

LYN-Who was Secretary of the Navy then?

SAM-I thought it was Webb.

LYN-Did you consider that an honor or did you want be off flying?

SAM-(Laugh) I'd rather be off flying. The Pentagon is an interesting tour in that it's so huge and traffic up there, people think traffic is bad anywhere in the world but up in Washington, D.C. is a

nightmare, it's really a nightmare. But it's a huge place and lots of folks there and it's just you're busy, you stay busy. Something is happening all the time, all the time. "Give me this, give me this, give me this." Headquarters, the military "I need it now, I need it now." So, it's a fast reaction pace that you stay in at the Pentagon.

LYN-So after the Pentagon what happened in your career?

SAM-I, my daughter, I was up in I guess it was December of '95 when I officially retired, I was commuting back and forth to D.C. from Orange Park until my daughter was a senior in high school so we couldn't move her so I caught planes every other week-end back and forth from D.C., Navy planes back and forth. So, then I had known Susie Wiles really well and so I talked to Susie and said, "Hey, I need a job, I'm retiring." So that was when Mayor Delaney had just won the election so I got on with the city and took over as the Fleet Manager for the City of Jacksonville. I stayed there for sixteen years.

LYN-I didn't realize that long.

SAM-Sixteen years and I had never been in one place over two years. You know one building for sixteen years.

LYN-Where was your building?

SAM-It was out on Commonwealth Avenue. It was, I enjoyed the job. It was a great job and as Division Chief Fleet Manager I had something like five thousand pieces of equipment and the smallest thing I counted was motorcycles. I didn't count lawn mowers or anything else but big stuff. We had all the fire trucks and police cars.

LYN-Garbage trucks.

SAM-Garbage trucks, buses, bulldozers, off-road equipment, front-end loaders we had it all.

LYN-The funny thing is now on the news we are hearing that they lost a garbage truck. Did you hear that? They are doing the count of their equipment and they've lost a garbage truck.

SAM-Oh really. (Laugh).

LYN-They need you back. They are just going to write it off. They want to move on with their inventory.

SAM-I also managed the fuel system. As a matter of fact, when I was there we built two additional sites because the city has its own fuel and rightly so when you get an emergency like a hurricane and all the others shut down but we don't shut down. We've got to keep the traffic flowing. So, my, the last year I was there my fuel bill was twenty-six million dollars for fuel. Of course, for replacement we bought new equipment every year and replacement was around sixteen million a year. We buy three hundred police cars almost every year.

LYN-So you went through Mayor Delaney and Mayor Peyton.

SAM-That was sixteen years.

LYN-That's right, two terms each. So, you retired before Mayor Brown.

SAM-No. Mayor Brown told us all to leave.

LYN-So Mayor Brown retired you all.

SAM-I had enough time to retire but a lot of folks didn't. I was fortunate in that you know after five years you're tenured but you can't retire until you put in twenty years except if you are sixty-five or older then you can retire with how many years you had. I had sixteen years so fortunately I was able to retire.

LYN-So now I know this part of the story. Sam retired to Spring Park Elementary School (Laugh) where he assisted a wonderful teacher, his wife Patti. Tell us a little bit about Spring Park. We talked off tape but tell me what you did at Spring Park.

SAM-I volunteered to go there for my wife. I think she needed help particularly in the beginning stage where she was just getting to know the kids and was getting to learn the kids, the children. I looked at that as a challenge because looking at the little ones coming to school and you know they are eager to learn and to watch them grow and grow in spirit and mind and become happy kids, it was just so gratifying to me to watch them grow and to work with them.

I would go with the ones that maybe needed extra help and I would go one-on-one with them so while my wife was teaching regular class I would take them over to the side and work with them one-on-one. I think that really, really helped them because they had one-on-one and they just, it did so much for them. It got to the point where some of them would go up and say, "Mrs. Houston, can I go work with your husband?" (Laugh)

LYN-You were very popular there.

SAM-I would joke and cut up with them and have fun with them so they were relaxed and well-mannered and I didn't have to call them down at all. They would just sit there and be real quiet and do their thing. They would come and "Mr. Houston can you help me with this?"

LYN-Mrs. Houston's students were always well-mannered. I also volunteered at the school and did some tutoring there and it was always a joy to work with her students. She brought something very special to the classroom, besides you. You all were a great couple for our school.

SAM-I think the thing that she did and probably something I couldn't do is from day one she showed she was strict on the kids and then she had control. They listened to her but she was pleasant with them. She wasn't mean with them. She was pleasant with them but she was strict and I think that made a difference.

LYN-It did. I wish we had a lot more Patti Houstons around. We miss her very much at the school.

So now you have moved on to another voluntary position and since this will not be released until after the announcement, we can say confidential things on this tape because nobody will see it for a while. So last night was the meeting of a very special group of people, volunteers who have a big dream. Sam is Chairman of the Board of that organization. So, would you put on tape about the organization and where at this point you think you are going with your project?

SAM-Well, I was approached to work with the project by Mike [Cassata]. He had a vision of this being a memorial in regard to Mary Hoff who actually designed the MIA flag and it was more directed toward Cecil Field. It's called POW/MIA Memorial. I think his vision was really about more of Cecil Field than the name.

LYN-Some kind of preservation status and memorial.

SAM-Right. So, I looked at it and I made the suggestion, "Wait a minute, there's all kind of museums around. There's something up in Mayport and Pensacola we have aviation, and we will be competing with all these others." I said, "I think we need to go another route with this thing."

That's where I suggested we go with MIA, Missing in Action, because there's not a national MIA museum or memorial or anything anywhere in the country. So, I said, "There is national recognition. We can go national with this thing, build a wall that has all the names on there and it's more important education-wise to talk about these folks that didn't come home and the fact that we are now looking to bring them home." We've brought home something like twenty thousand and still bringing them home every day.

I just got an email talking about we've had four out of Korea that we brought home this past week and the one out of World War II out of France. We are still getting remains and so to me it's really an interesting thing that we go in this direction. So, once I mentioned that all the others involved in this whole organization, our advisors and everybody else said, "Well, what a wonderful idea, what a vision." You're talking now this thing is going to be huge and it's the only one and it recognizes people who haven't returned and we're still trying to get them home. So, it's grown into that.

Our meeting last night was with all the advisors and people, shakers and makers that were there said, "Wow, we've got to redesign the whole thing. Our perspective has totally changed now." Some of the things that I looked at and saw was that if it's a national museum and it's about MIA's that we have to be very, very careful that we don't leave out any branch of the service. This is national. So, we have to include everybody in this thing. So, you can't put just Cecil stuff out here. This is much bigger than that. This is national.

LYN-You can still focus on a preservation effort for, specifically the chapel is what you are working on that represents Cecil.

SAM-Yes, the chapel. The other part, since we have a huge area and what drove Mike to do this thing in the beginning was the group of ladies and Mary Hoff and the sixteen pilot MIA's who are from Vietnam. It is just the Vietnam era. We are talking about MIA's from World War II all the way up so it's a much bigger picture. But to preserve her and the MIA flag I suggested that we over here in another place build that memorial for her and name it "Mary Hoff Memorial" and the sixteen pilots go along with that site and that way it doesn't detract from the MIA Memorial and Museum. So that's where we're going right now.

The engineer last night said, his company is Prossor, he is very bright and very imaginative in his thinking and after we showed him the direction we are going to go now as opposed to it being really a Cecil Field thing that after we build the wall and all and he says, "There are some other things we can do here. We could have what he perceives as a tunnel with water over it and reflections, names reflection in this wall, high-tech stuff." He said, "Just that alone will just wow people to see something like this." So, do this thing first, this MIA thing and then all this other stuff will come because once people get wowed by this thing we'll get this museum over and fill the museum with history of POW's and MIA's and this type of stuff.

There's so much out there and the other part of that is I said, "You've got to have touchy-feelies because for young children to get onto what we are doing you need visuals of the stuff, videos, something they can touch and something they can see. They're not going to read that plaque and says, "What is this all about?" You've got to educate them through voice and touchy-feely stuff.

LYN-And interactive.

SAM-That's the direction we're going and we're talking millions of dollars to do this but you know I looked at it and I said, "You know the wall type of thing." If we break it down by state, there are fifty states. I said you know, "If you go to each state and see maybe governors or senators or Veteran's Affairs and say, "We're building this thing and your state is represented here. Every one of your folks who is MIA is going to be on that place, the one's that's returned and all other stuff. Give us a hundred thousand dollars." What's a hundred thousand dollars out of the state budget? Nothing. It really is nothing. When you do that you've got five million dollars.

LYN-So you're hoping for other states to support it and I don't even know in our state who is supporting this. Have we, on the state level have we gotten support?

SAM-Everybody. We got John McCain is one we got, we got congressmen, we got Rutherford.

LYN-Al Lawson.

SAM-We got Nelson. I think we're waiting on a letter from the governor. It's all coming in.

LYN-So we are now looking at legislation going to our City Council that would ask for a lease, I think a one-dollar lease, on thirty acres of land at Cecil Field. That's the beginning project. We are hoping that will be introduced to the City Council on the 23rd of May 2017 and sponsored by Councilman Jim Love and Doyle Carter.

I believe that what will happen is all councilmen will ask to sign onto that and be sponsors once it hits the floor. That's what I'm expecting and I look forward to that time. [I had the honor of being in the audience the night all nineteen councilmen asked to be added to Councilman Carter and Love as sponsors of that bill-it passed with a 19-0 vote]



Mayor Lenny Curry
signs Cecil Field
POW/MIA Memorial Bill
Jacksonville City Hall
23 August 2017
Chairman Sam Houston
and Mike Cassata
standing directly behind
Mayor Curry

SAM-I think they will. We've been told that almost everybody is on-board with this thing particularly if it goes the way we envision it now. It's going to be such a plus to the city in that you're going to bring millions of people into the city every year to witness this thing, to see this thing. I think initially the city will have a funding line to help keep, support this on down the line. I would think so.

LYN-And it will help economically for small business obviously in that area. When people come they have to eat they have to stay places and it is a side of town that really needs the help. That's a very positive thing. The one comment that I've heard over and over is that is it so isolated. That comes from the mind-set that just local people would be going there.

SAM-That's exactly it. Even my wife said it. "It's so far out there." (Laugh) Yes, the local people will support it and appreciate it but I think it's there and you are so close, you're five minutes away from I-10 and very close to 95 and 295. That. it's unlike Andersonville where you have to travel an hour to get to it off the main roads. Now that we started looking big picture of the project that "Hey, it's not off the beaten path."

LYN-It can bring a new path to the Westside of town which has been a focus because the city does own enormous amount of land on the Westside that is just sitting there. It has to be maintained and that could be a beginning. I'm looking at this, when you left Cecil as CO,

knowing it was going to close, in your wildest dreams this would not have been there would it? Coming back and being part of a memorial?

SAM-No, never. Never entered my mind. After I retired from the city, I will be seventy-three this summer, so I thought it was time to go out and have fun.

LYN-Play golf.

SAM-Play golf. You know Patti and I both go to the gym three or four times a week and play golf once or twice a week and it's a lot of fun. I didn't think about ever doing anything else and then I was surprised when they found me and I guess Mike ran into several people and they said, "You need to get hold of Sam Houston?" I never met Mike but Mike is a real gentleman. He's a very good guy. When he asked me I said, "Oh, I can't turn you down." (Laugh)

LYN-I don't think many people turn Mike down and Mike doesn't turn people down. He is being inclusive in everything.

SAM-He is, I mean the fact that this is his only job and that his family agreed for him to go this route and not be bringing in a salary for the family.

LYN-We are saying "job". It is a volunteer job, a non-paying job. He has been working for about two years.

SAM-Oh yeah. I said, "How can you?" He's dedicated. He's had a vision and he's sticking with it and I'm here to support him. He likes to have me around I think in that maybe I'm a little older and little more mature and a military background.

I can say, "Oh, don't do this and don't do this and you got to watch this." Mike says, "I didn't think about that. I'm glad I've got you here you know." It's easy to get lost when you've got so much going on and keep track of everything. So, I made a suggestion to him, I said, "Mike we need a SIT REP." He said, "What's SIT REP?" I said, "That's a thing we use in the Navy, a situation report." You put it out over the week-end and it is a summary of what went on that week so that now you have a document that shows we did this and we did this and go back and review "What did we do with this one? We didn't follow up on this one. We need to follow up on this one." So, it's a tracking device.

And I said, "You don't need to send an email out to everybody on a daily routine that you do over here and over there and over there but you inform everyone of what went on that week so it keeps everybody involved and everybody up to speed on what we are doing and how we are progressing." He said, "That's a wonderful idea." Everybody said, "Wow, I love that SIT REP."

LYN-Everybody is connected. I'm getting emails and saying "Oh wow, I didn't know they were off in that direction." It has been very interesting. So that came at your suggestion.

Thank you, Sam Houston. And I just thank you for the days ahead that you are going be able to guide this and for coming back and having the love of this forgotten base and the forgotten people. There were so many. Thank you.

SAM-You are welcome.