

Conversation
with
Anthony W. Cassata

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Recorded and Transcribed
by
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TAPE 1 SIDE A

LYN-Today is July 22nd and I'm at the home of Tony Cassata and his claim to fame for me is that he is the father of Mike Cassata who has begun, who has this vision for a POW/MIA Memorial at Cecil Field. That is how I became involved in the Cecil Field oral history project. But, Tony has quite a story going back through his generation and another generation and so thank you for agreeing to do this today. I want you to begin with your dad. Who were you parents and how that military career began with him?

TONY-Well, I'm a little nervous doing this interview. (Laugh) But, I'm happy to do this. My parents, they actually met, both of them were in the service. My dad was in the Navy.

LYN-Their names.

TONY-Anthony Cassata and my mom Anna Jane Burrell. She was in the Army. They met. My mom was stationed at the Pentagon and my dad was, I think he was stationed at Glenview, Illinois and they met and I came along and they got married. We just moved around when I was growing up.

We lived in, well when I was born I was just in Illinois for a short period of time. His parents, both of them, were from Chicago. Then we were stationed in Jacksonville for a short time. I had a sibling born here and had another sibling born in Indiana.

LYN-Now in Jacksonville was he stationed at Cecil or NAS?

TONY-Cecil.

LYN-At Cecil so that was your first introduction to Cecil. Did you ever go out there?

TONY-I was just little.

LYN-What did he do?

TONY-He was an AMH.

LYN-What is a AMH?

TONY-That's aviation structural mechanics hydraulics. As a matter of fact, at his retirement ceremony in 1986 his first shop chief when he worked at AIMD was there at his graduation, a World War II veteran. He had pulled my dad aside and told him that, "OK, you've got a kid now so you need to get serious and get to work with things." So, he had straightened my dad out and my dad just went on in his career. Probably if it wasn't for him he probably wouldn't have stayed in and all that.

LYN-Cecil was instrumental, that time was instrumental in your life.

TONY-Right. As a matter of fact, there's a house on Wesconnett and I can't remember the name of the road, it's right there where the DMV used to be. There's a house on the corner and I lived there when I was about one or two. I have a few pictures but we lived there in that house. That

house is still there. The neighborhood over here where, I don't know what it's called, with all the Disney names and all that.

LYN-Right.

TONY-That was a brand-new neighborhood back then and my dad's chief lived there.

LYN-We are talking about a neighborhood that had Snow White, Tinkerbell, Cinderella as names, Miss Muffat, and those were new houses back in that day. They were military. Military families lived there off Normandy in that area.

TONY-Right. You know my dad tells me stories that when he used to go down Normandy it was a dirt road, cows in the pastures. He told me there was a plane crash that crashed into one of the two old hangars over there. I think he said that happened about '59 or '60. I don't really know too many details about that.

LYN-Do you know what kind of plane?

TONY-No, I don't.

LYN-If it was cargo or...

TONY-I don't know. It could have been, I really don't know. Then he would tell me stories about things and this and that and he is very nostalgic. He will come up here, and he has in the past, and we will drive around and he'll say, "Oh, I remember this and this and this and all of that you know." (Laugh) He told me there was a place called Summers and Tidwell and it was an apartment complex. It was a duplex. It was right on 103rd and right across from where, from Walmart where there's I think a Quick Lube place right there and it's a street, back there, that's where that was and we used to live there.

LYN-So you lived off 103rd and you lived off Wesconnett.

TONY-Also, we lived in Jax Beach. I can't remember how long for that. I was just a little kid.

LYN-He never was stationed out at Mayport.

TONY-He was. Because of Cecil he had to go to Mayport because of going out on the ships and all of that. He probably, well, he spent more time in the military than I did. He would have more stories.

LYN-So where did you go to school? Here in Jacksonville?

TONY-No. Well, I went to, when we lived in Key West my mom did not send me to kindergarten so I went right to first grade which, because my birthday falls so late in the year I really should have waited but I didn't. I ended up being held back but I was talking to my mom the other day and she, I was asking her about there was something that went on when we lived there and I was about four or five when we lived there.

I remember she had to get us certain clothes to wear. I had asked her what that was for. She couldn't remember however she did say that Kennedy had come down there to visit when we

were station down there. So, she told me that she remembers all that because we were there and I guess she must have been in the crowd and she told me that he was in a white car. I'm thinking, "OK, white car. That just doesn't seem to be right." So, I went on U Tube yesterday and I pulled that up and sure enough, he was in the white car. But that was pretty neat.

Then, I think a few days later, I think it was a few days later, that's when he got shot. So, my mom, she was going to the commissary or something, I don't remember, and she just got out and she was, everybody was just kind of stunned the way they look and all this. She didn't know what was going on. So, she asked questions and so she found out. "Wow, we just saw him." That was kind of neat though, not what happened to him but because we were there and all. I don't really remember that but I think I remember the funeral because he was shot on Friday and my birthday was on Monday or Tuesday because I was five then. But, it could have been when we lived in Puerto Rico because we used to the theater all the time. We loved Puerto Rico, it was great to live there.

LYN-What about Key West? Do you remember?

TONY-Well, I remember we lived at, there was one or two trailer parks. I do remember that the second one we lived in there was, it was nice, and I remember...

LYN-That was common for military people.

TONY-Yes. Right down the street they had just opened up a brand-new Sears store. I remember that and I remember my mom taking us kids over there and they had like a grand opening and they had this treasure chest. They gave the kids a key that you could try to open the treasure chest up. Well, mine didn't work but it was fun. It was neat. My dad has a drill that my mom bought him for five bucks and he still has the drill and it works just fine.

LYN-At that Sears?

TONY-Yes.

LYN-Craftsman works.

TONY-It was very good. But we liked Key West. I did get this fear of the water though. We were at some beach and I saw a crab come out of the water and since then I just...

LYN-You didn't want the creatures in the water nibbling at you.,

TONY-So, I remember driving on the conch train thing and all that. My mom and dad and my brother, he's been there, it's been several years ago, but it's totally changed from the way it was back then.

I also remember going out on these squadron fishing boats. The squadron had a fishing boat that they would rent out. We went fishing. My mom went with my dad and my mom was, she, Grouper was big but my dad he was in a contest. He, I don't know what happened to the fish, but it was a beautiful Dolphin, the Bull-Nose Dolphin. It was probably seven feet long, six or seven feet long. He had it stuffed. We had that for years. He came in second place. There was an

officer in the squadron that caught a Swordfish and beat him out for that. Yeah, they loved it there.

LYN-So life in Key West was good and it was military I assume. That was a military family.

TONY-I also remember one more thing about that, we lived in that trailer park, we had, my mom and dad had bought a single-wide trailer that was a construction trailer. It was there and we had an awning and Hurricane Betsy was coming through there. The only thing my dad did, the only thing we could do, he put two pieces of rope and tied it across the trailer. When we came back, we had to go in the barracks. I remember that. We had the sea rations, we ate all that stuff.

When we came back, we were driving back through there and it just looked like total destruction and we're thinking, "Oh, my gosh. What's going to happen to ours?" There was nothing wrong with that, nothing at all. It was like a miracle.

Of course, some of the people that lived there when we did, they were life-long friends to my parents. I had my appendix out there, my next-door neighbor, my dad was at work and I had gotten a bad fever and stuff. So, my mom went next door to get my neighbor. So, they ended up calling my dad back so he came and he took me to the hospital there. It was just like that and they had me. So, I woke up and I was in the hospital for a week and it was fun. I got out of school and this and that but it was fun.

One more thing, I remember when they building things I had a sand bucket. When the guys were done and they left I went over and I got some cement and I put it in my bucket. I didn't know what would happen so I brought it home and I set it outside. So, the next day I went out there and it was hard. It was fun

LYN-It was kind of an easy-going life for you. The trailer park was off the base so you lived off the base but your life did revolve around military.

TONY-Oh, growing up yes.

LYN-So then you went to Puerto Rico.

TONY-We went to Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico was great. I was older and it was just wonderful living there. If you were a teen-ager though that wasn't very fun because back then there wasn't a lot of things to do and I could be mistaken with this but, I don't remember too much of live TV stuff. I know there was a lot of the, just like they used to call it when they would have the movies and they would send them overseas and you could see things on the ship. But, I remember that. It was just kind of a neat time.

LYN-So, you didn't get American TV.

TONY-Well, we did but it seemed like it was taped maybe. I don't know, there may have been some live stuff.

LYN-So whatever was broadcast there was sent in on tape and probably not the same time we were watching it in America. What year was that?

TONY-We were there from '67 until '69. My dad actually went down there a few months before to get base housing. I remember going there and we were in the barracks, I don't know what they were called but it was just temporary. We were there just for a few days and got base housing. You know, if I could go there right now, and it was just like it was, I could go right to my house. I would know just where it was. I remember all the neighbors, even now, the neighbors... (Tony becomes emotional recalling the family and friends he shared in Puerto Rico)

LYN-It was a good time. It was your family. When you are in Puerto Rico you need family.

TONY-It was fun. You know it was neat because like I said, the theater, the buses would run from housing to everywhere. You could get on a bus. The movie theater was free unless you wanted to buy something. All the movies were free. My dad was into the sports and stuff like that so we would go watch him play baseball and all this. It was just a real neat time.

He had gotten into the Fleet Reserve Association and I remember picnics; squadron picnics were just totally awesome. I mean, going on the beach and it was just fun.

LYN-So, do you have friends that you are in touch with from those days.

TONY-The only person that I remember was the girl that lived next door to us. She, her parents were actually of World War II age. They were older than my parents. She was the only child. It wasn't because that was what they wanted that's just, they just couldn't have children and so forth and all that. So, but I had, oh gosh, this was forty years ago, it was close to forty years ago that I had seen her. I actually didn't see her, I went, I'm kind of jumping around here but when I got out of school we were stationed in Lemoore so my dad got orders to Orlando for a company commander duty. So, I stayed up north with my mom's side of the family.

So, when I came back down to Orlando there were people who lived with us in different places that ended up there and some of them were retired already. My mom and dad found out about those people so they went to visit them and all that stuff. One of the people was the next-door neighbor, the girl. We went to school together and all this stuff and everything. So anyway, she was living with some person and I just wanted to go. I never did get to see her but I saw pictures of her and stuff. But that's probably the only one I can remember actually.

The people who lived next door to us, I remember them. They lived with us in Lemoore. They didn't have any children, well, they did but it was many, many years later. They didn't think they could have any. But I remember them. She was like sixteen years old when she met her husband and her husband is like my dad's age. She was still in high school. She graduated in Puerto Rico at the high school.

I remember my mom saying that her dad really didn't want her marrying because she was so much younger and all that. But, she was like an older sister to me. I remember that so she and her husband would take, I went to a USO show once with them. You know, maybe I was just a kid they didn't have. They were into ceramics and things like that. So, you know, he and my dad went out on cruises together and things when we were in California.

LYN-When your dad was gone on cruises, what ships? Do you remember?

TONY-Well, he was on the Roosevelt, the Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was on the Saratoga. He was on the Forrestal and Constellation, the oh my goodness I can't believe I can't remember the name of it?

LYN-So they were all aircraft carriers. So, he was working on...

TONY-He was an air dale until he was on the Saratoga. Then he was ship's company. That was right before I decided to come in the Navy. They were stationed up in Philly and he really didn't like his job. He's just very old-school Navy and growing up in Chicago there's just certain things that he had a hard time with and all that stuff.

So, he had gotten sent to a school that he didn't really like but he took the job and so when he was going through the school he almost got kicked out of the school because he was asked a question and he gave his honest answer and he wasn't like one of the....This was a long time ago so he still didn't like certain things that were going in a direction back then.

So, he answered the question the way he just thought it should be answered so after that if it wasn't for his friend that was in charge of the school which he was an officer but they had been stationed together as enlisted so he knew my dad and he was a black man. That's the only reason why he was able to continue on through the school and finish and all that.

So, that's the only time he was on ship's company. I think that was in '80. Yes, that was in '80. One of the stories he told me about when they were coming down to Mayport, they had civilians on the ship.

LYN-Why did they have civilians?

TONY-They were part of the overhaul crew. When they were coming down they were just riding the ship down.

LYN-What ship are we on now?

TONY-This was on the Saratoga. On the way down, it was discovered that they were smoking marijuana. So, the captain of the ship got his staff together and had questions about what they should do about this situation because they really had no...

LYN-Authority over them.

TONY-So, my dad, it came around to him and he said, "What do you think?" He said, "Well," I don't know if I can say this but he said the "F" word and he goes, "Throw them over the side." (Laugh) "We are all laughing about that but we can't do that." That's how my dad was though. He was like that.

Oh, my goodness, to talk about boot camp. Growing up my dad was, I never, he had a bad temper, he really did but I never, well I can't say I never, there was some foul language that came out of his mouth but nothing like what I heard when I went to boot camp. Well, I went there when he was there but this is afterwards.

I had gotten out, I was only there for a few months and my brother-in-law and I had gone down there to visit them and he invited us to go to one of his companies so it was on a week-end. So, we went down there. We went inside the compartment and he was in there and when I left I'm like, "Wow." I never heard my dad talk like that before." He had a stick. He had a small stick and in the middle of the compartments there was picnic tables and he had all these guys lined up inside there and he was walking around that place beating on these tables. So, we went into the office in there and he, this friend, his partner told me, "I've got to take that stick away from your dad. He's driving me nuts with it." (Laugh)

But that was funny. Then that company that I went in there with, one of those guys, I had seen later when I went to HS-1. He worked in maintenance control. I saw him so we got to talking and that's where it was. After that, I have never seen him before either.

LYN-So, at some point you thought, "I'm going to do this too."

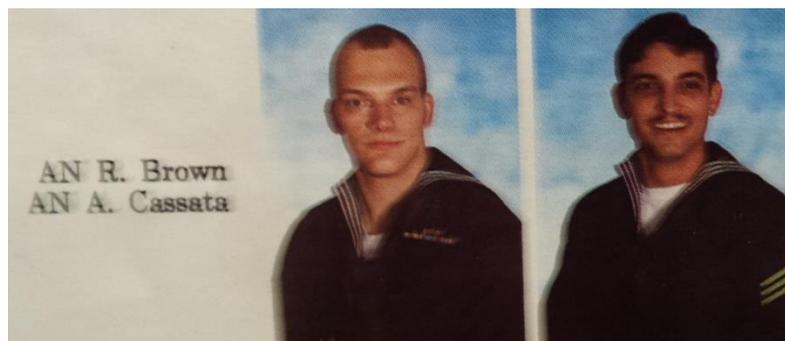
TONY-Well, I had worked, when I had moved to Orlando, my dad tried to get me a job at the dealership that he used to take the car to all the time. I ended up working there. So, when I, part of my job was to road test the vehicles after I had got done working on them. So, I would drive around the base, you know on the out-skirts of it. I would watch the guys out there doing all the jumping jacks and all this stuff and it was hot, oh my gosh it was hot. I would just kind of look at them and thing, "Oh, what a bunch of suckers."

LYN-So, that was the days when there was basic training in Orlando which is no longer. There was Great Lakes and Orlando.

TONY-And San Diego. Until Orlando was opened up, the women I think they went to Bainbridge. I don't really know where that's at. When they opened that up and they went to Orlando. I remember doing that you know and it was just so funny. Just a few years later...

LYN-There you are.

TONY-That was me.



LYN-So you did basic in Orlando?

TONY-I did that and then when I went in my wife and I were already married. We had our two older boys.

LYN-So what year?

TONY-I went in in '83. We got married in '79 and if we had our daughter I couldn't have went it because I already went in on a waiver, a dependent waiver. So, it wasn't because of that, that's why we didn't have any more children it just kind of worked out that way at that point.

But growing up though, I was interested in the military really just one time and that's when we lived in Texas. I was in ROTC and I went and we got our uniforms and stuff and I came home with it and stuff and I remember my dad made the comment, he goes, "Wow, he's only been doing this for a day and he's already a chief. He's wearing a chief's uniform." So, I liked it. It was fun. I enjoyed that.

So, we got stationed somewhere else. In fact, that's when we went to Lemoore. They didn't offer that at the school. So, things just kind of changed and I just lost interest. As far as when I got out of school and until I went into military I wasn't interested in it. I could really care less. I just wanted my piece of paper and that's it. Two years after I graduated I got married. That was in Orlando.

LYN-So, you enlist. What did you want to do?

TONY-I had an "A" school because my dad told me, he said, "When you go, you need to get you a guaranteed "A" school and all that. I had taken the asvab test and I had been out of school for like six or seven years almost at the time.

LYN-What's the test called? You took what test?

TONY-Asvab. It's just to see how dumb you are. I don't know what the acronym stands for it's like A-S-V-A-B or something like that. I can't remember. I did OK and stuff but it was kind of average but I didn't do too well at math. What I was looking into getting into the Navy I needed a better...

LYN-Math score.

TONY-So, I went to school and I took a math class, I took the test again and I did good enough this time to go for the rating that I wanted to which was AT. So, when I went there the recruiter told me, "OK, I got your scores but you can do this but you're sort of the bottom of the cut-off for that rate." I said, "Well, OK." He goes, "You could go to the "A" school and do just fine but he said, "On the other hand if you don't you know you're gonna be stuck and you're gonna be out floating on some ship and all this stuff." I said, "Well, what's my options." He told me so I ended up signing up for AW.

LYN-That's is.

TONY-That's aviation anti-submarine warfare operator.

LYN-And AT is aviation [electronics]

TONY-I forgot what that is. They deal with all the boxes.

LYN-That was my husband and I can't remember. My husband was AT and they do have the black boxes.

TONY-Right. We just called them "Trons" and they are kind of in their own little world just like the robot on "Lost In Space", you know?

LYN-They are in their own little world. You are talking about my husband.

TONY-They don't have any common sense and all that. Although I have met some of them that are pretty cool because....

LYN-You'll have to meet my husband. That's what he was so maybe he was smart.

TONY-He probably was, I'm sure. They do have a lot of schooling to do.

LYN-He stayed in school and then he was an instructor.

TONY-Then so I had that and I also had air crew school which was awesome.

LYN-Where was that?

TONY-That was in Pensacola. That was, wow, that was fun. That was a lot of fun. So, there was only one other person in my company that had the same rating I was going for so we went to boot camp together and we went to air crew school together then we went to "A" school together.

LYN- "A" school was in Memphis?

TONY-That was Memphis. He was from Puerto Rico but he was a teacher. He had a degree and stuff and all that and really smart with math and things like that so when we got to "A" school we had taken, well it was not a test but it was, it was to see where you at because some of the people because of certain subjects they would just waive them and move them on to the next step in the training. So that is what happened to him. So, he ended up being about two or three weeks you know ahead of me.

So, we went to "A" school, well Pensacola but air school was just, I just loved that. It was, the weather was perfect. It was really nice and there are things that we did that my son which is also an AW, he did not get to do. They just cut certain things out and this and that but it was a lot of fun.

LYN-Now where was your family during that time?

TONY-They were in Orlando.

LYN-They stayed there and you went to Pensacola and to "A" school. They didn't go with you to Memphis?

TONY-Right, no. Then when I got the orders here to, I was actually going to go to HS-1 originally and so then my wife had come up here with my brother-in-law and he was in the Navy

longer than I was so he knew the area so they went together and they found us an apartment. So, when I got here I went down to Orlando, packed everybody up, came up here.

LYN-Where did you live?

TONY-Right there on Blanding, it used to be...

LYN-That's OK, an apartment on Blanding but in Jacksonville.

TONY-Right and it's called something else now. But it was right there across from where all the dealerships are.

LYN-The car dealerships.

TONY-It was a nice apartment.

LYN-So you got assigned to?

TONY-HS-1 which is the, we call them RAG squadrons, for the helicopters. So, I was going, I was supposed to go to SAR school but I didn't have any depth perception so they had to take me out of that and switch my platform and that's how I ended up going to P-3's.

So, we were on hold for a month or so at HS-1 and we got done with that and so they reassigned us to VP-30. I went through most of the ground school there and I really had a hard time. I ended up flunking out so that's how I ended up at Cecil Field.

I don't remember when it was. I know it was in '84 and I want to say it was September maybe, October, I can't remember. Because I was, we were on hold again waiting on orders. So, that's when I had to take my rating because, my dad had already told me about the AMH being too much over-manned so I picked AMS which was not too much different as far as over-manned and stuff but it was a little bit different but they were all into the same category of jobs. So, I ended up at Cecil and twelve days later I was on my first cruise.

LYN-Twelve days later? No way.

TONY-I couldn't stand one minute of it.

LYN-What ship?

TONY-That was on the Independence. That was the first cruise, Indian Ocean cruise.



USS INDEPENDENCE CV-62

LYN-Did you sail out of Mayport or Norfolk?

TONY-Norfolk.

LYN-Indian Ocean.

TONY-It was only a four-month cruise because after that it was going in the yards so I did good on that. I missed all the work-up and all that stuff. Just a kind of a bad, eye-opening experience for me and all that. Just really tough.

LYN-Life, for some people it's a dream on the ship and for some it's just, it's tough.

TONY-It is.

LYN-Talk to us about that. It's a tiny space you live in.

TONY-Right. Actually, I was assigned to do my ninety days so in that I had to go to a ship's company berthing which was just people that were pulled from all departments and all that living in this room and it was, I don't remember how many people were in it, maybe ninety or somewhere around there but it was not very big and I didn't know anybody. It ended up that my bunk partner, he was in my squadron and so we became friends and all that. We eventually got to go back to our squadron toward the end of the cruise and that's when I ended up working on the flight deck being a plane captain. I was working toward that. That was probably the better part of being on the ship.

(BREAK IN CONVERSTATION)



LYN-So, you're on the Independence and you're on the flight deck. So, the first time you went on that flight deck. Scary? Exciting?

TONY-All of that. I really didn't know what was going to happen.

LYN-Loud.

TONY-Very loud. A lot going on. I mean it's just amazing and all that. Oh, my goodness, a lot of work. Long days. Chains. I've got a picture somewhere of me and I have about six or eight chains on me. I was very, very small. You know, it was a learning experience.

LYN-So you were wearing a green shirt.

TONY-Well, back, we had the green pants but I had the brown shirt. That was plane captains.

LYN-Plane captains had brown shirts.

TONY-A fun part too was when we came back, we were coming back home, we had this mail box thing we used in the shop. We had, it was a metal fixture that we had thrown away but we kind of folded it up to get it out of the door. So, our shop was right below the flight deck. So, we went out on the cat walk and it was at night and me and this friend of mine we threw it over the side. (Laughing) It hit the water and they had the elevator down and we thought it was go and

hit the elevator. There was nobody on the elevator but it was down and we heard the big splash and all of a sudden, we thought, "Oh, my god we're in trouble now." So, we went back down in the shop and there wasn't anything said about that but the thing is they are big on the "man overboard thing" so they thought, they could have thought maybe somebody went over. We could have been in really big trouble. So, that was fun.

LYN-Did you have port of calls?

TONY-We did. Actually, the only port of call that I was, that we got to go to was Singapore. We were going to go...

LYN-That's a pretty good place.

TONY-We were going to go Australia to visit and cross the equator and do the, that thing.

LYN-The crazy thing.

TONY-So, we were heading that way and then the captain came and said, "We can't go there. We're gonna go to Singapore." So, I think we were there for about a week. I think it was a week. But because it was a short cruise and all we did was just make a big circle around the Indian Ocean that's when we broke off and did that. That was the only port that I was in.

One of the better scenes was when our relief ship was coming. It was the most beautiful thing to see the Carl Vinson. I remember, "Wow, look at the size of that thing." That was such a, that was really neat. Other than when you get back and you had the off-load and all that which I was a part of that because I was a junior guy and all of that.

So, we pulled into Norfolk, February, I think that was 19th, cold, very, very cold you know. It took us about all day to do that because they off-load by seniority of the skippers of the squadrons so unfortunately our skipper was the junior man so we got to off-load last.

LYN-Do you remember your skipper?

TONY-That was Commander Phillips which had later when we had gotten back he had made captain and I think he went to the wing or Washington. I can't remember one of those two.

LYN-So, how did you get home? They fly you home from Norfolk, right?

TONY-Right. We went from there to right here at Cecil.

LYN-Talk about a homecoming.

TONY-Well, (laughing), that's, that was good. It was good but then also though, like some of the children, like I think it was David when I had come back off of one of the cruises. I didn't realize, "Oh, my gosh, who is that? That's David?"

You know, I do remember one time I think it was on the Forrestal I had come back and my oldest son Mike, he had some issue with his legs, something with his hips or something. He was in the hospital so they let me get off the ship when we had come back off of work-up or something. I think that's what it was but when we were coming off I was so excited about getting

off and I ran down there and I slipped and I fell and hit my elbow on the, I forget what they call that thing with the ladder sitting on it and you have the dock there, but they were asking me, “Are you OK?” I was really hurting and I should have gotten it checked out but I’m like, “No, I’m fine.” So, I just I went and saw him.

And then “manning the rail” coming back, manning the rail. I’ve done that a few times. It’s better when you’re manning the rail and you’re coming back than when you’re leaving.



Sailors Manning the Rail as ship enters port

LYN-Oh, that would be horrible.

TONY-Then they played the Lee Greenwood when we were going out on the Forrestal. [“Proud To Be An American”] I just lost it.

LYN-Did you leave from Mayport then?

TONY-Yeah, we were, I had to go below, I couldn’t deal with that. So, it was just...But once you’re out there a day or two later you’re like, “Well, I’ve got to settle in, no turning back.” So, then you just have the day-to-day routine.

LYN-So, that was your second cruise, the Forrestal. So, you were in the Med. Did you get to see some places that time?

TONY-That’s when I started to visit places. The big place was Palma and there were a couple of different places once you got on Palma that you could take the bus to and all that. That was a lot of fun. I think that was the first place where I got to go see the beaches where the girls didn’t wear all the clothes. I wasn’t used to that. It was a lot of fun.

Also, back then we didn't have cell phones or anything like that so you had to wait in line once you got off the ship to go to the phone exchange. You could be there an hour waiting in line and then they would only give you about ten or fifteen minutes. I don't think anybody was on there for ten or fifteen minutes. I know I wasn't.

I did make a phone call from Singapore, I forgot about that. We went there and I called my wife up and because of the time difference I think the phone call was about a hundred or two hundred or something bucks.

LYN-I had one of those from Europe and it was worth every penny for me.

TONY-I did a few MARS call. That was kind of fun.

LYN-Talk about the MARS calls. I did one.

TONY- "Over." And I would talk and I would say that and the guy would say, "You've got to say 'over'." That was kind of funny. I think we were on work-ups. We were going down around Puerto Rico and stuff like that and I think that on one of our cruises we were coming back or going out and they had the MARS station opened up. You had to fill out a request chit and it wasn't guaranteed that you would be able to do all of that.

LYN-And the whole world was listening to you.

TONY-No emails, none of that. Slow, what does my wife call it? Snell mail.

LYN-For me, I would go to the mail box every day and there would be nothing and then suddenly there would be seven letters in one day. I guess it was the same on the ship. I didn't know the routine. You are supposed to number them on the outside. Primm Wright told me that in her interview. You are supposed to put the numbers so they know which one to open first. I didn't know that. I just wrote a letter. It was hard. The separation is very, very hard.

So, was that a six-month deployment?

TONY-The only cruise that was longer was the war cruise. I had flown out to the ship in October, I think it was at the end of October of '90 so I got there before everything happened.

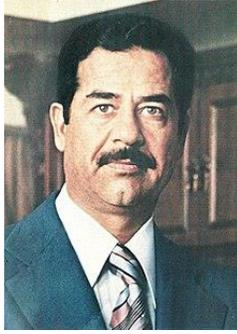
LYN-What ship are we talking?

TONY-The Saratoga. That was the '90-'91 cruise.

LYN-And what was going on in world history.

TONY-All that led up to the first Gulf War. That was kind of cool in that all the times that I had been on ship before you, you know you practiced. Every day they go out flying and do all their missions and all but this time it was the real deal. It was something to see almost every aircraft off the ship. You just didn't see that. That was really neat.

I remember I was working days and I went to eat dinner and we were in the chow hall and the skipper of the ship came over and he said, "Well, I have a message for everybody." He said, "About one or two o'clock in the morning Saddam Hussein is gonna get a big surprise."



Terrorist President of Iraq
Saddam Hussein

Everybody was just like, “Yeah.” Because there was all the buildup of all this and you heard things and this and that. That was just so awesome.



USS SARATOGA
CVS-60

I have to tell the story about the Scott Speicher thing because, well my shop was right off the hangar bay. I had gotten, I was done eating and I don't why I went back to my shop because our shop was as probably as big as the room right here. Maybe a little bit bigger, not much. It wasn't a shop. It was just a space that they had made for what I did at that time.

So, I went there and his plane was parked like right there in the hangar bay. I just, I don't know why, I just looked up and I saw the plane and I saw his name and I just stood there like, “Huh.” I don't do that.



LYN-Had you met Scott?

TONY-No, I didn't anything about him.

LYN-Did you know he was from Jacksonville?

TONY-No. It was just weird that that happened. I had no, then I just went back in my shop and it was after that that you know he had gotten shot down and stuff. I don't know, it just, I didn't know what to think about that. Then later on we got back off the cruise I told my wife that. She goes, "That's something." Then I kind of just forgot about it and then when Mike was doing all of this stuff I had told him about that.

LYN-I'm gonna interject here. Scott Speicher was a local man. He was missing for many years. His remains were in recent years brought home. [remains returned in 2009 after eighteen years missing in action] We do have an interview that will be included of that wing leader that Scott was part of, Dizzy Gillespie and how he just realized, they were on their mission and Scott was missing but they had their mission to do. Later they did go back to try to rescue and didn't find him. I'm trying to remember how many years, it was so many years and suddenly his plane appeared out in the desert and some remains came home that supposedly are Scott's. No one knows what happened.

It affected our city. We're both chocked up. [Scott Speicher was the first missing in battle during the Gulf War] It was a reality of these guys going out and not coming back. That's why we're kind of chocked up with this. OK, can you go on?

TONY-Oh, sure. I know I'm kind of going back and forth between cruises and this and that because I tried to think of things before this and stuff just....

And about the ferry incident too. Mike told me to talk about the ferry incident. This was on the same ship, the same period.

LYN-The Saratoga and were you in port?

TONY-We were in port, we were off the coast of Israel right by Haifa and the weather, it was bad weather. It was late in the year, I think it must have been November or December.

LYN-I think it was December. I remember it being very cold and the night that that happened I had shore patrol duty. We were all dressed and ready to go and we were going out on the hangar

bay to get ready to get on the liberty launch to go take us to Haifa and they came over and said that everything was cancelled because of the weather. The seas were too rough.

So, then we all went back to bed and stuff and then it seemed like almost right after that that is when we heard about everything happening. They came over the, the one MC saying that if you have this type blood, this and that, to go down here and all this stuff. I mean, I thought I was dreaming. I was sleeping and all of a sudden you get woke up like that.

LYN-What did they say? What did you know on the ship about the incident, what had happened?

TONY-Well, I had a friend that I had went to “A” school with and SAR school with that he was in another, he was in a helo squadron and he was an AW and he was a rescue swimmer. Actually, that’s where I got all my stuff. As a matter of fact, he was on that ship, on that ferry and he told me that he said he had jumped off. He said, “As soon as that thing started taking on water it went down like really fast.” So, he just jumped off and started swimming.

LYN-Can you remember how many people were on it? It was a large number.

TONY-I can’t remember how many people were on that. I was thinking about that and I tried to remember. I remember they had the memorial service a few days later on the ship. I don’t remember, it seemed like there was more ship’s company people but I could be mistaken. I don’t even remember how many people. But, he swam back and he told me that the Israelis had these little boats that they would try to help out and it was real dark and it was cold and it was ruff and he said, “Actually there was people out there and they were actually getting run over because they couldn’t see these people.” He finally made it back to, they call it the “Camel Back” and he got on the ship and he told what happened and this and that.

I, that’s where I got most of my stuff from. I don’t know, you are there, I didn’t think about it but you know what happens but I don’t know. But, had that not got cancelled I would have been on that.

LYN-When you are launching planes that go out and attack, the least thing you are thinking about is dying on a ferry in Israel. I think also, in our conversations, an officer who was in port at the time tells about him learning about the incident so that will be twice recorded, that incident.

Well, we’re glad you’re here.

TONY-Me too. My family wouldn’t be as big.

LYN-So, how many children did you have?

TONY-Hannah, she is...

LYN-Go ahead and name all the children.

TONY-There’s Mike, James, Sandy, Amanda, Hannah, David, Laura, Esther, Josh, and Katie. My wife had prayed that I would get back before Hannah was born. I got back one month before Hannah was born and so that was March of ’91 I got back, March 12th and Hannah was born April 12th of ’91.



Children of Tony and Lori Cassata



David Joseph Cassata

AWR 3

3rd generation sailor

LYN-We had the same thing. My due date was before they were due to get back and I didn't give birth for three weeks late and so I watched my guy come in and got him to be here for delivery. He had duty that night. (Laugh)

TONY-That's one thing, I was fortunate, whether, well, with Mike and James being born when we were civilians I was there for them but the rest of my children, even though I would miss anniversaries, birthdays, and stuff, I was always able to be here for their births. So that was good.

LYN-That is good. I do have on one of the tapes that one man learned two weeks after that he had child. The captain of the ship just said, "Here, I got a telegram so you need to go take some

time off.” (Laugh) That is hard on family life. It’s hard trying to figure out what you are going to do and how you are going to do it and the emotions involved compared to everyday life when you don’t have to be away.

TONY-Of course, we had the “Hi Daddy” films when we were out.

LYN-What is that?

TONY-They would, the families would go back to the squadron when we were out and they would do like a “Hi Daddy” film like say for Christmas, Thanksgiving, maybe New Year’s and they would tape them to kind of just say what you wanted to say and all that stuff and then they would send them to the ship and you know the squadrons, everybody kind of gave you time. You would usually go in the ready room because that’s where they had all the VCR’s and stuff so we would get to watch it there. I think I got a couple of those.

LYN-So, you come home off the Forrestal but you are still here in Jacksonville and you told me that you had been at NAS and Cecil. So, tell me about the difference. How do you see the difference in those bases? How did you see the difference?

TONY-I think probably the thing that stands out the most is the noise level. That was the big thing at Cecil. We really liked Cecil. It was really neat. It was a small, little base but it had everything you needed. It was very convenient and all that. We had a choice to get base housing there but I thought, “No, it’s just too noisy.” I didn’t want Mayport because it was too far out. They had Yellow Water but, “Let’s just go get Jax.” But Jax was quieter. I think it more business going on there because you had NADAP and all that stuff. It used to be NARF back then but it’s the same thing. It was bigger and this and that.

LYN-Well, there’s a hospital there. A big commissary there.

TONY-And that’s one thing, we were there when the commissary was, I was a little kid, things were different back then when we lived here, but as far as me being in the military things were different buildings and this and that. Things didn’t look like they do now and different locations. We were here when the exchange was over by the seawall, close by that. It was just more compact. It seemed more family oriented back then.

In, you know it seemed like, we just had the two boys and then we had Sandy, and that’s how we got into base housing. You had to have at least three kids. Of course, you had to be at least third class. They did have the inadequate housing which was a good deal.

LYN-Inadequate housing?

TONY-When you used to go into Jax in the main gate, to the left they had small houses over there and they were based on your rank and you did have to pay rent and electricity but at a very reduced amount. It was a good deal. They also had the trailer park over there which my sister and brother-in-law had lived over there and over at Cecil. That was a good deal for them.

LYN-So, we’re comparing bases. For working on the base?

TONY-Well, like when we lived, we lived in two different houses at Jax. Our first house, oh, gosh we just loved that house. It was just so neat. I had made third class and we got, we were on the list for about a year before we got a house. So, we moved on there, that was in June, I think it was June or maybe July of '87 and we were living in the apartments. We moved all our stuff one day we moved in the house and while we were doing all this stuff, we didn't have very much stuff and growing up in the military I knew we had paid for no electricity and none of that in housing.

The first thing I did was, we walked in the house and I took the air conditioner control and "swish" all the way over. We had the old-style air conditioners and not the heat pumps so we go in there and we take everything in the house, we set our beds up, we go to sleep. The next day we had already planned our vacation. We got up the next day, we left. Everything was in the house but just not put where it needed to go.

We came back thirty days later. The air conditioner was still running and as soon as we walked in at the storm door we walked up to that and the storm door, it was so cold in the house that the storm door was sweating. I saw that, I heard the air conditioner running all at the same time, I opened the door and it all hit me. "Oh, my gosh we left that thing running" and I had it all the way up because it was so hot and I didn't think about turning it off. I go, "Oh boy, we could have burned that. We could have done all that stuff." That was such a fun time. We just loved living there.

LYN-So, it was good living on the base. In Memphis, we lived on the base and it was so highly regulated. Like, you would get a speeding ticket if you left your porch light on in the daytime. If your dog got loose it was the same.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

LYN-I'm going to repeat in case we lost it on the other side. We were talking about living on the base. My experience, this was I did leave my porch light on in the daytime once and my husband got a speeding ticket. (Laugh) My dog did get loose once and all the neighbors helped me chase him down so we wouldn't get another speeding ticket for having a dog loose. So, there were silly things about living on base. It was just so strange to me. But, you enjoyed that.

TONY-We did. It was so fun. We would grill out almost every day during the summertime. On the back porch, they did have this wall up, they were re-doing the Buchman Bridge and you could see, from our house you could see the Buchman Bridge and they were doing all this construction to it. It was just awesome.

LYN-Well, it's a wonderful view of the water on the St. Johns River. It's a pretty location.

TONY-It is.

LYN-I'll put on tape, NAS Jacksonville is on Roosevelt Blvd. and Roosevelt is on one side and the St. Johns River on the other. It's a beautiful location.

TONY-It is.

LYN-Could you live on base at NAS and work at Cecil?

TONY-Yes.

LYN-I never did think about that. So, did ya'll have any events at Cecil or did you just work there? It was not like your family was hanging out at different places at Cecil. It was just where you went to work and came home?

TONY-Well, when we would have squadron picnics and things like there and we would go over to the picnic area and things like that. Like when we came back off the war cruise Mike and James had, no that was, no I take that back. That was, they went on a Tiger Cruise with me.

LYN-What is that?

TONY-That's when, I don't know if they do it anymore, but your children, male children they had to be a certain age and they wouldn't do it all the time but they would offer to have them come out on the ship and basically live with you for a week.

LYN-A week.

TONY-They would get to, they could go to different parts, places that maybe say I couldn't go to. They would have people give them tours of the ship and so forth. They could eat with me and all this kind of stuff. It was just a real fun time for them to do that.

They enjoyed that. That was on the Saratoga. That was the one we were coming back from the last cruise and they had, we stopped off in Bermuda and anchored off of there so that they could fly them from Mayport on a helo out there to the ship. (Tony is again choking up as he remembers the events)

LYN-That's OK, we're getting choked up again. Life-time memories.

TONY-When we came back off, that was a war cruise because I remember they had a Corsair painted up like a desert color and we got a picture of him. I need to find these pictures. It's him and James and I got them I think it was a F-14 squadron hats and they were standing in front of the planes and I got a picture of them. They had them all over by the tower. They had the planes parked over by the tower.

LYN-So, all the planes were painted the desert color?

TONY-Some of them were.

LYN-So you paint them right on the ship I guess.

TONY-No, I don't know if these were done by NADEP just for special purpose or what. I don't remember.

LYN-I do know at Cecil they did paint planes because...

TONY-Well, the squadrons.

LYN-My husband bought, I'll add this. It was so fun. He bought a MG off a guy that had been sitting out at the base while he was on the cruise and he couldn't get it to start and he hit it and it finally started. But, he, a guy painted it for him in the hangar. We had our British racing green MG that we were always putting money into but it was transportation and it was a fun car for him to have. [The car was purchased from Scott Chamblers in 1971 after a Forrestal cruise. Scott was killed the next week in a car accident while on leave. His name is memorialized on the plaque of men lost during their service at Cecil.]

TONY-Well, I guess I have a story about that too. I just wish I could make it like a Reader's Digest condensed version. I get to talking and it just keeps coming. But, when, at my work that I work at now, I work at Cecil. We went to a maintenance meeting one morning and there was this older guy standing next to me. He had this book in his hand. It ended up that it was the book from one of the squadrons that my dad worked when we lived in Puerto Rico. So, I saw that and I'm like, "That looks familiar." I couldn't see what it said on it and it wasn't very big.

So, it ended up that I had talked to him and asked him if I could see the book. As soon as I saw it it said, "VC-8" on it. I say, "I know that's it." So, I opened it up and I said, "When were you there?" He told me. I said, "Really, we were living there too." So, I opened up the book and I was looking through it and I was like, "There's my dad right there." He told me, this guy, that he was air crew on P-2's but he also was an AMS and he said, "Back then in the '60's", you're talking about paint and stuff in the hangar, the squadron, a lot of the skippers used to have a car that they used to paint up for them that kind of matched the squadron and stuff. They used to just drive back and forth in those. Well, he did that in the hangar. He painted the car in the hangar you know, but he says, "Now, you couldn't do that now." I

LYN-We did it.

TONY-It is just funny you know to have him when my dad was all that. It was just something else. But that was my story.

LYN-So, you continued, this is the amazing thing, you never left Jacksonville basically except on ships. So, how did your career continue. You came back off of the Forrestal and then how many cruises did you make?

TONY-Well, I did the one on the Independence. I big one on the Forrestal because of the way my rotation was working out. When I got to the Independence I had all the other schooling for the other job which didn't work out so that year, year and a half or so, that was that. So, when I got to that ship they were already doing things so that's why I was just one cruise on that.

Then, it was getting towards my first enlistment being up so I knew I was going to re-enlist so I did, the Forrestal came out of the yards and we went on work-ups and cruise for that. That was '86 and we came back and then when I was up for orders or re-enlistment I had signed up for five years to reduce my, what was left on my sea-duty time so I could leave early. Kind of a trade-off there. That's when I went to HS-1 and I was there for three years and then I went to, back to Cecil, well I was in VS-28 when I was on the Independence and the Forrestal. So, then I went to HS-1 and I went back to Cecil in a different VS squadron.

So, that's when we went to the Saratoga. We did the war cruise, the '90-'91 cruise, and then we did work-ups for the '92 cruise and in-between that and going out on that cruise the ship needed repairs so the Constellation was coming out of the yards and it was going back to San Diego and so they got permission for us to finish up our training on that ship. Then we would come back and they would go and everything would carry on.



USS CONSTELLATION CV-64

We did six weeks on that ship down around Puerto Rico and all that stuff. The thing about that is I was on that ship in 1976. My dad had come back off a west pack cruise and we went, we lived in Lemoore and they, they all left from San Diego and they came back and it was during the bicentennial so we went down there to go pick him up.

So, we got to stay the whole day on the ship. What they did was, they had a production on the ship on the flight deck. They had, oh my gosh, all these actors and singers of that time like Jackie Cooper, he was a captain, reserve captain in the Navy at the time so we got to see him. Anson Williams from Happy Days and some other people from TV shows and groups and things like that but that was so awesome.

So, then when I got to go on the ship before, I was, "I've done this." We still have the tickets from that day somewhere. My mom gave them to me. That was so awesome. We went back to the hotel we were staying at that time and we watched it on TV. But to see, I never saw anything like that to see all the lights and the cameras and all. But when you are watching on TV you don't see things. It was just really neat you know.

LYN-So, you went out on the Constellation.

TONY-Did that and came back and then we went out on our cruise, the '92 cruise. That's, the captain of the ship, I mean being my level of us and the captain you don't just sit here and talk to him like this. But, we went to France and I think it was during, it might have been a 4th of July also, I don't remember, but there was this small, little island like thing and the MWR had rented the whole thing for the ship's people for the whole day. Everybody got to go on there and we just had like a nice picnic and all this stuff.

Well, the captain and his wife were there. So, he is the kind of guy that you could have hung out with. OK, he was the captain and all that but he just seemed like a regular guy, just very people-person and approachable and all of that. So, we did all that and I remember me and this friend of mine, we were walking back to go get on the liberty launch to go back to the ship and we're just talking. Well, the captain and his wife come walking up next beside of us. There were a bunch of us all around. He just started talking to us.

LYN-Who was it? Do you remember?

TONY-That was Captain Drager. In fact, I was looking in my book because I wanted to make sure I remembered his name. He was this awesome guy. So, we were walking and he goes, "How are you guys doing?" We go, "Oh, fine you know." "I don't know about you but I kind of all-Frenched out." We had been to France. We went to Cannes. We went to a couple of other places, I can't remember what they were called. Then we were just ready to kind of get on with the rest of the cruise and all that stuff.

So, anyway, we were in the Adriatic Sea and our ship was playing war games with the French, I think they were French. It was at night and I remember we were in bed and all of a sudden everything just went. We were all anchored in this area you know. Our ship had shot off a missile and it hit this one French ship and just about sunk it. You know, I mean we had to send people over to this ship.

LYN-You're really on NATO training and you have bombed the ally.

TONY-That's right so I mean it killed the captain and a few other people, actually a lot of people. It took the whole bridge out of the ship. So, we sent people from our ship over there to help them out and everything because they had to do some serious damage control.

So, anyways, when things like that happen it doesn't matter whose fault it is or whatever, he's going to get relieved. It's too bad because I, the only other captain that I had seen, I didn't talk with him, I just saw him going up the ladder when we were on the war cruise. That was Captain Joe Mobley. He was on the Saratoga during that time. He was another good guy. He was an older man compared to the other guy. He ended up making admiral and stuff but Captain Drager, he was slated to become an admiral. I mean, all that. This happened and that's it you know. So, he had gotten relieved and all that. We finished the cruise out and all this.

LYN-So, is he relieved right then?

TONY-Pretty much. You have the executive officer that can take all that stuff but he was relieved. That was just too bad. But, I don't know what happened to him. I don't keep up with it.

Saratoga Captain
James M. Drager



So, we got off of the war cruise and came back and then we did the '92 cruise and then we did more work-ups. We got to go to Fallon which, oh god I love Fallon. I could have lived in Fallon.

LYN-No humidity.

TONY-I'm like, "Yeah." I only got to go there one time and but I'm glad I got to go.

LYN-So, that's the weapons, so, what were you doing?

TONY-We were just supporting our squadron. We just happened to go there but yes, that's where they do all the bombing and all that practice and things like that. But, just fantastic weather. I mean, oh my gosh. We were there for I think two weeks, ten days or two weeks and oh god, it's beautiful. We had, they had just built new barracks and it was for us, we had two people in ours, me and this other guy. It was great. We did have to share the bathroom with the other room on the other side.

LYN-Suitemates.

TONY-There was no lock. But fortunately, because of the shifts and all of that it worked out good. But, we got, I went to, I rented a car because dad here was old enough to do that and had the credit card so I took some friends of mine in the shop and we drove around. We went to Reno. I went to a really nice car museum which I ended up going back again because I just couldn't get enough pictures. But we also drove around Lake Tahoe. Oh my god, it was just absolutely, it is just indescribably beautiful. But it was neat. It was warm where we were at but you go up in the mountains and it was snow on the ground and this is in September.

But, it was just gorgeous. I wanted to go see the Ponderosa. I heard it was around there somewhere but I never did find it. But we went to a couple of places and then we just went back but the weather was just, oh wow. If I could have got orders there, wow. (Laugh)

LYN-Isn't it isolated?

TONY-It is.

LYN-It would be a little hard on family.

TONY-But on the other hand there is so many other places to go to. So, then we went on the last cruise, the '94 cruise, the De-Com cruise. That was pretty good.

LYN-What were you decommissioning?

TONY-The Saratoga. Yeah, it had, I think it was thirty-eight years it was in service at that time.

LYN-Do you remember the skipper?

TONY-Oh, gosh. I'd have to look on my book.

LYN-Perhaps Bill Kennedy.

TONY-That's it. OK.

LYN-I just met Bill Kennedy yesterday. (Laugh) [Conversation with William Kennedy is included in this project]

TONY-I was just looking in my book. Wow. But that was the best one because I was going on shore duty after that and, there is something else about that, and that was the last cruise, well for us, that it was all men. On the combatants, women weren't allowed it didn't matter what it was. So, after that, that's when they had allowed women on there.

LYN-So, the pilots started on too, the women pilots. I have some stories about that that are going to be in this project about when the first women came on. Tony is having a little fit here talking about that. It was a hard transition for the Navy to make. It was a very, very hard transition.

TONY-There is one thing too, this, but I have a cruise book for all my cruises except for the one that, I would trade all these in, except maybe the last one, for that one cruise book. I don't know why I didn't get it. It was only twenty bucks, maybe twenty-five, I can't remember what it was. I did not get the one for the war cruise and to me that's the prize one to have you know. I heard you can them on line but they are so much money you know.

One of the guys that I worked with at my job I have now was in a squadron that was on that cruise which I did not know him at the time. We ended up working together but he's got that.

Well, he had died in 2006 and I know this is wrong but you gotta know Bruce, but like, "If I could get my cruise book." I know his wife was going, "No, I'm not doing that." But that's the one I don't have and I wish I had bought that one.

LYN-So, tell me about the decommissioning. You were there. The Saratoga, a lot of people had heart-strings to the Saratoga here in Jacksonville.

TONY-I believe it was, if I'm not mistaken it started out here. It spent its whole career here.

LYN-It did. I just learned that, which is most unusual in the Navy for a carrier.

TONY-I remember especially towards the end of the cruise it seemed like there was all this memorabilia stuff that was going on sale. I bought patches. I bought the razor blade patch. I mean I got a lot of patches and all that stuff and I bought me a couple of windbreakers and I have, my dad also he bought one when he was on that back like in 1980 and I have that one and it looks just as good as the ones I have now. But the ones that I have they are a little kind of special because it has the years and all that. It's pretty neat.

It was just neat knowing that this is my last cruise, at least I thought it was. Well, it was as far as being in the Navy. I guess it was kind of special but I, maybe I didn't look at it that way. I just thought it was like, "You know what, I'm off of this thing and all that and everything." Probably afterwards when you look back at stuff that's when you can kind of think, "Well, you know it was kind of neat." It was just as you are going through those things at that time, "Oh, I can't stand this."

LYN-So when they decommission they pull into port for the ceremony. They were at Mayport. Can you remember that day?

TONY-Well, I remember there was like a ton of people and they were, it was funny because on the one side of the ship, I think it was the starboard side, they tried to paint everything up looking really nice. Even when you go into port they do the same thing. But, it was so funny because, and then they have all the flags and all this and you see all the banners and I mean just tons of people you know and all the news people are there and all that. It was a big deal.

LYN-Now what year was that?

TONY-That was in '94. Oh, gosh, I can't remember what the month was. I think it was in the middle of the year. I didn't have to man the rail that time. That was good so we were just waiting. We were so happy to get off.

LYN-Where had you been on that cruise?

TONY-Well, like in the Med for us it's pretty much about the same places. I know I started talking about Palma. Everybody goes to...

LYN-Spain, Italy, France.

TONY-Everybody goes to Naples. We went, we got to go to Greece once, gosh I can't remember the name of it. We went to different places in Italy. I think we anchored off of Sigonella once, Palermo which my dad's side of the family his mother's side they are supposed to be from around there somewhere. I don't know.

LYN-Wow, you could have gone home.

TONY-Let's see France, we went to, oh Toulon, we went to I'm a big World War II history guy, I like all that and there's a place we went there too. Cannes, we went to Cannes. Cannes is like "Wow." I mean people drive around Mercedes and things like that like we drive Chevy's around here. You see all the big expensive cars and all this and the boats. Oh my gosh, the boats, "Wow." Their life boats are twenty-five, thirty feet long boats that are sitting on top of these huge yachts. Just wow.

But, let me tell this really quick one. I was on shore patrol. We were in Palermo and me and my friend were walking down the street and this older Italian woman, she is walking down the sidewalk and she stops us. She starts talking to us. None of us knew what she was saying. So, I turned around and I see my LPO walking this way. So, I said, I called him over there and so I said, "Look." I said, "We don't understand what she's trying to tell us and all this stuff." I mean, he was from New York. He was Italian and he knew how to speak all of that. So, we just kind of waited until they started talking and then we left.

As I'm walking down the sidewalk I'm like, "Whatever he says, don't listen to him. I don't care, we're going. Don't even look back at him." So, he started talking to this woman and you can see them talking and all of a sudden, he looks at us and he starts yelling at me, "Come back here." He was getting mad. I don't know what was going on but I said, "Keep going." He didn't say anything to me about that but it was funny. Oh, my god it was so funny.

So, anyway then after I got off that I went to shore duty and all the time that I was, well, I shouldn't say "all the time" but some of the time when I was on that cruises I would talk to this friend of mine, "Wouldn't it be nice to not have to go on these things anymore, maybe do something else?" So, I was up for orders on my last cruise when we were coming back so I ended up getting orders to VP-30 and I thought, "Cool, P-3 orders, that's awesome" because I heard all these neat things about all this stuff. You just didn't have to go on the ship. That would be enough right there.

So, I got those. I got here and I spent three years there and I liked it. It was good for me. We had a huge duty section and with my rank, I only stood one watch, one certain watch and that's it. All the time I was there I think I had maybe five watches, maybe the whole time. That was it because we had, there were two thousand people in the squadron. We had that and like thirty-something airplanes. There was a lot of people so it was a big duty section. We had eight sections so it could be months. So, anyways and then we just lived like five minutes from there.

After that I was up for, my enlistment was coming up and one day I remember going home and I just, it had been on my mind. So, I went home and I told my wife, I said, "You know, you might

think I'm crazy here." At this point I had almost fourteen and a half years in the Navy. I think it was about a month shy and it would have been fourteen and a half years.

So, I get in there and I tell her, I say, "You know, I really feel like the Lord just wants me to get out of the Navy." So, she goes, "You know what, that's funny because I've been praying about the same thing." I'm like, "Wow." So, I knew that's what I needed to do.

So, I go back to the squadron and I tell them, "Look, you know I'm up for orders this and that and everything but you know what, this is what I want to do." So, "OK, fine." So, I filed the paperwork out, did all that, put everything in. Well, my dad, he did thirty-one years in the Navy and he knew the cycle of orders, exams, and everything. So, he is questioning me that whole year about where I was at with things. So, I was constantly putting him off on stuff. So, my wife said, "You know what, you're gonna have to tell your dad what you're doing."

So, Dad called up and I was talking to my dad and I told my dad, "You know, I feel like I've got to get out of the Navy." My mom was there by him on the phone and he dropped the phone. He couldn't believe that because that's like all he knew. From one thing, you look like a fool to do that because you're so close and all that but I knew what was ahead of me and at the time I think Mike and James were like sixteen, seventeen years old. They weren't bad kids. I did find out things later on and sometimes they are telling me things now, "You know when you were."

But, so, I just didn't see them on the good path and I knew that was out, I was going to go on sea duty again. I knew I was going on a ship. There was just no way about that. So, anyway, so my mom picked the phone up and she goes, "I think your dad said you're getting out." I said, "Yeah." I tried to explain to them. You know I think it was easier for my mom on one hand but my dad just... For several years he, I don't want to say he didn't speak to me but until I decided to go back in in the reserves, he really, it just wasn't the same.

He was so proud of me when I went in the Navy plus he put in for his last set of orders you know there and he was just so excited and all this stuff. You know, that was a big thing for him. So, when I decided he just couldn't understand because he could only look at it from one side.

So, anyway, we did all that and so we had moved off 103rd Street and we bought a house. I had no job.

LYN-No insurance. No hospitalization. It's eye-opening the first day you are out of the military [with no retirement] to realize you don't have hospitalization coverage. There are things you just haven't thought about having. It was for us.

TONY-It is but I guess I was just so excited I didn't think about all that. But, God has been faithful so I worked at UPS. It liked to have killed me. Then I got a couple of other jobs before I got what I have now. But, I mean, so the job I have now. We were over at JAX and so we had moved from there to over by Cecil but the reserve center was right by where we were at.

So, I went in there knowing nothing about nothing. It ended up that I got the paperwork and I filled it out. I brought it home and I told her and I thought she was going to think I was crazy.

But, it was almost seven years later. Almost. So, I did that and I went back in and I just stayed in and I only had to do five and a half years and I could retire.

LYN-Where was that?

TONY-That was at NAS. On my orders, it had VP-62/VP-30 and at the time I was only at VP-62 for about a little less than three months. So, what they were doing was they were forming up my unit at VP-30. It was all new. So, I would just, once that was done I went over there. I was pretty much on my own. It wasn't so structured then. I just had to do certain things. See this guy, he would always make sure I was getting my time in and pay and everything.

So, I did that and so eventually we ended up forming up and it got more all that stuff. We were having some training one day up in the building over there and so, it was something with the computers or something. I didn't grow up with those. I just had a hard time with those things.

So, whatever we were doing it had something to do with the amount of time you had in the military and all this stuff and when we could retire and all this stuff. So, the guy came around and he goes, "Well, you can retire in this." All of a sudden, "Wow." So that's what I did. It was 2010 in April I think when I retired.

LYN-Talk to me about the reserves. We talk about, a lot of the guys did reserves, but what was it like for you? What did it entail? What did you have to do?

TONY-Actually, to be honest with you, to me, it was boring. The reason being is because I think it was my attitude. I think at first, I enjoyed it because I was kind like, "I'm in the military but yet I really in a sense had nobody to really answer to." As long as I did my four hours a month, it was actually a week-end. It's eight hours, well you've got two days. Each period is four hours and all that then you were good.

Then you had to do two weeks minimum a year and all that. If you could do extra but I, I don't know, I, it was almost like it was no challenge for me. I think that may have been part of my doing. Under the job that I have now, it's working on the same type, well, they're getting rid of them now but the P-3 so like at my job I had qualifications that I didn't have when I was drilling and all that. I mean I did work towards getting those and stuff like that.

But, I don't know, it was different. The more people we got in, it just seemed like all we were doing was the same thing. We would do changing tires and doing things like that. We weren't really getting into the meat of doing something. But, you know that kind of made it like that. It was hard because at that time they weren't used to having reserves integrated in with the regular Navy.

They might be working on a big job but because they don't know where you're at with your knowledge and so forth, just to come in on something to try to take over and all that, that, it is kind of hard to do that. So, that's why they, we just did certain things and all that.

LYN-So, your job now. Who do you work for now?

TONY-Well, I work for Lockheed-Martin but we are contracted out for customs, border protection, the Department of Homeland Security. We maintain their aircraft. It is almost just like being in the Navy. Some of our bosses just can't let some of that stuff go but it's been a good job. I've been with the program now in December it will be fifteen years. We've had a few different companies that we've worked, that's been, that we have been in a company but it's the same program.

We've been Raffion then we went to a couple of other companies. But, our contract is coming up next year I think it is, yeah, in October so we'll see who gets us. But, it's been a good job. It's been very good. I really enjoy what I'm doing. I'm an aircraft painter. I did part of that in the Navy. The other part was just working on the air frame, part of the air frame and all that kind of stuff.

You know, I'm glad I got the experience I did in the Navy because it carried over into what I do now as with a lot of people that do that.

LYN-What about the GI bill? Did you use your GI bill?

TONY-No, I didn't. No, because you know, I could have put money in to that and everything but I guess for me and my wife, my life is her and our children and our family. Now, when you say that people could say, "OK, but isn't part of that being able to support them and do all this stuff for them and everything else?"

LYN-I think you are doing that.

TONY-I am. But on the other hand, that's why you have to kind of see the reasons why things worked out the way they did and all that. I don't know, I just got to a certain point where I'm like, you know what, I mean I was like almost twenty-five when I came in the Navy. I had no intention on going to school or anything like that. I guess I'm just too whatever. I like to go to work, do my job, go home and that's it. I could do that for a long, long time. But, some people just aren't like that. They have to have more of a variety. They have to have all that. But I never did, I just never did.

LYN-So, you mentioned you could put money into it at that time. I guess the GI bill had changed. When we were in you could go in-service GI bill and only used up like half or three fourths of your amount and you paid nothing. It paid for everything. Then the GI bill after the Navy actually gave you money and you could pay whatever you wanted to out of it. For us it paid for a bachelor's degree, two masters degrees and almost a doctorate. So, it was, I guess it was different for you by that time they had changed the GI bill. It was free. It was just provided for us and you had to use it within ten years of getting out. We used it up.

TONY-Well, they, we had that but we had the other thing. I forget what you call it. It was some kind of educational bill or something that you could put money into to but see, like when I came in it was, it was in-between the Vietnam Bill and I think it was the Montgomery Bill. It might have been the Montgomery Bill but it was in-between the Vietnam and the one after that.

So, they were kind of changing things around and I think that's when it came out with this thing that you could put money into like an educational savings account kind of thing. But, I just didn't do that that, you know. I guess, I just didn't I just didn't quite...

LYN-It wasn't what you wanted to do. OK, so how long have you been working your job now?

TONY-Almost fifteen years.

LYN-So, you've had a long career. So, your dad retired at thirty-one, between the Navy and this do you have your thirty-one now?

TONY-Oh, now I only did my twenty years.

LYN-But if you took your Navy job and the job you've been working now you've got your thirty-one in and you're still working.

TONY-Well, it would be thirty-five.

LYN-Thirty-five and you're still going. I know they have some retirement for you plus you get a little Navy.

TONY-Well, with the reserves when you turn sixty that's when you start getting your benefits. This year I'll be fifty-nine so I have another year.

LYN-And what will that provide?

TONY-That's gonna provide a house payment. That's gonna provide some groceries, maybe some utilities.

LYN-But you get medical and for family?

TONY-Oh, right. It's just like you're active duty. Well, they are always changing the TriCare stuff and all this stuff.

LYN-So you'll have access to total medical coverage for your family. That's a big deal if you're not working, for a lot of people. So, you get to go back to the commissary.

TONY-Well, we have that now.

LYN-You do.

TONY-We just don't have the medical thing.

LYN-So you get the medical and your retirement pay will begin when you turn sixty. That's right around the corner then.

So, I want to talk just a moment about, we mentioned the children. There is one that I have met and it is Michael. He introduced himself to me with a vision. The vision is for the POW/MIA Memorial at Cecil Field that would become a national memorial. When he said it to you, what did you think?

TONY-I thought that was totally awesome. I was like, "I don't where you got this from but you know I think that's great." He wants so much to be part of not just that but the military. I don't know if you want to talk about this but he, I think this is, this month he finds out whether he's gonna get a commission or not.

LYN-I didn't know that.

TONY-He's been working on that for some time now.

LYN-So how does that work? I don't even know Mike's background. Well, I'll let him tell me.

TONY-I don't want to say something and him say, "Wait a minute." That would be better.

LYN-I'll get his interview. So, you were aware of the memorial that is out there surely. Were you aware of its deplorable condition? Did he just find it?

TONY-No, I mean I drive by it every day I go to work. It's right there you know. I would look over at it once in a while and I would see it and I would see all the trees overgrown. Some of the lights weren't working. But, not the other part of that, when you go on the other side more in the woods they have another area which I, the other part is what I noticed more.

But, it was a Saturday, he had asked us to go over there if we would give him a hand just cleaning it up and all that stuff. It was us and his father-in-law and there were a few of us out there. We all spent pretty much at least a good half a day or so cleaning up and trimming bushes, trees, painting, pressure washing and all this stuff. We were doing all that and I was looking at all the plaques up there and reading all that and I'm like, "Wow, this is pretty neat." I mean I had seen it. When they were growing up we used to go to the chapel over there when they were little you know. I didn't think anything about it.

LYN-You went to regular services there?

TONY-Sure did.

LYN-That was a sad state when I walked in that chapel a few months ago.

TONY-That's what I heard.

LYN-Real sad. Awful. It was awful. So, you are proud of Mr. Michael.

TONY-I am. I am very proud.

LYN-OK, I will tell you after nine interviews, there is no one I've interviewed who that is not one hundred percent behind him and what is happening. We know there is just a large group of people who have bought into this. But, the hard work is way ahead of him. I believe that he's certainly got his eye on the prize and he's headed that way and it would be very beneficial to many families and to the city of Jacksonville. Thank you for raising up a son that has chosen to take on this task.

Thank you for your service too.

TONY-Oh, you're welcome.

LYN-We're gonna add a little bit onto this interview. [Tony is looking through cruise books]

TONY-I wanted to make sure I had his name right. Hopefully you won't interview him because it might embarrass him but he'll probably just laugh at it so you wouldn't embarrass him.

LYN-Now which book is this one?

TONY-This one is the Saratoga.

LYN-Let's look at the skipper's picture. Let's see if I'm right about Bill Kennedy.

TONY-OK, that's Captain Drager. This is the '92 cruise. He was a good guy. I really liked him. He was so people-oriented but on the other hand if you had to go to captain's mess, I heard he wasn't, he was captain then.

LYN-Tell me about captain's mess.

TONY-That's when you are in trouble, serious trouble, especially on a boat. (Laugh)

LYN-We'll add a picture of Captain Drager. Let's get all the writing. (taking photo from cruise book)

Back-tracking. We were talking about being in Trieste. How do you spell that? So, you really did join the Navy and saw the world, didn't you? Did they still say that back then? Was that their recruiting thing, "Join the Navy and see the world."

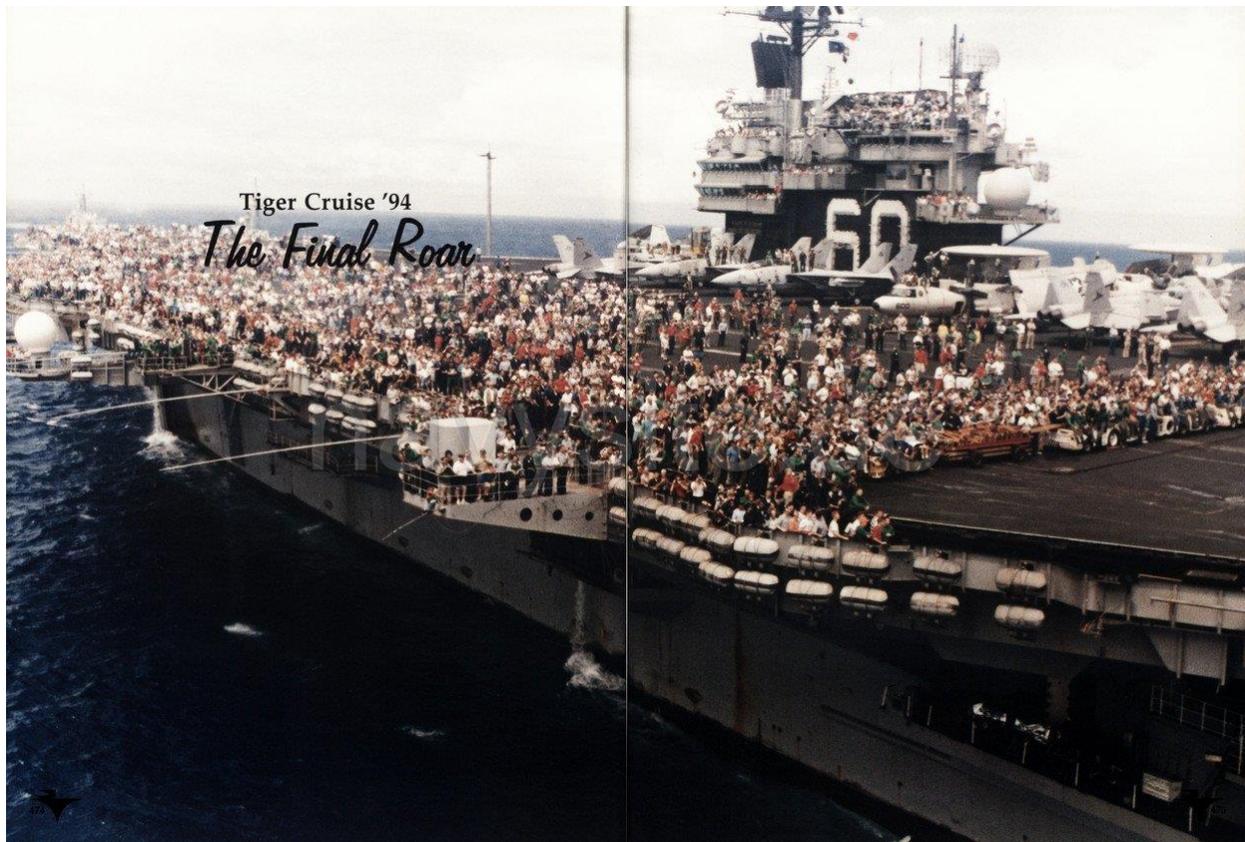
TONY-I don't know. When I joined I didn't have to get anybody to try to convince me. I knew I was going in.

You know, I had a one of my chiefs in one of my shops when we went to Naples he knew a little history about Naples and he was telling us that during the war, before World War II that Naples was a resort city and it was very beautiful and all this stuff. When the war came along, Hitler turned it into an industrial thing for him. So, he said, "That's really what kind of messed Naples

up as far as that goes.” It was just never got back like it was before. A lot of the guys like all this. It’s just another...

LYN-Everybody I talk to missed the one that my husband first went to was Malta. The ships didn’t pull in there anymore. He was there in ’71.

Tiger cruise of ’94.



TONY-When Mike and James were on with me.

LYN-Are they in the picture?

TONY-I don’t know.

LYN-Let’s see if we can find them. Now, a funny story. What happened?

TONY-I’ll have to leave the lingo out, language but we were in Fallon and I got stuck with a watch, I was second class, I don’t why but I got stuck with a watch. I think I was duty driver. Anyway, I went to go into the duty office and I’m sitting in there and this guy right here, Captain George N. Crimm, he comes in the office and he’s mad. He’s a pretty big guy. He was driving

his car into where he was parking at the hangar and he had problems getting in the gate. I guess he had to know a code or he didn't have the code or something. Something was messed up.

He was pretty mad about it. So, we were sitting there and he come walking in the office and the lieutenant sitting at the desk, he pops up tall like this stuff so he's standing at attention and he comes in there and he was all mad and he goes, he says, "That gate down there. I tried to get in and"... I can't say this. He goes, "I want that "F" now." (Laughing) "Yes sir, yes sir, yes sir." He walked out, he gets on the phone like right now. The guy was taking care of it but it was funny though. I just walked in and I just sat and all of a sudden, he comes in and it was hilarious.

LYN-So, he is going to be in charge of your shift.

TONY-He was in charge of the air wing. He was the air wing commander.

LYN-The air wing and he wasn't really handling the gate very well.

TONY-But, it was funny though.

LYN- So, they are real people aren't they.

I think you had a good career and knew when to leave it and God provided wonderful for you and your family.