



The Oral History of

**Rear Admiral Mack C. Gaston
U.S. Navy (Retired)**

Interviewed by
John Grady

Oral History Program
Naval Historical Foundation

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Introduction

Rear Admiral Mack Gaston's impressive naval career spanned almost 31 years. His professional record is documented with numerous achievements and awards and his distinguished performance at sea and in combat as a Surface Warfare Officer, including command of two destroyers and the cruiser USS *Josephus Daniels*, and ashore as Commander Field Command, Defense Nuclear Agency and as the first black Commander of Naval Training Center Great Lakes, is the subject of countless accolades. And yet, by no means does this record of excellence fully capture the measure of this extraordinary and inspirational person who as a young black male growing up in rural Georgia overcame daunting obstacles, including overt prejudice and institutional bias to graduate from Tuskegee University and receive a commission as an Ensign in the United States Navy in December 1964.

If you have had the good fortune to meet Rear Admiral Mack Gaston, or simply Mack as he prefers, you will never forget him. His infectious smile, unbridled enthusiasm, boundless energy and firm, some would say 'bone-crushing', handshake are hallmarks of a man who throughout his life has focused on people, human rights, personal dignity, increased opportunity for all and dedicated public service. Whether in uniform leading or representing thousands of young men and women serving their country with honor, or in the private sector contributing to the success of several major corporations, or as a private citizen volunteering his time to motivate and improve the lives of our nation's youth, Mack has served as a mentor and role model and positively influenced the lives and careers of countless individuals.

I have known Mack for 25 years and had the privilege to work for him twice. In that time I have never heard him disparage or unfairly criticize others; rather his words and actions have always been uplifting and inspirational. Given the numerous roadblocks he has faced at every juncture in his life, it would have been easy and understandable for him to take a less challenging career path and maintain a lower public profile, but that is not Mack. A profound optimist, without a hint of a 'chip on his shoulder', Mack has enthusiastically and professionally, met or exceeded every obligation and climbed to the highest rung of the ladder of success and never at the expense of others. The life of this remarkable man as documented in this oral history is one of determination, perseverance, humility, courage, accomplishment and inspiration. Mack has achieved something far greater in life than recognition as a superior naval officer who overcame significant organizational and cultural barriers and achieved flag rank, or as a successful businessman in the corporate world. The fact is he is an exceptional and caring human being!

Greg Maxwell

REAR ADMIRAL MACK CHARLES GASTON
UNITED STATES NAVY (RETIRED)

Mack C. Gaston was born in Dalton, Georgia, on 17 July 1940, the son of John Henry and Mildred Felicia (Gilliard) Gaston. Growing up in rural Georgia, he set his sights in life on being an achiever and leader of others. He entered college at Tuskegee University in 1958 and, after being told by his advisor he was not college material, proceeded to graduate with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Commercial Electronics. He applied and was accepted to Navy Officer Candidate School and was commissioned in December 1964.

Ensign Gaston's initial assignment was sea duty aboard the destroyer USS BUCK where he served as Electronic Material Officer and Combat Information Center Officer until March 1967. He attended Destroyer School in Newport, RI from March to September 1967. He served as Engineer Officer aboard the destroyer USS O'BRIEN from 1967-1969. In May 1969, Lieutenant Gaston joined the staff of Commander, Destroyer Squadron FIVE as Nuclear Safety/Material Officer and Squadron Engineer. He made four deployments to the Western Pacific and Vietnamese waters during these tours.

In May, 1971, as Lieutenant Commander Selectee, he reported to the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, where he served as Personal Aide to the Director, Research, Development, Test and Evaluation. In January 1973, he served as Surface Warfare Assignment Officer (detailer) assigning senior Lieutenants.

At sea, 1974 to 1976, Lieutenant Commander Gaston served as Executive Officer of the guided missile destroyer USS CONYNGHAM and he deployed to the Caribbean and Mediterranean. Following completion of Naval Command and Staff College, he served as Commanding Officer of the guided missile destroyer USS COCHRANE from October 1977 to October 1979 and deployed to the Southern Pacific and Western Pacific. From 1979-1981, Commander Gaston worked as Branch Chief, Surface Junior Officer Assignments at the Navy Military Personnel Command in the Pentagon. In 1981, he assumed command of the destroyer USS CONE and again deployed to the Caribbean.

In 1983, Commander Gaston completed the National Defense University, Industrial College of the Armed Force. From 1983-1985, he served as Branch Head for Surface Warfare Training and then as Director of Navy Equal Opportunity Division and Special Assistant for Equal Opportunity to the Chief of Naval Personnel. During this period, Captain Gaston also earned his Master's in Business from Marymount University. Captain Gaston next commanded the guided missile cruiser USS JOSEPHUS DANIELS from 1986 to 1988 and deployed to the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. He then served as Director of Manpower and Personnel Readiness for the Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Command. He completed duty on the Chief of Naval Operations' personal staff as a member of his Strategic Studies Group and then as Director of Surface Warfare Manpower and Training Requirements Division, also in the Office of Chief of Naval Operations. Captain Gaston assumed command of Field Command, Defense Nuclear Agency on 22 June 1990 as a Rear Admiral Selectee. His final Navy assignment was as

Commander, Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, Illinois from August 1992 to June 1995. He retired from active duty on 1 August 1995.

Admiral Gaston has been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, Defense Superior Service Medal, Meritorious Service Medal with one Gold Star in lieu of second award, and Navy Commendation Medal with one Gold Star and Bronze "V". He is also authorized to wear the Navy Achievement Medal, Navy "E" Ribbon, National Defense Service Medal with one Bronze Star, Vietnam Service Medal with four Bronze Stars, Sea Service Deployment Ribbon, Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation and Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal.

His civic awards include the following: Dalton, GA Education Hall of Fame Award, Northern Illinois Council on Alcohol and Substance Abuse Community Service Award, Admiral Mack Gaston Parkway, Dalton, GA named for his distinguished success as a native of Dalton, GA, and June 13, 1995 was declared "Rear Admiral Mack Gaston Day" in Illinois by Governor Jim Edgar. 1997 United Way Distinguished Volunteer Award He is a member of a number of community organizations including the Board of Trustees of Benedictine University, Board of Directors of the Military Officers Association of America, Member of the Executive Committee of the Navy League of the United States, Board of Directors of the Navy Historical Foundation, Board of Directors of the Tredegar American Civil War Center Foundation, Honorary Chairman of the National Naval Officers Association Washington DC Chapter and member of the Executive Committee of the national organization, member of the Naval War College Foundation, Surface Navy Association and the Naval Order. His academic credentials include an MBA from Marymount University and a BS in Commercial Electronics from Tuskegee University.

Admiral Gaston is a native of Dalton, GA. He and his wife, Nancy currently reside in Centreville, VA. They have three grown children, Sonja, Jeff and Craig.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Nancy, my wonderful and loving wife for her help in inspiring my thoughts and who I could not do without.

I offer my most profound thanks to my mother and father for putting me on the path of success early in life. I'd like to extend my gratitude to my brothers, Henry and Frederick for their positive challenges and brotherly love as we grew to professionalism.

I'd like to thank my childhood sweetheart and my first wife, Lillian Bonds Gaston, for her love and support and faith throughout my early and adult life until her death in 1995. And thanks to my wonderful daughter, Sonja, who has been my strongest supporter throughout her life, my career and now.

Special thanks to my Uncle Mack, who I was named for, for his faith in me at an early age and for making me a supervisor in his business at the age of 10. And, thanks to David Stock of Dalton, Georgia for the opportunity to work after school and continue my early growth with positive challenges.

Special thanks to my stepsons, Jeff and Craig, for their friendship.

I offer special thanks to The National Naval Officers Association, The Surface Navy Association, The Golden Thirteen and The Tuskegee Airmen.

A special thanks to Mrs. Cornelia Easley, my first homeroom teacher who taught me much more than what I learned in class...she caused me to establish my motto for the Navy and for life; "Start something and finish what you attempt."

I offer thanks to all the church members of the Hopewell and New Hope Baptist Churches of Dalton for their teaching and guidance.

Thank you to the great citizens and leadership of Dalton who voted for me to be inducted into the Dalton, Georgia Education Hall of Fame in 1990 – the first year of selection with only five citizens selected. A special thank you to Mrs. Jean Lowry and Mr. William J. Willis for their total involvement in this honor.

Special thanks to Georgia Congressman Harold Mann (deceased) of Dalton for introducing me and my promotion to Rear Admiral to the state of Georgia. Also, those who supported and passed Resolution H.R. No. 874 designating the "Admiral Mack Gaston Parkway," August 7, 1992.

I'd also like to recognize and thank Capt. Robin Battaglini, USN, (Ret.), Rear Admiral Joe Strasser, USN, (Ret.), Rear Admiral Barry Black, USN, (Ret.), CDR Pud Roth, USN, (Ret.), deceased, Admiral Mike Boorda, CNO, USN, deceased, Chief Palmer, CDR William Norman, USN, (Ret.), Capt. Ken Johnson, USN, (Ret.), deceased Vice Admiral Sam Gravely, USN, (Ret.), deceased, Senior Chief Keel, Vice Admiral Ralph Weymouth, USN, (Ret.), Mrs. Fran

Galbraeth, who retired from government service to the Navy, Master Chief Browning, Mr. Carl Ross, also retired from government service, Master Chief McNutt, Capt. (Chaplain) Tom Johnson, USN, (Ret.), Capt. Greg Maxwell, USN, (Ret.), and many others who influenced my life.

I offer thanks to Kirsten Arnold, Dr. David Winkler, Frank Arre and John Grady of the Naval Historical Foundation Oral History Program.

To all those who contributed to the success of this Oral History and those who will benefit from their support, thank you.

This is in loving memory of my father and mother, John and Felicia, my first wife, Lillian, and my brother Frederick who are deceased.

Interviewee: RADM Mack C. Gaston, USN (Ret.)
Interviewer: Mr. John Grady
Place: RADM Gaston's office at EDS Government Headquarters

Session I – 24 February 2006

John Grady: I'm going to ask you to identify yourself.

Admiral Gaston: I am Rear Admiral Mack C. Gaston, retired, United States Navy

John Grady: That's G-A-S-T-O-N.

I'm John Grady and this is a recording taking place at EDS Government Headquarters, July 31st, 2006. It's the first of the interviews with Admiral Gaston.

Where were you born?

Admiral Gaston: Dalton, Georgia. It's a little town in northwest Georgia just south of Chattanooga, Tennessee. The town is known as the . . . it is the carpet center of the world. Sixty percent of the world's carpet is made there and unfortunately I don't own any stock in any of it [laughter].

But I was born in 1940 in that town.

Because of all the prejudice, I wasn't allowed to be born in a hospital. So, I was born in my grandparent's home and that's where my parents lived, with my father's parents.

John Grady: What did your parents do?

Admiral Gaston: My father, John, worked for the railroad. My mother, Felicia, became a beautician.

They actually moved from Dalton to Atlanta, Georgia when I was two years old and my father moved there to work on the railroad and my mother went to beautician school. I actually grew up in a little old place called Rockdale Park in Atlanta, Georgia, where there was also a segregated school system.

I finished elementary school in Atlanta and then my grandfather died and my grandmother would have been living by herself, so my family moved back to Dalton when I was 12 years old.

I had two brothers, Henry and Frederick. Henry and I were born in Dalton and Frederick was born in Atlanta. I was the oldest. I grew up in Dalton from 12 years old until I left there to go to college in 1958.

During that time, I was a member of the Boy Scouts of America and I was a Royal Ambassador, which is a Christian organization and similar to the boy scouts. In fact, I was ambassador-in-Chief which was the position of president of our chapter. I was a junior deacon in our church, Hopewell Baptist Church where my father was a deacon. I was also a student library assistant. And, I had an after-school job as a janitor at a department store.

Some of the teachers in early school and in high school that had a very positive impact on me were my 3rd grade teacher, Mrs. Waters, my 7th grade teacher, Miss Davis, my math teacher in high school, Mrs. Underwood and my chemistry teacher, Mr. Carmichael. But, my best teacher in school was Mrs. Easley because she generated thoughts in me that I didn't know were possible. She caused me to create my motto for life, "Start something then finish what you

attempt.” And all of this coupled with what my parents did, which was the best ever, made me what I am.

John Grady: Yes, and so you went to high school in Dalton and graduated from high school there?

Admiral Gaston: That’s correct.

John Grady: What were your primary interests in high school?

Admiral Gaston: In high school I really wanted to be an engineer and as I said, it was a basic school so we didn’t have pre-math. We just had reading, writing and arithmetic. But I had this interest in being an engineer so I found a way to read some geometry stuff and some calculus stuff. I never had any formal courses of those because the school only offered basic courses. I was the valedictorian of my class. The school was separate but it certainly wasn’t equal.

But I remember a statement my father told us as youngsters. He said, “Whatever you’re going to be, be the best at it. It doesn’t matter whether it’s digging ditches or washing cars or being a doctor, be the best there is. Have that as an objective.” My father was the best male friend I ever had.

So he didn’t have the means to send me to school after high school and I knew that was going to be the case. I had an uncle who I was named for who had a plumbing business in Dalton. We used to go to Dalton from Atlanta in the summer. He didn’t have any children himself. When I was about eight years old he invited all his nephews to work with him. Of

course we all took it as fun being able to ride in the truck. We carried the tools and things like that and he also said it would be good for us to work. And so I guess it was fun. The second summer that we were doing this I went to my uncle and said, “Uncle Mack, I want a real job”, and he said, “What do you mean?” I said, “I would like you to show me what you want done, I’ll get it done, I’ll come back to you and tell you it’s done, you go and inspect it and then send me to the next job.” He said, “Really?” I said, “Yes Sir.” He said, “Okay, that’s what I’ll do.” So he started tasking me that way while the others were still having their fun riding on the back of the truck. And so he found out I was pretty serious. When I was ten he actually gave me a real job in the summer and when I was 12 – we moved there when I was 12 – I actually learned how to drive the truck. I couldn’t drive it from place to place but I could move it around on the job and so forth. And when I was 14 he actually made me foreman over two adult men and so I’ve been in leadership positions ever since I was 14 years old.

My father was still my “go to person” if you will. He said, “Mack, I don’t know how we’re going to get you to college but somehow you’re going to get there.”

I finished high school and I saved up a little bit of money. I was accepted to college by Tuskegee, Georgia Tech, and Tennessee A&I. My choice was to go to Georgia Tech since it was the closest and certainly the best of the schools of those three. And so I got a letter from Georgia Tech and they asked me to send some other information and send them a picture. After they received the information, they told me I couldn’t attend. That was disappointing but after I had been initially accepted I didn’t think there would be a problem.

John Grady: What year was this; 1958?

Admiral Gaston: '58.

John Grady: 1958.

Admiral Gaston: Yes, and so I didn't make any bones about it. It was not my objective to raise a ruckus. And then my second choice was Tuskegee and so that's where I went, and my father took me there. He didn't have a car. He worked for my Uncle Mack, too, so he drove us down to Tuskegee in the company truck and dropped me off because in those days you couldn't even stop at a motel or anything. So you make your lunch and you drive. I think it was 250 miles or something like that. It might have been a little further.

But anyway, I went through the registration line and signed up for all these courses and got to the end of the line and they told me how much money it cost and it was kind of comical, and I think it was \$1,500 or . . . you know that was 1958 so that was a lot of money. At Georgia Tech it would be \$3,000 for the same courses. But anyway, I pulled out my savings; \$100, and I put it on the table and I said, "I'd like to pay down on this." They said, "We're sorry, you can't do that", and so I said, "They told me I could work." They said, "Yes, but you have to go sign up for work and then come back and register with how much time you have after you do your work." I said, "Okay." I went around the campus and found a job in Buildings and Grounds and they hired me to help maintain and clean the student union, which was probably the biggest building other than the gymnasium on the campus, and that's where I worked for five years. But anyway I went back and signed up for the maximum courses I could take, which was about six hours. So as a part time student it took me six years to get through Tuskegee.

John Grady: And what were you intending to major in when you went there?

Admiral Gaston: Electrical engineering; that was my total objective. But even though I was signed up for engineering I still had to take the basic courses before I could go to engineering courses, or either go to the Engineering building. I needed college geometry, college algebra, physics, and I could take early calculus in the engineering department, and so I had two years of basic courses before I could actually start engineering courses.

And my first course of college algebra I flunked. I guess it was really no surprise to anybody since I didn't have the background for it even though I had been the valedictorian of my high school class, but it was very disappointing to me because I had always been an "A" student. And I went to my father and he said, "Son, don't worry about it." He said, "You know there are going to be a lot of things in life that you haven't done before and you might not be the best at it when you start but if you stick with it you can be the best." I said, "Yes Sir." So I went to summer school and worked my way through. I took that course of college algebra and an advanced algebra course that summer and I passed. So now I'm ready to start engineering. I did pretty good my first semester, which means that I didn't flunk anything, but I had one "D" and the rest of them were "B"s and "A"s. The second semester I went to both sessions of summer school. Whatever little time I had between summer school and the first semester I did plumbing for my uncle who was now doing plumbing, heating, air-conditioning and wiring. I became an air-conditioning expert for him. And then I went into my second year of engineering courses – there were only one or two courses I could take because I still had to do electives – and I took electrical theory, which was a primary course if I remember right, and I got a "D" in it. I had to go to the Dean of Engineering. I went to his office one particular morning and the door was

open, but I knocked on the frame and I went in. It was kind of dark in his office but he had a desk light on and he had his head down working. He never looked up and he never invited me to come in. He said, “Gaston, you’re dumb. You’re too dumb to be in college. Get out!” I felt like crying but I refused to cry in front of him. So I went back to my room and cried. Nobody had ever called me dumb before and it really hurt. After about 30 minutes I took myself outside and I grabbed myself in the chest and I said, “Don’t you ever take 30 minutes to make your mind up about anything again! You pick yourself up, go to the registrar’s office and change your major and finish school”, and that’s what I did. I went to the registrar’s office and changed my major. Obviously I wasn’t going to be successful under that Dean. He was going to make sure . . . he told me I was too dumb to be in college. I certainly didn’t agree with that but he had already made up his mind, that’s the way I felt. And so I changed my major to commercial electronics, still lining up for graduation on time. That’s what I finished in, commercial electronics. That was my major and I graduated with honors. I now have a Masters in Business and quite obviously I’ve been successful.

Now why did I join the United States Navy?

John Grady: Did they have a Navy ROTC program there?

Admiral Gaston: No, they did not. They had Army and Air Force. I wanted Air Force of the two. It was a land grant school, which means ROTC is mandatory. So I took two years of basic but I couldn’t get in the Air Force because they were already full and so I had to take Army but that was okay. My objective was to get my requirement done, and then I had to wait two years before I could take advanced ROTC to get my commission because you have to graduate at the same

time you get your commission. So when I went to sign up for the advanced course it had to be Army and it was logical for it to be Army because I had had two years of Basic Army, and I was excited. When I signed up for school that year Tuskegee decided that they were not going to allow ROTC to count as an elective that semester. I couldn't take it because I had to have electives in order to graduate on time two years later and I wasn't going to be there more than two more years. So I did not take ROTC. At the end of my fifth year, my junior college year, I was eligible for the draft and I was designated A-1. I did go to summer school again but you didn't get the same waiver in the summer as you do during the regular school year. They could have drafted me in the summer. I was lucky they didn't.

John Grady: So this would have been 1963?

Admiral Gaston: 1963.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: So the school year of '62/'63.

John Grady: Yes.

Admiral Gaston: And so what I decided to do in my senior year of '63/'64 was to take the OCS exams for all the services, and I said, "Whoever answers up first, that's where I'm going." Now remember again that I had never been anywhere but Georgia basically in my life. I think my

family had one vacation on the train when my father was working on the railroad; to California on the train, so basically I had never really seen the ocean. I'd never been in an airplane and didn't know anything about flying. So I took all the exams in December and my objective was whoever answered up first for acceptance, that's where I was going. The Navy answered up first. So I accepted the Navy then I had to go to Birmingham, Alabama for an interview. I went to Birmingham – that was still during the school year – and checked in, and there was a requirement to be interviewed by three different officers. I went to the first officer and the office was empty so I went on in and sat down and waited for the person to show up. He came in and he said, “Stand up”, so I did. “Come to attention”, and I did. He said, “How can you, as a black man, tell a white man what to do? How do you think you can be an officer in the United States Navy”, and I chose not to answer him.

John Grady: He was white; I presume he was white.

Admiral Gaston: Yes, all the interviewers were white.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: I never saw the other two because what I decided to do is that, that place; that was the wrong place for me to be. I went to the Commanding Officer's office and I told him what had happened and I said, “Sir, I'm leaving and I'm going back to Tuskegee and tell the President of my school what has happened in this place.” He said, “Well before you go would you interview with me?” I don't remember the Commanding Officer's name.

John Grady: Right.

Admiral Gaston: My thoughts were about the right thing. And so I said, “Yes Sir, I will.” He said, “Please sit down.” So he gave me an interview in a proper way and that was the only interview I had. I went back to Tuskegee. I did tell the President. That was President Foster at the time. I told him what had happened. I said, “But it was seemingly rectified and I’m only telling you for information. I’m not presenting or offering a complaint.” And I guess it was two or three weeks later I got a letter from the Navy being accepted for officer training in the United States Navy.

So I graduated in May 1964. My uncle, who I worked for, and his wife, Aunt Roberta were there. My father and mother were there and they all came down together. And my brother Henry was going to Tuskegee also. We were roommates. He was a part-time student too, pre-Med. He was Army ROTC and received his commission.

But anyway, I went back to Dalton and I had a call from Tennessee Valley Authority, which I had sent a letter to so that I could work for them. They really gave me a thumbs up that when I finished my basic service in the United States Navy – and I was figuring on being in the Navy for whatever the minimum was; four or five years – and then I was coming back to Tennessee Valley Authority . I can’t remember exactly what it was... an engineering type of job.

In August, I entered the United States Navy. OCS class 505. And there was another classmate from Tuskegee in that 505 class. In OCS, in those days, there used to be three to five hundred students. The Navy was big.

John Grady: Where was OCS held?

Admiral Gaston: Newport, Rhode Island. In those days the Navy had 600 ships I think it was.

Anyway, I think there were only, out of 500 and something OCS students, about four or five blacks and none of us were in the same company. And as I said, there was one other from Tuskegee; one of my classmates, Tharnell James was his name. There were also two people in my OCS class section who were previous enlisted. They were white and I still remember them. They were Dr. James Recner, who was a Signalman First Class (SM-1). He is now over the Vietnam Center at Texas Tech University and we are currently fellow members of the Secretary of the Navy Subcommittee on Navy History. And the other great American was Russell Anderson who was a Gunnersmate First Class (GM-1) in OCS and retired from the Navy as a Navy Captain. But anyway, OCS was 16 weeks and it was hard because it was much more than academics. The toughest course for me was celestial navigation. There was a Lieutenant that became quite interested in me finishing and there were about four other students in my section that he took extra time with to actually wait for the stars to come out to show us the realism of celestial navigation. That ended up being my best grade [chuckle]; celestial navigation.

John Grady: What were your relations like with the other officer candidates going through OCS at that time?

Admiral Gaston: Very good. There were three people . . . I guess there were about 20 people in my section or company if you will, and there was a mixture of previous enlisted people as well. But there was no obvious segregation because I mean we're all going through the same training

supporting each other and it was more buddies than . . . I mean that's what the Navy is. That's what the Navy is now as far as I'm concerned.

John Grady: And this was your first experience, I presume, of being with large numbers of whites, correct?

Admiral Gaston: No. When I worked for my uncle, 99% of his customers were white. But, in OCS, I had great relationships. You know I worked after school in a department store in Dalton in 1954 to 1958 before I went to college as I mentioned before. There was a staff of about 30 who were all white. We became friends. This came from my father and mother – they said, ‘You know there are differences in people but differences are going to be made, but don't you ever hate anybody’, and that still rings in my mind like it was said to me yesterday.

There was another thing that came from my parents. When I was eight- that was the first year I worked for my uncle –my father called me and my two brothers in and said, “Boys, it's time for me to tell you about the birds and the bees.” And of course he got our attention because of what we had heard about the birds and the bees. He said, “I'm going to tell you the moral way, the religious way, and the legal way”, and he said, “Not only am I going to talk about the birds and bees, I'm going to apply that to everything in life.” And I mean he never lost our attention and he talked to us for two and half hours. And he said, “From this day forward boys, I'm not going to ever tell you what you can and cannot do, not ever again. From this day forward I'm going to tell you what you should and should not do.” And every time I think about doing something – I don't mean by that I've never done anything wrong – but every time I think about something that I shouldn't be doing, it's just like his voice rings in my mind. It rings in my heart

to tell you the truth. But that doesn't mean I haven't done anything wrong. But I'll never, ever forget, and that had lots to do with how I got along with people and how I get along with people now.

I'm going to jump way ahead but I'm coming back. In 1995, when I retired from the United States Navy my objective for retiring was to take care of my wife. She was very ill. My mother was ill at that time too. My wife had some complications of Lupus. My mother had Leukemia. And my wife and I went to Detroit in March to see my mother where she was living with my brother. I was scheduled to retire in June or July. My wife died in May, a month before my retirement ceremony, and my mother died that same week. And those two people . . . my father had already passed two years before that and my youngest brother a year before that, and I think my mother and my wife really sort of carried on the tradition of what my father had said so many years before. And I said that to say also that my wife died and I was a bachelor for five years, then I remarried. And my wife is white but, she never looked white or black to me. I love her and like I say, I've been romantically in love with two women and I married both of them.

But coming back to the United States Navy, that doesn't mean . . . going back to the problems, I won't say there have never been any problems. If I would have said that it would be a lie.

I'll go back to my first ship. I finished OCS, went home for Christmas and then went out to San Diego for my ship, the USS *Buck*.

John Grady: This would have been 1965 then; early 1965?

Admiral Gaston: Yes, I left home after Christmas; before January, to go to San Diego for my school. And I knew what ship I was going to and I visited before it deployed, and then I was going to school for six weeks. When I finished EMO; Electronics Material Officer School; I went out and met the ship in I guess it was Vietnam. They thought the ship was in Japan so they flew me from the school through Hawaii to Japan to catch my ship. Well I got there and the ship wasn't there. They had already left there to go to the South China Sea. So I transported on every form of Navy transportation in getting to my first ship, none of which I had ever done before. So I think it was a 707 I flew from San Diego to Hawaii - I maybe flew up on small craft up to LA - and then it was a C-130 from there to the Philippines and then a COD flight there to the carrier. I think it was the carrier *Oriskany*. And then they were going to do a high-line transfer from there, over a store ship, to the USS *Buck*. Well the first ensign, there were two or three ensigns that were going to other ships, not the *Buck*, but when the first one was dipped in the ocean, I was like, "I'm not going that way." The officer in charge of the sea transfer station said, "You can go in the helicopter. Go up to the helicopter deck." So I got in the helicopter and the helicopter was having problems. It would rise up and kept vibrating and it would slam back down on the deck. So he asked me to get out. I said, "You know, I think that's the end for me", or something. So I waited and they worked on the helicopter and it finally took off and I went to my first ship by helicopter line. They let me down to the ship. So that was my first experience at sea.

Now I'm aboard the USS *Buck* (DD-761). We were at war in Vietnam and there were three qualified Officers of the Deck and the Senior Watch Officer decided there were three new ensigns onboard – they didn't come onboard with anybody, they were three relatively new ensigns – and it was decided that the more experienced Ensigns and JG's would be in CIC and the new Ensigns on the bridge with the qualified Officers of the Deck. Officers of the Deck are

the people in charge of the ship in the Captain's absence on the bridge, so they're responsible for everything. The Senior Watch Officer decides that I'm going to stand my watches with him and he likes the mid-watch, which also means the next watch is the 12 to 16. So I mean I'm a new ensign and everybody's assigned to this kind of thing so there's no issue, and I said, "Aye Aye Sir." So on the first watch, which is at midnight, he said, "Oh, Ensign Gaston, I forgot to tell you that you have to answer questions on every watch." I said, "Aye Aye Sir." So he asked me the first – I don't remember what the question was – so he asked me the first question and I got it wrong. He said, "By the way, for every question you get wrong you have to stand the next watch." I said, "Aye, Aye Sir". So now I'm on the mid-watch. The next watch is the 4-8, which means I've got 8 to 12 off and then I come back at 12-16. So he asked me the next question. Now the questions can be about anything in the Navy; anything, like who is the Vice Chief of Naval Operations. I didn't even know . . . I knew that Admiral Moorer was the Chief of Naval Operations but I didn't know who his Vice Chief was. Anyway, I missed the second question so now I'm standing watch all night and all day. He asked the third question and I got it right. I don't know what it was. When I was off watch, I started going to the Chief Petty Officers. I heard that the Chief Petty Officer was the backbone of the Navy and I still contend that – one or two of them started to help me and they sent me to the First Class Petty Officers. The First Class Petty Officers were the experts in their field. I was learning. I was learning all kinds of stuff and it got to the place where he couldn't stump me on questions about anything in the Navy. So I thought all three Ensigns were getting this kind of treatment. One night I was leaving watch going back to my bunk and saw one of the other ensigns and I said, "How are your questions coming?" He said, "What questions?" This gave me an indication that I was being mistreated, and I prayed on it. And again, I thought about my father. I said, "Mack, you've got three choices.

You can complain to your boss; the Ops Officer. You can go straight to the Captain; take it to the highest point and claim discrimination, or you can keep learning. If you keep learning it all counts.” And I made this choice. I chose not to complain. I chose to keep learning and what happened is that it usually takes a year to two to qualify as Officer of the Deck, like that Senior Watch Officer did. I qualified in six months. In fact the Captain called me in and said, “Mack, I am really excited about how fast you learn and what you’ve been doing so far as handling the ship”, and so forth, “learning the ship”. And the Chief Petty Officers tell me how smart you are, not just intelligent but how much you do. And I’m going to qualify you . . . this is your letter of Officer-of-the-Deck but I’m not going to give it to you yet because I don’t want the other junior officers to feel slighted.” I didn’t know exactly what he meant but I knew I was excited about being Officer-of-the-Deck and when the ship did independent steaming out of formation I was Officer-of-the-Deck after six months and I never forgot that experience. And then I started thinking back to what my father told me at eight years old. It applied for this experience and still does. “Wow”, you know opportunity . . . you say you’re lucky. Well you make your luck but it’s not all you, it’s also people recognizing.”

John Grady: What kind of ship was the *Buck*?

Admiral Gaston: It was a destroyer.

John Grady: A destroyer.

Admiral Gaston: A FRAM II destroyer from World War II.

John Grady: Yes, and *Buck* is B-U-C-K?

Admiral Gaston: B-U-C-K (DD-761).

John Grady: How large was the crew and how large was the officers' compliment?

Admiral Gaston: The crew was about 230, the officers about 18/20.

John Grady: Commanded by a Commander?

Admiral Gaston: A Commander, yes. It was Hal Carpenter and the Chief who worked for me at that time was Senior Chief Keel who was black.

John Grady: How long were you aboard the *Buck*?

Admiral Gaston: For almost two years.

The second commanding officer who was Cdr. Roth came aboard and after about six months . . . the normal tours are two years but it was short of that, the CO called me in based on a recommendation by my department head who was Lieutenant (JG) Strasser - who made Rear Admiral – and he asked me if I wanted to fleet up because I had been recommended by my boss to be the next ops officer after he left. There are four department heads on a destroyer type ship; the Ops Officer, the Weapons Officer, Engineering Officer and Supply or Logistics Officer -

they called them Supply Officers in the Navy - and I worked for the Ops Officer. I was the Electronics Material Officer and I became the Combat Information Center Officer, and he recommended to the Commanding Officer that I fleet up to his job when he left. And the Commanding Officer called me in and he said, "Mack, I'm willing to fleet you up to Operations Officer. You have the option of doing that, and they have this new school now called Destroyer School." It was specifically for destroyer officers. The destroyers are the front line ships in the cruiser/destroyer world for a surface officer. And I chose to go to the school because going to the school meant having the opportunity to learn engineering, logistics, weapons and operations. If I didn't go, I would learn only operations and would be limited in the future.

John Grady: Where was the school?

Admiral Gaston: The school was back in Newport, Rhode Island.

John Grady: Yes.

Admiral Gaston: Newport, Rhode Island is a major school area of the United States Navy which includes OCS, Naval War College and many surface warfare officer senior and junior courses, and also some major senior enlisted schools are there. Part of the fleet used to be in Newport but they moved all the fleet out of Newport. It's still where the Navy War College is where I attended the Command and Staff course in 1976, and it's a major educational system center for the United States Navy. Because, as I realized, the War College there has students from the international community as well as all the services.

Coming out of that I asked to be . . . I had been in operations so I wanted experience in one of the other departments but I did not want engineering. Engineering is really tough. It was steam engineering in those days. Today we don't have any destroyers that are steam-propelled. They are all gas turbine these days. But I asked for weapons first, then operations and then engineering. Well engineering probably was the toughest course somehow and I was getting my lowest grade in engineering; steam engineering. And I got called in by the commanding officer saying, "Hey, you really need to improve in engineering." He got my attention and it turned out that my highest grade in finishing the six months of Destroyer School, my highest mark was in engineering.

John Grady: Now when you went to the school were you a Lieutenant (JG) at that point?

Admiral Gaston: Yes Sir, I was a Lieutenant (JG) when I went and I was a Lieutenant (JG) when I finished. And when I went aboard ship as the Chief Engineer I was still a Lieutenant (JG). I was still a youngster. In fact what I understood is that actually one other person, Lee Gunn who was in Destroyer School with me went to the same ship and they adjusted the officers on that ship so that both of us would be senior to the division officers. Now I think they transferred a couple people off the ship so that could be the case. Lee Gunn was the Operations Officer and I was the Chief Engineer. Admiral Lee Gunn made three stars before he retired.

John Grady: What was the name of the ship?

Admiral Gaston: The USS *O'Brien* (DD-725) out of Long Beach, California.

And the experience that I had as Chief Engineer was great but I was really sort of what was called a “Topside Puke”, alright, and I’m down now with the engineers who are the toughies. And we were in the shipyard when I took responsibility to be the Chief Engineer, which is a tough time for a ship especially for engineering. I mean the whole ship is going through the process and usually the Chief Engineer is the lead for repairs of the whole ship whether it’s in the weapons department, operations or engineering. They have responsibility. The interface with the shipyard is the Chief Engineer. So I had a lot to learn there too. And the ship was already behind in overhaul so one of my objectives that I established for myself was to try to get it out on time but at the same time be well prepared so that you don’t have breakdowns when you come out. Coming out on time is one objective but coming out in good shape is a stronger objective. So we did get out of overhaul a little bit late but in pretty good shape. Immediately after that you have to work up for exercises to prepare the ship for going overseas and, of course, the Navy is always mobilized. When you deploy overseas you’re ready for war. There’s a long time to work up. It takes about a year.

Anyway, we worked up – I’m going to go back to something in a minute – but we worked up everything; all the preparations for operations and engineering, all those things, and weapons. You go over to shoot on the range and make sure your guns are accurate and that your crew is accurate as well. So we went down to San Diego for Refresher Training and we were going out every day and coming into the port of Broadway in San Diego, and one evening we came in overnight to go out the next day and we went ashore – I can’t remember the name of the pub that’s right on the waterfront - and I went in there with some of the officers, and the officer that I was telling you about from my first ship; the USS *Buck*, was in there, and he saw me and he came over and apologized for what he had done to me; the discrimination that he had caused.

And I said, "Sir, you don't owe me an apology. You need to apologize to yourself." I said, "I'm doing fine." And I thought that was quite interesting that he would be conscious of it and I think that it was great that he was conscious of what he had done. I didn't try to embrace him and I don't have any idea whatever happened to him but I thought it was quite interesting that he apologized.

But we went through Refresher Training and we did have some engineering issues that were tough for us to get through. In fact we got a partial completion. We did not get a satisfactory because we had a major engine problem. Well we got the engine problem fixed well enough that we could get from San Diego back to Long Beach but we couldn't deploy with the situation we had and the shipyard wouldn't take responsibility for that. We were also losing vacuum so we couldn't do high speed without losing the engine. I sat all of the engineers down and I said, "What should we try?" "Sir, we had this problem before we came into the shipyard. It was never fixed." I said, "Well did the shipyard know it needed fixing?" And of course, the previous Chief Engineer is long gone by now, it's my responsibility not his. And so, "Yes Sir, here's the work request and", on and on and on; all these details. I said, "Well it seems like we've signed off any responsibility for the shipyard.

"We need to fix this thing so what do we need to do to get it fixed?"

"Sir, we've tried everything."

I said, "Obviously not because it's still broken. Have you gone through the naval ship technical manuals and have you done everything there is to do in the technical manuals?"

"Yes Sir."

"Okay."

“Now Chief, why don’t you open the book and bring out all the things that the NAVSHIP technical manual recommends with this problem we have and another team sort of look at things as they are and from your knowledge of things, what we need to try that we haven’t.” And I said, “I’ll just be neutral and I’ll go up from team to team.” So one of the Chiefs said, “Well Sir, when do you want us to have this done?”

I said, “In the morning by 9:30.”

He said, “Well that means we won’t get any sleep”, and I said, “Is that a problem?” But I’m getting attuned to engineers, right. And so they did that. The next morning at nine o’clock they called me and they were excited, and they showed me all the things that the NAVSHIP technical manual had recommended and they had done them all. I said, “Well let me ask a question.” I said, “You have right here that you heated up the plant like when you do 20 knots at sea but you don’t say what happens out there.”

“Well we can’t see anything so we don’t know what happens.”

I said, “What do you mean by that?” “You have to be inside and you can’t see it from the outside.” I said, “Explain that a little bit more to me.”

“Sir, we’ve got the DA tank here, we’ve got the main condenser here, and if you were to get inside the condenser you can see if it’s leaking.”

I said, “Well why can’t we do that?”

“Because it gets too hot in there. You can’t send somebody in there.”

I said, “Well have you asked for any volunteers?”

“Yes, but it says it’s too dangerous.”

I said, “Okay, I understand. I volunteer. Let’s go light off the plant and set it up for going 20 to 25 knots but just make sure that when you start lighting off that I’m in the main condenser

on the saltwater side before you start so that my body heats up with the plant”, and they did that. And I went in there. I mean I was in there. There was one tube out of 3,000; there was just one tube, but you can’t detect it anywhere but being in there and all I had to do was put a plug in that tube; one tube out of 3,000 and it fixed the ship, and I couldn’t do anything wrong after that. They thought of the fix. And that was the same kind of leadership that my father taught me. You say I keep going back to him and yes I do.

John Grady: And you were still a Lieutenant (JG) at this point?

Admiral Gaston: Yes Sir.

The experience on the USS *O’Brien* was a great one. It caused me to change my language. And what I mean by that, you know I was a “Topside Puke” and it was always gracious language because you’re basically on the telephone to others – outside language – you had to make sure that all your “i’s” were dotted and your “t’s” were crossed when you talked for the Captain to other Commanding Officers and the Force Commander and all that. Whereas you go down in the hole and you try to be that proper and they don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. So I changed my tone of voice and you know there’s a lot of noise in the engine rooms and the fire rooms, and if you don’t blurt it out it doesn’t get heard. And yes, you have to add a little bit of profanity. It seemed like you had to use a little bit of profanity to make it profound enough that action took place but that doesn’t mean that I didn’t know how to react again when going topside. So that experience gave . . . it actually took me back to plumbing. And then I look back at my life’s beginning; going to that department store, which was polished language, and going to the plumbing that was not so polished, it gave me the same thing that I

was getting in being an OOD and being eventually an executive officer with the polish necessary and with the bluntness of being a Chief engineer. They are two different worlds. They are two different languages although they are in the same body.

John Grady: What kind of operations was *O'Brien* . . . *O'Brien*, I presume, went back to Yankee Station?

Admiral Gaston: Absolutely.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: When I was on *O'Brien* I deployed two times and I was only there for 18 months. I had two deployments to the South China Sea; to Vietnam. We had plane guard. We went up the Delta River. We did get shot up a bit. We lost a crewmember. It was always hot. Everything is hot. It was a real wartime experience. And we actually recovered a lot . . . you know when a lot of pilots went to make it “feet wet,” even though they were shot down, if they could make it to the water then they figured they could survive. So we had that kind of responsibility and we recovered quite a few pilots. And I did a lot of boarding of Sampans to keep the bombs. I mean the Sampans; they’d load them with ammunition so they’d blow ships up.

And I hardly talk about the war activity to my family or to anyone and it’s not because I’m ashamed of it. It’s because I don’t want people to say, “Well he almost died.” I just never shared that with my family.

John Grady: How long were the deployments, about 90 days?

Admiral Gaston: Six to nine months.

John Grady: Six to nine months.

Admiral Gaston: And I deployed to Vietnam four times. When I left the *O'Brien* I went to Destroyer Squadron FIVE. I was the engineer for that squadron of nine ships.

John Grady: And where was this?

Admiral Gaston: San Diego.

The *O'Brien* was out of Long Beach, California. So my first few years in the United States Navy were on the West Coast.

John Grady: For a guy from Georgia and going to school in Alabama you were certainly getting your taste of Southern California.

Admiral Gaston: Yes. In fact when I went to California the first time my parents wanted to know, "Why are they sending you so far away?" But the fact is I asked for it. I asked for the West Coast because I had never experienced it except for that one trip on the train that my father took when I was nine years old. But the bottom line is most people in the United States Navy

will say that they were either East Coast Sailors or West Coast Sailors. I was about 50/50. Those three tours were on the West Coast. My Executive Officer tour was on the East Coast. My command tour was in Hawaii and all my shore duty, which is only ten years out of 31, was on the East Coast. So if you look at my whole career, it's about 50 percent East and West.

John Grady: What were you doing when you were with the squadron?

Admiral Gaston: I was the Chief Engineer for the squadron and they called it the Squadron Material Officer. I had been promoted to Lieutenant at this time. Even though when I went to my squadron I was still a JG I knew to call up the Lieutenant. And there were a couple of Chief Engineers that were senior to me but the fact is I had great interface with the shipyards. I had great interface that I caused with the Type Commander who was responsible for paying for repairs and getting repairs. And those super Chiefs that I had, had taught me some ins and outs of things and that evidently the system thought I was well qualified for that job. To say that I wanted to do that; in those days you had to have a split tour they called it and some people went from that ship to another class of ship. You'd go from a destroyer to an amphibious larger ship. I was able to go to this squadron so now I'm still within the cruiser/destroyer world, which is an elite world, if you will, of the surface Navy, like the jets are of aircraft carriers in the aviation Navy, and that was another 18 months on my tour. There was one ship, for instance, that had a major engine problem that was headed for deployment and she was within two months of deployment. She came crippling in with this engine problem. They had already presented the Casualty Report to the Type Commander, which goes to NAVSEA and all the heavies, if you will, in the Navy, but it is still their responsibility to get the pieces together to get this thing

fixed. Well nothing that anybody had said or done could get anything there in time for that ship to deploy on time. Well I didn't say anything to my boss. I went to the ship. I went to talk to the Chief Engineer and actually I wanted the Chief Engineer on neutral ground. So I went to the ship to pay my respects to the Commanding Officer and so forth but then I went to a neutral zone place to talk to the Chief Engineer about what we needed to do, and I said, "You can't fix this by waiting for somebody to see what's in their stock. You've got to go push the stock. You've got to go push the system a little bit." And I said, "Hey, we're going to do this together. I'm willing to help you do it or if you're not willing to do it I'm going to go do it." So I got my Master Chief, MMCM "Hawk Eye" Hawkins and we started going to the tender and to the Type Commander and then we also started looking at stuff that was in the casualty yard. And actually my Master Chief and I found an old engine that was just like the engine they had; the same specifications, and it didn't have a tag on it. I knew this Lieutenant Commander who was an expert, and on the Type Commander's staff, so we said, "We've identified this engine over here and we want authorization to move it to our ship. So we can't do that without going to Washington and they have to come out here and inspect it." I said, "Okay, I have a document here that identifies it. Would you sign here saying that you agree with the identification on that document", and he said, "Yes", and he signed it. Then I said, "Do you want me to send the paperwork forward to NAVSEA or do you have to do it", and I said, "I'll draft a message and send it to you but with this document I can go do something with the engine, can't I?" And he said, "Yes, we need a message. But yes, with that document you can go do something with the engine", and I said, "Okay." So we drafted the message and my commodore released a message for the ship. The Master Chief and I went over and identified what needed to come out of the engine to go fix the ship's engine and we did that. We got that engine fixed in about four days

and then we wrote another message for the commodore to send to the Type Commander saying we had taken this part out of this engine and put it in the ship's engine. We just moved forward before the authorization was completed. Then NAVSEA came back and said, "The engine (from the shipyard) is scrapped," which meant we actually didn't need authorization. Sometimes the system doesn't react fast enough. I mean you can take the situation that happened with the space flight. The Chief Engineer said, "No", but it happened anyway. Life is full of those kinds of things and those are good things. So that experience was good too and my experience in going from not wanting to be an engineer to being a Chief Engineer, for a relatively short time, to assisting Chief Engineers on nine ships.

And our command ship was the USS *Fox*, which was a good experience because that was the first experience that I'd had on a cruiser and actually volunteered to stand Officer-of-the-Deck watches on that ship, which was another learning experience. Experiences were happening sooner than the norm. That experience also included knowing and becoming friends with Lieutenant JG Richard Mayo. We are still very good friends. He is a retired three-star now and lives in the Washington, DC area.

John Grady: Now you were a squadron engineer from what years?

Admiral Gaston: From 1969 to 1971.

John Grady: '69 to '71.

Admiral Gaston: Right, so it would have been '67 in Destroyer School, '68 to *O'Brien*, '69 to the squadron staff for 18 months, and then the next duty, which would have been in Washington, DC, for the first time; 1971.

So I came to Washington, DC; my first duty, after whatever that is, six and a half years, almost seven at sea, and I was a selectee for Lieutenant Commander at that point and so I was a selectee for Lieutenant Commander after six and a half years in the Navy. I think the norm in those days was nine years so I was two years early selected. I came to Washington to be a flag aide to a three-star Admiral; Vice Admiral Ralph Weymouth, who worked for Admiral Zumwalt, the Chief of Naval Operations, in OPNAV over Research and Development. And that was a great experience. I found out after I was here that I was the first black flag aide.

Following that tour I was the first black detailer for officers in the Bureau of Naval Personnel and so I spent 18 months as flag aide and then a detailer for a year and a half. I was in Washington for three years.

John Grady: Now when did you get married?

Admiral Gaston: The first time?

John Grady: Yes.

Admiral Gaston: The first time I got married I was 25 years old, so 1965 after being in the Navy for about a year.

John Grady: How did you meet your wife?

Admiral Gaston: She was my childhood sweetheart. So when I first came to Dalton, Georgia when I was 12 years old I saw her then. I was too shy to say anything. And so she would have been 11 and I was 12. And I remember being school patrol; I had been a school patrol in Rockdale Park Elementary School there in Atlanta so I knew about being a school patrol and I remember helping her across the street going to school, and it just made my day. I guess we actually started dating when I was 14 and when I went off to college she thought we were going to be engaged and of course my objective never left my mind to be an engineer and that's what my concentration was. I left for college without any commitment on my part or hers and I think she was very disappointed. And I think that I didn't . . . I mean there was still a very closeness there and I asked her if she would wait on me and she said yes. [END OF TAPE 1]

Session II – 31 July 2006

John Grady: This is the second tape of the July 31st interview with Admiral Mack Gaston, picking up the story of meeting his wife and completing OCS.

Admiral Gaston: In completing OCS I came home en route to the West Coast and we were engaged. I proposed but we didn't marry until August of the next year. When I got back from deployment I asked my boss; Lieutenant Strasser, if I could go home to get married and he allowed me to. The ship had to go to San Francisco for a shipyard repair but then they allowed me to fly from San Francisco to Dalton to get married and the wedding was on the 15th of August in 1965, and I was married in uniform and I was very proud of that.

I had saved a little money. I had already rented an apartment in San Diego for us to go back to after the wedding - but going home to my father's house; 433 4th Avenue where I was born, with my plans all in mind, and I had enough money to buy a used car and had enough money to gas the car - it wouldn't handle it today - but to gas the car across country, maybe stopping one time in a motel. And I guess by 1965, out of the South, you know we could stop at a motel, not a hotel. We still couldn't go to the hotels. But my father said, "You're going to do what?" I said, "Dad, I'm going to buy a used car. I've already identified one." He said, "You're going to drive your new wife across country in a used car and not knowing whether you're going to make it or not!" I said, "Well Daddy, that's all I can afford." He said, "Well Son, I think you need to do something better than that. I can't afford to buy it for you." So that's when I called the Navy Federal Credit Union in August of 1965 and I've been a member ever since. They said I had to be a member in order to borrow the money to buy a car so I said, "Well how much time will it take and how much money will it take", so I could join. At that time I think it was five dollars and I could borrow up to whatever it was but it was enough for me to buy a Super Sport, non air-conditioned, Chevrolet, and that's what I did.

John Grady: A Chevelle Super Sport or a Camaro?

Admiral Gaston: An Impala.

John Grady: I had a Chevelle Super Sport. I remember that [chuckle].

Admiral Gaston: And it was haze grey because I guess that's all I could think of having been on the ship for six months; haze grey. It had a black vinyl top. And my wife and I kept that car for 13 years [chuckle]. I finally gave that car to a Sailor who needed a vehicle.

But my lovely wife Lillian and I had a daughter; one daughter. Well actually she gave birth to two children. We lost the first one. It was stillborn. That was when I was in Destroyer School in 1967. And then we were anxious to try again so I knew we had to wait some time after the doctor said. After Destroyer School I took her on a trip to the World's Fair in Montreal, Canada. Then from there we drove to Georgia, which is our home, and then drove across country again in that same car [laughter]; that 1965 Super Sport and I think by that time we had had some kind of air-conditioning put in there. But in fact my first command was in Hawaii and we took that Super Sport car to Hawaii, and everybody who was new in command in Hawaii at the time – and I'd left my command in USS *Cochrane* (DDG-21) – all the other commanding officers - I wouldn't say all, but most – had, I guess they call it going through their mid-life or early mid-life, had convertible sports cars. It seemed like, to me, the 240Z was very popular then and somebody wanted to know when I was going to get my 240Z or get my mid-life crisis for a new car. I said, "Hey, I got my mid-life. I've got that haze grey and underway DDG right there" [chuckle], and the people in Hawaii still talk about that [chuckle].

John Grady: Now when was your daughter born?

Admiral Gaston: My daughter was born in 1968.

John Grady: And where was she born?

Admiral Gaston: She was born in Long Beach, California. In fact that's when I was on the *O'Brien*. I was Chief Engineer. She waited for me to come back from deployment. I got back from deployment on Thanksgiving Day, 1968, and she was late. She was supposed to be born just before Thanksgiving and she didn't come until 1 December but it was a glorious, glorious, glorious day for all three of us. We named her Sonja Marie.

John Grady: And what is she doing now?

Admiral Gaston: She was called to the ministry about five years ago. She worked at Moody Bible Institute.

John Grady: In Chicago?

Admiral Gaston: In Chicago. After her mother died she asked to come live with me and I said, "Yes", and she lived with me for about a year and then she got her own house. She's still in Chicago, but I think she's ready to go back to the East Coast; Virginia Beach somewhere. She's a great person. She's obviously not a youngster anymore. She's just, I guess 1 December she'll be 39 years old and we still have a good close relationship. She ministers young people on a one-on-one basis through the church. She also teaches computers through a foundation.

And I met my present wife Nancy in Chicago. My last command was Commander of the Navy Training Center, Great Lakes. I met Nancy through a community board we both served on. And, I married this wonderful lady six years ago.

I now work for Electronic Data Systems and I've been with EDS for nine years. My first job after Navy retirement was in Chicago with a company called Waste Management; an environmental company. I was with them for nearly three years. So retirement from the Navy for 12 years and it's been a ball. It's gone by very fast but I'm still having fun.

John Grady: Let's go back to the assignment as the aide.

Admiral Gaston: Yes.

John Grady: You were the first black officer to serve as an aide to a three-star Admiral?

Admiral Gaston: As far as I know.

John Grady: As far as you know, okay, because I thought you said that and I wanted to make sure.

Admiral Gaston: Yes, as far as I know I was the first black officer to not only serve for a three star but to serve as a personal aide to any Admiral.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: At that point in time we didn't even have a black Admiral in the United States Navy. You know Admiral Gravely was the first black Admiral and he was not selected until

1972 I believe. I think when I went to the Pentagon in 1971 he was a Captain in the Pentagon working for the CNO in communications.

But the Admiral that I worked for - I'm a surface officer and he was an aviator, not that that's a requirement one way or the other - and he was over Research and Development for Admiral Zumwalt. His name was Ralph Weymouth, he's a World War II veteran, and we are still friends. He lives up in Wonalancet, New Hampshire with Lo Weymouth; his wife. They have eight kids and I had a place as a personal aide with the family as well as the Admiral. He was my champion, if you will, and he still is.

Looking at the first time that I reported . . . I mean when I went to the Pentagon the first time. . . I'd never been in the Pentagon before. I was scared, not scared of him but afraid of this big monstrous thing, you know.

John Grady: [Chuckle].

Admiral Gaston: I had never heard any good stories about the Pentagon and maybe I still haven't, but I did talk, before coming to Washington, to him. I did talk to the Chief staff officer on the DESRON FIVE staff who had been a personal aide to someone and I don't think it was in the Pentagon but I was trying to find out . . . there is no school for a personal aide. Every Admiral is different. And what he told me is, "Find out all you can about that individual because that's the most important part. You should know what turns him on and what ticks him off or whatever and that's important to know." So one of the first objectives that I had was not to do that but to find out how to do that because if I went about that the wrong way I felt - and I go back to my father for that - he said, "You know, you can survive and do well in any system but

you need to know the system before you can do that.” So I took what the previous aide said but I applied what my father said and I took what needed to be done and then how to get it done, and how to get it done was not easy. You can’t find out from somebody else because if there was an aide to him to begin with you’ve got a couple of days or maybe even one day and then that person is gone so you’re not going to find out very much except what’s going on now. So I felt that since I’m a personal aide to this great three-star and all three-stars are great. You don’t get there without being great – I felt that the only way to find out was from him, not from somebody else, because how he reacts to somebody else might be different from how he’s going to react to me. And if I try to act like that person then I’m giving him false information and he’s the last person that I want to have false information. But at the same time I did it through having some experience with lots of people. I felt that I did have a feeling for how to interface and read people pretty quick so I took the advantage of that, not even trying to outline but properly reacting, and I felt that the main thing for me to do was listen. So rather than asking the executive assistant or the secretary or the writer, “Should I go in to do this”, I didn’t ask anybody. My seat was right at his door. So if my seat is at his door it must mean I have some responsibility to him and if I have some responsibility to him first in line, then I can go in there whenever I want to. So if I know the schedule then I’ll go in and say, “Admiral, I have this and this and this on your schedule”, never suggesting. And I remember this experience and this was probably the greatest early experience with him that really paid off. He had a speech to do and I didn’t see the speech before - I mean this is after I’d been with him for about a month – and the speech . . . we had to ride a helicopter to get there and then they picked us up in the car and then took us to wherever it was. It was in Carder Rock, Maryland. And I carried his speech in a folder and obviously he couldn’t rehearse except to read it on the helicopter and how long he had had it, because it was too early

for me to help . . . they didn't know me and I didn't know them and there was no interface. So we got up in the helicopter and I made sure I had the speech. And so he flipped through it a little bit because after we get in the car it was a short ride and he wasn't saying very much, and I just happened to say, "Admiral, do you want a drink of water" – there was water in the car with us – and he said, "No, I'm fine." And so he went on in and gave the speech and it was awful. It was absolutely embarrassing. But I'm not so sure at that time whether he felt like it was. I think he felt like he did okay. And so we got in the car to go back to the helicopter and he said, "Well I got that done", and we were just about to the helicopter and he said, "Well Mack, how do you think I did?" I said, "Admiral, do you mind if I tell you after the helicopter ride on the way back to the Pentagon", because you know I didn't have time to tell him anything and I didn't want him to be upset for the flight. So we got on the other end; Andrews I think it was because the helicopter didn't fly into the Pentagon, but anyway, after the helicopter flight I wanted to tell him before we got back to the office, and I said, "Admiral, I thought it was terrible Sir." I said, "I think the content of the information is one issue but how you presented it was another and I thought it was just awful. You looked away from people. There didn't seem like there was much engagement to the people." It was not a civilian audience, it was a military audience but it was seniors and juniors and it was in the research area. "Then on the content it seemed like it was just jagged; somebody just had some thoughts and there was no flow." And he said, "Really", and I said, "That's right." He said, "Okay, thank you Mack." So I never heard anything, he only said, "Thank you." And so it became evident later when he got back – I don't know if it was that same day or not – but at some point in time he told the EA that anything that he had to speak on he wanted me to see it first. And it even got to the point that they had to give me the material that they were going to present for the Admiral to speak on for me to screen before the Admiral saw

it the first time, and I appreciated that. But it also meant that he was not going to get hit on the blind side or I was not going to get hit on the blind side in trying to support him. Now I'm not a great writer. People tell me I'm a great speaker. If you don't speak well they don't call you back. And in my experience at Great Lakes; I was there for three years and I was averaging about 99 speeches a year. The content is one thing; how you do it is another. And first of all, in that first speech he was too long. He had a lot of scattered information in there and there was stuff; it was words, and it was technical and that's okay, but it was too technical. He needed to get maybe three points out of 15 and give it to them and maybe give them the rest of it to read or something. But then it was probably about five months later he did a speech. He just knew he did well, and he did, and he said, "How was that Mack?" He had never asked me again, leading up to that. So I told him he did well. It was never done except one-on-one, even if his wife was present. I never did that.

And I got very close to the family and still am very close to the family. He had eight kids as I mentioned; two of them married and left home. But the other six were younger children; were kids, and the youngest was a boy and the oldest was a boy so one boy and five girls at home that I helped raise. And I think the one thing that brought me into his family close was one time they were going to France and they were going on Space Available out of Delaware, and they had gone on the trip and they were coming back and he had some conflicts that he couldn't get there to get them. Anyway, it was early in the morning or late at night and my wife and I took care of it all. He or his wife had made arrangements but they just couldn't get it done. And then our families became close from that point on.

But he also gave me the opportunity to be involved in all of his decision processes. I mean he had major . . . the fact sometimes that the executive assistant got jealous or trying to get

his way in or he didn't get as much detail as I did, not that I was trying to act powerful but he did that. And I remember one time Admiral Ike Kidd, who's a tough guy – he was one of the toughest four stars I've ever known but he was also good – and he was NAVMAT; Commander of the Naval Material Command at the time as a four star, and he called Ralph on the Red Phone; that was the hot line, and I answered the Hot Line. Usually nobody but the flags answered the Hot Line, but the Admiral was down in a meeting and I was trying to take care of the Admiral. And so I answered the phone. He said, "Ralph." I said, "No Sir, this is Mack Gaston Sir, his aide." He said, "You're answering for Ralph?" I said, "Yes Sir." He said, "Well I want Ralph." I said, "Well he's down in a meeting with the CNO Sir. Can I be of assistance?" He said, "I don't know if you can or not." But then he gave me the situation so that I could have the answer – I mean I wanted to know what it was so that I could have the answer ready for my Admiral when he got back – and he said, "I want this answered soon." I said, "Aye Aye Sir." I mean I wasn't giving excuses. I got the answer but I wasn't going to give him the answer without the Admiral knowing it. When Admiral Weymouth got back, I gave him the Q & A; he called Admiral Kidd and gave him the answer to the question. He said, "Who is this, who is this? Gaston was answering your phone." He said, "That's my personal aide Sir. He's the best I ever had" or something like that. So Ike Kidd stopped by and said, "How are you doing great guy?" Life is interesting.

Another factor on that aide job is your openness to all the things that exist and then learning the involvement, not just the stuff but the people. You're talking about interfacing with the CNO's office all the time and being able to carry that message. But I learned more in the first six months in that job than I learned, so far as the Navy system is concerned, than I learned in the six and a half years that I had at sea. And the Pentagon is called a necessary evil and there's that

and much, much, much, much more. All the three stars in the Pentagon have to interface with Congress. Congress controls the money and DOD; the military of the United States should never be in control. In fact that's what our Constitution says. And then interface is the bible to know the system. Going back to my father again, you know, "Know the system that you're working in", and I was smart enough that I knew the system and Admiral Weymouth made the system real to me and he gave me the opportunity. And every time, even now, I still thank him and he says, "Mack, all I gave you was the opportunity. You did what you needed to do." And I try to use that example to the kids that are still coming up and I still mentor and counsel juniors and seniors, and I did quite a bit of that on active duty as well.

But that experience though . . . I'll give you another thing that happened in that Pentagon environment. The Navy, from an operational perspective, you know there are aviators and surface guys and submariners, right. Those are the three operational kings, queens; whatever you want to call them now, and Admiral Weymouth was an aviator. I'm a surface guy; a ship driver; black shoe we call them. And there was going to be a meeting by the CNO with all the flag officers. The CNO was Admiral Zumwalt at the time. . . but they were going out to some isolated place in the Virginia area. I can't remember where it was. But anyway, Admiral Weymouth; my Admiral, had a big van he called "The Frog" because it was green. His kids called it "The Frog". Anyway, it was a big van, so it was an eight-passenger van. He invited some of the flag officers to ride with him. But I was down at the car receiving them until the Admiral got there and one of the people was a three star over the surface Navy, in the Pentagon. You know there was an aviator czar and there was a surface warfare czar and his name was Roho Adamson, and Admiral Adamson said, "Mack, you're a surface guy so what are you doing down here," and "You work for Ralph?" I said, "Yes Sir." He said, "Well that doesn't make sense to me," or something like

that. So Ralph came down to drive off – I wasn't going with them – and so Roho said, “Ralph, what are you doing with this surface guy working for you?” He said, “Admiral, he might not be an aviator but he sure can fly”, [chuckle] and Roho never said another word after that. But that was a great awakening experience and probably the most education; the most learning, that I got of the Navy system.

From that position, I went to be a detailer, which was the first time a black officer; African American whatever your proclivity is—I still say Black—had been a detailer for officers to the best of my knowledge.

John Grady: Let's pick that up for the next one because I know that we're getting near the end of this tape.

Admiral Gaston: Okay.

Session III – 9 August 2006

Admiral Gaston: Now going back to when I was an aide. Admiral Weymouth and his family still played a very important part in my life. They supported my family and I supported theirs and I went from there to BUPERS to be a detailer. As far as I know, again, I was the first black aide to a flag officer and I was the first black detailer. If there were others that went at the same time I don't know. I know I saw one or two others later and I didn't know any of that at the time. I was doing what I was ordered to do. I wasn't seeking information.

John Grady: What year was this?

Admiral Gaston: This was 1971 and I was in Washington for three years so half of that was as an aide and half of that was as a detailer.

John Grady: Yes.

Admiral Gaston: So I was a Lieutenant Commander at the time so I had responsibility for the senior Lieutenants and I had about a thousand people and it was a very busy job. In those days you didn't have any computers. You didn't have anything but the telephone and one record and it was a paper record. And if somebody else had the record; it was going around to be . . . you had to request it and then wait for it, sometimes it was two or three days before you'd see the record for detailing. I learned a lot in the job and if I combined the aide responsibility and the system of the whole Navy and the government in that 18 months I was there, and then I take the 18 months that I was an assignment officer for officers, then I learned the whole system. I learned the working part of the system and the people part of the system and that had to do with serving on selection boards, detailing people; satisfied and not satisfied. And there are still people that come up to me and say, "Admiral, you might not remember this but you detailed me to such and such a ship back in 1973 and I wanted to go to this other ship and you told me that ship was not available for me and go do the best job I could on what you sent me to," and they still did the best they could and some of them were Admirals and some were Captains so I guess they were successful. It doesn't make me successful, it makes them successful. Sometimes we're more successful at what we're required to do than what we choose to do because we don't know what we don't know and I certainly didn't know that I needed to be a detailer, and I had heard nothing

good or bad about it. What I'd heard was bad things about detailers because they send you to places that you don't want to go [chuckle]. I guess that happens in all the services.

But that's also when I met Admiral Boorda, who eventually became Chief of Naval Personnel and Chief of Naval Operations and he was the first enlisted person to do that. He was a Lieutenant Commander detailer. He was also a Lieutenant Commander but he was probably two years senior to me. And this detailing job for a thousand people, the norm was about half the number I had, so I was going in at 0-dark thirty and going home at 0-dark thirty and working on the weekends too and it was Saturday and Sunday sometimes. But this was after I'd been in the job for about a year and I was working on a Saturday morning and Admiral Boorda; LCDR Boorda at the time, Mike, said, "Mack, where do you want to go next", and I was screened for XO; Executive Officer. I said, "I want to go to my XO tour." So he said, "Well where do you want to go?" I said, "Well I want to go back to the West Coast but I really can't do that. I won't say I can't do that but I really prefer to go to the East Coast because my father is not in real good health and I want to be fairly close to him." He said, "Okay, what about Norfolk?" I said, "That would be great." He said, "What about this ship; it's a guided missile destroyer?" He called the name of the ship, it was USS *Conyngham*, and I said, "That sounds good to me but do I qualify for that?" He said, "Mack, you're a great guy. You've already proven that you can do anything that somebody assigns you to do. You've never had a missile ship but this is a missile ship and you go be XO if that's what you want", and I said, "Well that's what I'd like to have." I also found out that this was very exceptional because if you hadn't had any missile experience; hadn't been on a ship that was a missile ship, it was very, very difficult, if not impossible, to get on a ship at that level, at that seniority; the number 2 guy on the ship and you never had any missile experience. Three of the people that were detailers at the time that I was a detailer made flag

officer and one was a female; Admiral Evans, and it was an absolute great experience. And I also found out that people who are assigned to be officer details are the pick of the litter, if you will, so that's a key job to have and I was sort of fortunate to have had it. And again, I didn't know what the qualifications were and I was doing what I was ordered to do so somebody was taking care of me.

John Grady: Was the Navy drawing down at that point because this is the tail-end of the Vietnam War?

Admiral Gaston: Yes it was. In fact the end of the first year I was there the Navy cut 25 percent in the officer community.

Now going back to me being an aide and a detailer, I give credit to Admiral Zumwalt. Admiral Zumwalt made tremendous changes in the Navy and he had LCDR Bill Norman, a black officer keeping the pulse on all of this...I did not know at the time, but what a great job he did.

Then I went from being a detailer to being an executive officer on the USS *Conyngham* with Captain Battaglini.

John Grady: Let's spell *Conyngham* because it's a peculiar spelling.

Admiral Gaston: C-O-N-Y-N-G-H-A-M; *Conyngham*.

John Grady: That's the way I've got it here and I just remembered it was a strange spelling.

Admiral Gaston: Yes, and the USS *Conyngham* was named in honor of Captain Gustavus Conyngham, an important figure in the American Revolutionary war against British commerce. In fact, we called the ship the “Gus Boat” at times.

John Grady: [Chuckle].

Admiral Gaston: But the ship was on its way to overhaul and as you’ve heard by now, in the first two ships I’ve already been on, both of them I had shipyard experience so I guess I’m a shipyard overhaul guy. But it was going into the shipyard two weeks after I arrived and I arrived onboard the ship and it had already been sort of disabled because two weeks later we were tug-boated to the shipyard, not on its own steam but by tugs.

John Grady: So the overhaul work was going to be done at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth?

Admiral Gaston: Yes.

And so I went up, reported aboard the ship, went up to the Captain’s cabin and said, “Lieutenant Commander Gaston reporting for duty Sir.” I don’t even remember if he offered me a seat or said, “Close the door”, or whatever, and I can’t remember if I said that. But he said, “You’ve got to outdo the XO that’s leaving and he was the second best executive officer in the United States Navy.” He said, “I was the best”, and then, “You’ve got to try to outdo me as

Executive Officer”, and that’s all he had to say. So I left the cabin – and I probably won’t repeat the words that came to mind [laughter].

I went to put my things away and basically turned over from the XO and there was probably about maybe two or three days because the ship wasn’t operating, and it might have been the same day, I don’t remember, but it was a very short turnover because there wasn’t very much to turn over.

So we went to the shipyard and the shipyard is a really tough life for a crew. And my whole objective was to try to keep the crew organized and energized because they’re doing what they weren’t trained to do and somebody’s coming in to mess up what they’ve cleaned up, and shipyards are tough. And what experience I had as a Chief Engineer was helpful. I found out that the crew hadn’t had a personnel inspection by the Commanding Officer - the Captain had been there a year when I got there or something like that and he came there from XO of the same class ship right there in Norfolk. I think it was the USS *Byrd* - but there had not been a personnel inspection the whole year he had been there. So I felt that was one way to get them started and give them a mental set of disciplines so they would transition that to cleaning up after the shipyard and keeping the ship from being a fire hazard. So I went to the Captain and made this recommendation. I can’t remember whether it was after a month or two months. The Captain agreed to have a personnel inspection and we were going to have it in dress uniform, and I would have them lined up. We would have it first thing in the morning so we didn’t really mess up the workday.

Then as we were going further in the shipyard, things started falling into place. Even though there were some major difficulties we got them ironed out and of course close to the end of the shipyard the first major inspection you have from the outside is engineering. Well the

Captain knew I'd been a Chief Engineer. He was a weapons guy and he stayed as far away from engineering as he could or so it seemed [chuckle]. But we had a person who was a Chief Engineer; who was an engineer's engineer. I mean he was not a line officer, he was an engineering type, and that was good. But the kind of inspection we were going to have is tough if everything is good. They only looked at things that were bad or not exceptional. Anyway, we were up late painting and getting things ready for this inspection and I stayed in the hole – we call it – all night with the Chief Engineer, and I think the Captain was onboard the ship but he wasn't in the hole. And I think we flunked it the first time and had to take it the second time and that's a major setback. And we finally got through it. We got through the engineering thing and now we've got to get ready to get out of overhaul, and we've got to do the shipyard test now. We've got to go to sea to do these machinery and weapons tests and all that. The Captain recognized that the inspection had a very positive effect on the crew. He saw that he got great respect from the crew and I think that was absolutely wonderful.

Then we were preparing for going to Guantanamo Bay for Refresher Training as ships do before they deploy; as they work up for deployment, and en route to that we had to go to Key West for sonar evaluation and we got that done. Then we go to the tongue of the ocean to actually exercise that and that's about two weeks but I had some personnel things that I had to get done for the ship and while the ship was out doing its thing the Captain and I agreed that I would take the boat in; take his gig in along with the Coxswain and do my personnel business with the Bureau because in those days you didn't have phones on the ship. That's old Navy. Today you can do everything you need to. And there was a major, major, major thing that happened. We reviewed with the coxswain the route we were going to take to get into shore and

I was in the gig doing some last minute paperwork in preparation for what I was going to shore to do and the Coxswain went aground.

John Grady: On the wrong side of the

Admiral Gaston: He grounded the boat. Actually he hit rocks. You know the ocean is so deep in that part of the world and the rocks probably looked far away but he didn't go where we had the track and we went aground. I said, "Oh shit!" And fortunately it didn't puncture a hole in the boat so we were not sinking but it did damage to the hull and obviously it wiped out the propeller and the shaft. And so we went on in. We called in on an old PRC-10. They towed us in and I got my business done and then they've got to furnish a boat to tow us back out to the ship. The ship came in relatively close and I thought sure the Captain was going to fire me for running his boat aground. I mean he believed in the . . . he had the fastest gig – you know ships compete against each other with their boats and the gigs – he has the fastest gig on the East Coast and he knew he did. This is before I got there. And I had wiped out this propeller and the shaft. They replaced it all and we went ahead and deployed and our first assignment was east of Crete with what was called Lebanon Contingency. It's amazing what's going on right now. I mean it seems like the Middle East will never get solved. It was called the Lebanon Contingency and this was in 1974. So we were the gunship with all these amphibious ships and one of the first things that they decided to do during this contingency operation was to have a race of the gigs; of the Captain's boats, and ours was embarrassing and of course I was to blame. But the Captain - you know I thought I was going to be fired - he never said a word to me about that until he lost that race. "You messed up my boat", and I think he never forgave me for that. Captain Robin Battaglini

was the best Commanding Officer I ever had – bar none. He taught me everything I know about weapons systems and as far as I’m concerned, he’s the best “cannon cocker” the Navy has ever had.

Anyway, then the contingency was done and we went to do some other things - and this is a guided missile destroyer, the first guided missile destroyer class ever built; the *Adams Class* - and it’s anti-submarine warfare system is very limited because there were other ships that were built just for anti-submarine warfare. This ship was built for anti-air warfare even though it had the mission; gunfire support, anti-submarine warfare and anti-air warfare. It did have sonar. And we were not in a part of the anti-submarine warfare group of ships but we detected more submarines than anybody else during the deployment and we held them down. You know the Soviets had conventional submarines but they were so quiet and this anti-air warfare ship got more submarine contacts and held them down longer than anybody else in the U.S. Navy to the point where they gave our ship the Hook-Em; what they called the “Hook-Em Award”, and that’s the first time – and as far as I know the only time - a guided missile destroyer in those days ever got the “Hook-Em Award” over the specific designated anti-submarine warfare ships. And the whole crew was proud. The Captain was proud and we were the pride of the fleet.

And then we went to the home port of the Sixth Fleet at the end of my tour; I was going to be turning over during the deployment. I was leaving the ship.

John Grady: How long was your tour?

Admiral Gaston: Two years.

John Grady: Two years. And when were you off Lebanon; you said '74?

Admiral Gaston: Yes, it was . . . I said '74.

John Grady: And that would be about . . . well what I was thinking was 1973.

Admiral Gaston: I think it was '75.

John Grady: Okay, because I was thinking of the 1973 Mideast war.

Admiral Gaston: No, I think it was '75.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: Because '74 is when I went to the ship.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: And then it was in overhaul for six months so it would have been the first of the year, so it was '75.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: And so I left the ship in late '75 or . . . no, I left the ship in . . . um, I have to get that straight. It might have been '76 because I left the ship after the deployment and then went to the War College in Newport and that had to be in '76 because I went to my first command in Hawaii . . . now let me back up. I took command of *Cochrane* in Hawaii in 1977 so it would have been '76. I was XO for two years.

John Grady: Yes.

Admiral Gaston: And I went there in '74, I know that, from BUPERS.

John Grady: And what was your relationship with the Captain? Did you get another Captain or was he still aboard the ship?

Admiral Gaston: He was still aboard the ship. He was onboard that ship as CO for evidently three years because I was there for two and I left him in the Med on the ship.

But there's another story about that propeller that I messed up and it was as I left the ship. I had my wife come over because I knew I was going to leave the ship and meet her in Rome. The ship was in Gaeta and there were several wives that came over and they threw a ship's party for me in Naples. And so my wife, the Captain's wife, I know the Chief Engineer's wife and I don't remember who else, but they had this party at this great restaurant in Naples and all the presentations were given in exchange to my wife and me and all the great words, and then the Captain got up and said, "I have one final thing I want to present you and I don't ever want you to forget this because I never want you to go aground again." So he had the Chief Engineer

present me that propeller [chuckle]. I thought it was great. And Robin Battaglini and I are still friends. We're best friends, alright. And so, you know, things that happen happen for a reason and I think that I made flag officer because of that gentleman. He is the best writer bar none I have ever experienced. He's a super naval officer and we learned some things together. He taught me weapons, I taught him engineering. We taught each other a lot of things and together we learned people very well; Robin Battaglini.

John Grady: And you were a Lieutenant Commander at this point?

Admiral Gaston: I was a Lieutenant Commander.

I went to the Naval War College Command and Staff Course. While I was in the War College I was screened for command as a Lieutenant Commander. While I was in the War College I was also selected for Commander and this is the Junior War College; Command and Staff, and never, ever figuring that I would go to command that early. I actually went to command after the War College and they allowed me to be, what we call in the Navy, frocked. So after getting to the command billet I could put on Commander even though I was just frocked so it looks like I'm a Commander even though I had not been officially promoted. So I took command of my first ship after having something like 13 years in the Navy – it's usually 16 – I was very fortunate. (END OF SIDE A – SIDE B IS BLANK]

Session IV – 29 August 2006

John Grady: Okay, this is John Grady.

Continuation of the oral history interviews with Admiral Mack Gaston.

Today is August the 29th, 2006, and we're picking up you; were in command of *Cochrane* at that point?

Admiral Gaston: Yes.

John Grady: Yes, okay.

Admiral Gaston: This was my first command in the United States Navy and I think I indicated that I was the only black Commanding Officer in the Pacific, and Admiral Gravely was Third Fleet at that time. He is the only black flag officer to ever command a U.S. Navy numbered fleet.

Now going back to the command itself; we finished the overhaul and one of the agreements that I had established with the crew was that we were going to do something special after getting out of the shipyard early. We did show the crew a special time during the sea trials. But we did finish the shipyard early and I requested that *Cochrane* be included in the South Pacific deployment that was scheduled for diplomatic purposes and we won that assignment, and this was going to the South Pacific to ports in some of the countries that the United States Navy hadn't visited in a long time. But it was a diplomatic cruise with the objective of operating with the navies of all the countries and those countries included Fiji, Tonga, New Caledonia, New Zealand and Australia, Indonesia and the Philippines, so obviously all of them weren't small but a lot of ports that we went into had never been visited in a long time by a U.S. Navy warship. For instance, Bluff Harbor, New Zealand, is the most southern point of New Zealand. I mean if you

fall off of Bluff Harbor you fall into the Antarctic. The trees in Bluff Harbor grow at 45 degrees. But we had a great time in Bluff Harbor and we finished that deployment with much success.

Coming back to Pearl Harbor through Guam I thought it would be beneficial to have a picture made with all the crew since a lot of people were going to be transferred and it was done in working uniform. It was done on the spur of the moment so the crew was in their working best and they were just excited. It wasn't line up by rank, it was just . . . I had a tiger cruise on the pier and I ordered the crew to the foc'sle, to the signal bridge, to the bridge, and it was that kind of photo on the spur of the moment, which was just wonderful, and I had a great, great crew.

We got back to Hawaii and there were visiting ships from Australia and of course we had been challenged down there because we were designated the fastest DDG in the West [chuckle]. So one of the Australian ships challenged us to, they had done it in Australia, but they challenged us to another race. Of course we didn't do it so what they did was ran the race by themselves and declared that they went faster than we did by staking out a mark here and a mark some miles away, and they declared they were now the fastest DDG in the West [chuckle]. But it was all in fun and they talked to the newspaper and so it was also in there, so rather than causing a hardship of any kind I agreed with them but our sign still remained the same; "Fastest DDG in the West."

As I mentioned, the crew was absolutely super, but I want to point out a few of the super officers that made my first command tour absolutely successful. The XO, Steve Farrow who is now CEO of U.S. Airways, Dave Ellison, my Chief Engineer who retired as a two-star Admiral, John Kenny, Ops Officer who now has a PhD and is doing research at a major university, Rodney Matsushima, Supply Officer who is CEO of a government contracting company, Bob Kraus, Engineering Maintenance Officer, Lt JG Tamayo, First Lieutenant who is deceased, and

Lt JG Lundquist, ASW officer who retired as a Captain. And, I must name some of the super Chiefs; EMC M McIver, Master Chief Carrier and Chief Dice.

I left that tour and was assigned to the Bureau of Naval Personnel. I had been to the Bureau once before when I was an aide and as an officer detailer, and I got a call from Captain John Adams who retired as a two-star Admiral, who was PERS-41 and in charge of all the surface officer detailing, asking me to come and be in charge. And I guess the right term might not be asking, but suggesting - giving me the opportunity is the way I read it - because I considered officer detailing the strong suit in the personnel business and also I had been aware that many people who had been through officer detailing, especially as a senior officer – and I guess at this point I was considered a senior officer – to be considered successful and usually made Captain. To say my eyesight was on Admiral, no, I wouldn't say that, but I would go back to the statement my father said to me, "Be the best at whatever you do." But I certainly didn't put a star on the shoulder in that process. So I went back to that job.

John Grady: When was this?

Admiral Gaston: This was in 1979.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: And I went to be the head of the area in officer details that was over all Lieutenants and below, so that was just about half of all the surface officer detailing. When you take the Lieutenants, the Lieutenant (JGs) and Ensigns, that's about half of all the officers in the

surface community. It might even be more than half. Anyway, it was a big job. After I was there for about six months or eight months there was an opportunity, and I say that first, but there was a problem with a ship down in Charleston that had gone aground and that Commanding Officer had obviously been dismissed from command and it happened about a year from the time that Captain Adams was trying to get someone to command that ship to get it underway. The Executive Officer had been assigned as the acting Commanding Officer with no authority to get the ship underway. So this was presented at Captain Adam's meetings two or three times. On the third time I said, "Well Captain, I volunteer to go to be commanding officer of that ship", and he said, "Really", and I said, "Yes Sir." He said, "Well you've already had a command." I said, "Yes Sir, but it seems like there's a problem that needs to be solved and I'm willing to go do that." He said, "Okay, well why don't you talk to me after this meeting." So we did and he said, "Are you sure you want to do this?" So I went home that night and told Lillian that I had volunteered and she was quite pleased because she understood my attitude about doing the right thing for the Navy. And I was told by several people, including Captains and people of my rank; Commander, that they didn't understand why I was doing that. I had done what I needed to make Captain and I was taking a risk by going to another command because first of all it was a Reserve ship with very little really qualified people as it was known at that time. And the ship did not have a full crew. It had not been underway and the last time it was underway it was aground and it must be in very bad shape. So their recommendation, of course, was not to do something like that. I was pretty headstrong, like I am on a lot of things, and so I kept my plans on track. I kept my volunteerism on track and actually went back the next day and told Captain Adams that and he said, "Well you need to be there as soon as you can", and I said, "What does that mean Captain?" He said, "Well you need to be there . . ." I think this was something like

Tuesday or Wednesday. “. . . so you need to be there Monday.” He said, “I’d like for you to be there Monday.” And of course Sunday was Easter and so now I’m a little bit worried. I’ve got to go home and tell my wife now I’m going to be driving to Charleston on Easter Sunday, and we have a daughter that’s a youngster; about ten years old at this point, and so I go home and tell her that I’ve got to leave on Sunday to drive to Charleston, South Carolina to my command. Now she was upset with that but she accepted it, and yes, on early Easter Sunday morning I drove to Charleston and went to the BOQ and I had called down and told the acting commanding officer that I wanted to meet with him in the BOQ on my arrival. So I suppose it was somewhere between 1700 and 1800 that I arrived and he was there, and I didn’t ask him hardly anything about the ship. I used most of that time to inform him of what I was going to do and what was needed, including my Standing Orders. So I really sort of dictated my Standing Orders for him to have done when I arrived the next morning so I could review that so the crew, especially the officers, would know where I’m coming from so they wouldn’t be guessing about what I was looking for. And so I guess that meeting lasted about three hours; three or four. I never ate that evening. But I went aboard the ship the next morning. This is the USS *Cone*.

John Grady: How do you spell that?

Admiral Gaston: C-O-N-E, (DD-866).

I went aboard the ship at 0600 the next morning. I did not inform the XO or tell him the night before what time I was going aboard. I just told him I’d be aboard the ship the next morning early. He was not there. The duty section was the only people there of course. And so I announced to the Officer of the Deck who I was and I went aboard and told him to tell the XO as

well as the department heads to find me that I would be walking throughout the ship. So I went to every crevice in the ship and eventually the department heads and the XO found me and I didn't say, "Stay with me", but they all did. I advised them to go ahead and do whatever they had to do but they felt that they needed to see what I was finding, and I found lots of problems. So I did that all day; I did it for 12 hours - obviously I was taking notes - from 0600 to 1800. I knew what the ship was when I finished. I did not eat breakfast on the ship. I did not eat lunch. I did not eat dinner. I left the ship and went back and organized my notes. I got a call from the executive officer wanting to know if there was anything that he could do and I said, "No Sir." I said, "I'll be aboard the ship early in the morning." This time he figured it must be going to be about 0600 [laughter]. So I went aboard the ship at 0600 to the Officer of the Deck and I said, "I'm Commander Gaston and I am the commanding officer." I said, "Have the Executive Officer and the department heads meet me in my import cabin." So the XO came - I don't think he was the first one but I don't know - but all of them came and I said, "I want to tell all of you first that this is what I intend to do." Now this is Tuesday. "I intend to get this ship underway on Thursday and go to sea and do all the things that this ship is designed to do on Thursday and Friday. We'll come back in on Saturday." So hands went up, "But, but, but", and I said, "I'm not going to take any butts or questions." I said, "Please get all the officers together in the wardroom and I want to meet with them in an hour. That gives them a chance to get whatever thoughts they need to get together." And it was fairly obvious to me they were going to tell me how many things were wrong to keep us from getting underway on Thursday. That's what I figured might happen. But anyway, in an hour I went to the wardroom and all the officers were there and so I announced to them that I was the Commanding Officer and let each officer introduce themselves, and I tried to remember most of the them and I did a pretty good job of it. And I said, "I don't know what

you've been told but I want to tell you myself that we're getting the ship underway at 0600 on Thursday morning and we will be at sea for two days and we will do everything that this ship is designed to do. We will do a full-power trial. We will shoot all of the batteries on the ship, torpedoes, fire the MK 38 guns, machine guns, and all the things that this ship is designed to do." And I said, "I think we only have time for one question from one person and is there a question?" I don't remember exactly but it was something like one person and I think it was a JG who said, "Well Captain, do you realize how long the ship has been sitting alongside the pier", and I said, "Yes I do." I said, "And now Executive Officer, if you would please arrange for me to meet with all the Chief Petty Officers in an hour." So that now gives all of the division officers and the department heads whatever opportunity they want to say whatever to the Chiefs before I get there. So I met with all the Chiefs and told them the same thing and one of the Chief Petty Officers – and I don't think it was the most senior Chief – said, "Captain, we will do whatever we need to do to make that happen", and that was the first time I heard that. And I said, "What I would like for you to do now is you to help the XO and tell him – because the XO was there – I said, "XO, please now get all the crew together on the flight deck. I want to talk to everybody at the same time and tell them what we've been talking about for the last two hours." So he did and there was mumbling and rumbling but I allowed the crew to ask questions and I remember the sequence of the questions. "Captain, do you think that we can get this done?" I said, "If you think so we can. If all of you would put forth the effort that you've been trained to do we can always do anything." I said, "But if you think we can't then we can't, but I'd like for all of you to think like I am and think you can because if you don't try you'll never do it. So let's think we can." I said, "Is everybody aboard with that", and it sounded like the crew said yes, I don't know. There might have been some that didn't raise their hand or whatever and I didn't look for that.

But I had a very positive response. So Thursday morning came and we got the sea detail set and I called for the first bell; steam ship, and they opened the throttle and we had a major steam leak. Obviously we're not going to get underway in an unsafe situation and the steam leak was so major that we had to shut that plant down. And so I told them to secure just that plant, leave the other plant steaming, unless it would interfere with fixing the one that needed fixing, and that was the Chief Engineer's responsibility. So I secured the sea detail and then immediately had to figure out how it could be fixed because the objective was still to get underway and do what we needed to do. The leak was so severe that it couldn't be done by the facilities that we had. We had to go to the repair ship and I think we even had to go outside the base to get some assistance. So obviously, I wouldn't say obviously, but it couldn't be done that day so we did not get underway on Thursday and I think it was late afternoon, early evening, before we could get underway at all the next day.

John Grady: And that would be Friday.

Admiral Gaston: That would be Friday. So now we're going to be underway Friday late, Saturday, and come back in on Sunday or Saturday night.

And so we tried to do a full-power trial and had another steam leak. We got up to 27 knots, the first time the ship had been at that speed in; I don't know how long they told me, but years, but we got some bugs out. I think the crew was - when I say the crew I mean the officers and all - were really surprised that we were able to get underway at all. And then we got ready to shoot the guns and we finally . . . we had six guns; two guns per mount, and we finally got one gun shot. We got two rounds out of one gun out of the six guns we had, that's progress. We had

hedge-hogged the mounts so we got one . . . we had two mounts; one on each side of the ship and we got three hedgehog rounds fired. We got the 50-caliber guns fired. All the radars worked but the air-search quit and fortunately the surface-search radar continued because we needed that to go back into port with. We fired a torpedo. So I considered it successful and I told the crew that. It's a reserve ship so the regular crew represents only about 60 percent of the personnel and then when you have reserves come aboard, and they don't come aboard every day; they come aboard periodically, and evidently at that point – I'd never been on a reserve ship before so I didn't know what the rules were but I knew that you didn't have a hundred percent of your crew all the time - but somehow they were able to get the reserve crew in for this underway period, which was very positive.

And then the following Tuesday or Wednesday we were scheduled to get underway to go to REFTRA to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, so we had to get all the things when we got back in on Sunday night . . . no, Sunday morning I guess it was, but we had the rest of Sunday and Monday to get all the things fixed to get underway on Tuesday or Wednesday to go to Guantanamo Bay for Refresher Training. Refresher Training is like preparing for war, that's exactly what it is. And it's usually the case at Guantanamo Bay that it's not whether you're going to pass or fail but how well or how least you fail. It's that tough. So by this time the crew was engaged and we got underway on time, whatever day it was, and the crew was actually excited about what we were going to do because they hadn't been underway in a year. So we practiced a lot of the procedures going down of course and of course going down you couldn't actually shoot things but the procedures had to be right for Refresher Training because that is training and you have to say the right words and you have to order the right thing and all of that. So we got to Guantanamo Bay on time without a hiccup. We started Refresher Training; we reported to them, and had a

successful Refresher Training even to the point that the commodore down there sent a message to the East Coast Type Commander – and I don't remember . . . I'm trying to remember. I think it might have been Vice Admiral Roho Adamson who was the Type Commander; who was SURFLANT, that same Admiral that I had mentioned earlier about when he was OP-03, but I think that's who it was. But anyway, it was a very nice message and the message said, "This is the best ship trained in a year", or something to that effect, and obviously I passed that to the crew and so we were very, very excited. And I stayed aboard that ship for about a year and eventually the ship was sold to another country. But one of the officers who was a reserve officer at that time is an Admiral now. His name was Hugh Blackwood and he's a Reserve two-star today and we are friends. He was the Deputy of Military Sealift Command under Vice Admiral Dave Brewer and he recently gave me his button; his two star button. But that's the kind of camaraderie and excellence that we have in the United States Navy. It doesn't matter where you are or whether you're reserve or active duty. Our duty is for our country and success and desire breed success, and that keeps us the best Navy the world has ever known and I'm so proud to be a part of it. There is another officer from the USS *Cone* that I want to recognize, LCDR Terry Payne who was my Chief Engineer – one of the best engineers in my experience. On a comparative basis, I would put him in the same category as Bernard Jackson, who I will talk about later as a super engineer. Terry and I remain friends.

Now I went from the USS *Cone* back to Washington, DC; back in the same organization I was in, and Captain Adams was still in charge and he thanked me for doing that job. And I was the assistant for a while to the Commander detailer because somebody else had already been ordered into the job that I was doing. Actually it was Admiral Phil Quast who eventually made Vice Admiral.

And from there this was the intent; that I go to the Industrial College of the Armed Forces at the National Defense University. So I went there for a school year and received my diploma.

John Grady: And what year was this?

Admiral Gaston: This would have been 1981.

John Grady: And you were still a Commander at that point?

Admiral Gaston: I was still a Commander and I was selected for Captain while I was in school and promoted during that year.

So I was assigned, coming out of that, to the Pentagon in OP-03; I was OP-392, which was the Surface Warfare Training organization. Actually OP-39 was the Surface Warfare Manpower and Training organization for the surface warfare community and I was the training person; OP-392. And I was in that job for two years; almost two years, and I was screened for major command while I was in the job, which means that I screened with my first look; my first look at major command. That means going to sea as a squadron commander or a cruiser or a major ship or a major shore assignment. Then I got a call from the Bureau; from my detailer – I can't remember who it was. Captain Adams was not there anymore, he had made Admiral. I can't remember who the detailer was then – but he called and said, "Mack, this is not a conversation, this is an order. You're going to be assigned as Equal Opportunity Captain for the Bureau of Naval Personnel." This quote might not be . . . I think he said, "Do you have any questions?" I said, "Yes Sir, I do." I said, "I realize that getting orders from the Bureau is not a

request. I've been a detailer, I understand that. But my question is, is it your intent that I go to this job and not go any further in the United States Navy", and he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well if I go to this job and stay there for a normal tour of two years . . ." and the last person who was in there was in there for three years ". . . that's the end of my career. Is that what you intend?" I said, "Well could I please have the opportunity to talk to the Admiral", and he said, "No, I will talk to the Admiral." So he talked to N4 who was the Admiral. I don't remember who that person was. So I got a call from the Admiral and the thing was I was going to be interviewed with other candidates for other jobs and he would like for that procedure to continue. So that procedure did continue and I guess it was two or three days later that I was supposed to go to see that Admiral and I reported to his office and he said, "Please go up and see Admiral Lawrence." Now Admiral Lawrence was the Chief of Naval Personnel at that time. And so I did and Admiral Lawrence said, "Welcome aboard. I'm pleased to have you and I look forward to you making a difference." I said, "Well thank you very much Admiral." He said, "And in one year you will go to your command." But I didn't know any of this. I thought I had been reconsidered, I wasn't going, and I was going to stay in the job I was in for another year and then go to command. Well that solved the problem for me and it solved the problem for what the Navy wanted to do. And so I went to be his equal opportunity representative for the Chief of Naval Personnel and after I was in that position for about three weeks I had called all the people to find out what was the highest priority of what they were doing and why it was priority and find out what needed to be done before I could decide what I could influence. Well when I found out that I really didn't . . . and that office almost really didn't have any influence. And somebody had created two or three years before, a command-managed equal opportunity program but it had just been created and put on a shelf. And putting anything on the shelf never solves anything. So

that was the first thing I grabbed and I called in the three leading people and said, “What needs to be done with this to make it effective and if it is effective what good is it going to do for the Navy?” So they said, “We need to read it all again Captain and could we have some time to do that before we answer you?” I said, “Yes, in fact come back to me in about an hour or so.”

[Chuckle] I’ve got this thing about an hour. And so they did and they answered the questions. I said, “To implement this then it appears to me that you’ve got to get individual commanding officers and individual flag officers to buy into this. You can’t just send it out from the CNO and expect it to get done, is that correct?” “Yes Sir.” I said, “Okay, then let’s come up with a plan to do that.” I said, “Let’s work it together. Get on the chalkboard”. And I said, “Name all of the three stars on both coasts and in Washington and go down each one of them until you get all of the key people that I need to talk to.” So we did that. It took a while to do that because there’s no one piece of paper that has all of that in it for the United States Navy. So what I did was I visited people in Washington. Before we got to that it needed to be sanctioned by the Chief of Naval Operations through the Chief of Naval Personnel. So I presented it to the Chief of Naval Personnel who suggested that I bring it through his organization so a flag officer in his organization could present it to his board, but I already knew how he felt about it. Well we got it approved and presented it to the Chief of Naval Personnel who presented it to the Chief of Naval Operations who blessed it. That was Admiral Trost. But anyway, so now I have license to go in where I wanted to in the Navy; anywhere I needed to. So since I was closest to the East Coast I went to the East Coast first and I met with the three stars. I went to CINCLANTFLT and asked him if he would help me get together the three stars under his command and he did. I met with AIRLANT, SURFLANT, SUBLANT and Second Fleet. Admiral Mustin was Second Fleet at the time. I think Admiral Kihune was the type Commander. Admiral Dunn was AIRLANT. Admiral

Kihune, I believe, was SURFLANT and I don't remember who SUBLANT was. But anyway, they were onboard. And Admiral Dunn did something that gave me the idea to try it across the whole Navy. What he did was invited me to come to his quarterly or semi-annual – it might have been quarterly – commanding officers meeting and it was done in Norfolk. I can't remember the air station out by the beach.

John Grady: Oceana.

Admiral Gaston: Oceana. And he had all his commanding officers of the whole Atlantic Fleet – and I believe their XOs. Maybe the Commodores or however that structure is – and he started off his meeting, he said, “I'm going to start the meeting off a little bit different than we usually do. I'm going to talk for a few minutes and my subject is going to be equal opportunity.” So he talked for probably 30 minutes or so; 30 to 45 minutes, and he said, “Now I would like to introduce . . .” and he introduced me. “. . . who is going to talk in more detail about equal opportunity and what you're going to have to do.” So I had license. Now can you imagine doing that to each one of those people at their commands one-on-one to get the same impact? It's impossible. Because they were already charged before I talked to them and when I went to their individual commands it was more on the details of how to, not whether or not, or not asking because they had already been told. And to say that that was the method used across the whole Navy, no it wasn't, but it was used in several places at my suggestion because Admiral Dunn had established it. Admiral Dunn and I are pretty good friends. He's over at the Naval Historical Foundation. He is the president and I'm a member of his board. And from there . . . that took the whole year to get that done.

There were a lot of other things that I did and one of the things was to counsel individuals too when they would come in and that included any rank and anybody. So all the people that came in for assistance in the equal opportunity office weren't just JOs and they weren't all officers and they weren't all minorities - they went across the board – seniors as well. And a lot of those people that I counseled and coaxed, if you will, were very successful and we're still friends.

But I went from that job to my major command as promised by Admiral Lawrence and I went to command of the USS *Josephus Daniels*, the namesake of the Secretary of the Navy from 1917 I think it was.

John Grady: World War I.

Admiral Gaston: World War I, yes, and Josephus Daniels was the one that took the booze off of ships [chuckle]. And there are a couple other stories, one of which, it's my understanding that the reason he did that is because his wife suggested it and she also suggested that he stop the sailors from wearing pajamas at sea. I mean she thought it was silly for them to have to undress for bed or something like that. But I don't know how true that is but I heard that.

John Grady: [Laughter] He certainly did take the liquor off the ships though.

Admiral Gaston: Yes he did.

But the experience of *Josephus Daniels* was wonderful. There were also some problems. I took command at sea. But before I go into that, the experience that I had in preparing for that

job: we go to school before we, or close to six months before we take command, and one of the things that had been established, because we had some major safety problems on all of our ships with engineering, was we had to go to a major engineering school out in Idaho Falls, which is where the senior nuclear power school was and that school was designed by Admiral Rickover, and that was for two and a half or three months. That was tough, again, to take chemistry and all those applied courses. I consider them hard. I did well in all of them but I had to work hard and that was an attention getter. And it wasn't just for fun, it was because we were killing people on our ships and we had to stop it and training is one of the key things involved in that. And so I brought that up to say that I totally agree with it and it was a great experience and it seems also that the people who went through it together became better people too. And I still remember some of those people and are still friends with those people, most of which . . . it was a school of Commanders and Captains; so everybody who was going to significant command tours of ships. So I was a Captain when I did it but it was more, there was probably as many Commanders as there were Captains and I know that about six or seven of the Commanders made Admiral and about five or six of the Captains at the time made Admiral, which is wonderful.

John Grady: Where was the pre-command course taught, was that at Newport?

Admiral Gaston: When I went it was at Idaho Falls, Idaho.

John Grady: Okay, the whole thing was at Idaho Falls.

Admiral Gaston: Oh no, Newport had the rest of the training.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: Yes, and so there's three months in Idaho and about two and a half or three months at Newport.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: And then I went aboard the ship and the ship was at sea so I went aboard the ship by helicopter and relieved at sea. It was at sea for a major exercise and the ship was in this major fleet exercise in preparation for deployment.

John Grady: Where was the ship home ported?

Admiral Gaston: In Norfolk.

John Grady: In Norfolk, and what kind of ship was it?

Admiral Gaston: It was a guided missile cruiser. It used to be a DLG and they converted the DLG to the cruiser designation and so this was a guided missile cruiser.

John Grady: Okay.

Admiral Gaston: I think it's the . . . I can't remember the class. CG-27 was the hull number and there were two classes of the old DLG and I think the *Fox* was the earlier class but it was a single-ended. Some of them were double-ended; they had missiles fore and aft, which some just had missiles forward and I think the double-enders were an earlier model.

But anyway, we were at sea for a major fleet exercise. Admiral Mustin was Second Fleet and he was out there. And I mention that because after I relieved and we were running from missile exercises back to the regular maneuvering exercises for fleet practice and one of the times we were going back and forth we had a major engine casualty, bad enough that we had to secure the engine and we had to return to port. I reported the casualty to the Fleet Commander and to the Type Commander who sent it out that the Deputy Type Commander would meet the ship coming in and make sure we got repaired expeditiously. The repairs caused us to miss our scheduled deployment, but in the work up for the next deployment we were going to be in a fleet exercise later but we also missed that fleet exercise and it had gone to the North Atlantic. But what was planned was for us to be the enemy for that task force coming back from the North Atlantic so we had the task of attacking them. We were one ship. I mean they were actually now well versed. You know they had finished the fleet exercise. They were ready for war, okay. So we were their enemy and we had to approach undetected and kill as many ships as we could. There were 15 ships in that exercise; two aircraft carriers, a battleship and a refueling ship and a bunch of destroyers and cruisers. We killed an aircraft carrier, the battleship and two destroyers and they never found us. If we had tried to do more than that we would have been detected. But that's crippling and we got all kind of accolades for that accomplishment. So that Group Commander who was in charge of that fleet exercise, or who was going to deploy that group to the Med, had already selected the ships for different missions but I had been designated now to

deploy with them and there were two other cruisers already designated, so I was the third cruiser so I figured that I would get no missions. But I went to him and asked him if I could be his Anti-Air Warfare Commander, which is what the cruisers do. And usually there are two cruisers and the Commanding Officer of one is the transient and Mediterranean Anti-Air Warfare Commander during the first half and the other one is the second half in bringing the ships back. So I'm Third Round Charlie with nothing to do. But I went to him and asked him if I could be his Anti-Air Warfare Commander. He said, "Well why do you think you should be?" I said, "Because I already killed your fleet and I did it undetected and it's because I'm good at it." He said, "Okay, we're going to see how good you are." He said, "And I'll let you know when we get underway for deployment." I said, "Aye Aye Sir." But first of all, all of the work up and all of the paperwork – and there's a lot of it – had hardly been done for these other two ships. So if he were to re-designate I would have to start from scratch because I didn't know anything, I didn't have any paperwork, but we prepared for that. And with the expertise of my weapons officer LCDR Tansey and my Ops officer LCDR Reams, there was no question I would be ready. There's going to be a lot of work. And as we got underway . . . actually we got underway on December 30th, which is very hard to leave home immediately after the holidays. I'll never forget that.

John Grady: What year was this?

Admiral Gaston: This would have been '82, yes, 1982, December 30th. And after we were underway he designated me to be in charge of the missile exercise that we were going to have en route and I didn't have . . . he sent me all of the stuff that I needed and I had about 24 hours to

work it up. It used to take about two weeks. But I was prepared for gearing the ship up and we worked it up. I sent it back to him and shocked him. I think he expected – well he told me later – but he expected me to come back and say, “I can’t be ready.” And we had a ship that was out there to launch missiles for us to shoot down. And then in the middle of the exercise my ship loses power and I’m in charge of the exercise. I can’t communicate. We rigged emergency communications and never lost communications and then rigged emergency power to our missile and we shot our missile and got a hit. So after the exercise he said, “You know . . .” and of course we reported the loss of power and we eventually got it all back but it was after the missile exercise. So he sent a message over saying, “You are the Anti-Air Warfare Commander” and we kept the Anti-Air Warfare Commander job the whole deployment including when we went to the Black Sea. Usually they don’t send the AAWC responsibility to the Black Sea.

And so we had a wonderful, wonderful deployment and came back from deployment and they gave us an operational test and evaluation on the engineering plant, which is not normally done after deployment, it’s usually done before deployment. But we had what was called an Outchop OPPE and that’s a tough time in your life for sure. And I said, “Well, you know . . . With the expertise of Lt Bernard Jackson we’re going to totally succeed on this inspection and we did. I will give you more details later. Lieutenant Jackson is now retired as a Captain with a very successful Navy career. He is also president of the National Naval Officers Association. I also want to mention that Captain Jackson is one of two black officers I served with in the Navy. The other is Lt. J.C. Bess, who was Captain Jackson’s DCA. And, I point that out only as a point of reference. I was not seeking to serve with another black officer – only pointing out that the number of black officers at that time was few. I’d also like to point out three other superstars on that ship, Master Chief Alfred McNutt, my command Master Chief, and I didn’t do anything

with the *Josephus Daniels* without talking to him. One other is Lt. Tom Johnson, my chaplain and mentor. He retired as a Captain and is now pastor of a major Protestant church in northern Virginia. And, finally, LCDR Bastian who was my supply officer and I guess you might say I have been blessed with super supply officers. It makes a difference in the readiness of your ship.

[END OF TAPE 4]

Session V – 29 August 2006

John Grady: Continuation of the August 29th interview with Admiral Mack Gaston and we're having his ship coming back for an operational readiness test on the engineering plant, correct?

Admiral Gaston: That's correct, and we have what's called the Outchop OPPE, plus I have a new Chief Engineer who's been on the ship now for probably two months, maybe three, so half the cruise. And we've been operating . . . most of the six months we've been at sea; most of it in the Mediterranean and Black Sea, but we do whatever is required so we didn't have much time for preparation because we didn't have very much input time. So the machinery has been running all the time but what we ended up doing was shutting down one plant while we did some re-tweaking, if you will, mainly some minor repairs, but tweaking; making sure that everything is balanced and peaked up. And so this OPPE; Operational Propulsion Exam . . . and we did in fact pass it, not just barely pass it, we did well. An Operational Propulsion Exam is not just engineers, it takes the whole ship's support and we had the whole ship's support, but it did not make anybody sour; it didn't sour us on deployment. We had a successful deployment. We didn't know until the end that we were going to have this exam. I never questioned why. Maybe I

questioned why when it was first done because I didn't expect it and I don't think it was something that's normally required at the end of deployment but I did not try to fight it. The only way to fight something that's required is to question it and the only way to win a war is to fight it. You, as a military man, can't talk your way out of it. You win it by conducting it. And the crew just answered all bells. They were just absolutely super.

I came back from deployment and it's also close to the time for me to be transferred and I'm working for Admiral Boorda - he was the Group Commander. I think that was Group Eight - and he said, "Well it's time for you to be transferred. Where do you think you're going to be going?" I said, "Well Admiral, I don't have any idea but if I had a choice I would like to go be executive assistant to a three-star in Washington, DC. I'd like to continue to progress. I'd like to have a job like you have right now one of these days." And so he said, "Okay." Then a requirement came forth from Admiral Baggett who was CINCLANT. CINCLANTFLT used to be CINCLANT and CINCLANTFLT and I can't remember what Secretary of the Navy split it so CINCLANT was one four-star and CINCLANTFLT, so was another four star. But it was Admiral Baggett who was CINCLANT and Admiral Kelso was CINCLANTFLT and evidently there was a situation where both four stars were still using the same personnel staff for both of their jobs and Admiral Baggett wanted it separated totally. So I was selected - I'm not saying Admiral Boorda had anything to do with this - but I was selected to be the guy to do the separation on a temporary basis before the guys that they actually had ordered in to be the personnel staff leader for Admiral Baggett had gotten there, so I had three months to get this thing separated. Admiral Baggett was a tough guy. You either do what he wants done or you're fired. Well obviously I didn't have any choice but to go to the job and it was a temporary job, and obviously I didn't - I wouldn't say obviously - but I did not know where I was going after

that temporary job. So I really didn't know the details of the task but I also knew that it probably wouldn't be appropriate to ask the Admiral, so I went to the LDO: Limited Duty Officer, who is the expert that worked for the Admiral and I asked him what the task was and how to get it done. Now the LDO was a Lieutenant or a Lieutenant Commander who was an expert and had been in the Navy for, what, 25 years or something, and he had been working for Admiral Baggett before so he knew what was good and bad from his perspective. He just really helped me out. And my staff consisted of a Lieutenant Commander, a Lieutenant and a Third Class Reserve. So I had very few people and I had an office with all of us in it with no other space and I'm there to establish an organization to support a four-star that has a staff of about 80 or 90 people. I found out what needed to be done but I didn't have any wherewithal to do it. So I started to ask questions; people on the other staffs. There were a couple of them that were very helpful. They were officers and both of them had been on the staff for years and had knowledge about how to get space, how to get furniture that was redone or rebuilt by prisoners, but didn't know how to get more people. So I took what information they had and they also helped me even when they were working on the other side of the fence. They were great people and I'm still friends with them. So I called the Bureau because the Bureau of Naval Personnel controls the furniture that comes in from the prison and is dispersed all over the country, and also having been in the Bureau myself I knew who to talk to about getting more people but I didn't have authorization. I didn't have a request number or all that but I found out who was available and got them to give me their names, but I needed to go to Washington. Admiral Baggett was overseas at this time - I think he was in NATO HQ; some major conference - and he was going to be gone for a couple or three weeks and I needed all this lined up by the time he got back because I knew he was going to call me in. And so I hitched a ride on Admiral Kelso's helicopter. He wasn't going but

somebody on his staff was going. So I hitched a ride to Washington and the person who is the Deputy Chief of Naval Personnel at the time found out what I was doing. So when I got on the ground I got this message that he wanted to see me. I went to the Admiral's office and he said, "You might not think I know what you're doing but I do." I said, "I don't have any paperwork." He said, "Mack, as of now you have authorization. It's the right thing to do." I said, "Aye, aye Sir. Thank you very much Admiral." I got all the furniture I needed, I got the people I needed, and I don't know how but I got it all done in about a month and a half and I had about three months to do it. And Admiral Baggett got back and I told him and he said, "How did you do this? No, I don't want to know. Good job Mack."

Shortly after my meeting with Admiral Baggett, I received information that I had been selected for one of the great things for Navy Captains and Marine Colonels, the CNO's Strategic Studies Group - SSG. When I was a part of it, the SSG contributed to the conceptual foundation and technologies for innovations in naval warfighting; as an operational research and concept development center. Our assignment was to develop the Middle East Strategy. I don't know if the concept is still the same today, but the SSG still exists. I do know that it prepared me to be a flag officer and prepared me for the Capstone course that exists for development of new flag officers. It was an honor to serve as a member of the SSG with eight other officers. Several in my group were selected for Admiral, including Don Baird, Jon Coleman and Steve Johnson. I believe Steve is still on active duty. The SSG resides in Newport, Rhode Island and only the CNO tasks the SSG and the SSG reports directly to him. I did the final briefing to the CNO on our Middle East Strategy. This strategy was used by Naval Forces in the Gulf War.

And then my assignment came up to be OP-39. I was very pleased. I was very happy. Now I'm going to work in OPNAV again to be in charge of the area where I worked before. I

just had the training before and now I have all of it; the manpower and training for the surface community.

John Grady: And when was this?

Admiral Gaston: This would have been '89 and I was there for about a year. I was selected for flag in December of '89.

And the job was new to me so far as familiarity. It was new to me so far as having the position because I didn't know all the interfaces. I also knew it was the only job at that level in OP-03, right in the surface warfare community that was not a flag. There was a flag billet but there had never been a flag officer in the billet but flag officers were selected while in that job, not everyone that had the job but most and that included me. But I remember Admiral Nyquist was OP-03 at the time and he had allowed me to exercise my talent and I got some good things done. Actually, initially OP-39 had not been getting very much money to get done what needed to be done because the emphasis was on shipbuilding and other things and the people side didn't do very well, and maybe it also didn't justify itself to the point. And I remember the first budget meeting and it was announced that, "There is no need to try to justify what you need because the decision really had already been made as to where the money was going." So the people who needed to present the justification did that and there was no time for anything else so I never got to say anything. I asked to see the Admiral the next morning and the secretary said, "He comes in early but he uses that for his self-time." The next morning I got there before the Admiral arrived. As he came in, I asked if I could have just five minutes to present my case. He said, "No, you can have three," and I said, "Yes Sir." I presented my stuff and he agreed with the need and

approved my budget. It was the best three minutes I had in Washington. Admiral Nyquist has been a mentor ever since.

John Grady: What were your priorities?

Admiral Gaston: People and training. We were sending people to the fleet unqualified and it was impacting our readiness and that's the way I presented it. And I said, "We don't have this and we don't have that and we can't really do it." And evidently, you know my last job in the Navy was Navy Training Center Great Lakes and Surface Warfare Training School was there, and I think they sent me there to execute what I said needed to be done. You know there were old text and drawings from World War II and I said, "Let's modernize," and with that computerized training was introduced.

John Grady: So the "A" school was not bringing them up to put them to the task in the fleet that they were to do?

Admiral Gaston: Right.

And we were also having that problem in the technical . . . well all "A" schools, yes, including the very technical; the ETs. You can't do that for nothing. You can't make that kind of change with zero dollars. So that was the priority and he saw that and he agreed, and he started to fix it. I don't say that I take credit for fixing it but it got fixed and we're doing things today even differently than that, but they put a lot of money into Great Lakes since I was there.

But anyway, I was selected for flag in the OP-39 position. I had been in the United States Navy for 26 years now. Making flag was quite an honor, even to the point that there's a parkway named for me in my hometown; the Admiral Mack Gaston Parkway. I was honored with that in the early 90's, and it's still there. Also, in the early 90's, I was honored by the Dalton Education Hall of Fame "in recognition of outstanding contributions that have reflected well on the Dalton Public Schools and Community." But I don't look at that or anything that I've accomplished to put myself in any chair above anyone because everything that I've been able to accomplish I've had a lot of help to get me there. The opportunities have been there.

Anyway, I had not had joint duty and the law had changed; Goldwater-Nichols.

John Grady: And that would have applied to you because that law was passed in '86.

Admiral Gaston: That's correct and I was in the last year that you could be selected for flag because they had a grace period. I was in the last year that you could have been selected for flag without having joint duty but the first assignment as a flag officer had to be joint duty. But before going to my first assignment as a flag officer, I had to go to the Capstone course for Flag and General Officers at National Defense University in Washington, DC. The first briefing that we had at the course was given by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell. It was much more than a briefing. He was with us for four hours. His opening briefing was about 45 minutes, but it was like a semester, even a year of learning. He was most knowledgeable and most impressive. Included in this course, also were meetings with the Vice President and other members on the Hill, with joint commands, with missile commands, with NATO, with other allied forces, with allied countries and with troops in the field and ships at sea.

Following Capstone, my assignment, first flag officer assignment, which I went to in 1990 – as a Captain I couldn't be frocked until I was in the flag position and I guess the other services had authorized frocking – but anyway, I went to the Defense Nuclear Agency Field Command in Albuquerque, New Mexico; my first job as a flag officer and it had to be outside of the United States Navy and it was the first time that I'd ever worked outside of the United States Navy, and it was a new experience.

John Grady: And most of the employees are civilians if I'm not mistaken.

Admiral Gaston: Most of the employees were civilians. The inspecting personnel for the nuclear arsenal are uniform people but all of the test people in Nevada are DOE and DOD civilians. Most of the scientists on the Defense side are civilians. My boss, who was Army; Army Lieutenant General I believe he was, was Army Chemical Corps, and I was the first Navy Admiral assigned there as a non-nuke to the best of my knowledge. Anyway, the Defense Nuclear Agency is the agency that authorizes the conduct of underground nuclear tests for the Department of Defense and they actually pay for them. The Department of Energy owns all the nuclear weapons; all the nuclear arsenal. They are built by DOE for use by DOD but DOD has the responsibility for organizing or paying for the tests of nuclear weapons, making sure all the tests are safe, and for accountability of those nuclear weapons to the national security as well as the DOE, as well as the country. But I had the responsibility for the tests. Well let me rephrase that. When I first took DNA's field command the testing had been removed from the responsibility of the field command because some three or four years earlier there was a fouled test and it had ruined so much test equipment – that's the most expensive aspect of underground testing is the test

equipment – and most of it was destroyed and the field command had responsibility for it, so the chief scientist at DNA is in Washington and the chief scientist through the director of DNA; a three-star, removed the responsibility from Field Command. Even though it had been removed I still looked at it as my responsibility so I continued to check every angle of what was being done through my people. I was also responsible for all of the nuclear weapons accountability and inspections worldwide. We also had the responsibility to report that accountability within a certain timeframe to the National Security Agency or to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs or to the Secretary of Defense; whoever asked for it. One of the early questions I asked was, “How much time do we have to report those kinds of things”, and the answer was given, which I cannot divulge here. And my question was, “Why did it take that long? We know where everything is all the time, don’t we?” They said, “Yes Sir, but we do have to make a current count.” I said, “Okay. Again, why does it take that long?” They said, “Well we don’t know. We just know that that’s what it is”, and I said, “Okay, why don’t we just take a look and see why it’s that long. I mean take a count – I won’t say as fast as you can – but see if you can’t beat that time by some.” And I said, “Take an hour to think about it and come back.” So they came back. They didn’t try to take the test but they thought about what they might try and I said, “Okay. Well why don’t you go ahead and do it.” So they came back with a new time. I said, “Okay, do you think that’s the best you can do. Well why don’t you just think about it a while and we’ll just look at this again tomorrow.” So they did and I think we were meeting at one o’clock or something like that. They came back to me at eight o’clock the next morning and said, “Admiral, we can do it in half of the original time.” I said, “Is it safe to do that time?” They said, “Yes Sir.” I said, “Okay. The next time we’re called to provide the Security Agency or whoever asks for that, let’s do it in that amount of time even though we still have the full time.”

“Yes Sir.” So we did get a call and we actually did it in one minute less than half of the time. I said, “Okay, we’re not going to report it. Let’s do it again to make sure. I don’t want anybody to take any shortcuts. We can’t afford to do that.” They came back again in one minute less than half the time. I said, “Okay, go ahead and report it.” We did it twice in less time than we’d been doing it; less than twice from before we’d been reporting it, and I said, “You know the National Security Agency might need better time than what we ultimately do, so why don’t you take credit for this. You know there were scientists involved in that too.” I said, “Why don’t you write to the General what you’ve done and I’ll endorse it so you get the credit?” And that’s the way we sent it in. I didn’t send it in from me. I sent it in from them, and then the same thing with the tests. The scientists had a big meeting; all the scientists. You know scientists really love to talk to each other. No, they love to hear themselves talk like when there are lots of people around. But anyway, I was invited – I wasn’t invited to the meeting – I knew the meeting was happening and even though I wasn’t invited, I went and it was in Nevada. Actually it was in Las Vegas. The meeting was scheduled for two hours and it lasted for 12 and I sat there and they never asked me anything. They never recognized I was there until the end and they said, “By the way Admiral, anything you want to say?” I said, “Yes I would.” I said, “It appears that you’ve done your meeting and I didn’t hear any action items or when the next meeting was going to be or how long the next meeting was going to be”, and I said, “If it’s alright with you, could I give you the action items that I’ve written down and appear to me”, and they said, “Yes Sir.” It was ten. So I had my aide there taking notes. So I had ten and I read them all out and they agreed that they were action items. I said, “Well could I go down each one again and ask for volunteers to take these action items.” And so they said, “Yes.” So somebody volunteered for all of them but one and I said, “Dr. Jones, you were the one that presented that. Could I ask you to use two

minutes to go over that again?” So he said, “Yes, I’ll do that.” He started talking and he talked about them and he said, “Well why don’t I take that one for action.” So they got all the facts and I said, “Well how often do you meet”, and they said, “Periodically.” I said, “Well is that once a month or every other month or something like that?” They said, “Yes Sir.” I said, “Okay, could I suggest that you have the next meeting in a month and I’ll volunteer to host it.” They said, “Yes Sir.” I said, “But there’s one more angle, if I might.” I said, “I know that this is Tuesday because you don’t like to travel on a Sunday. . .” I said, “. . . but if I offer to cook you breakfast on Monday morning in a month from now would you agree to travel on Sunday?” They did. And I said, “Would you also agree that the meeting would be two hours”, and they agreed.

So they came to Albuquerque. I hosted it and I prepared them breakfast. I actually cooked breakfast. And I said, “Do you mind if we . . .” that’s after all of them had breakfast “. . . do you mind if we go ahead and start the meeting?” We started it at 0730 and by 0800 everybody had their meal and so they agreed to start while they were still eating. One of the first action items – we did the action items first – and the one action item, this guy put a formula on the board for the testing, then an equal sign for the costs of elements of testing. We were only doing one test a year because that’s all we could afford. And it takes a long time to build . . . it’s like building the empire state building underground horizontally. So I raised my hand and I said, “Doctor, would you please go through that for me again because I see the same thing in your formula three times”, and he said, “Yes I will.” So he went through it and I said, “Okay, what would the safety results be if you took one of them out?” He said, “It would be the same end result and the cost would be less. The cost would be half.” I said, “Really?” I said, “Well what if you took another one out and just had one in there?” He said, “Well it wouldn’t be safe.” I said, “Well don’t even go there.” I said, “Are you telling me that it’s just as safe with two and it costs half as much?

That means we can build two tests in a year?" He said, "Yes Sir." I said, "Everybody here agree with that?" They did. I said, "Why didn't we do this before?" They said, "That's the way we've always done it." So I said, "Okay, why don't you write this up." "Write this up for the lead scientist; all of you sign it, why don't all of you sign this and send it to Lieutenant General Watson and I'll endorse it." "Yes Sir." And we did that kind of thing throughout the meeting. We finished in two hours and I couldn't do anything wrong. And they'd come with the great ideas and wanted me to hear them. I'm not a scientist.

You know I'm a reasoner. I mean I listen. I can reason well. But then as a result of that and the success of the next test and accountability, I got a call one day from the General - he was flying to the West Coast for something; some kind of conference - and he called my office from his airplane and asked me to meet him at the airport in Albuquerque. The Air Force and the commercial airlines use the same landing strip but there is a little building over there for the base. So I met the General at the airstrip and he said, "I just want to tell you face to face, Dr. Linger, who is the chief scientist, and I, have decided that the nuclear weapons test will be coming back to you", and he said, "I'll explain it all to you later and I'll also give you a letter to that effect and I'll send a copy of that letter to the Secretary of Defense."

And so the nuclear weapons tests responsibility came back to the Defense Nuclear Agency Field Commander and it changed the whole command. It put life back into our responsibility. There are three people who were on my personal staff that I'm indebted to for all their support and all the many things they did that I just didn't have to worry about; my Command Master Chief Denny Browning. I requested, and it was approved by BUPERS that Master Chief Browning transfer with me to NTC Great Lakes; and, my personal aide, Lt. Jeff Kindschuh and my secretary, Connie Wolfe.

Session VI – 26 September 2006

John Grady: Continuation of the interview with Rear Admiral Mack Gaston, September 26, 2006, picking up after his service with the Defense Nuclear Agency.

Admiral Gaston: The summer of 1992 I was transferred from the Defense Nuclear Agency Field Command to Navy Training Center Great Lakes. I just recently learned that I was the first black Commander at Great Lakes. At that time, the Navy Training Center at Great Lakes was being considered for closure and it hadn't been decided that it was going to be done but it was one of the considerations. Base closure by the Base Closure and Realignment Commission, which is mandated by Congress, had considered Great Lakes and what was decided is that all of the Navy major training centers would be considered, and that's Great Lakes, San Diego Navy Training Center and Pensacola Navy Training Center. Now of course the other two spots, geographically, were more popular since they don't really get cold.

John Grady: [Chuckle]

Admiral Gaston: But that was kind of the circumstance under which I went there.

Another major circumstance that existed at that time is that while I was at the Defense Nuclear Agency Field Command my wife became very ill. We did not know when it first started what the problem was but she started having seizures. I continued to take her to the hospital at Kirkland Air Force Base throughout this period and this went on for a few weeks, months actually, and they never really figured out what was wrong with her. She'd have very high fevers

and even Grand Mall Seizures and it was very frightening to take care of a person who is dying. So I finally said – and I think this was in the June timeframe; May or June timeframe – after one of these major seizures she was hospitalized and they got her fever down and they said, “Well you can take her home now”, and I said, “No I’m not.” I said, “I’m not going to take her home until you find out what’s wrong with her.” “Sir, we can’t keep her in the hospital. We would have to probably send you to one of our regional hospitals.” And so then I said, “Well I’m not going anywhere.” So they said, “Well you have to talk to the Commanding Officer of the hospital.” I said, “I’ll talk to whoever I need to.” So that Commanding Officer came up and he said, “Well Admiral, what can I do for you?” I said, “You can get me a bed and an office because I’m not leaving this hospital until you find out what’s wrong with my wife.” He said, “Well we’ve never done that before.” I said, “Well there’s a first time for everything.” I said, “I don’t care who you call. You can call the Navy and tell them they can have my star or anybody else you want to but I’m not leaving and I’m going to work from this hospital to do my job if I still have a job. In fact, if you want to call the Defense Nuclear Agency and tell them what I’m doing so they can fire me, that’s fine too, but I’m here for my wife.” So the Commander said, “Okay.” So, they got me an office and they got me a bed and after about, I guess, probably six days – it might have been seven; somewhere between five and ten days – they came to me with the proposal that they could take her to some Air Force hospital in the Midwest; somewhere in Texas, and I said, “No, that’s fine. I’m not going somewhere in the boonies”. So I started calling the President at NIH, Walter Reed, and Bethesda and there was nothing research wise that would determine that they didn’t really know what it was but they thought it might have been some complications of Lupus. And so that’s what I was using to call around to these hospitals and finally Walter Reed said that they had some research going on in that area and we could come

there. I told the Air Force base that I wanted to leave the next day and they told us how they didn't have any transportation the next day and I told them that I would fly commercial, if necessary. So later on that night they informed us how they had arranged something. There was an Air Force medical airplane that brought us to Walter Reed.

I was still attached to Defense Nuclear Agency Field Command and so I operated my job from Walter Reed.

Walter Reed had researchers. They had my wife and me into a conference with a field of doctors - there must have been ten researchers - and they explained that they didn't know what caused Lupus or if Lillian had complications of Lupus and they were going to do whatever they could do. They didn't know if it was going to work or not but they needed our permission to proceed and we said, "Our interest is in no way limited so you do whatever you need to do", and they did some major things and she started to get better. She got good enough for me to take her back to Albuquerque. About a month after we returned, I was transferred for duty from the Defense Nuclear Agency Field Command to Commander, Navy Training Center Great Lakes.

We drove from Albuquerque to Great Lakes and had the medical people at the hospital at Great Lakes meet us on arrival. It was a tough time for Great Lakes and it was a tough time for me personally. But the medics did meet us on arrival. They took Lillian to the hospital and made her comfortable. The medical people at Great Lakes dynamically involved themselves in her case. After over a year, she improved and they came up with a procedure to make her even better. She got to the point she could get her driver's license again and she was happy. I was happy. She didn't do much driving but having that license was a positive thing. In the early part of 1995 I made a decision with the CNO that I wasn't going back to sea. I was going to retire from Great Lakes and take care of my wife. And my mother was very ill at that time. My mother

was with my brother in Detroit. My wife and I went there in March of 1995 to see her. She was given about six months to live and she had leukemia, and we came back to go through this procedure that Great Lakes had come up with to make Lillian even better. She went into the hospital in early May. They went through the procedure and she was transferred to a hospital in downtown Chicago – I can't remember the name of the hospital - and my family was there. My daughter Sonja was there and some others. She went into a comma that she never came out of and that same week my mother died. So I lost my mother and my wife the second week of May, 1995, two months before I was scheduled to retire to take care of my wife. But I still had the Navy and I did not fail to tell my wife what a great part she had been in my life and made me what I am in life, and for the Navy. She never understood the Navy and at a point in time – and this was probably after six or seven years of her asking what going to sea was all about she finally said, “Well you know, I really don't understand” she said, “. . . but I support it. I support you because I know you love it”, and she did until the day she died and she knew how much because I told her so; how much she meant to my career and to me.

Lillian's death was a great loss to me and my family and especially to my daughter Sonja. Lillian was also Sonja's best friend. But there have been some things in my life, including Great Lakes, that I was very profound about and wanted to get done, and especially at Great Lakes because it was so big and so vast and they talked about closing it so people were thinking more about not doing things rather than doing things right. And I can remember a particular day and night that I had expressed and explained to Lillian something I was going to do the next day and I was going to be hard core. It was just absolutely the best thing to do. And she never said anything. She never asked me a question. She never made a comment. And she said, when I finished, “Okay”, and the next day came and I never did do anything relative to what I said. And

when I got home that evening I realized that Lillian had influenced me with her kindness, understanding and prayers. It was angelic to me. She'd been doing it all along. In a quiet way she had influenced me to make me a better person in all respects. I shared this for the first time at her memorial service.

At Great Lakes I had a personal aide, Lt. Jack McLaughlin, who was my confidant then and still is. He is now a corporate executive for a Chicago company. My secretary was Alice Alwardt, then Betty Lee, and my Command Master Chief was Denny Browning who I brought with me from Field Command Defense Nuclear Agency. And, my driver was Seaman First Class Lance Shavers who is now a Chief Petty Officer. He knew the Chicagoland area like the back of his hand. I really believed in them and they were great people and I expressed all my ideas to them and used their feedback. One of the commanding officers of the service school, Captain Greg Maxwell was also a great person and a go-to person for me. He retired as an SES and is now a senior executive at Booz, Allen and Hamilton. We are great friends.

But, one of the things that hadn't happened in training at Great Lakes and it seemed like it hadn't been developed across the Navy, was computer-aided training. They were still using old methods and the chalkboard . . . I almost said blackboard but that goes back almost 75 years [chuckle].

John Grady: This was a green board [laughter].

Admiral Gaston: Yes, so I think it's okay to say chalkboard . . . and old diagrams. And what I started to do was visit classrooms in the recruit training as well as the advanced training. I didn't like what I saw; not that I was this total innovator but it just seemed like it needed to be updated.

The Navy Training Center is an enlisted training base except for advanced engineering training for Commanding Officers on their way to command. Before Captain Maxwell actually came; about a year before he came – and I looked at all this stuff in the classrooms and so I told the commanding officer at the time that I would like to see him in my office and he could bring with him whoever he wanted to. I just didn't like what I saw. So he did that the next day and I said, "Why are we failing 80 percent of the class that starts in electronic technician?"

"We're not satisfying the fleet need for electronic technicians with 80 percent failure." The first answer was, "I don't know." I said, "Well if you don't know who does and what are you doing about it", and I said, "I really don't expect you to answer that today but I do expect you to answer that tomorrow. And again, 24 hours from right now, and again, you can bring back whoever you want." I think he probably said, "I don't think I can have an answer for you in 24 hours", but he came back the next day and he brought several people with him. And this one Chief Petty Officer who was an E-7 – and I wish I could remember his name – he said, "Well there's one thing that we can do. We can bring in some computer training that I've been working on and I've been talking about." I said, "Well Chief, what are you saying, nobody's listening to you?" He said, "Yes Sir." I said, "Well I guess I can understand Chief why you would not say that because you don't want to put your Commanding Officer on report." I said, "And I'm not going to look at it like that."

"But what you did say sounds good to me. How do you think we ought to start this Chief?" He said, "I think we ought to start by making it available to the people who are required to go to study after class." You need to get a certain grade with the other students and if not, then you have to go to school at night and maybe on the weekend to try to catch up." They started using this computerized process and it turned out those students that were going through the

required after class study were coming out better than the other students. So what was starting to happen is that some of the students that were doing very good came to required after class study voluntarily and those students ended up being top-notch students. So with that we put the methodology in the classroom. In six months we went from 80 percent failure rate to 30 percent failure, so 70 percent were successful. In a year it was 90 percent successful. Computerized training is what the kids . . . I mean the youngsters today, you know at five years old are acclimated to computers and toys, continuously. So we started to improve training across the whole spectrum of Navy Training Center Great Lakes and Carl Ross, who was a civilian and who only retired a short time ago, was one of the key drivers at Great Lakes across all phases in recruit training as well as advanced training and he was also the one that had talked to me about what I needed. He is a real superstar. He's still in the Chicago area and we remain friends.

Also, during my command Captain Wo King, the Commander of the Recruit Training Command came to me to suggest that we celebrate the commissioning of the first black officers in the United States Navy, known as the "Golden Thirteen." In 1994, it was their 50th anniversary. Not only did Captain King suggest it, he came to me with a plan. We executed that plan which included having Sidney Poitier as a guest of honor and the guest speaker was Secretary Cooper who was the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. There were three and four-stars present from the Navy. It was a great celebration. Seven of the original thirteen were still alive and present.

I was asked by the Chief of Naval Operations, who was Admiral Mike Boorda to extend my command another year since I was going to retire to take care of my wife. When the Base Realignment happened they decided to keep Great Lakes open and close the other two. Now that decision is not made by the Navy. These decisions are made by the Congress commission and if

uniformed people try to influence it, it's against the law. You can be prosecuted. The community can be involved in it and the community in Illinois, the Chicago area, got quite involved. Even the Governor at that time visited Great Lakes and got involved. But there was a congressman from Florida who suggested adding into the consideration for the three Navy training centers, which one lost the most training due to weather. Like I said, this congressman was from Florida and I think his objective was for Great Lakes to close because it's so cold there. Well, when the study was finished it turned out that the one that lost the least amount of training due to weather was Great Lakes because somebody, at some point in history, had made the decision to have all the training necessary done inside and the other two did not have that capability. And if it got too hot or it was too humid, which was a health consideration, they couldn't do the training. So that wasn't the case at Great Lakes. It had the least amount of training loss due to weather out of all the training centers. I don't remember what the congressman's name was and I probably shouldn't say it if I did remember but I don't remember, and I think that was one of the factors.

Anyway, Great Lakes is thriving and it was my last command in the Navy. It was very satisfying. It was also very sad for me based on my family situation. And to say that I would have had another opportunity to go to sea had my wife not been so ill . . .

Well, I don't know that, I never will. I don't even worry about that because I made the decision that I was going to leave the Navy at the point that I did to take care of my wife and so I know that the Navy can succeed without me because that's the way we are. That's what we do; we train people as we develop ourselves to take the responsibilities in the jobs that we have, so I never worried about the Navy being without me because I helped train many, many of those who are still in for that matter. There are several flag officers that worked for me. To say that I'm the reason for them being flag officers, I certainly wouldn't say that but I think I had some positive

impact at some point in time in their personal development. Like Chris Weaver who retired as a two-star, Dave Ellison who was my Chief engineer on the *USS Cochran*, my first command – he retired as a two-star and Vice Admiral Tim LaFleur who retired last year. Maybe unlike industry, we in the Navy develop people so that they can continue the development of the United States Navy to continue to be the best Navy the world has ever known. It's the best Navy the world has ever had. And whatever the mission is the United States Navy does it well and we also do it with other navies and we do it jointly with our own services. Without hesitation it doesn't matter who gets the credit. What matters is what the result is and the result is accomplishment of mission. If I had to start my life over again I would take the same path with the United States Navy and I think the conclusion of my career at Great Lakes was great. It was wonderful to be where most people in the United States Navy start. It was a special treat. It was where a lot of things ended for me but I think in other ways made me stronger and in a lot of ways made the Navy stronger.

Going to my final act at Great Lakes was my change of command or retirement ceremony and the person that I asked to retire me was the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Mike Boorda, who had been a friend of mine a long time and I would venture to say he was my best friend in the United States Navy, and he accepted. And when he was delivering his words he acknowledged my wife Lillian. He said, "Before I say anything about Mack I want to tell you about this great person, Lillian Gaston", and actually he talked more about her than he did about me, which I thought was the right thing to do. I had nothing to do with what he was going to say. And then he acknowledged Sonja, my daughter, our only child, and then he had a few words to say about me. But I was already satisfied. But he did something at the end of the ceremony. You know the normal ending for a retirement is to be piped over the side in the United States Navy,

that's traditional, and I had also made my selection of people that I wanted to pipe me over and they included enlisted and officers from the base and other places. But the CNO; Admiral Boorda, got up and said, "I'm the Chief of Naval Operations and I can do whatever I want to do", and he had invited or asked many Admirals to come to this change of command and retirement, and there were about 16 flag officers in the audience and the CNO asked all of those 16 Admirals to come forward and form the line to pipe me over and he was in that line as well. So I was piped over by the CNO and 16 other Admirals in the United States Navy and I still feel special about that.

Admiral Pat Tracey was the one who took over from me at Great Lakes. She went on to have a most successful career. She was a one-star when she came there, then she was selected for two in about a year and then she went from one to three, and she was the Commander of Navy Education and Training and eventually became the first three-star to be a Director of the Navy Staff. She's been retired about two and half years now but both of us have Great Lakes in common. And there was another person who made three stars, who commanded Great Lakes after I did that was Kevin Greene and all three of us are in the Washington DC area these days. Kevin is now also retired. Ann Rondeau also commanded Great Lakes and has since become a three-star and also was the Director of Navy Staff. She is presently the #2 person in the DOD Transportation Command. We are all still very close friends.

To go back to one other thing at Great Lakes that was really significant, in my estimation, was the exposure to the citizens of the Great Lakes civilian community, which from my perspective extended all the way to Chicago and to all the Midwest, because I also had the responsibility of disaster preparedness for the Midwest; 13 states in the Midwest. And from what I understand no one who had ever commanded Great Lakes had ever been to those 13 states to

look and see how the interface was going to take place with Great Lakes in that arena so I felt it necessary that I do that. I visited all 13 states so that we could work together, have communication exercises to see if we could actually talk to each other if we should have a disaster, and in that process we embraced not only the 13 states but the immediate communities. And what I also established was an Honorary Commanders Program with the community. It meant that nobody gave up their positions on the base as the Commanding Officer and we had several COs. But that an Honorary Commander would interface with the base and other COs and for the Commander of the base to interface with the community, and it worked wonders. My Honorary Commander was Teresa Bartels, who is now the CEO for United Way International. She is an incredible community leader and dear friend. In that same process we had people come as a guest of honor - and maybe the other training centers did that for the graduations - but we also had a luncheon for – first come first serve – for the graduates at the eating facility and that guest of honor was a speaker for the luncheon and that also accelerated community involvement. In addition to that I thought it was good for me to be a part of the community by being involved in things like the United Way and other non-profit types of organizations, and what that also does, and did for Great Lakes, is to make them more welcome and make us more welcome in the community in which we were a part. Otherwise we were isolating ourselves, which is not a good idea, especially in today's environment because our families don't want to feel isolated all the time where a lot of families live in the community. And of course the Navy housing is not on base like it is in some arenas so you're in the community all the time. That responsibility, I think, is the Navy's interface with the communities where they are and that's exactly what we did, and I think it made us more open to the community. It also, I think, enhanced the training because people didn't have to worry about whether they were accepted. I don't know if it's still done or

not that way. I still go to Great Lakes and I am still a graduation speaker, sometimes one or two times a year, and I think Great Lakes has been embraced by the Navy as a key facility for training, although the organizational structure is not necessarily the same. I think it's even better than it was when I was there. But I say again, if I were to restructure my life and start over again I'd choose the same profession through the United States Navy. I think I said it earlier on that I came in the Navy to satisfy my obligated service, whatever the requirement was; four or five years, and I went to sea for the first time and never left, and I'd do it again.

John Grady: What did you do immediately upon retirement?

Admiral Gaston: I went to work for Waste Management, Inc. It was an environmental company right there in the Chicago area. Waste Management is headquartered in Oakbrook, Illinois and I interviewed for the position while I was still on active duty knowing that it wouldn't have had any interference with what I was doing for the Navy. My last interview with the company was with the COO and the CEO. I was being interviewed for the Vice President position for Executive Development. I was later extended an offer, which I accepted and started work the day after retirement on 1 August. I worked for them for two and a half years.

John Grady: June of 1996.

Admiral Gaston: 1995.

John Grady: 1995.

Admiral Gaston: And EDS, which is where I work now; Electronic Data Systems, which was started by Ross Perot, a Navy Academy graduate, actually came to me through an executive recruiter. I got a call from this executive recruiter when I was at work one day and he said, "EDS is highly interested in you", and I said, "Well I'm doing fine where I am." He said, "Is it alright if I call you back later", and I said, "Sure." And so I guess it was about a month or a month and a half later that this same person called me back and said, "EDS would like to interview you." So I took two days vacation and I went to Texas and it was an all-day interview. I flew in at night and the first interview was at 7:30 a.m. and there were multiple interviews throughout the day. So I was on a flight back to Chicago at night and then there was still about two months before I heard anything and I got a call from EDS. One of the Vice Presidents I interviewed with was coming through town and wanted to meet with me at O'Hare. During the interview he made an offer, which I accepted. I was hired in 1998. I still lived in Chicago and commuted to Texas for the first year. Then they promoted me. The people want to see you when you're at a certain level. Then I moved to Texas in '99. I got promoted again while I was there, and then promoted again and went to work for EDS government.

John Grady: And the EDS government part is here in the Washington area.

Admiral Gaston: That's correct, and that's what I'm doing now. I've been doing this for six years. So I've been with EDS for nine years, and I'm still having fun. My experience in the U.S. Navy certainly has been a factor for my success. No matter what the technology is, the analytical processes are, you still have the people aspect of business whether that's military business or

industry business or government overall business, or political business. They socialize that because everything that we do in the United States of America or in the world is with people. We do IT for people; we do engineering for people; we do everything for people, and I'm much a part of that. And the basis of my learning, going all the way back to that example that I gave you about – well not an example, it was the truth – and about the first ship I served on where that officer was doing something from meanness and he made me one of the best officers in the United States Navy by the process. Even now you have to decide whether something is for the good or for the bad yourself. You know even though people are doing some things to you or against you for meanness, sometimes it's for the best and you have to figure that out... So connection to people is vital and that's true in EDS. It's true in sports. It's true in every business. We've had some examples. If you look at – I'm a Washington Redskins fan and some people say, "Well that's too bad for you" [chuckle], but that's how it is. Their football is great. And I think sports are sort of an equalizer for the country. So everybody goes to sports events no matter what their profession is or what their background is. Every player has a part in the game. It doesn't necessarily have to be the Captain of the ship. It doesn't necessarily have to be the head coach. I'm telling you, someone down in the . . . go back to Great Lakes, that Chief Petty Officer. Now maybe he tried to speak up with all the other Chiefs but they might have been protecting their territory. "Hey, if I can't use these old methods, you know, they don't see any need for me. They'll get some first class over here who . . .", and that happens. So people try to protect their territories and lose the war. It happens in industry. It's happening now. And what happens there – and when I say there in the United States Navy – good and bad, I get asked the question, you know, what commanding officer gave you the most lessons. I said, "I can't narrow it down to one." I said, "I'd take some things from great commanding officers, average

commanding officers, and I have . . . well I'm giving you the combination of what I had. I had great, average and bad. There is no breakdown of bad and it was about equal, and I took more from the bad than I did from the good. And the reason is, you can take the good but you don't experience everything and you know [END OF SIDE A]

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John Grady: This is the second tape from the September 26th interview with Rear Admiral Mack Gaston and we're picking up from the learning from the different Commanders that he had.

Admiral Gaston: And learning from bad gives you a front view of what you should not do, because it's a little bit easier to determine what you should do and if you only think in that vein it sometimes doesn't prepare you for trip-overs or courses that are not clear. I mean you can take a racetrack and if you're running this track usually somebody prepared the way and it's a smooth track and that's what you get from the good. But if you have a flaw in that track and you don't know how to deal with it you can stumble and you don't know what you'll break. So just dealing with the good all the time is a flaw in itself in my opinion. That doesn't mean that you always look for faults in people because if you just look for faults; if you just look for bad, then you'll forget about the good too so you can create the same kind of situation. Maybe I used this example once before when I was talking about the Defense Nuclear Agency Field Command and maybe I didn't, but there was a situation when I was in that command that the command did not have a lawyer and there was a lawyer in the Defense Nuclear Agency at Headquarters in Washington but there was not a lawyer . . . and to call somebody from a distance – I worked for

somebody else – when you need some lawyer kind of assistance it’s too long. It doesn’t matter whether it’s across the street or across town or across the country, it’s too far away if it doesn’t work for you or work with you continuously because communicating just by paper or just by e-mail without seeing reflections and inflections is just not good, and sometimes we miss that boat too. But anyway, I got the Commander in Washington to agree – my boss – to allow me to hire a lawyer but he said; he caveated it and said, “But with the concurrence of the Headquarters lawyer. I said, “Absolutely.” So I went to him; the Headquarters lawyer, to talk about the process of hiring a lawyer. We got probably 15 or 20 applicants and we narrowed that down, without interviews, to about seven and we actually interviewed seven. And what we agreed on is that after the interviewing was done he would go off by himself and I’d go off by myself and come up with three or four people to re-interview. We went off separately with these seven that we had interviewed and believe it or not, he and I came up with the same three to interview in the same order. Then we decided to discuss – we put these three aside – and decided to discuss why the other four were not considered. One knew everything. He was an Air Force lawyer and he was now somewhere in Tennessee but he worked at Kirkland Air Force Base for ten or fifteen years so he knew where everything was. He knew the good, bad and ugly. That’s not somebody you want. We both agreed. I mean we also agreed to disagree for the same reason and it was amazing. I’m not a lawyer. I’ve never been trained in it and I never wanted it. One person - I think it was the only black candidate we had - he had great qualifications. He would have been on my list and according to the lawyer he would have been on his list too, but what he did was tried to bait the trap for his selection. He went out and started talking to key people in the command to talk to him. I mean I couldn’t believe it. I could not believe it. Actually I felt like running him off the base. I mean he had to know that they were going to feed that back to us. I

still don't understand it. There were two, their qualifications were good but they did not . . . they just didn't come up to what their qualifications . . . they didn't even talk close to what their paperwork showed for qualifications. They were not qualified from our perspective. And the three that we looked at; decided to re-interview, the one we chose was a female who had worked for the government but not for the Department of Defense. One had never worked for the government or the Department at all and I don't remember about the other one. But the one we chose, where after the interview we separated again and he came up with his One, Two, Three and I came up with my One, Two, Three; we came up with the same One and the Two/Three was different but it didn't matter. And we came up with the same One for the same reason and that was the woman that had government experience but not DOD. And it was . . . and that person is still there. And he said to me, "I don't understand how you, as a non-lawyer, came up with the same thing I did." I said, "Well when you consider for the betterment of the organization we're looking at the same things and we can both read qualifications, and I'd say that if you as a lawyer are helping me to review a case on someone who did something wrong in the Defense Nuclear Agency, I'm not saying that you are going to be different because you're a lawyer." I said, "We'd probably come up with the same thing there because we have the same kinds of feelings and experiences in where we work and what we do it for, not because you're a lawyer or because I'm an Admiral." He said, "You know, I never thought of it that way. But some Admirals think that way. They say, 'Well I don't really want him to serve on this board because he doesn't have the experience that I have. He doesn't have the experience of a lawyer', but he's had the experience. Diversity brings about more change and change is the name of the game. We can go in industry again to great companies like GE and IBM and some others who at some points in time started to fail big time, and you say, "Well how did they fail?" Because they got too glued

on fixation and not looking at change, and when somebody starts . . . and included in that change is not just what that industry is but looking at the people and what makes the people perform better or perform with change, and just engaging them in discussion says, “Hey, they fill a part now.” I mean even go to the assembly line in GM/Ford Motors or Toyota. All of the assembly lines are the same. Why does Toyota now outdo Ford? Because they consider people and they consider the customer inside and outside. The people inside are just as big a customer out on that assembly line. Does that play in the Navy too?” You bet it does! In fact it plays out here because of, I mean there was a report, I guess it’s been about three months now - and I can’t remember what company reported it but it was in the Washington Post – and there was an analysis of CEOs in companies across our country and more successful CEOs had military experience than those who didn’t. Now 30 years ago nobody would ever come close to targeting us. They didn’t even want to have military people on their staff. And maybe Ross Perot was probably one of the people that started to change that because that was a majority of the people he knew and trusted. I think that the military is also finding out that more business processes are necessary for the military process than there was before. When I was at the ranks of Lieutenant Commander, Commander and Captain, we felt like we had to do everything inside. We had a research area. We had all of it and we hired a few people from outside to come in and do things and now we’re finding out that we probably need to outsource a lot more. The only thing that we were outsourcing after World War II were the big items like ships and airplanes because at one point in time we were building ships inside. And I think more things now are being done outside and rightfully so, not just in the Navy but all the military.

John Grady: You might want to end this by talking about your second wife; how you met, and then any final thoughts you might have.

Admiral Gaston: Okay.

I remarried six years ago to a wonderful, wonderful lady named Nancy Magee. Nancy and I met in the Chicago area when I was the Commander of Great Lakes. Lillian also met her. She was a board member for one of the community boards that I was on. The board's focus was on alcohol and substance abuse. She was very involved with the women's and children's program and actually founded and was President of the Women's Board for the organization. After Lillian's death and my retirement I needed to move off the base. So I decided to call the company that I was going to work for and I said, "Don't you have a corporate apartment until I find a place", and they said, "Yes we do." So I called the Executive Director for the board that Nancy and I served on and I said, "I'd like to get Nancy Magee's phone number because I have some plants in my house that I'd just like for her to keep until I find a place to live." I knew she was single because I didn't really want to interfere with some married people's lives and that was my objective. And she said, "No, I won't give it to you but I'll call her and ask her if she will do that or if she'll call you." I said, "Well please do." Nancy told the Executive Director to give me her number and it would be alright to call her. So I did and she said, "Yes, I'd be happy to keep your plants for you." I took the plants to her and didn't see her again until I had moved off the base into the apartment. Then I called her and said, "You know, if you want me to move the plants out of your house I can put them in this small apartment because I still don't have a house and I don't know when I'm going to get a house." She said, "No, I'll keep them longer." So eventually I started calling her otherwise and invited her to the symphony. We both love the

symphony. Soon, we started just seeing each other exclusively. I fell in love with her and we married six years later.

On 9/11, I was in South Africa and I couldn't call. I couldn't get a flight home and she was scared and so was I, and it was a terrible feeling being away from the country when somebody is attacking the country and usually when I'm away from the country it's to keep people from attacking, so it was a strange feeling. I think when I got back home it made us love each other even more.

She has two sons, Jeff and Craig and I have my daughter, Sonja who I've talked about before. Craig has two boys, Shane and Aidan and Jeff has three boys, Jon, Nathan and Luke, and a new baby girl, Emma and a dog. Sonja has three dogs. So the five boys and all the dogs can forget about attention for the next 15 years or so because she's our first granddaughter. We love them all.

John Grady: Well congratulations.

Admiral Gaston: Thank you, and it's wonderful.

As I said before, I've been romantically in love with two women and I married both of them. You know some people can take that out of context but Lillian died and that was a great time while I was with her. She was my childhood sweetheart and Nancy knows all about her. Nancy has accepted my family, they have embraced her, and all our children get along very well together.

John Grady: Anything else you'd like to add?

Admiral Gaston: I'd just like to say that this experience with you has been a very educational one for me. I just never imagined sitting down like this talking about my career, and even though I've been blessed with a great opportunity with the United States Navy, I am blessed by being a citizen of the United States of America and blessed with wonderful people in my life.

John Grady: Well thank you. It's been my pleasure.

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