Transcription: James Cooper

Today is Wednesday, May 5th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and I'll be interviewing Dr. James Cooper. This interview is being done by phone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Dr. Cooper is at his home in Bryan, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. It's an honor for us. I guess the best question to start with is maybe tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you entered the military.

James Cooper: Well James, I sort of wanted a military uniform from the time I was about 5 years old on up, and I had sort of a militaristic leaning for a long, long time as a child. Then after I graduated from high school in June of 1945, I got permission from my mother and father at age 17 to enlist in the Navy and did that with two other friends. So I've had sort of a military yearning for a long, long time.

Why do you think that was? Was your father or anyone from your family in the military at one point?

James Cooper: None of my family had ever been in the military except at the time of course World War II was at its apex and I did have a brother who was in the Army and he was in medical school actually and the Army was paying his way through medical school, and I had a brother in law who was a P-38 pilot who was involved in the invasion of North Africa and with this P-38 as a photographic airplane went up and did all of the pre-Italy invasion photographs of southern Italy and northern Italy up to the French border. So he inspired me, plus there was military all around us. I lived in Carroll, Illinois. There was a Coast Guard contingent there and I just, military was all around during my teenage years.

And to go back a little bit, do you remember where you were on December 7th when you learned that Pearl Harbor had been bombed?

James Cooper: Most assuredly I do. I was working in the Brass Field drugstore in Greenfield, Tennessee, and it was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon if I remember correctly when we got the word that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor, and all of the farmers in that part of western Tennessee immediately went out and loaded their shotguns, got their pitch forks out, and we were 25 miles south of Fulton, Kentucky, and they knew that the Japanese were just north of Fulton, Kentucky and would be in Greenfield that afternoon. So yes, I remember very vividly.

And at that time did you think that the war would last long enough, that at some point you would be in the service as well?

James Cooper: You know, I did not have any comprehension about length of time, since I had leaned toward the military and had thought about military for a long, long time as a child and loved to see military things. I wished that I was old enough to certainly enlist at that time and was not.

And so I imagine then you followed the news of the war very closely through the newspaper and the radio at that time?

James Cooper: Very, very closely. It was primarily radio and if you remember the song "Let's Remember Pearl Harbor…"

Sure

James Cooper: …was composed about that time. There were also some inspirational things going on, and I moved from Greenfield, Tennessee to Cairo Illinois about 1942, I think maybe June of 1942, and I worked in another drug store there and the son of the drug store owner was in the Far East at that time. I beg your pardon, was in the Pacific at that time and was a B-17 pilot and certainly he was one of my heroes and I just couldn't wait until I got old enough to join the military.

You mentioned the town in Illinois, is that spelled like Cairo?

James Cooper: It is.

Okay, I've heard of that.

James Cooper: Cairo, we call it "Carrow." It was, and you call it Cairo and yes, that was the town.

So that the Little Egypt area?

James Cooper: Little Egypt, yes.

Okay, I know right where that is. My father was born in kind of in that area, near Carlisle, Illinois, and he went to Southern Illinois University.

James Cooper: Southern Illinois was in Carbondale and my folks eventually lived in Carbondale so I know all about Southern Illinois.

I've not really been there myself but I've heard a lot about it. So when you said the name of that town, I thought I recognized it.

James Cooper: It was Little Egypt.

Yes sir. So when you turned 17, then you were able to enlist.

James Cooper: In my senior year in high school, we lived in Cairo and we moved back to Tennessee. And my mother and my father agreed to sign papers to allow me to enlist in the Navy with two of my friends who were in my graduating class, from the Greenfield, Tennessee high school. Now we had the distinction of having 25 percent of the graduating boys in that class became physicians, 25 percent became FBI agents, 25 percent became embezzlers, and 25 percent became automobile designers.

Huh.

James Cooper: Now that's easy to say this because there were four boys in the class.

I figured it was something along those lines.

James Cooper: I'm the 25 percent physician.

That's great. Yes sir. So you at 17 then you'd signed up. Did you go right at your seventeenth birthday?

James Cooper: No, it was in June of 1945. My birthday is August 30, and we then went on active duty sometime probably in June or July and I don't remember exactly. The three of us who signed up at that time stayed together until we come to Great Lakes, where we went to boot camp. Then we were split up. Two of us, because we had some musical ability, were selected to be in the Bluejacket Choir, while at Great Lakes. And that's where we had boot camp.

How long was that training for you?

James Cooper: That training was approximately 90 days and the war was at its height at that time, in the Pacific. The European war had ended, and actually we were getting prepped to go to Japan for the invasion of Japan. And right before we got out of boot camp we had already been programmed to go to Schumacher, California, and eventually to the Pacific, and the A-bomb was dropped and by the time we got to San Francisco and embarked for the Pacific, the war had ended.

What was your specialty at that point?

James Cooper: Well at that point, I didn't have one but then when we got to Japan, we were the first people into this area of Japan. It was about 30 miles north of Kobe if I remember my geography correctly. A little fishing village named Wakayama, Wakanura. And there were a bunch of ships in the harbor there and I was assigned to an LST type ship that had been made into a refrigeration supply ship. Eventually I became a diesel mechanic on that ship. So when I got out of the Navy then later August of 1946, I had become a diesel mechanic.

When you were on your way to Japan, what did you expect, I mean I know the war had ended at that point but what did you expect when you arrived and did those expectations carry out?

James Cooper: Of course we had no idea of what we were going into. We had no idea of where we were going. And we kept wondering, are there any submarines out there now that don't know that the war is over and might we be torpedoed? And there was some apprehension but certainly not like the apprehension of the young men who had gone before us when they knew that they were going for an invasion. I don't know whether you know it, but it was estimated had we invaded Japan, there would have been one and a half Allied casualties and four and a half million Japanese casualties. There were a lot of talks of for schools involving the VFW here in Bryan and I'm always asked do I agree that the first two A-bombs should have been dropped and my answer is profoundly yes, because had they not been dropped, I might not have been here. I might not be here. Then I go on, do I think any should be used again? The answer is profoundly no, because again I tell them that war is no way to settle differences between nations. There are victors but there are no winners, ever. Both sides lose.

When you arrived in Japan, how were you treated by the Japanese people?

James Cooper: Well, the Japanese people when we arrived in Japan, we were the first Americans into this particular area, and you couldn't find anybody in Japan who had ever been in the armed forces. Which means that they had all changed their attitude and by the time we got

there, it was all a subdued nation and there was bowing and scraping and were super afraid, I think, of any Americans or any Allied troops. So we were treated like kings and queens.

Did you notice that there were not as many men in the community, had a lot of the men been killed or wounded in the war?

James Cooper: The funny thing is that everything was just so civilian when we got there in this little fishing village, but then go 20 miles inland to a larger town, Wakayama, that had been a manufacturing area and the only thing standing in the entire city were the bank vaults. They had firebombed the city. All the factories, the shells of the factories were there and the bank vaults were there, but the little fishing village had suffered no bombing or any damage at all and looked like a typical Japanese village that you would see in a photograph.

How long did you end up spending there?

James Cooper: We stayed from September until the following March or April. I'm not sure, but about April of the next year.

And what type of living conditions were you in? Were you on a ship or in the town?

James Cooper: I was aboard ship and we were in this big harbor and there were probably 30 or 40 ships in that harbor, both fighting ships, supply ships, a floating dry dock, a submarine tender, a destroyer tender, and as I say, we were a supply ship and I have something to tell you about it in just a minute. It had been a landing ship tank, an LST. It had been converted into a refrigeration supply ship. I got a call not long ago from a man in Tacoma, Washington, and he because of my Internet site, typed in USS Dorchester and my name pops up. He had bought the ship and the ship is still in operation as a fishing, cannery ship, running between Tacoma and Anchorage, Alaska.

That's pretty amazing, I'd say.

James Cooper: Absolutely amazing. He sent me pictures of the ship now and of course it had all been done over and it is not a bad looking vessel now. And I sent him a 3 x 5 feed picture of the Dorchester in World War II. So it's real interesting that he found me.

On board that ship did you have a lot of provisions of food and things of that sort for the civilian population and the troops?

James Cooper: Well being a supply ship, of course we had most everything that we wanted or needed, nothing fresh. There were no fresh veggies. There were no fresh eggs or anything like that. Everything was dehydrated and canned. We supplied other smaller vessels than we were with canned goods and there were no meats or anything like fresh meats, and so it was primarily all canned goods, but we were actually their supply ship for smaller vessels.

And I guess to go back a little bit, when the bomb was dropped, can you tell us about when you learned about that and what your first thoughts were? Did you even believe that was true?

James Cooper: Here we were and who had ever heard of an A-bomb?

Sure.

James Cooper: What is an A-bomb? We were young, young kids and we had known about blockbusters and the destruction of a 1,000 pound bomb, but here is a bomb that had wiped out a whole city, or two cities.

Yeah.

James Cooper: Nobody knew anything about it, so we were awestruck but we knew it was something big, and of course when the war ended we were on the way to Japan, my goodness, what a gift that was to us.

Sure. Tell us too, sir, what it was like when you learned, when everyone on board your ship learned the war had ended.

James Cooper: Actually I was in a camp in Schumacher, California; I mean a camp called Schumacher in California right outside of San Francisco, and it was jubilation. I mean lights and horns and the lights of the city had come on. They hadn't been on for years and years and years. It was just jubilation that you would never, ever imagine. I don't think that could ever be reproduced again.

Sure.

James Cooper: Because here the whole world had been dark since 1941. All of a sudden now everything is lit up, and it was just absolutely phenomenal the difference in seeing signs and things like that lit up that hadn't been lit up before.

Then to jump ahead again, when you were in Japan, did you know how long you were going to stay there for, or that sort of thing?

James Cooper: We had no earthly idea how long we would be there. Of course we, the people I went over with, not having been overseas, we were meeting people aboard ship, and people on the beach that had come up all the way through the islands from Guadalcanal all the way to Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and incidentally, we went by Iwo Jima and Okinawa and we were in a horrible hurricane at Okinawa, and here all of these guys were older than we were. Some of them had been away from home for three or four years. Here we were just fresh, not dry behind the ears people and we stood in awe at these particular people. And they were anxious to get home, and there was sort of some turmoil in that nobody, the military attitude sort of went down the drain then because everybody knew they were coming home and the regular military officers were being most easy as far as discipline was concerned, both in the Army and Navy and the Marine Corps. So it was an unusual time to say the least from a military standpoint.

So when did you finally get back to the Unites States?

James Cooper: I got back to the Unites States probably in May or June of 1946. And we first landed in San Francisco. It took us 38 days to come from Japan to the United States because that ship only made about eight to ten knots.

Wow.

James Cooper: We stopped for a brief time but total time at sea was about 38 days. It's built just like a bathtub. It's up and down and roll, roll, roll up and down and it was really a rough trip coming back. It went into San Francisco and eventually into Portland, Oregon.

Okay. And at that point, how much were they I guess were beginning the process of discharging sailors because the service was so large and they no longer needed them?

James Cooper: Everybody on that ship with the exception of about 15 or so of us and there was probably two or three hundred on the ship, were being processed for discharge and they couldn't do it fast enough. We were put into a holding type situation where we were tied up at a dock and at that time they were trying to preserve these ships. They were putting them in mothballs. They were in the process of doing that. Very shortly after we got to Portland, the crew was nearly all gone, because most of them had been veterans of the Pacific campaign for two or three years and they were all going home and we were still there. So it was an unusual time in the military, for sure.

And how much longer was it before you were discharged or were you discharged?

James Cooper: Fortunately a young man was shot aboard that ship in probably the last part of June or the first part of July in an accident that two guys had made a bet on a Joe Louis prizefight of all things, and this one guy had stolen this 45 automatic out of the armory and he was going to go down and threaten this guy to get his payment from him because he had lost. He put a slide into the gun and he thought he had ejected all the shells, and he was going to hold the gun out and pull the trigger thinking that the chamber was empty. One of the shells had hung in the chamber and he shot the young man in the abdomen and he died. Because I was aboard the ship and sort of witnessed some of the aftermath, they, I was supposed to have gotten out in July, and I didn't get out until probably the last of August, because they were holding me as a material witness as far as that shooting was concerned. But eventually I got out about the last of August. I don't remember what the date was.

What ended up happening to that sailor? Was he convicted and put away in the brig?

James Cooper: I don't really know. I think he probably got involuntary manslaughter.

Jeeze.

James Cooper: I heard later, and I think he probably served one or two years and then he was discharged dishonorably.

That's horrible.

James Cooper: It was horrible.

After the whole war, too.

James Cooper: Both young men under 20 years of age. It was horrible. Here the war had ended and now this young man dies in Portland, Oregon.

I know in the Marine Corps they have the safe weapons handling rules and number one is treat every weapon as if it is loaded. Second is never point your weapon at anything you don't intend to shoot. Obviously he didn't do those.

James Cooper: Well you know how the old automatic was. You put the slide in from the bottom and you could pull the ejector slide back and forth and eject the shells. I guess he counted that he had all of them out and one was still in the chamber. It's a tragedy, is what it was.

Yeah I feel bad for the sailor who was killed, having…

James Cooper: It was bad for both.

Yeah.

James Cooper: It was horrible

So then when you get out, at what point do you decide you want to become a doctor?

James Cooper: I had already decided that I had a burning desire to become a physician from probably the mid part of the senior year of high school on. Since my brother was already in medical school, that even gave me more of a desire. So when I got out of the Navy, I knew exactly what I wanted. I wanted to go into pre-med.

And where was it you ended up going to?

James Cooper: I went to the small Baptist college in Jackson, Tennessee named Union University. One of my classmates was named Punk Lafon. Lafon has sort of a place in history in that he's Al Gore's uncle.

Oh really? Okay.

James Cooper: Years and years later, I was at a VFW meeting in Milwaukee. Gore was running for president and he walked down the aisle and I yelled Punk Lafon. And he looked over and he said, "You've got to be kidding me," and he reached over and shook my hand.

That's funny.

James Cooper: Punk is dead now. That was in Jackson, Tennessee at premed and later on to medical school at the University of Tennessee in Memphis.

Were you able to use your GI bill at that point to go to school?

James Cooper: The GI bill having been in only about a year and a month or two, I didn't have that much GI bill. I did have some and yes, I did use the GI bill. I think we were paid $87 a month money and they paid for our books and our tuition. I think I got about one and a half years of tuition pay. Then the rest of medical school was on me. By that time my brother had graduated and had gone into practice in Kentucky. So he loaned me enough money to go to medical school.

So you get through medical school and then I know at some point you're back into the Navy.

James Cooper: All the way, I never got out of the Reserves.

Okay, so you were always in the Reserves.

James Cooper: Yes. When I came out, I immediately signed up in the Reserves, then in medical school was promoted to what they called ensign HP, which is hospital probationary. Knowing that I was going to go back in the service, not knowing where I would go, I was fortunate enough to obtain an internship at the Naval hospital in Bethesda, which is the Navy's main hospital. What a treat, and delight and experience that was.

What years were you there at Bethesda?

James Cooper: I was in Bethesda from June of '52 through August of '53. I stayed a little over fourteen months there. And then was assigned to the destroyer fleet Atlantic, as a destroyer squadron medical officer. I had eight destroyers that I had to be the doctor for.

Talk a little bit about Bethesda. Tell us what that was like when you were there.

James Cooper: It was just so, so unique and an experience that's just so memorable there's so many different points that were memorable to me, but you never knew from minute to minute what historic character you were going to see, because this now is 1952 and the war ended in '45, so you're only a few years away from the end of World War II. At one time we had three, five star admirals in the hospital there. Because it was the Navy's main hospital, if any diplomat or any member of Congress had to go into the hospital, they either went to Walter Reed or came to the Naval hospital at Bethesda. Shirley Temple had a cesarean section while I was there, for instance. Her husband was Commander Black, who had been called back into the Navy during the Korean conflict and was stationed at the main Navy building in downtown Washington, so she and her kids used the Naval hospital facilities for their medical care, and she did have a cesarean section while I was there. Joe McCarthy of McCarthy fame, was out there all the time. I used to see him probably on a weekly basis. The King of Siam, whoever that was, was there. Just a parade of historic people who came through there. It was a most unusual time.

What about too, you mentioned being there in '52, did you see many wounded from Korea?

James Cooper: It was full of wounded from Korea. And this was so, so sad, because the Navy would send their most seriously injured and especially the ones who needed plastic surgery back there, and yes we saw a lot of Korean War wounded there, and certainly a lot of plastic surgery victims, not victims but patients came there for repair of different war wounds that they had.

And what was your specialty and your role there at Bethesda?

James Cooper: I didn't have a specialty at that time. I was a general medical officer and of course I was an intern during the time I was at Bethesda. Then when I went to the Atlantic fleet, I was a general medical officer and one instance that occurred when I was with the Atlantic fleet; I eventually was assigned to the flag ship of the destroyer fleet Atlantic, the USS Yosemite. It happened to have been at Newport, Rhode Island and the aircraft carrier Bennington had hydraulic catapults for launching airplanes. We were about 500 miles off the Rhode Island coast and I was in harbor at that time aboard the Yosemite. They launched an airplane and this

hydraulic catapult had been leaking fumes and the fumes went through the ventilation system, into the officer's wardroom and ignited and exploded. It killed 105 officers, primarily in the original blast and fire, and then 270 something severely, severely burned were transferred from the Bennington back to the Newport Naval Hospital, so every medical officer in the harbor in Newport at that time, we were mobilized to all go to the Newport Naval Hospital to help take care of these severely, severely burned and injured people from the Bennington. That was one time that I wished that I had never been a physician, because it was a nightmare for about 72 hours until we got things settled down. The Navy then went from hydraulic catapults to steam catapults, which they are now. That's why when you see an airplane launched now; you see all this steam comes up from the deck. It was an interesting and tragic time, and event in my life. The memory will stick with me forever.

You mentioned too, sir, having been a medical officer for a group of destroyers. How often would you have to go out with them? Out to sea?

James Cooper: We would go out on anti submarine patrol not longer than two weeks usually and then come back to Newport Rhode Island. You'll ask, "Well, did you find any submarines?" And yes, we found them all the time. "But what did you do about them?" Nothing, we just let them know we knew they were there.

Sure.

James Cooper: It was a cat and mouse game all the time but we weren't at war with Russia and of course they all were Russian submarines. We just let them know that we knew they were there. They let us know that they knew we were there, so we just sort of kept tabs on each other.

What would a typical day be like for a Naval medical officer aboard a ship out at sea?

James Cooper: Well, on a destroyer, they were so small that the sickbays were measured about five feet by eight feet. In those days there was no air conditioning on the ships. Unless it were wintertime, the sickbay was right over the main engine room and it would be about 120 degrees in the sickbay so all the ointments turned to liquid and these guys on the destroyers all were young. Even the officers were young. Consequently, except for injuries, you didn't really have many sick people, except for sore throats and things like that. But if you had a severe injury, then you took care of the first aid part of it the best you could. Then we always were operating with an aircraft carrier and we could transfer any really, really ill person over to the aircraft carrier. They had a big sickbay. And that was done by breeches buoy which I'm sure you've seen with ropes between the two ships and that was a trick. If I had to transfer from one destroyer to another, it was by breeches buoy and if they rolled together, the sailors had to pull real fast on the pulleys to keep you from going into the ocean.

That's right. What was that like the first time you transited from one ship to another?

James Cooper: Oh it was terrifying because when they rolled apart it was like a slingshot, you being pulled all the way and slinging back the other direction. You wondered if you were going to be able to stay in the sling. But I never went in the drink.

So you, how long, sir, were you there in Newport with the destroyer group?

James Cooper: Well, the second time I was in the Navy, I stayed a little over two years. I stayed with the destroyer fleet about one year. I then got discharged and came back and first went to Portland, Oregon to practice and it rained 365 days. I've been in Bryan, Texas ever since.

Ever since, yes sir.

James Cooper: When I first came to Bryan, there were no specialists here of any kind, so you did everything that you had to do. About 1960, I became interested in aviation medicine and became a Federal Aviation medical examiner and have been a Federal Aviation medical examiner for 50+ years.

Wow. Congratulations, that's amazing.

James Cooper: I'm still working and I still do a lot of airline physicals.

Sir, tell us a little bit about that. It sounds interesting.

James Cooper: Well these airline physicals, the airline crews of the pilots have to have a physical every six months. They have to have an EKG at age 35. Every year they have to have an EKG after age 40. It's a lot of responsibility in that after all, if you pass somebody who is physically deficient in any way and he can't handle an airplane, you're responsible for several hundred people aboard the plane, so it is a job that requires diligence in keeping up with modern trends in aviation, and modern trends in aviation medicine. Some of these people, one man in particular, I did every single physical he had from the time he started with Continental until he retired about 3 or 4 years ago. With the exception of 2 or 3 and there are a lot of pilots that I have done for 20 years, every 6 months.

So the pilots are allowed to pick the doctor for their physicals?

James Cooper: They can pick any physician they want to, but usually once they come to you, even if they are transferred out of your territory, they keep coming back. I have a guy who comes all the way from Guam.

Do you have to travel to do the physicals or do they come to you?

James Cooper: No, they come to me. I don't have to travel. As a matter of fact, the FAA discourages that and even if you move your office, you immediately have to notify them, even if it's in the same town. No, there's no moving around. You're stationary.

Makes sense. Yes sir.

James Cooper: And one interesting thing; I had the privilege of being at every manned Apollo flight, 7 through 17, and I was 2 and a 1/2 miles from launch, and there had been 27 men on and in the near vicinity of the moon. Of the 27, 20 of them I know.

Wow.

James Cooper: I did Doctor Werner Von Braun's flight physicals on 2 or 3 occasions.

Would you tell us sir, how that all came about.

James Cooper: Like Dr. J.R. Maxfield, I'm a five thousand hour pilot. I'm instrument rated and I am an instrument instructor but I don't fly anymore. A man who was a pioneer in nuclear medicine, J.R.Maxfield from Dallas, took an airplane and through one of my airline pilot friends, he flew Dr. Maxfield's airplane and many times when he couldn't fly, he would call me and ask me if I could fly Dr. Maxfield wherever he wanted to go. Dr. Maxfield traveled extensively. He and Dr. Von Braun were very good friends and he was also very good friends with General Bruce Maderas. They both had cancer of the prostate. That's what Dr. Maxfield's expertise was in was treating cancer of the prostate with radioactive iodine at the time, I think. So it was through him, and his involvement with Von Braun and the space program, every space launch 7 through 17, he would attend. He would call me and I would fly his airplane, with a load of dignitaries down to the Cape from Dallas and would stay there. Of course him knowing Von Braun, we had VIP treatment and we were 2 and ½ miles from launch.

That's a fascinating time and some fascinating men.

James Cooper: It was very fascinating, very heady times. We got to meet nearly everybody, as I say; I got to meet 20 of the Apollo astronauts. One of them, Jack Swaggart, was on Apollo 13; he and I became very, very close friends.

Wow. I remember Kevin Bacon was the one who played him in that movie.

James Cooper: He did and there is a line in that movie, Jack was sort of a playboy, and Jack died at age 37 of cancer of the pesopharnyx. There's a line in the movie, Fred Hayes, one of the other astronauts that developed severe prostatitis about 72 hours before re-entry and was running 102, 103 temperature and Tom Hanks was hugging him in the movie to keep him warm. Fred Hayes says to Jim Lovell, who was played by Tom Hanks, "Do you think that I caught something from that relief tube from Jack?" It meant nothing to anyone else but it meant a lot to me.

And you said that you knew him pretty well. You were good friends with him?

James Cooper: Jack and I were real, real, close friends. I'm looking at a picture of me and Jack in front of my airplane up at Indianapolis.

I know there's a statue of him in Congress and also one of him there at the airport in Denver that I've seen that I'm sure you've seen.

James Cooper: I've never been in the airport in Denver and neither have I seen the one in Congress, but he was elected to Congress and was sworn in and then died shortly afterwards.

Yeah he died right after he was elected in '82. Do you remember anything about when he ran?

James Cooper: Well, he ran for senator first from Colorado and lost. And then after that, and I don't know the time sequence he ran for congressman from his district and did win, but at that time he was already a sick, sick man with cancer of the nasopharynx.

Well that's too bad. It's amazing that you knew him. I've read a lot about Jack Swaggart.

James Cooper: Jack was a very, very fine young man, a very precise pilot, a very good astronaut and he got blamed for a long, long time about causing the Apollo explosion. It was determined that when he threw a switch to stir the liquid oxygen in that cryotank , there was an exposed wire in that tank and it shorted out, of course did the explosion. He was one more fine fellow and a very interesting man.

Of course there wasn't any blame that could really be attributed to him for that, right? I mean it was an accidental.

James Cooper: It hurt him though at first. They said, "Well, you caused the explosion" but..

I wasn't aware he had gotten any blame for that.

James Cooper: He certainly was not blamed. It was an accidental thing. A tragic thing

Sure.

James Cooper: But all the things that went into getting them back from the moon is just absolutely unreal.

Oh, that's right.

James Cooper: Of course having known all three of those guys as a matter of fact, I just saw Fred Hayes about 3 months ago. He was here at the Bush Library, on the A&M campus. He and Gene Crans, who was the flight director. Gene Crans was going to give a speech and he came out on the stage and he was beginning his speech and all of a sudden everything went blank and it says "Houston, we have a problem." Fred Hayes walks out on the stage. We didn't even know he was going to be there. It was interesting.

That's neat, yes sir.

James Cooper: Other than those things, I've had a pretty boring life.

Yes sir. To go back a little bit, after you finished your time at Bethesda and at Newport with the destroyer crew, at that point did you get out of the Navy completely or did you remain in the Reserves?

James Cooper: I stayed in the Reserves for probably another 10 years and there was a Marine infantry Reserve battalion here at Texas A&M and because the Navy furnishes all of the medical care for the Marine Corps, I was affiliated with that Reserve unit. But I really didn't go back on active duty or anything.

Sure. And at what rank, sir, did you retire with?

James Cooper: I retired as a Lieutenant Commander.

Lieutenant Commander, yes sir.

James Cooper: Same as a Major in the Army. Sometimes I wish I would have stayed in but then if I would have stayed in, I wouldn't be doing this interview.

Sure, that's right. Well I know sir, that Julie Ruiz is one of my coworkers and she had recommended that I try to call you and interview you and I really appreciate her doing that.

James Cooper: Well I've had sort of a boring life.

Ha ha, yes sir. Well sir it's been a real honor to be able to talk to you today and I don't know if she told you or not but what we do with this program is we save all these interviews in our archives. Try to save them for posterity and here at the Land Office we have documents going back to the Spanish land grant days. We have Steven Fossen's original register. We've got paperwork that was given to Davy Crockett's widow after he was killed at the Alamo. So we have a lot of those things and our goal is that, you know, in a hundred years, two hundred years from now, people can listen to these interviews of our veterans and learn something from it.

James Cooper: Well I hope, I hope. Gary Morrow's family lived in Bryan. Wasn't he land commissioner?

Yes sir, he was, for 16 years.

James Cooper: I took care of his grandfather, his uncle, and I don't remember who his mother and father were. Was Gary from Bryan?

I'm not sure, sir, I believe he's an Aggie though.

James Cooper: I think that he was from Bryan but I don't remember who his mother and father were. All his aunts, uncles and his grandparents, I took care of.

Small world. Well sir it's been an honor, and I know Commissioner Patterson and everyone here is very thankful for your service to our country. We will be making copies of this onto CD's soon and I'll get those in the mail to you as soon as we have them made.

James Cooper: I appreciate that and it's been my privilege to talk to you.

Well yes sir, and thank you very much and you have my number as well so give me a call anytime we can help with anything.

James Cooper: I thank you very, very kindly.

Yes sir. Well, thank you. Have a great day.

James Cooper: I'll do it.

Bye, bye.

[End of recording]