Transcription: Dave Fulton

Today is August 23rd, 2012. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I will be interviewing Mr. Dave Fulton. This interview is taking place at his office, at TXDot in Austin, Texas, and is being conducted in support of the Texas Veteran's Land Board, Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to chat with us today.

Dave Fulton: Well James, it is my pleasure. Anything that I can do to help with this program.

Well sir, you sat in on Mr. Hollins' interview so you kind of know the format. First question I always start off with is just to tell the listeners a little bit about your life before you joined the service, your childhood and that sort of thing.

Dave Fulton: Okay, I grew up in a very small town in Tennessee called Savannah, Tennessee. It's located very close to the shallow battlefield of the war between the states, and it's down at the Tennessee/Mississippi/Alabama juncture. It is right on the border down there, a little town of about 4,000 people. I grew up like all kids in a small town, grew up and went to school and graduated from high school in 1958 and then went to college in Nashville, Tennessee at Vanderbilt University. I spent quite a while there (laughing) …. I finally graduated with a degree in Civil Engineering after about five and a half years, I think, and at that point the draft was still in effect. I'll step back, momentarily …. I took a couple of years of Navy ROTC while I was at Vanderbilt so that was my first exposure to the military. Then once I graduated, I started looking for a job and the Tennessee Highway Department was hiring civil engineering graduates, so I went down and with a very minimal interview they said "you can go to work for us, where do you want to work?" … and I said, "How about my hometown?" So they placed me in my hometown and I just kind of hung out with the contractors and the resident engineer in charge for the Tennessee Highway Department. I realized I wouldn't be there very long because in a small town like that, you can check your draft status daily, it being a small town, and when I got within the top 5 that were to go, I think I was number 4, I thought well I'd rather be an officer so I volunteered to go into the Navy.

What year was this?

Dave Fulton: That would have been, let's see …. '63. In fact, I remember when I was employed there – I must have the date right – that John Kennedy got shot that year, wasn't that right? It was about that time. So, kind of a funny story, I went to Nashville to get sworn in and talked to a Chief Petty Officer and I said, "I'd like to join the Navy," and he said, "Fine, we'll take ya." And I said, well I've got this Civil Engineering Degree and I understand you have a Civil Engineering Corps and he says, "Yes, we do!" I said, "I'd like to do that." And he said, "Well, there's a slight problem, they are all full right now, but we can accept you as a line officer and when you get up to Officer Candidate School just tell them that you want to change and they will be glad to accommodate you." Well, that never happened, so I became a line officer, I went to Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island – that would have been – I started in April 1964 – and I think that was about a 3 or 4 month – I think it was 16 weeks, or something like that, I can't remember. And I got my commission and my first duty station was Little Creek, Virginia, which is in the Norfolk area – it's the – then, and I think it still is – was the home board for the amphibious ships. And they put me on an oiler, but not a big oiler, it was a little tiny one. It was AOG52, the U.S.S. Matabassett. And, the oiler was – you know the big oilers back before Nuclear Power provided petroleum for the carriers, the destroyers, and what this ship did

was, when ships got below their minimum, they had to stay something like 85% capacity at all times, so this little oiler would just go around and make sure they stayed up to capacity. It was kind of an interesting ship. The commanding officer was a senior Lieutenant, O3.

So it really was a small ship?

Dave Fulton: It was kind of like the movie that Henry Fonda and Jack Lemon were in, what was the name …. Mr. Roberts. We had this Lieutenant, who was a senior Lieutenant, an academy graduate. They had a mustang Lieutenant, former enlisted guy – he was the only one that really knew what was going on. We had one or two JG's and everybody else was an Ensign. So we were pretty much rookies. So anyway, I ended up there.

Were you frustrated at that point to be on an oiler and not in the Engineering Corps?

Dave Fulton: No, I was a little surprised, my roommate at OCS – I was in the top 4 or 5 – and he was the dead last and we both got AOG's! That's typical, maybe. I thought they would have some ranking system – well, that didn't evidently work too well! But, it was okay. So, the Matabassett was the smallest U.S. Navy ship at that time that crossed the Atlantic alone. Flank speed was 12 knots. And I think the Captain's name was Roberts, I guess that's where I got that idea.

How big was the crew?

Dave Fulton: How big was the crew? You know, it has been so long ago ….

Less than 100?

Dave Fulton: Probably – or right at maybe something maybe in that range. And it looked like something that was used in World War II. And it took us 12 days to cross the Atlantic, and I had never been to sea, and I remember standing on the side of the ship as we crossed in a very calm sea, and I swore the thing wasn't moving. I couldn't see a wake at all. So, we get over to the Mediterranean, finally, which took, seems like a lifetime, and we went into some ports there. I think we first, though, went to Naples, which is a fairly big Naval facility back then, and may still be, and I was the First Lieutenant which is in charge of the deck gang. We got over there in Naples and then you have to park and they bring an Italian pilot on board to take care of getting the ship positioned for dropping the anchors. I don't think he spoke very good English. We got right in the middle of the harbor and he started doing all this - they take over from the Captain, they have command of the ship – somehow he got the two anchors spread-eagled, so we had blocked the entire harbor and were stuck and I am sure that senior Lieutenant saw his career disappearing. So he came running down to me – I had been on there 10 days – and he said, "Mr. Fulton, what do you think we ought to do?" And I said, "Are you kidding me? I've only been here 10 days!" So, anyway, somehow they succeeded, after a couple of hours and there were all kinds of ships raising Cain trying to get in and out, we got the thing loosened and got it parked, but I spent on that ship, maybe two or three months at the most, and then I got a message that my wife, at the time – who was from Newport – I had met her at Officer Candidate School – had had an automobile accident and they needed to send me home. It was pretty serious, but she recovered. So they sent me back to Newport, Rhode Island on emergency leave. She started to get better and then the next thing I know - I didn't solicit it - I was transferred to the Naval War College which is based at Newport. And I thought, boy, this Navy's a great outfit, they really look after people. They took care of me. They transferred me to this duty station – I didn't find

out until years later that my wife – my wife's Aunt was a Rhode Island Supreme Court Judge – and they had made a call, the Judge had made a call, and I didn't know anything about that. It was a learning experience. So anyway, but it worked out good for me because I really didn't like shipboard life much anyway. I liked to sleep 8 hours a night and they tend to interrupt that, that was the big issue. Anyway, when I got to the Naval War College we had a Vice Admiral and a Rear Admiral in command there. The Rear Admiral of course was the Deputy Commander of the facility – the Naval War College – and I was one of only two Ensigns. All the students and staff were either O-5's or O-6's, and I was a young gopher officer. I handled the coffee mess and I arranged the quarters for the students who would come to the Naval War College. And a great percentage of the students were Aviators, they call them Airdales in the Navy, and of course we were a novelty, the other Ensign and myself and so I got to know a lot of these guys because I arranged the quarters for them. The school was pretty intense at that time and on Friday the first thing they would hit was down the street to have a couple of totties after work and they would start taking me along. They never talked about anything but flying and they never said anything negative about flying. And I thought, maybe I ought to look into that, it sounds like a pretty good deal. I didn't want to be a civil engineer, my father had made me take that in college, he said you gotta have a trade. So, I always felt that I had a pretty good ability of observing other people, and it made sense, I thought, boy, they must really like this so why don't I look at it. So by that time I was over 27 almost 28, and the age limit was about 27 but the Vietnam War was raging and it took them about 3 days to waive that, you know that's the way it works then. So I also applied for a regular commission and that came through in record time. Things were expedited obviously during the war. So I went to Pensacola and started Naval flight training …

Was this about 1966?

Dave Fulton: No, it was ….. I started flight training, let's see, I got to the War College in '65, I was there a couple of years, I think '67, and I believe I started Naval Flight training down in Pensacola around August or so of '68. And I had never been in a small airplane in my life. I was sort of an oddball, also, all of the promotions get accelerated in war time, so before I started flight training I was a full Lieutenant, I was an O-3 and they did that after like 18 months or so, it was really quick with the needs of the service, so I had to be the company commander for all these gaggles and we started flight training and it was very challenging to me because I had never been in a small plane, but it worked out okay. We started out at Saufley Field, it's not there anymore, in a T-34, and we flew like, I think 13 flights or something like that, and you'd solo, and you were just beginning to learn to fly. And then at that time you would go to a location outside of Pensacola called Whiting Field – in Milton, Florida – about 20 or 30 miles away. They had T-28's that were much bigger than the T-34, and that was your basic training - the T-34 was the primary training. And after you finish your primary training you ask for – there are two pipe lines for flight training in the Navy (there was then, I don't know how it is now) but there was the Jet Pipe Line, well there's three: The Jet Pipe Line , the Propeller Fixed Wing Pipe Line, and the Helicopter. As I mentioned earlier, I wasn't real hot at being aboard ship, so I thought I want to go to the Prop Pipe Line and fly something like P-3's so I can go home at night and get in bed. So, that's what I did. I went to Whiting Field and started flying this T-28 – I don't know if you're familiar with it, I used to have a picture of one around here, but they are great airplanes. They looked huge to me, they were round engines, radial engines, and we spent quite a while – probably 6 months there – which concluded in going out to the aircraft carrier and landing on the carrier in this airplane, and I will never forget that experience in my life. It was unbelievable.

Let's go … before you get to that part … let's go back to flight training. I'm curious that you mentioned that – I've always heard that there are difficulties for anybody who goes through flight training and different things might come easier to some folks – what did you find to be the most challenging part?

Dave Fulton: The transition phase from one airplane to the next was always the hardest for me because I didn't have any background. Learning how to take off and land the airplane, instruments and things like that I excelled in, but I would struggle to get adapted when we changed from one plane to another. I did pretty well there, and once I'd get past that initial phase I always seemed to do pretty well.

What was the attrition rate for your class?

Dave Fulton: You know, it wasn't as high then, again because the war was on. It's cyclical depending on the needs of the Navy. There were some – I don't remember what the attrition rate was – I'm going to guess somewhere between 5 and 10 percent. It wasn't very high, because they needed people. But the most interesting thing I did was – I really enjoyed flying that T-28 and going out to the carrier – and you went alone. You didn't take an instructor. They did it for a short while and then the instructors refused because they couldn't see and they were sitting in the back seat. So we had to make this trip alone.

So the carrier landing was solo.

Dave Fulton: Right. We had a Naval Aviator – this was training squadron 5 - in fact the commanding officer, who was a P-3 pilot, took us out but he just led the group and then he got out of the way while we did our thing. One thing they did that was very interesting – they do a videotape of all carrier landings, they've always done that, or at least for many, many years. And they showed us all the mistakes to encourage us not to make the same mistakes.

That puts that thought in your head of what went wrong.

Dave Fulton: I guess the funniest one, we were all sitting there and of course we were scared to death – we knew we were going out pretty soon, so we were pretty motivated – and you'd see the way they would do it with the T-28 and the Lexington was the training carrier, the same one that's down in Corpus Christi. It wasn't a very big carrier, and you land on the angle deck, catch the wire, and for the T-28's, they were a fairly small airplane, they didn't catch shoot them off. You could deck roll. You'd just power up and go down the long deck.

That is kind of old school then.

Dave Fulton: Yeah, so it was interesting to watch. Some of the mistakes were sad. You'd see a kid come downwind, and you're flying very near stall speed and you're supposed to put the gear and flaps down, and in this case he forgot to put the flaps down. As soon as he turned, he just spun right in. So you'd see all these things, and they made an impression on you even if you were a kid. But the funniest one was you initially did two touch and go's on the angle deck, and then the next time around, you would take the wire and they would turn you down the long deck for the takeoff roll. That was his first takeoff from the carrier. This kid comes in and does, he does his touch and go's, then he does his arrested landing. The confusion is always enormous on a carrier. There's a lot of yelling and noise, and so the guy, LSO Landing Signal Officer, tried to turn him down to the long deck, but he didn't understand it so he just powered up and shot off

the short one, and you could see the plane fall for what seemed like an eternity. Then you saw him finally made it up. He came back around, he did it again. And as I've said telling Jay, I'm sure he thought boy, this is a lot more difficult than I thought it would be. And then the LSO gave him the cut signal and said come here boy, down that way. Oh, he was very lucky. But I remember going out there and this was funny, too, since I ended up flying P-3's, which is – you're familiar with the P-3?

Oh yeah, I'm familiar.

Dave Fulton: The commanding officer of VT-5 was a full commander, and he hadn't been back to the training command since he went through, so he was leading us out there in the T-28, and it's like a bunch of geese. And we get out there and he spots, he thinks he spots the carrier, so we all start. He leads us and we're following him just like sheep and we get down and it's an ocean going barge – so we all go back up.

That's pretty good.

Dave Fulton: So we didn't know, but I guess the experience at the carrier, the thing that had stuck with me for years, I did make two touch and go's, my 5 arrested landings and takeoffs, and on climbing out after I was completed my turn, it's the first time I had any awareness of what was going on. The adrenaline had been so high, I didn't even realize, I didn't remember it almost. It was an amazing thing.

I always heard stories that the carrier seemed so small when you're making that approach to land that it's almost like a stamp on the floor if you're standing up, it's so tiny.

Dave Fulton: What really ticked me off is they never did tell me that where you're gonna land moves sideways. The angled deck is moving sideways. So I kept wondering how come I line up and I keep slipping off. They never bothered to tell us that, and of course we didn't know anything. But so it was exciting and once, it was the way I liked the Navy back in those days. Once you completed that, we all convened at the anchor bar I think it was in Pensacola and we're all celebrating. It was a wonderful experience. Then I came to, that completed my training in Pensacola. And then my next duty station was the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi, and I flew the S-2 Tracker which is a twin engine airplane, still radial engines. It's an airplane that was used for two different missions until it was phased out or replaced. One of the missions was carrier on board delivery. A carrier has to have continuous air transportation to the carrier for mail, personnel changes, emergencies, and so it was also used to protect the carrier and the carrier group, and submarine warfare, a different version of the same plane. Anyway, that's what I learned to do multi-engine in, and I'm trying to remember, I guess I graduated, let me see here, not in late '69, so all this evolution of training was completed in 1969.

Right during the heart of Vietnam.

Dave Fulton: Yeah, so it was great. Some of the more humorous stories, it was a different Navy back then. Today if you get a DWI, they'll throw you out. Back in those days they'd say don't do that again. But it was war time. There was a totally different atmosphere. One of the stories, I'm recalling stories here that I had a Marine friend that stayed in the same apartment I did, and in Pensacola, and we were all buying Corvettes. That was the thing to do. In fact, we were crazy. I had three convertibles at one time. I had a Stingray convertible the first year they came out. My wife had had an MG convertible and also had a '66 Impala convertible – three

convertibles. I remember coming out one night in the Impala and forgot to put the top up and you opened the door, it was a crazy world, but back to this Marine – we all bought Corvettes and he went out and bought the most expensive luxury car he could find. We said what'd you do that for? He said well, I wanted to go buy the finest car I could buy. They're going to send me in a helicopter to Vietnam, likely I'll never come back and I'll never have to make the rest of the payments anyway. That's kind of the crazy mentality. So it was a lot of fun. It was very stressful because without any previous experience, a lot of guys had some experience, I didn't have any, so it made it challenging but I enjoyed it and I guess that kind of wraps up my training which was completed around late '69 and I was transferred to Moffett Field, California, the transition to the P-3 Orion.

The P-3 is still used today, right?

Dave Fulton: Yes, they are finally replacing it by 737's, Boeing 737's, but it's been used since, it was used long before I got there. Not long, but before I got there in '70. You first go through a replacement air group. That's where they give you some training in the new airplane, and that's at Moffett Field which is in the San Jose area basically, and we did some training there and then I went to my squadron, which was BP-47. We were assigned to a crew and we were given a ground job. That's the typical thing. And then our first deployment was to Okinawa for six months the summer of the next year. That would've been '71 I think. So we go over to Okinawa for six months, and Naha, Okinawa, which at that time was a civilian air field used by the Navy. It still belonged to the Okinawans, but we had a joint use agreement or something. Our primary job really was over in Okinawa was to take the time, crews would take time about going to either Cameron Bay, Vietnam, or Udipau, Thailand, and we would fly night time patrols.

Out of Okinawa down there?

Dave Fulton: Oh no, out of Vietnam.

So it was like a deployment within a deployment.

Dave Fulton: Yeah, everybody wanted to get the war time benefit of the money. You got tax free money, so we would all go down there and stay over 'til the end of the month and get two months. It was the cycle. We'd go down for 10 days and most of the time I think we were in Cameron Bay was where we were in Vietnam. We would fly maybe 10-hour missions at night, and it was pretty simple flying. All we would do, we would go down to Thailand and go around the entire coast up north in Vietnam, and we'd look for radar contacts, and that information would be transmitted to the ground and they'd be looking for bad guys trying to bring in supplies to the Viet Cong. So we'd do that every night and we'd have a night off sometimes. I think you'd probably get some time off.

Did you enjoy it?

Dave Fulton: Yeah, well, it was, I had mixed feelings because I thought, I didn't feel like I was really participating in the war. That sounds a little idealistic I guess. We actually had a football on the beach drinking beer, eating hot dogs, and I'd hear the shooting in the distance, and man, something ain't right about this, but wonderful beaches in Vietnam. But it was fun. It was enjoyable. And we did some other things. We would fly out of Naha and we'd fly what's called par-pro patrols, a show of force. I don't know how we could show force in a P-3, but we'd fly down from Naha and go up by China between in that sea, between Taiwan, to let the Chinese

know we were watching them. I don't know what we'd have done. And there was a lot of boring times. I'm starting to think about funny stories. You know, young guys are crazy. This other friend of mine had a crew and in the cockpit of a P-3 you've got the pilot, the copilot, and another big seat for the flight engineer whose an enlisted man. The crews are very close. The officers enlisted are very close. My friend's flight engineer went back to the forward of observation. They are great big chairs, bigger than this, and he fell asleep, so they went back and strapped him in and started ringing the bailout bell. That kind of stuff went on all the time. It was fun. And of course on the beach we were pretty crazy, too. We were always, it was great. The Okinawans loved us because in those days, their primary commerce were component sets. What do you call those? Stereo component sets, and of course we were just buying everything we could get, so they catered to the Americans big time back then. That doesn't exist anymore. So we all had to buy our components. Another funny story, the same friend of mine I just mentioned, he got out after one tour, but he decided to buy a motorcycle and he worked in the maintenance department, and he was determined he was not gonna pay to have that thing shipped home, so he took it all to pieces and he was gonna get in in a maintenance shipment box, and he spent the whole cruise taking that thing apart, and when he finally got ready to ship, it wouldn't fit. It was a crazy lifestyle. I remember this happened twice, we were just kids. We were paid once a month and twice I did this. I thought I ran out of money. At the end of the month I couldn't even buy any food. I was eating Cheez-It's and stuff because my checkbook, I forgot to put the deposit in it. We were just crazy kids. Another funny story, Air Force had an officer's club, and of course the Air Force always did things upright as far as that's concerned, and we had to stand alert duty, and there was the ready alert that you had to stand in flight suit and be ready to launch in 30 minutes, there was the two-hour stand, I think it was the two-hour backup, you could wear your uniform, and then there was a standby after that. Well the standby, you never got launched. Well I'd had some kind of duty for three or four days in a row, so I decided to go up to the officer's club and you weren't supposed to drink any alcohol no matter what level of alert you were on, but we never got launched on the lowest level one. So they had a special for Beefeater's martinis 15 cents. So I bought two of them and took this water glass and poured the water out and poured them in the water glass. I thought it was pretty clever. And so I sat down to have this drink and eat my food, and in comes this lieutenant commander friend of mine who had just been playing handball and you could see his face was all red and he reached over and grabbed that glass and drained it – he thought it was water. We were crazy, I mean the war was on, we were nuts. I fit into that real well, too. I was made for that time period in the Navy I guess.

You did about 10 years' active duty?

Dave Fulton: Yeah, after that tour, we had another tour. Those were six-month deployments. Then we came back and then the next year, we went to Adak, Alaska. Do you know where Adak is? That was unusual. It was six and a half months.

A little different than Okinawa.

Dave Fulton: Okinawa was so hot. You think it's hot here, you don't know anything until you go over there. But Adak was terrible. There was no grass, no trees, no women, it was overcast statistically 90 percent of the time. The flying was good.

Was your mission there to hunt Soviet subs?

Dave Fulton: That's right, and I have kind of an interesting story about that. He's heard this story, but the latter part of that six and a half months I had moved up to being the aircraft commander, left seat. I was still a lieutenant, and somehow this fighter pilot admiral had ended up in Adak. I don't know what in the world he was doing up there. But he needed to go to the island of Shemya, and I was assigned the responsibility to fly him over there. Of course an admiral was like a god to us, and he's a good looking guy, typical fighter pilot, and he shows up at the airplane, and it's a short flight. It was like maybe 30 or 45 minutes, and I'm saying admiral, welcome, we're pleased to be taking you over to Shemya. When I got him on board, I said admiral, we'd love to have you stand in the cockpit for the takeoff and landing if you want, you don't have to sit in one of the seats. And he'd say well that'll be fine lieutenant, and so we get over there, and the weather on the Bering chain is probably the worst weather in the world, and when we got over there, it was God awful. I made an approach and the wind was blowing so hard across the runway that I was looking out my left window at the runway, and just beating the crap out of us. The P-3 is a big airplane, but it was just beating the crap out of us, and I made the approach and there was no way we were within limits to land, so I did a missed approach, and of course as I say, it had been admiral lieutenant. I made the missed approach and the only place to go from there for an alternate airport was Anchorage, Elmendorf Air Force Base, and even in a P-3 it was four hours away. It was about 1500 miles. And I said admiral, I'll be glad to try another approach if you want, but I don't think it looks real good. He said whatever you think, Dave. He didn't know how to fly that airplane. So I think that sent a message to me. Things change in crisis, and he was in a crisis. I mean he had no control of any kind. He could not fly that airplane, so it was an interesting.

Did you go ahead and go to Elmendorf?

Dave Fulton: Yeah. Another story that's kind of interesting, a guy that really trained me to be the plane commander was a wonderful pilot. I thought the world of him, but he did have an ego. We went into Kodiak a couple of times. Kodiak is an island, I don't know if you're familiar with it, but the 8,000-foot runway is built in a box canyon, so you always land going in and you always take off going the other way there. The first time we went in there, there were, you could see places all over these mountains that made this box canyon where people had tried to get out and hadn't made it. I kind of took notice of that. So we decided, we had another trip to Kodiak, and he had the third pilot, the rookie, in the left seat. This guy was fearless, too fearless really, this guy that I liked, and Kodiak you had to make a missed approach at two miles out, and you could identify two miles out with what's called a DME distance measuring equipment. So this kid, great training for him, water was pouring off of him because he was just sweating like a pig. We made a couple of approaches and you'd make a hard left bank when you got to that two mile, if you couldn't see the runway, and the radar operator would say tighten it up, we're about a half mile from the mountain, and it's wonderful training. But the third time he was going to make one more try, well in between, some old DC-3 had gotten in, and boy, that really chapped this guy. He was damned and determined that we'd get in. So we make the third try, and I'm standing behind the flight engineer seat, and this kid is just working his butt off. Well just as we got to the two-mile missed approach point, this friend of mine, the lieutenant commander, saw the strobe lights blink from the runway, and the guy had already started to roll it and the 30-degree angle bank, so he said I've got it. He was going to go ahead and take it in. He swung it back toward the runway and he pulled three and four power levers to fight flight idle, but he missed one and two, so we were totally assymetrical, full power on the two left engines and no power on the two right. Well what happens when you get in a situation like that, you tend to level off. So we go right back into the clouds. And I think hey man, we're gonna die here. So I had recalled that there was a little notch in the mountain down there. It's funny, you never forget

these things, 248 degrees, and as we, if we couldn't get it down, I was going to yell "come to 248 and pray." Well he comes over the end of the runway doing about 150 knots, and in that P-3, and now we can see the runway. That thing has barn door flaps. You put the flaps full down, pull the power off, and we're floating down the runway and he finally gets it on the runway and we rolled to a stop right at the end where there's a two lane road. He raised the flaps, stacked it off like nothing ever happened.

Yeah, that's a little hairy then I would think.

Dave Fulton: One other interesting, when we got, he was a great pilot, good stick, and he really knew the airplane, but he had flown in VR and he just could not accept not getting in. We had one other incident when we got back from Alaska. We went out on a patrol. This may be, had been before we went to Alaska out of Moffett Field, California, in the San Jose area, and you play these games of no communication like war time, so you have time that you hit a certain point and we go out and we're supposed to stay at prudinal limit of endurance. In other words, stay as long as you can and still have minimum fuel to get back home. Well I was the two pilot at that time, number two pilot, and the flight engineer was supposed to keep up with the fuel and I thought something doesn't feel right. Something didn't feel right to me and I got to calculating it and he'd made a one-hour error the wrong way. And I thought oh no, and so I told the plane commander, Ben Janes was the name, and we're late, and not only have we burned too much fuel but we're late in leaving and we're supposed to hit this point coming back in at a certain time. So we go full power heading back straight to Moffett Field. Well back then, even in those days in the 70s, there was a lot of commercial air traffic, so they always had a procedure that they would take you up to Ukiah, California, and bring you down the coast. They told us to do that. I said Ben, let me tell 'em that we're a little short on fuel. No, he ain't gonna tell 'em anything. And so we waited and I tried again to get the controllers to let us go direct because we're down right pointing right at where we're going. They tell us no, we can't do that. So here we go with limited fuel up to Ukiah. And we start down. We finally get heading back where we're going. I'm thinking man, we ain't going to make it. And they gave him some other vectors. He said cancel IFR. He cancelled the instrument flight plan as we head towards San Francisco, and we were in and out of the clouds sort of. We came right over San Francisco International the wrong way, and I looked up and there was a plane landing, a commercial. We get back to Moffett Field and turned downwind and they have big blimp hangars there, and I couldn't see 'em. We finally got around, he's VFR here, and when we got on final we were able to pick up the runway. And it makes the guy sound awful. Those were two crazy things to do out of a very good career, but I thought, I don't think we should be doing that. So it's just funny things that happen. I mean they're funny when nothing bad happens. When I did get transferred to the naval air station, I had been down there a couple of months and we were over in Cecil Field in Jacksonville, Florida, and I picked up the newspaper and there was a report that the crew that I had had, had just had a mid-air with a Conveyor 990, like a DC-8. They had parallel runways at Moffett. They had three big blimp hangars, one on one side and two on the other and two big runways, and the training runway was normally the left one, and this was a NASA airplane that was based there. Well they changed controllers in the tower and they dropped the ball. It was horrible. They got confused and cleared the P-3 to land on the right runway. The Conveyor 990 never saw the P-3, if you believe that, and came right down and they just married up and fell down in the field. It killed everybody on board except, and none of them in my crew. It's a chilling thing except one of the enlisted guys, sometimes fate is cruel, and the damn fire truck ran over him. He was really messed up. He survived, but unbelievable.

How long was that after you'd been with them?

Dave Fulton: After I'd been away from there? A couple of months.

So it was all the guys that you'd served with.

Dave Fulton: We have a great J-will support that's the personality types that go into certainly naval aviation have a great ability to compartmentalize, and I think it's absolutely necessary. You'd go crazy if you didn't. I knew five guys that died during my initial flight training from one way or another, and you just blocked it out somehow. You just have that ability to do that, which is good. And then, I'm probably pretty much to the end, I did a three-year tour there. Then I was transferred to the training command in Corpus Christi to train other pilots and in my mind, that's the best job I ever had. I really loved, I like to teach to begin with, and had done quite a bit of that, and you had the best candidates in the world because virtually almost without exception, these guys had made the cut by this time, and their motivation level was extremely high. It was like coaching a top notch football program. Everybody is so motivated and they're giving it everything they had. It was fun. And the old airplanes we had were really old. Those S-2's like most Navy airplanes, they were at the end of their lifespan. They were past their lifespan probably, but they had wings that would fold, and we were based at Corpus on the sea wall, and of course you'd come back from a trip and you'd fold the wings, and when you go out, you'd taxi out and then the lineman would give you a same signal to spread the wings and there was a little lever up here that you do that with, and I remember being an instructor and the right wing would come down, the left wing would stay up there, and some kid would get up there and beat on the hydraulic line with a ball pin hammer, and finally it'd come down. But it was a great airplane.

The Viking, S-2 Viking?

Dave Fulton: No, it was way before that. It was an S-2 C-1, which is a tracker, and the company that made it was Grumman, they called it Grumman Iron Works. I believe you couldn't damn near flown through a building on that thing. It kept going. It was made for, like World War II planes, it was made to take punishment.

What was the Viking then?

Dave Fulton: It was the first jet that replaced the S-2.

And they called that an S-2 as well?

Dave Fulton: S-3, yeah. It was amazing. I'd take students out to get field carrier land practice before they'd go out to the ship, and I'd be in the right seat and that old airplane and the trunnions were this big around for the gear and you would fly it at like I think it was 85 knots for the right half stall speed with power on, and those kids would be struggling and they would get 30 degrees off runway heading and that thing would hit the ground and it wouldn't hurt it at all. It would bounce up in the air and then it would straighten out. I'd get up in the seat every time. They had to learn, but I had so much confidence in that plane. It was fun. I really enjoyed being an instructor.

When did you transition into the Reserves? Was it after -

Dave Fulton: In 1975, I left I think it was May, I believe, and as soon as I left – one of the big issues for me was the Navy had, and it probably still has, for a good career path, you can't just fly airplanes, you have to go do ship stuff, and I didn't want any part of that. I didn't like 24/7 jobs. So I said I'm going to get out. But I was smart enough to get into the Reserves. So I went, I sold my house, my wife and I, in Corpus, and went back home and got a job with the Tennessee Bureau of Aeronautics, which is a similar office to this. I'd tried to get a flying job. The airlines in 1975 wouldn't hire anybody over 30 years of age. They could pick and choose. All that Vietnam veteran group actually went out to Flying Tiger in LA and went in to talk to them about filling out an application, and this very attractive girl said we'll be glad to take it, but we got 50,000 applications on file or something like that. So I went back home and my mother knew the Commissioner of Transportation, so I got hooked up for an interview, and they had planes but they didn't have any old pilot openings, so I took a staff job and then that was '75, and in '81 I became the Director and I've been hanging around this business ever since.

That's great. And you stayed in the Reserves all the way up to the rank of Captain.

Dave Fulton: Right, what I did is drilled in the naval air station in Memphis, in Millington, Tennessee, it's now where the Navy Bureau of Personnel is, but back in those days we had a P-3 Reserve squadron there, and they'd come pick us up in Nashville. They'd go all the way to Denver to pick people up for the weekend if you can believe that, if they really needed them. Then we'd fly, and flying in the Reserves was wonderful. We went two years, I flew a little bit in the old P-2, but you still see bore 8 bombers, fire bombers, P-2 Neptune, and then we lost those and we were the last Reserve squadron to get P-3's, so we had two years with nothing to do, so there was a lot of old club time. I mean we didn't have anything to do. Then finally we got the P-3's and of all the guys in the squadron, only myself and one other guy had P-3 experience. So they would give us a P-3 and say go for the weekend and fly as many hours as you can. So it was like having your own airliner. We'd go to Key West, San Francisco. We actually went to San Francisco once by flying this way up and down across the country to build flight time. We just had to have it. But there were a lot of interesting stories that came out of that as well. I probably don't need to go into them.

That's great. And when did you come to work at TxDOT?

Dave Fulton: OK, I was in Tennessee 17 years and then in 1991, in September 1st, they formed the Texas Department of Transportation, the old highway department and the aviation commission group were merged together and it became DOT, and they put out an application announcement for a director of this division, and I wasn't real happy with lack of leadership in the Tennessee Department of Transportation, so I kind of got a wild hair and I applied and they hired me. So I came here May of '92.

That's great. So you've been here over 20 years?

Dave Fulton: Yeah.

What is kind of if you'd explain to an average person that you do with TxDOT aviation? I think probably the average civilian thinks just highways or maintenance.

Dave Fulton: What we do is we provide financing through federal and state funds and it comes from taxes on the aviation industry, primarily. We provide grants to these small towns like Taylor or Smithville or even San Marcos or Georgetown, we provide funding to build and

improve their airports and we also manage the construction, project management, we do a turnkey delivery for these airports. So we spent the last 20 years. The airport system was pretty poor in '92, so we spent the last 20 years taking one of the worst systems to what I think's the best.

That's got to be thousands of air fields in Texas.

Dave Fulton: Well, the money we allocate goes to public entities, so we have about 276 clients of small airports like a Smithville or Taylor or Georgetown, and we spend currently about $85 or $90 million a year helping those people improve their airport. And that's been fun, too. It's always fun to build something and we had what I, maybe Mississippi was a little worse, but Texas airport, rural airport system was pretty poor and now we've really made a very fine system.

So it's pretty standardized.

Dave Fulton: Well we had to rebuild, we spent over a billion dollars doing this in 19 years, so all these communities have very nice airports, and it's important not just for people flying around, it's important for rural economic development. So we're kind of in the airport economic development business.

Does that allow you to get out and fly very much?

Dave Fulton: It does. I have a V-tail Bonanza and about every 10 days or two weeks I'll go visit some of the airports to see how they're doing. And the other thing we do is 7, 8, 9 years ago, something like that, the state aircraft fleet almost went away. It was called the State Aircraft Pooling Board, and -

That used to be up at Miller Airport?

Dave Fulton: A long time ago. Then it moved when Bergstrom was opened down here, and then it seems like Texas is always in a budget crunch like every other state, the budget wouldn't balance so the governor had to start line iteming some things out and he lined out funding for the Pooling Board. Well that was an issue after they realized it because the Department of Public Safety gets all their maintenance and support from them. But they'd been abolished. So at that point, all the powers to be got together and said we can't let this totally go away and they asked DOT would they take it over, and my boss asked me and I said sure, we'll take that over. So we took it over and I kind of managed it from here for a couple of years and then Jake Joseph was hired from US Airlines to come out and he has done the same thing with the flight department we did with the airports here. He's taken it to a very high level in a relatively brief period of time. But I've enjoyed talking about this. It's kind of fun to relive that career. There's something about naval aviators. You see the Air Force guys and they always have wonderful facilities. And of course in the Marine Corps some are, too, but the Navy, our facilities were terrible. Many times the Navy would treat us like crap, but we're intensely loyal to the Navy. It's a strange, it'd make a good study for somebody I guess. I know Jay does, I do, and everybody I know has an intense feeling about the Navy. An example of the facilities we had, when I was at Millington, that had been at Naval Air Station Memphis, that had been a World War II training base and they had all these old Quonset huts left over from World War II, and the classroom we used, we'd take a break and go outside and in gigantic letters on the side of the building it would say DO NOT LEAN ON BUILDING. That was typical of the facilities. But it

was fun and I'm glad I got to stay in the Reserves. That was really fun because you only had time for flying there. You didn't have to do a lot of paperwork which I don't like or ground work, you just get in an airplane and fly and I had found a perfect home for me for my personality.

It sounds like a perfect deal for someone who likes flying, able to walk in on the weekend and fly the whole time.

Dave Fulton: Yeah, it was great.

And it's got to be pretty unique, too, as well that you were able to make your whole professional career pretty much aviation as well, right?

Dave Fulton: Yeah, because the airlines weren't hiring. Back in those days the airlines was a good job. I personally don't believe it is anymore, and I saw very quickly, I was 35, I was an old man to the airlines, so I was lucky enough to get that job there and found another way to continue, and I got to do some flying in Tennessee, and then I bought my airplane here about 11 years ago. So I could not complain about the life I've had in aviation has been wonderful.

That's great. Well sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to share with us some of your stories and anecdotes, and I think you heard when I talked to Mr. Holland, I always like to kind of wrap up the interview by mentioning that we're going to archive these and our goal is that they're going to be around hundreds of years from now just like we have the documents that belonged to David Crockett's widow and Stephen F. Austin's original Registro and that sort of thing.

Dave Fulton: That's wonderful.

So with that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say to somebody listening to this years from now about your service or anything along those lines.

Dave Fulton: All I would say is if this is heard some 20, 30, 40, 50 years from now, I hope this country is as patriotic and appreciates the sacrifice that a lot of people have done for the freedoms we have. I hope it's still the same.

Absolutely. Well sir I thank you very much.

Dave Fulton: I enjoyed it. It's fun!