Transcript: Ray Presson

Good morning. Today is Thursday, June 28, 2012. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Ray Presson. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Presson is at his home in Tyler, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time out of your day to talk to us. It's an honor for us. The first question that I always like to start with is please tell us just a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Ray Presson: Okay. I was born and raised in Fort Worth, Texas. The middle child of three. I have an older and a younger sister. Had a really simple, normal childhood, I guess. My feelings before I joined the Navy were, foreign travel was going over to Juarez, Mexico, when we'd go to El Paso to visit my grandparents. Never flown in an airplane in my life until I joined the Navy and flew to San Diego for boot camp. I was a really, really naïve young man, but knew from the get-go, that I was probably going to join the Navy when I graduated high school 'cause my father and grandfather had both served in the Navy. And they came back, so I figured if they did, I stood a good chance, so I enlisted just before I graduated high school, and started boot camp in June 1973.

June 1973. Tell us, sir, how your grandfather and father influenced you to go into the Navy. Did you talk to them a lot about their time in the Navy?

Ray Presson: Unfortunately, I didn't discuss with my grandfather his Navy time much. Didn't really find out a lot about it until later on in life when I was talking to my dad. And I got some hints about what my father's story was like and what his experiences were in the Pacific and primarily in the Philippine Islands. And it was very intriguing to me. It just seemed like the thing to do. And of course, one of my favorite shows on TV at the time was McHale's Navy, so I just knew that's where I needed to go. 'Cause they were having too much fun, so it was just kind of a sure thing.

Now, your father served in World War II and your grandfather, he served in World War I?

Ray Presson: Yes sir.

Did you find out what your grandfather did during World War I in the Navy?

Ray Presson: He was listed as a seaman second class. He was trained as the hospital corpsman, but for the best part of his tour in the Navy on the USS Rochester, he was the ship's tailor, which he ran for many years a tailor and dry cleaning store after he got out of the Navy. But he was the ship's tailor because he knew how to sew really well.

That's great.

Ray Presson: Spent a lot of time doing that.

And your father? What was his role in World War II? Was he aboard a ship?

Ray Presson: He was on board ship. I can't remember. I think it was the USS Cabal, but I'm not certain of that. He was a signalman. And he and his navigator didn't get along well so at first

opportunity, the navigator arranged for my father to be put ashore in the Philippine Islands working for a supply officer there who happened to like my dad's work ethic. And arranged to keep him there for the . . . Just about the remainder of his tour. And so, my father took and passed the second class exam for signalman second class but they withheld it from him pending his reenlistment. They said, "If you reenlist, we'll make you a second class." He says. "And if I don't reenlist?" They said, "We won't make you a second class," they says. "I guess I'll get out as a third class then." And he left and went home.

So they definitely, though, influenced you to join the Navy. You didn't think of joining any other branch of service?

Ray Presson: No. No.

Tell us what that was like. You said you'd never been aboard a plane before, so you get on a plane, you fly out to San Diego for your training. Tell us what your memories are of that.

Ray Presson: Boot camp in San Diego was quite interesting. It was in the summertime and it would be 100 to 105 degrees on the tarmac in the daytime. And at night, you'd have to cover with two blankets because it would get down to nearly freezing. So that was quite an experience. Boot camp was just pure culture shock. It was just like nothing I had ever experienced before. I actually had to have a three-pound waiver to join the Navy. I was 102 pounds, and for my height I had to be 105 when I went in. And when I came out of boot camp, I weighed 125 pounds.

Did they put you on double rations there in boot camp?

Ray Presson: No. It was just amazing what eight hours of sleep and three good meals a day will do for you. So, I've never been down to a hundred pounds since then. So boot camp was quite an experience for me. Wasn't sure, even then, that I knew what I was doing. I did know, after our ASVAB tests there in boot camp, I qualified for any program that the Navy had. And sitting talking with one of the counselors, he mentioned AW Rating. I said, "What do they do?" And he says, "I don't know. It says here that they fly around looking for submarines." He says, "And you get extra pay for flying." "That's what I want to do then." So that's how I became an AW, an anti-submarine warfare operator. I was selected in boot camp for that school.

When you were in boot camp, in '73, the war in Vietnam was still going, but had the draft been abolished yet at that point?

Ray Presson: No. Actually, I had a draft number, but they were not drafting a lot. It had not been abolished, but they were not drafting as many as they drew numbers on. So I never stood a chance of being drafted.

Were there any draftees in your platoon in boot camp?

Ray Presson: There were a couple but they were retreads. They had been drafted into the Army, served, got out, and then joined the Navy because they thought it was a better deal.

Okay, so they weren't drafted into the Navy? They'd been drafted prior.

Ray Presson: Right.

So by the time you were there, in a sense, the war was winding down. So you didn't have the stories of the draftees being there against their will and that sort of thing.

Ray Presson: Right. It was winding down significantly. And by the time I got through with all my training, Vietnam War was over.

Tell us where they sent you for your anti-submarine warfare training.

Ray Presson: Okay. I went to Millington, Tennessee, Naval Air Technical Training Center there. All of the aviation training schools were in Millington. They felt like that was a good place to send them because it was midway in the country.

It was there for a long time.

Ray Presson: Yes, it was. And went to school there, Class A school for AW Rating. Twelve and half weeks. And basically taught us what a submarine was, what it looked like on sonar, and other methods to locate them from an aircraft using passive and active sonars. So when I left there, I thought I knew it all, and they sent me to VP-30, out of Pax River, Maryland, for my flight training. That was quite an experience. Again, I got to do a whole lot of flying then, in the squadron.

What type of aircraft were you flying?

Ray Presson: I was flying in P-3 aircraft. P-3 Charlie aircraft.

Is that the Orion?

Ray Presson: Yes sir. It's the Orion. It's a four-engine turboprop aircraft. Crew complement is about 13. I was one of three AWs on there.

Were you enjoying it when you started doing it or did you realize, "Hey this is really cool. This is what I want to do"?

Ray Presson: Oh, it was absolutely phenomenal. I just thought I was it because one of the things about being an AW in the Cold War was that we all had to have security clearance. And we got to find out all kinds of neat stuff about the Russians that nobody else knew. So I really thought I was hot.

That's great. I was going to ask you as we go into this interview more. I think a lot of people, at least when I was young, I remember reading Hunt for Red October and all the kind of cat and mouse games that went on with the Soviet submarines in the Cold War. So this was . . . Vietnam was ending, and you were kind of transitioning more back into that kind of the Tom Clancy type submarine warfare type era. Tell us about once you get through your training and you're there at Patuxent River, tell us kind of what some of your missions would be like. How often you would fly or some of the things that you would do.

Ray Presson: Well, once I completed my training in VP-30 in Pax River, I got orders to VP-56 in Jacksonville, Florida. And me and two of my buddies through training all got scheduled to go that squadron. And we hit the ground there and two weeks later deployed to Sigonella, Sicily, for six months. Once we got to Sigonella, we flew almost daily.

Did you fly in the Mediterranean?

Ray Presson: We flew in the Mediterranean Sea, yes. And flew off the coast of Libya a lot. We were, you know, rattling swords, as it were, with Libya, and keeping track of all the Soviet submarines in the Mediterranean. So we flew quite a few hours there. I had real culture shock when I got to Sicily. We flew into Catania, Sicily. I got off the airplane and there stood the carabinieri, the police officers there, holding machine guns. I never knew policemen carried machine guns, you know. And the country there is thousands of years old, whereas here in Texas, it's hundreds of years old. And it just was . . . From an old Texas boy, it was just amazing, the differences in culture. It was just awesome for me. I knew then that that was what I wanted to be doing.

That's great. I was going to ask you a little bit about the submarines in the Mediterranean. How well were you able to track and identify Soviet subs?

Ray Presson: We actually were real good at it. Different types of submarines are easier to track than others. But not only myself but quite a few of the fellows in my squadron were really, really good at tracking submarines. We got a lot of on-top time, keepin' 'em at bay and gettin' em' on the run. It was a lot of fun. My second deployment, though, was to Keflavik, Iceland, which . . .

Oh wow.

Ray Presson: We were up there for the wintertime, which was dark 21 hours out of the day. But the northern Atlantic was where the Soviets sent most of their nuclear submarines out of, and so we . . . I really enjoyed that because we got a lot of nuclear submarine time tracking those guys coming out of there, whereas the Mediterranean was mostly diesel-powered subs.

And I imagine the diesel would be easier to pick up than nuclear, is that right?

Ray Presson: When your top running your diesels, yes, but when they're submerged running on battery, it's a whole lot trickier. It can be done, but you don't get near the ranges that you do on the nuclears or the diesels when they're on their motors.

How was it that you'd detect them? Did you drop buoys in the water?

Ray Presson: We'd drop buoys. Active and passive buoys. We used, of course, radar always was an option. Electronic countermeasures, in case they came up and fired off their radar. And we also used magnetic anomaly as well as infrared at nighttime. So we had a whole handful of sensors available to us to keep an eye on 'em.

With those buoys, were you able to retrieve those, or were those, once you dropped them, they were gone?

Ray Presson: No. They're expendable. They had a certain amount of life in them. They had a saltwater plug that would dissolve and it would sink to the bottom of the ocean.

How about U.S. submarines? Were you able to know kind of where they were? Was there a way to . . . How would you identify the difference between a Soviet sub and a U.S. sub?

Ray Presson: Well, everything that moves in the water makes sound. And different things make different sounds. Well, the Soviet submarines made certain sounds. The American submarines made certain sounds. And we were able to determine which was which. The U.S. submarines were much, much quieter, and much harder to detect. So when we were able to actually get some tracking on a U.S. sub, it was a lot of fun.

That's interesting. I guess you could tell, perhaps, that they knew you were tracking them based on actions that they would take, is that right?

Ray Presson: Yes. They, a lot of times, would come up to periscope depth and see us. They could hear us if we flew over the top of them. Those old turboprops make a lot of noise in the water, even flying over at hundreds of feet. So they could actually hear us and would take evasive action to try and get away from us. And that was what was fun, with the cat and mouse.

Were there ever any times when you felt like it was more than just cat and mouse? Or, it wasn't as high an attention level?

Ray Presson: There were a few times, and a few locations, that we had to keep close track on 'em because of rising tensions in the area. So we had to keep close track on all the submarines in the area to have an idea for where everybody was in case we had to do something about it.

I've read stories before about how sometimes when fighter planes would intercept Russian bombers out on missions, that the bombers would occasionally try to mess with the U.S. pilots by shining lasers at them, and things of that sort that could blind them. Did you ever have anything along those lines with the submarines, where they ever tried to do something that would hurt your aircraft that you were in?

Ray Presson: No. They didn't have any anti-aircraft weaponry on board that would be a threat to us. Our biggest fear was that they would sneak away and we'd lose track of 'em and not know where they would come up next.

So you were in Iceland for a number of years, and I understand . . . I know it's cold and dark, but I've also heard it's a really beautiful place. Did you find that to be true?

Ray Presson: Yes. It's quite a beautiful place. As a matter of fact, that was the one thing I really loved about the Navy was the places I got to see. You know, it's amazing what this big world is got in it that is out there for us to experience. So, I really enjoyed all the places I got to visit.

I know at a certain point, you were able to be stationed on an aircraft carrier, and you served on three different aircraft carriers, which I find fascinating. Tell us how that came about and some of your memories of being on the different carriers.

Ray Presson: Well, after my tour in VP-56, I went and taught for three years at the AW A School in Millington. And when I was due for orders out of there, the only thing they had available was orders to an aircraft carrier. And back then, they said every AW needs to do at least one ship tour, and then rotate back to the squadrons that they're primary in. So the only orders he had was to the USS Enterprise, which I didn't know a lot about. But I knew I liked that ship because it was the first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. I knew that much about it. And it was only a two-year tour. So I gladly took the orders to there. Checked on board when it was still

in the yards, coming off of a three-year yard period getting refueled. And we had a really neat captain on board at the time. Captain Robert Kelly. They called him Barney. And he, his entire career, had wanted to be the CO of the USS Enterprise. So when he got those orders, and we were able to come out of the yards, he drove it like a hot rod. He loved to go fast. He just really did. He put it through its paces and it just made for a really enjoyable cruise.

That's great.

Ray Presson: We went from Alameda, California, all the way over to Perth, Australia; Mombasa, Kenya. We covered the entire Pacific. Went north, northern Pacific, right off the coast of Alaska. We visited Japan. We went within 90 miles of the Russian coast. Like I say, we went out and showed the flag and rattled sabers all over the Pacific out there, just to see if we could stir up some interaction.

What year was this?

Ray Presson: That was in 1982.

Was it a six-month deployment when you were on that float?

Ray Presson: That one actually was almost eight months to the day.

Eight months, wow.

Ray Presson: Yes sir. And it was really an interesting cruise because unbeknownst to us at the time, John Walker, the U.S. spy for the Soviets, was very active at that time, and his cohort in crime, Jerry Whitworth, was a chief petty officer in the message shack onboard the Enterprise.

Oh, okay, I've read about that.

Ray Presson: Yeah, he was the leading chief at the telegraph office. And a lot of our secret messages never got transmitted, were never received where they were supposed to be going. And we just thought it was stuff falling through the cracks. Well, a couple years later when we found out about what was going on, we determined that's where our messages had gone. They had been shanghaied and sent to the Soviets. That was just kind of an interesting side note.

How did you find life to be on an aircraft carrier? I know I've had a chance to tour one and I know a lot of people have seen the documentaries. And they describe it as a city at sea. Did you find it to be that way?

Ray Presson: Absolutely. There is nothing that you can do in a small town that you can't do aboard an aircraft carrier except . . . Originally, you couldn't see women but they even have women onboard the carriers nowadays. But, yes, if you wanted something to eat 24 hours a day, you could get something to eat somewhere onboard the ship. The crew itself was about 3,500 people. When the air wing was onboard, it's about another 1,500 so you got anywhere from 5,000 to 5,200 people onboard a ship, a single ship.

That's a lot.

Ray Presson: That's a lot. And what was funny was my mother, when I was on the America, my mother wrote me and said that a friend of hers had a son that was on that ship and wanted to know if I knew him. I wrote her back and said, "Mom, you know, chances are I probably don't know him," because of just the sheer size of the ship and the fact that when we are underway, we were working 12 hours on, 12 hours off, or more. But actually, one of the guys that she asked me about, I did know. I got to meet, and we got to be good friends and got to visit back and forth about our mothers at church.

That's great. During this time, were you married?

Ray Presson: Yes. I was married to my best friend's sister-in-law. She was a twin. My best friend married this young lady and I met her sister, and we ended up getting married about six weeks later. And we raised two beautiful children together. So she got to stay home and guard the home front while I was out at sea having a good time.

Back in 1982, they didn't have the Skype or the Internet, email, that sort of thing. Did you have any, I would assume that it was primarily just mail?

Ray Presson: Primarily. We did have Western Union. We were able to receive Western Union messages, and in an emergency they had satellite telephone communication available but it had to be a real emergency before you were you able to use the satellite phone.

That's what I've heard.

Ray Presson: That was about all you had available.

How long would it take for you to get mail when you were out there on a long deployment like that?

Ray Presson: Believe it or not, we could get mail within seven to 10 days just about anywhere we were.

That's pretty good.

Ray Presson: That was real good. They had C-2 CODs that would fly on and off every day to bring mail in and out as well as other supplies and new personnel and transferring personnel out. So we had a pretty good supply system set up where we were able to keep in touch pretty well.

And the CODs, that's the carrier on-board delivery?

Ray Presson: Yes, that's what it stands for.

During that time on the Enterprise, were you flying yourself or were you stationed just on the ship?

Ray Presson: I was assigned to ship's company but because I was an AW, we had to fly a minimum of four hours a month to maintain our proficiency. So, not having any P-3s around, what most of us did is we caught flights with the helicopter squadron, and we would fly with them. During flight operations they'd put a helicopter in what they called starboard D or starboard delta where you just fly in a racetrack pattern on the right side of the ship while the

planes are taking off in case one of 'em takes a cold cat or crashes for whatever reason. The helicopter is available with rescue swimmers on the spot to get in there and save the crew. So we would get our flight hours with them, and that was real enjoyable because helicopters normally would fly around between 50 and 100 feet off the water. We'd sit there with a strap on, tied into the aircraft, dangling our feet over the side, looking between our feet at the water, you know, from 50 feet up out in the middle of the ocean.

That's pretty wild. There's not a lot of people that can say they've done that.

Ray Presson: A lot of fun.

What type of helicopters were those? Are those like the Seasprites?

Ray Presson: They were H-3, SH-3s.

I guess I'm not familiar with those. Tell us a little bit about what those were.

Ray Presson: There were just workhorses.

Did they resemble the Blackhawk-type helicopter?

Ray Presson: No, they're an older version. They are a little larger, little bulkier, but they were the workhorse of the fleet. As a matter of fact, they probably still use SH-3s in the fleet today. I don't know. Most of them have been replaced since then but . . .

But those are different than the Seasprite helicopters?

Ray Presson: Right. I believe so.

What about the S-3, I believe it was the S-3 Viking? Was that an anti-submarine warfare plane?

Ray Presson: Yes.

Did you ever fly on that?

Ray Presson: No, I never flew on the S-3 but, as ship's company there in the anti-submarine warfare module, we were responsible for briefing the S-3 crews and the H-3 crews on their missions. We would give them oceanographic predictions, weather reports, and give them tasking as far as submarines and stuff like that. And we would control them, brief them and debrief them when they came back from their missions.

Was there much difference between the capabilities of the Viking and the Orion in terms of what they could do in terms of tracking submarines?

Ray Presson: Not really. They were both extremely capable. Just based on your proficiency and the systems that were available to you. In the S-3, you had one AW that basically did the jobs of three AWs onboard the Orion. So you stayed pretty handy and pretty busy most of the time. He did share some of his duties with the tactical coordinator onboard.

I was just curious because I know that the Orion was a land-based aircraft and the Viking, I think, pretty much was used off the carriers. So I was curious if there was any limitations or advantages or disadvantages between using the two different platforms.

Ray Presson: The biggest disadvantage of the S-3 Viking is its time on station. It didn't have as long a legs as the Orion did as far as fuel sustainability. The Orion could fly 13, 14 hours, and the S-3 normally was scheduled for about a three-hour flight. If you extended them for a second flight cycle, then you'd send out a Texaco, an in-flight refueler.

Okay, a Texaco.

Ray Presson: And they would top them off with fuel so they could stay out another cycle. Most of them didn't fly beyond four and a half hours, sometimes six if we couldn't get a replacement on station for them and they had something good going on.

Tell us a little bit too about . . . Did you have a chance to ever watch some of the nighttime carrier landings because I've always heard and read that can be kind of a hairy time aboard an aircraft carrier.

Ray Presson: Oh yeah. It really gets spooky at times, especially when we were up in the northern Pacific. The seas were really, really rough, and it would not be uncommon for an aircraft coming back to have to take two or three passes before he was able to catch an arresting wire and get safely on deck. Yeah, it was pretty hairy. I would take a Navy pilot over any other pilot in the world if it came down to it because they can do it the way nobody else can do it, you know? None of the rest of 'em have their airstrip driving away from them at 30 miles an hour, you know? And they have to try and pick that little bitty dot out of the middle of the ocean and land on it. A thousand foot doesn't look very long when you're coming in at 130 knots.

Yeah, and they have to land into an arresting cable to stop them which is kind of unusual.

Ray Presson: Right.

So you did that tour a couple years aboard the Enterprise, and I know at some point later you were on the America and the Kennedy. So you really got to see a lot, or have a lot of time and service aboard carriers. Was that just something that you found that you liked or was it they told you you had to keep doing that?

Ray Presson: Well, I really enjoyed my tour on the Enterprise, and when I came up for orders, they didn't have any orders back to VP squadron so I would have to change platforms, but he kept telling me he had this one set of orders to USS America. And I said, "Okay, I'll go there." And he says, "Well, you know there's no training en route. You just go straight from here to there." And I said, "How long you give me to get there?" And he said, "Ten days." I said, "I can drive across the States in ten days," so I went directly from the Enterprise to the USS America.

Where was the America homeported out of?

Ray Presson: It was homeported out of Norfolk, Virginia. It was coming out of a yard period also when I checked on board there, and it was quite interesting. We had a captain named Snuffy Smith, was our commanding officer. And his favorite thing to say when he would talk to the

crew every day on the 1MC, the loudspeaker system, when he would sign off, he'd say, "Press on." Well, my name being Presson, I got teased a lot about that.

That's really funny.

Ray Presson: And I was selected for chief while I was onboard the America, while we were in the Mediterranean, and so when we pulled into Monaco, we got initiated there and the captain came down and congratulated us and put us through our advancement. And when he saw my nametag, he went, "Ah, Presson." And I went, "Aye aye sir." It was quite interesting.

That is pretty funny. I could see where you would get a lot of ribbing over that.

Ray Presson: The one thing I really liked about the America is when its keel was laid, it was designed to have a sonar. None of the other aircraft carriers were designed with sonar. This one had a sonar dome on the bow of it, and during my tour they decided to come and install a cylindrical array, sonar array, type of array in the bow in our sonar dome, and connect it to our equipment in our anti-submarine warfare module onboard for experimental purposes. And I got really involved in installing that and working that. And I remember one time we were pulling out of port and we had not re-flooded the sonar dome. You have to have it flooded with water to keep the bow from collapsing due to the pressure against it as you're going to the water. And we were filling it as they cast off lines, and the captain called down to our warrant officer and says, "Can you guarantee me that this bow will not collapse or fall off?" And Warrant Officer Cantor says, "I can't guarantee you that I'll be here tomorrow, Captain, but I don't think your dome's gonna collapse." What he didn't tell 'em, was that I was down at the dome 30 feet below the water line holding on to a fire hose rapidly, as fast as I could, filling it up with water so we could tap it off before we got to the breakwater. Just barely got it done but it was quite an interesting time.

Yeah, that sounds like it. I wouldn't have wanted to have done that. So, why was it, you think, that the America was the only one to have its bow built in that manner? Just kind of experimental?

Ray Presson: Well, that and it was . . . The keel for it was laid the same time the keel was laid for the USS Enterprise, and they actually . . . The America was designed originally to be a nuclear carrier also. But before the keel was laid, they changed and said, "No, we're gonna make it conventional," so they swapped keels, the Enterprise and the America. They just designed it with the sonar dome in the front and never put a sonar in it. It was just a sealed space up until the time we came on board and then saw the sonar array in the bow.

Very interesting. So how long were you with the America? A couple years as well?

Ray Presson: I did two years there, and from there I went to Dam Neck, Virginia, and taught at fleet combat training center. I taught there the ins and outs of the anti-submarine warfare modules onboard aircraft carriers. So I taught AWs how to go to the aircraft carriers and survive and to do their jobs there. I did that from 1985 until 1989 when I got commissioned.

That's great. Tell us about getting commissioned, how that process went.

Ray Presson: I applied for the limited duty officer, chief warrant officer program, when I was at Dam Neck, and you have to be interviewed by . . . Part of the selection program is being interviewed by other officers at the command who would then evaluate you and put that in as part of your packet going to Washington for selection. And through the process I had answered all their warfare questions, you know, pretty well. They didn't really catch me flatfooted with anything until the very, very last question. The lieutenant commander looks at me and says, "Well, Chief Presson, in your opinion, what is the cause for all the traffic problems in the Tidewater area?" And I just . . . My mouth dropped open and I just kind of stared at him for about five seconds, and I said, "Too many cars." They all broke up and I thought, "Okay, I've blown it now for sure." And they sent my packet off and a few weeks later it came back and I had been selected for ensign, limited duty officer.

Wow. I'm sure that had to have been a great moment for you and your family.

Ray Presson: Well, I just knew they had it wrong. I just did not . . . I just could not for the life of me believe, until I saw it in writing, that I had been selected. I thought somebody was BS-ing me. Because I was also up for senior chief that year, and the day that the officer board let out, my detailer calls me and said, "Are you taking your commission because if you are, I'm going to pull your record from the senior chief listing so to make room for someone else." So I told him, "Yeah, go ahead and pull my name." So he did and I got my commission.

How long was it after you got the notice that you actually got commissioned? Was it pretty quick?

Ray Presson: I found out in February, got commissioned on May 1st.

That's great. I take it that you were able to stay then in your specialty as an anti-submarine warfare operator, is that right?

Ray Presson: Well, as a limited duty officer, the responsibilities are just that. They are limited in scope compared to other line officers. And my designator, my specialty, was aviation operations which encompassed ASW. So I got to continue doing that but from the officer's viewpoint instead of the enlisted. In other words, I was more responsible for the briefing, the debriefing, the message writing, and that sort of stuff, and the enlisted were more the nuts and bolts, hands on, doing the nitty gritty.

That's right. The ones that do the work.

Ray Presson: Yeah, exactly.

That makes sense then. So it wasn't like they commissioned you and then they sent you off to a completely different type of specialty as an LDO.

Ray Presson: Right.

That's great. When you finally got out, what was your rank?

Ray Presson: Well, that's kind of interesting. From my payback for getting my commission, I did three years on the Kennedy. We got a five-day notice from the captain that we were going to the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, for Desert Shield.

This was in 1990, early 1991?

Ray Presson: Yes sir. So we had to go fight that battle. But when I transferred off of there in ’91, I went back to Dam Neck to the same schoolhouse teaching the officer courses for the same thing. And at that time they were downsizing because the war was over. They were downsizing. And as an officer, I was never screened for lieutenant commander. I had been selected for lieutenant and was working as a lieutenant. I was frocked, they call it.

So you’re lieutenant JG at that point?

Ray Presson: I was actually JG, being paid for JG, but wearing the uniform of a lieutenant. And as an LDO, once you get to lieutenant, you either have to accept a permanent commission or resign your commission and you revert back to your highest enlisted grade, which at that point for me, would have been master chief. If I had remained as an LDO, I would have had to . . . I was never screened for lieutenant commander so I was stuck at my pay grade. I’d been an O3 forever. I would never be able to screen for that because I had limited time. They were cutting back the amount of time you could stay on active duty. And I would have to go from ship to shore, ship to shore, and I would stand duty everywhere I went.

Sure.

Ray Presson: Where the enlisted detailer who I kept in touch with because he was an AW, I was an AW, offered me the chance to go to run the A school in Millington as the master chief if I resigned my commission. Being a master chief in the AW rating, I never would go to sea. I’d never stand duty anywhere, so I’d always be shoresided. And after 20 years or right at 20 years, I was ready to stay shoreside for a while, so I resigned my commission, reverted back to master chief, and moved back to Millington to run the A school. And that was my last tour there. I retired from there in 1994.

When did they close down Millington?

Ray Presson: Right after I left. They were in the process of moving all that to Pensacola. As a matter of fact, my last tour, I got involved in the design of the building for the aviation training schools down there, and the rewriting of all the curricula that was gonna be moved down there, but I retired just before the move. I retired in October of ’94, and the move began, I believe, in the spring of ’95.

What did they end up doing with that site, do you know?

Ray Presson: Bureau of Naval Personnel now exists there. They took down all the gates, took down the fences, widened the street, tore down the barracks, built some really beautiful facilities, and moved everybody from Washington, DC, down to Millington. The only part of it that still resembles a military installation is the north side of the highway where the airfield is.

That’s interesting. So they still have an airfield there?

Ray Presson: Yes sir, they do.

That's interesting. I didn't know that. I was curious as to what ended up becoming of there. There's a lot of places like that now that have been changed or repurposed or in some cases, they just kind of become ghost bases.

Ray Presson: Well, unfortunately the only command that I was ever assigned to that still is in existence is the USS Enterprise. The Kennedy has been decommissioned. It's now a training carrier. The America has been sunk as a reef. VP-56 was decommissioned back in, I think it was in 1985. So all those have either died, gone away, or been decommissioned, so I really feel like an old man.

Yeah, it's a strange feeling. The battalion that I served with on active duty in Camp Lejeune, they just shut them down, I guess, the first part of, I want to say May, just because they're doing some restructuring and impending draw-downs and that sort of thing, but it is strange when one of your old units goes away. It's like, they're gone so . . . It's definitely kind of a sad feeling.

Ray Presson: Yeah, even my boot camp's gone.

That's right. They're all in Great Lakes now.

Ray Presson: Great Lakes now. Yeah, my son went to Great Lakes as did my father. My grandfather and I both went to San Diego.

What did they do with that location there in San Diego?

Ray Presson: Well, I heard they were going to . . . The City of San Diego was going to repurpose the barracks there as homeless shelters.

I hadn't heard that.

Ray Presson: For at least part of it. I don't know what finally actually became of it but that was what they were gonna do with a portion of the barracks on the south side of the base. I don't know what all actually became of it.

That's pretty prime real estate next to the airport and not very far from downtown. I know with the recruit depot there where I went to boot camp, they for a long time wanted to get a hold of that and the Marine Corps has been able to fight them off all these years. But that's a great piece of land, and they've kind of tried to make that argument that, "Well, hey, the Marine Corps, they only need one boot camp just like the Navy." And the Marine Corps has been able to, so far, successfully make that argument that, "No, we need to keep two. We've got one on each coast." So I hope they never get rid of it because it's a really historic depot, and just the traditions there. It would be kind of sad to see it gone.

Ray Presson: I agree. I agree.

So when you got out, then did you come back to Texas at that point?

Ray Presson: Well, actually at that point I moved back to Virginia Beach. The lady I was married to at that time was still on active duty onboard a ship. Her ship pulled into dry dock in Norfolk for a year and then went back. Her ship was homeported out of Guam. So when her ship headed back to Guam, I packed up my bags and we moved to Guam and lived out there for two

years. And then she got orders to San Angelo, Texas, as a Navy recruiter. So we moved there and I lived there for about two years, and my father was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1989, and his condition was worsening. When my wife and I separated, I moved back to Fort Worth to help my mother with my father. Long story short, I met up with my old high school sweetheart at a class reunion, and she and I have been married now for nine years.

Oh, that's great. And now you are in Tyler and she works at the veterans home there and you kind of volunteer some? That's great.

Ray Presson: It's just an excuse to get to hang out with her some, you know?

That's great. You said that you have a son that went into the Navy, is that right?

Ray Presson: Yes.

So four generations, then, of your family have served in the Navy. I'm sure you felt proud when he went in.

Ray Presson: I did. I was a little concerned for him because he was in during 9/11, and his ship, the USS Constellation . . .

That's another carrier, right?

Ray Presson: Another carrier which was older than any of 'em I had been on. He ended up going back to the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and fought the Iraqi war again to finish up what we had started in '91, so we were very concerned about his welfare and his safety until he got back. But when he got back, he decided he didn't want to make a career out of it. He kept apologizing to me, and I said, "Son, it's not for everybody."

That's right. He did an honorable service and that's great.

Ray Presson: He did and he did a great job at it, and they made a man out of him, and he's just a super young man.

What was his specialty when he was in the Navy?

Ray Presson: He was a machinist's mate. He worked down in the . . . His claim to fame was he lit the fires in the boilers for the USS Constellation's last deployment, and he put out the fires in the USS Constellation boilers for the very last time.

That's neat. That's a hard job too, working in machinery on a big vessel like that.

Ray Presson: Oh yes.

Well, sir, I tell you, I really appreciate getting a chance to interview you today and learn a little bit about your story and your service. I'm fascinated by the whole anti-submarine warfare aspect and being aboard three different carriers. I think that's really neat that you had a chance to do all that and go all the places you did. As you probably know, I think you know a little bit about the program, but this was started several years back by Commissioner Patterson really for two purposes. First is to thank veterans, all veterans in Texas, for their service. So in about a week or so, we'll be sending you copies of this interview on disk that you can keep or give to friends or

family or whomever along with a nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson. And we put that in a kind of a commemorative-type binder. And secondly, our purpose is to archive these interviews for posterity. The idea is that people potentially hundreds of years from now can listen to these interviews or read the transcripts and get some sort of understanding about various veterans' service and what they did and what that meant. We have documents here at the Land Office that go back to the 1700s. We have the original registro that Stephen F. Austin kept in his own hand of the settlers that came to Texas. It's all in Spanish. And we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo, and it says on there he was discharged from the Texas Army by reason of death. So we have all those things here, and so our goal is to add these to that. With that in mind, is there anything that you might want to say to somebody listening to this interview long after you and I are both gone?

Ray Presson: Wow. If you get an opportunity to serve this great country, do so, because you will experience things you will not experience in any other way, and you will make friends that will live with you for a lifetime, and have experiences that will never fade.

That's great. Yes sir. I agree with that. And then on another note, sir, hopefully at some point soon I'll be able to get out there to Tyler to meet you in person and bring one of these recorders with me. I was talking with my boss the other day and he said it's really just a matter of making sure they have the funds and the travel budget and everything. But I think we'd really love for you to be able to do some of these interviews yourself with some of the veterans there in Tyler. I think you'd really enjoy it and it would be great for our program too.

Ray Presson: I would love to do it.

Sir, again, thank you for your time. I appreciate you taking some time today to let us interview you. We'll be talking to you again soon.

Ray Presson: All right, Mr. Crabtree, thank you so much.

All right, sir, take care.

Ray Presson: Have a good day.

You too, bye bye.

Ray Presson: Bye bye.