

**Interview with John T. Mason, Jr.**  
**by Benis M. Frank**  
**July 16, 1983**

[OHMAR presented the 1983 Forrest C. Pogue Award for excellence in oral history to Dr. John T. Mason, Jr., at its fall meeting in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, on October 15, 1983. Dr. Mason had just retired as director of the U.S. Naval Institute's oral history program, which he founded thirteen years earlier. He was interviewed by Ben Frank, head of the Marine Corps' Oral History Section, and the first president of OHMAR.]

FRANK: Jack, as you know, as the recipient of the Forrest C. Pogue Award of OHMAR, we'd like to get an interview down with the recipient for the OHMAR newsletter. I've been asked to do it with you, and I'm pleased that you are able to spend a day here or part of the day talking about your involvement in oral history. I know that you began doing interviews for Columbia for the Naval Project. Do you want to talk about that, please?

MASON: Yes, I began that series of interviews back in 1960, and do you want to know how I got involved?

FRANK: Yes.

MASON: Well, my wife [Elizabeth Mason] was working there at the Oral History Research Office. Allan Nevins was still chairman of the advisory committee, and Louis Starr was director of the office. But Allan Nevins was very much on the scene. He was also a member of the Secretary of the Navy's History Advisory Committee, I guess it was.

FRANK: Secretary of the Navy's Advisory Committee on Naval History, yes.

MASON: Nevins had been to Washington for one of these sessions—the time of year I can't recall—and he came back to New York and asked Betty if she could think of anybody in the area who might do naval interviews since he felt that they should have a Navy section to their oral history project at Columbia. So, she thought about it, and she being an old Navy gal herself—I suppose this is the reason he went to her—but she couldn't come forth with any name. So, she came home to me that night or a night later and said, "The Professor wanted somebody to interview Navy people in the area," and could I come up with some suggestion because I had known so many Navy people, having served in Naval Intelligence during World War II. Well, that had been a long time before and I hadn't kept up my Navy connections, but at any rate I told her I would think about it and see if I could suggest somebody to them.

I suppose I promptly dropped the subject, because I didn't do very much thinking about it. I didn't really know anybody whom I could suggest, and I knew that they didn't have in their stable of interviewers at Columbia anybody who was cognizant of naval affairs. So, she didn't approach me again on this for some time and finally came back to me and said, "Have you thought of anybody who could do this kind of interviewing? The Professor is pressing me again and I can't come up with anybody." I said, "No, I haven't," and she looked at me; I can see her

now. She said, "Why don't you do it?" And I said, "Dear, how can I possibly do it? You know what my schedule is here in this parish. We're building this place up." We had seen to the erection of the church building and a new rectory and this was all in being. And she said, "Well, of course." I worked seven days a week and every night I was out at some kind of meeting. She said, "Well, that's precisely why I suggest that you do it. I've always thought that you should take a day off during the week and this would give you an opportunity to do something quite different from running a parish and it would bring back some pleasant associations for you." Well, I said, "I'll think about it."

I took a long time to think about it again. She finally came back, she's a very persistent gal, you know. And she came back and she said, "What have you thought about this, will you do it?" I said, "I have great doubts about it. I've never done any interviewing in my life and so I don't know whether I could do this." And she said, "You interview every day. You see parishioners who come in with problems and you draw them out on the extent of the problem and ask them all sorts of probing questions. Of course you are interviewing. So you do have a technique whether you know it or not." Her persuasive powers were enough to have me say, "Yes, I'll do it." Then I arranged to take off one day a week, which was largely on Monday, and I undertook this series of interviews. At first it was limited to the Navy.

FRANK: I was going to ask you, and this is a good place to interrupt you, did Allan Nevins recommend to Judge Eller, Admiral [Ernest M.] Eller who was the head of Navy History at the time, that the Navy have a program, or did Eller come to Nevins and ask him to undertake it?

MASON: Well, they both sat on the Secretary's Advisory Committee and I don't know what the conversation was between them, but I do know that once I had agreed to do this, one of the first people I went to talk with was Judge Eller, who agreed to get me started and to make it possible for me to approach various people, people whom he suggested. Now, this was in the initial stages and after I got franked it was necessary to get a little help with an individual who was reluctant, why then I would get in touch with Judge and he would help me.

FRANK: So, the program in a sense was not a Navy program being undertaken by Columbia, it was strictly a Columbia program.

MASON: It was a Columbia program, yes.

FRANK: Okay.

MASON: And at the instigation of Allan Nevins.

FRANK: Now, you said, "people in the area." Were you initially to interview naval officers in the New York area, the metropolitan area?

MASON: Well, it wasn't necessarily confined to the area. There were a number who lived in the area, I discovered. And I think I approached every one of them in time. But, it also

immediately involved Washington people. And for the most part, the program was confined to the Washington area and the New York area.

I soon developed a routine that involved leaving the church in Haworth after the second youth group was dispersed—took a place from LaGuardia, stayed at the Wardman Park Hotel, interviewed on Monday and returned that night to LaGuardia. Perhaps it is interesting to note that in those days I carried a Tandberg [tape recorder], weighing about 50 pounds, for interviewing. Matters were facilitated when the Eastern Shuttle came into being. I was a passenger on their first flight from LaGuardia to Washington and have a picture to show for it. [Eastern Air Lines operated the shuttle from April 30, 1961 until 1989.]

FRANK: Sort of the Washington/New York corridor.

MASON: Yes, it was easy for me to get to these people. As a matter of fact, one of the first men I did interview was Tom Kinkaid, Admiral Kinkaid, who was [General Douglas] MacArthur's 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet commander and who was in command at Leyte Gulf/ This was at my own instigation. I had, when I was in naval history, seen all these dispatches coming in on the battles and I remembered so vividly seeing dispatches signed "Kinkaid." I could visualize the admiral riding the waves, you, see, the nature of his message had to do with some battle—Leyte Gulf was one of them, but there were others.

FRANK: San Bernardino Strait, of course.

MASON: Yes, yes, all of those were involved. So, he was the first one I went to see. And Judge Eller helped me to get to him. I went to Kinkaid and found him a perfectly charming man, and his wife equally charming as a woman. I can see Tom Kinkaid sitting up at his desk in his office and being very, very frustrated because he had before him a half-completed manuscript of his story of Leyte Gulf. He was not a man who was adept at writing, and he felt terribly frustrated because he couldn't express himself in the way he wanted to express himself. So when I outlined what I proposed to do with him, to have him tell me about these various engagements and about how whole career, it was as though some weight was lifted from his shoulders. He entered into it very joyfully and we had a wonderful time together.

FRANK: How did you prepare for these interviews? Now, for the Marine Corps interviews, the general officers, I go to their OQJs, their officer qualification jackets, and I'm able to excerpt the chronological listing of their duty assignments and perhaps look at their fitness reports to see who their seniors were and to get this type of association. Were you able to get any such thing?

MASON: In some cases I did. I used all the information I could lay my hands on. It wasn't always from the official files of the Navy, although Judge Eller did help me there too. There were always jackets of information that I could use. In later time, why of course, I had access to a tremendous amount of it. I remember in interviewing Admiral [Robert] Dennison, he got all of his files and all of his secret dispatches, which were on file over here in the Washington Navy Yard, and he brought them to his office and had them kept in the safe. His secretary

almost had a stroke. She was so worried about these classified things.

Then when we agreed on the nature of the content of the interview that was forthcoming in his case, I went to his office in the morning—we had an interview right after lunch—and I'd spend about three or four hours reading his files and all his dispatches that pertained to the period we were going to talk about. This was immensely and very authentic, actually, because I could be very specific in the kind of question I asked, and it was not necessary for Dennison to peruse his papers again. He was so agile mentally. He was a very brilliant man. So it wasn't necessary for him to refresh his mind. I refreshed his mind, really. He was using me to a greater extent than most did. So that's just an example.

FRANK: Did you find yourself getting on the "old boy" circuit that—

MASON: Oh, very soon. I like the term, "I got franked into the fraternity." I no longer had any problem with them. It was like a grapevine. Word was passed by word of mouth from one man to another and I was accepted by them. This was largely due to my dear old friend, Tommy Hart, who was very senior—

FRANK: Very old at this time.

MASON: Very old, but he was still very alert. He was in his eighties, and he was in communication—he wrote voluminously to all his old Navy cronies, very large correspondence, and he also carried on many telephone conversations with some of them, like Harold Stark and people like that. When Tommy put his imprimatur on me, that was the last word, you see, I had no further difficulty at all.

FRANK: One of the things that's come up in a number of the OHA Colloquia is dealing with sensitive subjects. Of course, during that period of time, the people you've spoken to during the Columbia period and the Naval Institute period, I'm sure that a lot of things that were imparted to you off the record or on the record must have been quite startling. Was it startling in the minds of the interviewees or was it actually startling?

MASON: Well, I don't know that it was startling. Certainly it wasn't startling to me because during the war I had access to all sorts of secret material.

FRANK: Startling may not be the word, but do you get the sense of what I'm saying?

MASON: Yes, yes, and in the case of these men, you mean what they told me, whether they were surprised that they told me some of these things? I don't think so. Once in a while a man would say, "Oh, I should not have told you that," or something of this sort. But for the most part they didn't. I have learned through the years that the senior officers are far less concerned for material that's classified than lesser lights in the service. They're not so concerned about the rules any longer, although they don't break them intentionally. But nevertheless, I don't think they live with the idea that they have to reserve comment on this or that.

FRANK: Early on when General [Edwin H.] Simmons took over as director of Marine Corps history, he objected to the idea of having any of our interviews classified “closed” or any restrictions put on them because he didn’t want our oral history collection to be a repository for grinding tired old men’s axes. Did you find any of that?

MASON: I found that the majority of these naval officers were reluctant to say derogatory things about their peers.

FRANK: They were gentlemen.

MASON: They were gentlemen and they did not think this was the thing to do. Well, Admiral [Chester] Nimitz felt very much that way and that was the reason he didn’t want to put anything on tape because he was so upset by what General [Bernard] Montgomery had written about his colleagues in World War II that he didn’t want to be guilty of anything like that.

Now, in terms of classified material, Admiral Dennison, who had access to the top flight information on the Bay of Pigs and all that sort of thing, had those dispatches for me to examine and he felt at the time that this was the only collection of these dispatches that existed because Bobby Kennedy had called all the participants in to the Cabinet room and told them to bring their dispatches and material that pertained to the Bay of Pigs and when they left they were asked to leave them and they never got them back. But Dennison got his back because he insisted to General [Maxwell] Taylor that it was his material and he was going to get it. So he got it and preserved it. When I saw it, he was under the impression that this was the only record that existed for some of these interchanges or dispatches.

I was aware of the nature of the classification and I talked with him about it and told him after it had been transcribed that I thought certain areas should be closed and not available for a given period of time. Dennison said, “I don’t think so.” And I said, “But I know what the NSA [National Security Agency] people think about this.” He said, “I don’t give a damn about them.” And he said, “You see that this is made available. I think it should be on the record.” So I went to Ed Hooper, who was then—

FRANK: Director of Naval History.

MASON: —Director of Naval History, and I told Ed about my dilemma, and he said, “Well, let me take the manuscript and review it and then I’ll tell you both whether I think it should be opened or whether certain sections should be closed.” Ed read the record and he said that, “There are two sections in here that I think should be closed.” I told Dennison this, or he told Dennison, and he said, “I don’t think so. I think they should be open.” Well, when I made up the volume, I eliminated those sections from all the copies other than Dennison’s copy, and I put in a little note in the other copies saying that this material had been removed and at some future date would be added to the volume. That was my way of dealing with it.

I had one other instance of that sort, I think it was [Admiral U.S. Grant] Ollie Sharp, who had—

FRANK: CinCPac. [Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command]

MASON: He was CinCPact and he had some very firm opinions about things and he suffered almost martyrdom when he was CinCPac. So, first he wanted to hold his tapes because he was uncertain as to what he wanted to do with the interviews. He wanted to hold the tapes and not have them transcribed. I, on the telephone, remember telling him, "Admiral, we have sunk some money into this, and I think that we should hold the tapes and have them transcribed, but hold the transcript too until such time as you make up your mind what you want to do with the total manuscript." He hemmed and hawed on that. So I have, and it's in the file at the Naval Institute, a very strong letter which I wrote him and I said I am quite cognizant of classifications and all that sort of thing because of my record—and I outlined it to him—in naval intelligence. I said, "I think that you should trust me that I'm telling you the truth and that I will observe this." So, he did, and he let me keep the tape and transcript.

Later on, when it came to putting the interviews in a volume, he wanted me to get clearance for these things and it was not only clearance with the Navy, which was easy enough, but it was clearance with the State Department and the Joint Chiefs, and that was a real stickler. So I told him that—again I had many telephone conversations with him on this subject—I remember telling him that I really had no clout, but he was a four star admiral and if he wanted clearance on these things, he better follow through himself. And he did, he followed through with the Joint Chiefs and the State Department, got clearance on the whole thing. Of course, time had passed and it wasn't so highly classified then, I suppose, it had been previously. But those are illustrations of the sort of thing you run into.

FRANK: Was the Sharp interview the only one that—or the Dennison interview the only one that you went to Naval History for clearance on?

MASON: No, no, it seemed to me there were some others. A Coast Guard man comes to mind, too, Admiral [Chester R.] Bender, who was Commandant. Bender was a very meticulous man who when he got his transcript sent it back to me with innumerable sections marked: "This is classified; that is classified," and so forth. He was terribly sensitive because he had gotten burned on that incident, the Russian who jumped ship up at Cape Cod or someplace. Bender had to take the brunt of this and he never forgot it. He had told me this story in his own version and he wanted to close the whole thing. He wanted to close any number of sections which was very picayunish, really. I had enough sense to know that this was not necessary. So I called the security man at the Coast Guard and told him what my problem was. He said, "Well, why don't you bring it over and we'll go through it together." So we went through it together, piece by piece, and every one of them he set asked and said it was not necessary to classify that any longer. So we got the whole thing released.

FRANK: Did you find many of the interviews you did both for Columbia and for the Naval Institute restricted by the interviewee or did you—

MASON: Some few, now I can give you the ultimate of that and that was Columbia and

that was Admiral Mick [Robert B.] Carney.

FRANK: I was just about to say Carney.

MASON: Yes, Carney is a very frank man, as you know, very opinionated about many things and especially about people, except where Admiral [William] Halsey was concerned, and there he was reluctant to say very much. But, about everybody else he was very, very outspoken. So when we finished the series, Carney said he was going to close it for 25 years, which was an unprecedented length of time as far as I was concerned. But he was closing it for that period of time because he said, "I'll be gone and then I don't give a damn." So that was the way and it's still closed until, I think '86. He's still alive. [Carney died in 1990, at the age of 95.]

FRANK: He's still alive, of course. His son died. Did you find as you went on there was a lesser reluctance on the part of the interviewee to restrict?

MASON: Yes, yes. In part, Ben, I think it had something to do with me and it had something to do with this clerical collar which I, at first, was most reluctant to reveal. I remember early on when I was first talking with Judge Eller, saying to Judge, "Now, as I embark on this series, please don't tell them that I am a clergyman because I think it will be detrimental to a relationship I might establish with them." My concept of a Navy man at that time was an old salt who swore and cussed and did all sorts of things and I felt that this might inhibit him, you see.

FRANK: Yes, yes.

MASON: Well, it was entirely wrong. It was not the case at all. It was a great help, and it, I think, built up a certain amount of trust in these men that I had integrity and that I was not going to betray them in any way or take advantage of them. That's what it came out to be in the end, I think. And it certainly was a tremendous asset with some of these men. I found Navy men as a whole, whatever their faith, I found them extremely high caliber people with a great amount of integrity and well, I just found it a tremendous experience. I do think in retrospect that being a clergyman was a great asset. It was borne out by Jack Kane [Rear Admiral John. D. H. Kane, director of Naval History] recently when he wrote me a letter and said that he thought that my background had been most helpful in establishing a relationship of trust with many of these men. Well, it was a very complicated thing. I mean, it had to do with being franked in and it had to do with a lot of other things. But that, I think, was an element.

FRANK: Tell me about the techniques that you developed early on. What technique, perhaps, did you use and how did it change over the period of time?

MASON: Well, I suppose my technique is a most informal one to begin with. When I first started, I tried as frequently as I could to go and meet a man in his home environment or wherever it was, without any tape recorder in two and simply get to know him as a man; to establish at that point a relationship and to go from there. But, it wasn't always possible and it cost money to travel when you're not going to get a tape as a result. So I couldn't do that, for

instance, for interviews on the West Coast. I couldn't do that, so I would resort to the telephone, and sometimes resort to prolonged conversation in order to establish some kind of relationship on the telephone—a highly personal kind of relationship which is the sort of thing I've always worked for and I suppose that comes out of my ministry, actually. It was never a formal, businesslike concern with me.

One other thing that I would always do in going into a man's home perhaps for the first or second time was to be very cognizant of the home itself, the decorations, pictures on the wall, anything and everything that would give me a clue as to his interest or his wife's interest. And then, somehow or other to weave those things in introductory remarks. I always found that this helped to establish a quick relationship, you know.

FRANK: We've talked about this before, but I'm sure you'll agree with me that getting into these kinds of interviews, these interviews in depth about the man's career, you'll wind up for the most part with these people being personal friends.

MASON: Oh, yes. That, in almost all cases, has worked out that way. There were a few who were standoffish and really you couldn't hope to establish, I suppose—

FRANK: Very formal.

MASON: Yes. There were a few like that, but very rarely was it so. It was a personal relationship and I used this as an illustration again, in the case of two of the admirals whom I talked with like Tommy Hart and Harry Hill—well, in the case of Harry Hill, I had his funeral at the Naval Academy Chapel. It was his wish and the case of Tommy Hart, Frank Sayre, his son-in-law [former dean of the Washington Cathedral], and I had his funeral at Arlington. Most recently, on January 6 of this last year, Frank Sayre and I again had the funeral for Mrs. Hart.

So now, all of this comes out of a relationship that was based on oral history interviews. There are many other cases where, not to the extent of bury people, but there were many cases where there are some very warm friendly relationships which include Betty and many of these naval families. I feel that way about Arleigh Burke and Mrs. Burke, Bobbie. Lovely people, and they're our friends.

FRANK: I'm going to interview him shortly.

MASON: Are you really?

FRANK: Yes, about his Marine Corps relations. He's fantastic.

MASON: He is a charming, charming man. Well, there are a lot of relationships like that which go far beyond the professional and become personal. This is due to the kind of relationship one can establish with people over a period of time when you are interviewing them, when a man tells you his life history.



FRANK: I've found that in the course of the interview, a man would reveal his philosophy of life and just about open himself up. It's almost a catharsis and confessional together.

MASON: It is that, it is that, you know. When I started with these interviews, I've always been interested in people as such and so I've been interested in men and women who have achieved things in life because that was my basic concept of history as I learned it in school. Then as I began to work at this and biography, I was very cognizant of what Thomas Carlisle said once that "biography is the essence of history." I firmly believe that and so I began to broaden my concept of biography and think in terms of what made a man tick, why was he this way, why did he think this way, why did he act in this fashion; and then go into some detail on his background, his personal background, his family antecedents, his economic status, his political concepts, all of these things enter into the picture. It gets very broad when you try to investigate all of this. But, it gives you a composite picture of a man and a greater understanding of him, too.

FRANK: Now, the Navy program at Columbia, the mission, using the military term, was what, to get a body, a certain body, a number of was it going to be a never-ending thing, a continuing thing?

MASON: I think it was an open-ended project. I don't know. I'm sure that it depended on the financial status of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia, how far it was going to go. But every quickly we did establish, and I think Allan Nevins must have had something to do with it, and I know that Betty had a lot to do with it, and so did Louis Starr, establishing some sort of paying basis for the Navy. Judge Eller was not able to say we will allocate a certain number of thousands of dollars a year to the project. He couldn't do this under the General Accounting Office regulations. So it was worked out that the Navy would buy each volume I turned over to them and pay a stipulated amount which was far in excess of what I suppose it was worth, but it was a stipulated amount which helped to underwrite the program. This was carried on when I went to the Naval Institute. We also made that arrangement with the Navy, and I made it with the Coast Guard. I also made it with the National War College—not the National War College—

FRANK: Naval.

MASON: Naval War College.

FRANK: Talking about the Institute, how did that program begin? I think it was about 1970 or so, wasn't it?

MASON: '69, I think, was when I went on duty there.

FRAN: Roger Taylor, I believe was the editor.

MASON: Roger Taylor was there. He was the chief honcho under Bud Bowler. Roger

Taylor went to the Oral History Colloquium in Lincoln, Nebraska.

FRANK: Yes, I went out with him.

MASON: You went with him?

FRANK: Yes.

MASON: And Betty was there. At that time, I wasn't very much involved and knew nothing about it. Anyway, she went out there and she and Roger were thrown together at some point and discussed oral history and he indicated a great interest in doing oral history and setting up a program at the Naval Institute.

FRANK: I can fill in a little memory. This won't go into what we use for OHMAR, but give you a little background. General [Henry W.] Buse, who was chief of staff of the Marine Corps, was a member of the Naval Institute Board.

MASON: Oh, I see.

FRANK: And he was very hot with our program and thought it was great and wondered why the Naval Institute—the Navy didn't have such a program. So he pushed for such a program and recommended that I be consulted, which I was. Roger visited us. I visited Roger, and we spoke about it.

MASON: Well, I didn't know that, you see.

FRANK: Yes. They were thinking, I don't know, they may have thought about me, had me in mind, but General Buse told them, "And don't you dare steal Ben Frank from the Marine Corps. So your very best friends sometimes are your worst enemies, but I doubt very much that I would have been—might have been interested, but the Marine Corps was—

MASON: Was your forte.

FRANK: —Was my forte. But, yes, Roger went out. As a matter of fact, we flew back, spent some time together, and then he talked to Betty out there.

MASON: Yes, well, as a result of it, shortly thereafter, I think, he advised her that they were interested in setting up a program and again, I suppose, asked for suggestions of names. Anyway, she asked me would I be interested in it. I said I didn't think so, that I still had the parish and was still heavily involved in it, and it seemed to me I was giving as much time as I could to oral history, which was one day a week, and sometimes lapping over a little more than that.

Eventually, Roger offered the job to me. I have always said, "If you want a job, be the only one in the field doing Navy history," you see, because that's what I had done and then

maybe get the job if you are the only one in the field. Anyway, he offered me the job and it took me about three months to make up my mind. I know he got very impatient with me for just procrastinating, but it was a terrific decision for me to make to give up the active ministry and to undertake an uncertain future, really, in this new job. I'd then reached the age of 60 and although I'd been in this parish for 12 years, I could stay on until retirement age. But I felt that I had done as much as I could there. We had done all this building, we had incurred a tremendous debt and we paid off everything except, I think, \$20,000 or something like that, in all this time. So it really was that, and I was getting a little bored with the program, you see, and needed a change.

But where could I go at that point? Most parishes in seeking a new rector want somebody 30 years old or someone full of ideas and young and vigorous, you see. Here I was 60 and so, there was not much chance. So finally, I think that that was enough to convince me that maybe it would be wise to accept this offer.

It turned out to be not that easy. It sounded promising and the salary was very good. But I found that I was not immediately accepted there. I was not really a Navy person. I was a clergyman, and this was a strange new element in this organization. All of them had commissions or what have you, or were retired from the Navy, and I was just an unknown quantity, you see. I had in the back of me a record of having talked with this person and that person and quite a collection of interviews, but that made no real impression on people. So I quickly learned that I had to fight my way along there to endure. Well, then there was a blow because Roger, once I came on, which was in April or something like that, Roger announced that he was leaving at the end of May. My only voice in the institution, the only person who had any real interest in the oral history program, was Roger and he was leaving the next month. Here I was an unknown entity, and, of course, they had told me that I would stay on for a year. I mean, this was a sort of a—they wanted to see what would happen.

Then I got in bad, anyway, with Bud and Roger didn't back me up and this was a very sad thing because—and this is another story. I don't know whether you want it or not, but when I went to the Naval Institute and before I was there, I'd always thought that there should be a biography of Admiral Nimitz. Why I thought so I don't know, but I was confirmed in that belief. I admired him from afar, I had interviewed him for Columbia on the West Coast, and so, I was imbued with this idea that there has to be a biography of the man. Then I went through the minutes of the meetings at the Naval Institute and discovered that the admiral, when he was CNO, had been approached by them. They wanted to have a biography written of him, and he said, "No." He said no—and this was in the minutes and still there—that he had no fortune to leave his four children. All he had was his reputation, his naval career, and therefore, it was his intention to have his four children write his biography. Well, I thought, "What a ridiculous idea." How could you get four children to write your biography? One was a nun in a convent, one was in electronics—Chet, Jr., was in electronics—and the two others, one was married and one was with the Rand Corporation. So I called—after all I was the director of oral history and I thought I had some kind of authority—I called Chet, Jr. He was up at Perkin-Elmer up in—

FRANK: Norwalk.

MASON: –Norwalk, and asked him if I could come and see him. So I set up a date and I was going up there on a weekend or toward the weekend. I told Roger about this and Roger quite approved of it, and he thought this was a good idea, but he was filled with plans for his retirement and going up to New England and setting up a publishing house. He did not say anything to Bud about it.

FRANK: That's Bud Bowler [secretary-treasurer/publisher of the U.S. Naval Institute].

MASON: Yes. Didn't tell Bud anything about it, and here I was missing and Bud is cognizant of these things and he said why hadn't I come and asked his permission to go. Roger didn't speak up for me, and so I was in the stew when I came back. Bud was fuming and would hardly speak to me. I was really in a bad way. Nevertheless, Chet was very open to the idea and said, "Yes, I think the time has arrived when we should have a biography of my Dad, and why don't you go out and see my mother, because if she will give you a green light on this, why then we can move forward with a biography." I came back with that knowledge and finally when I could get in to see Bud, it was pretty frigid, but he warmed up to the idea and he at least gave me permission to go out to California and see her. As you know, the result was a pretty good biography based on a whole series of interviews. I think we interviewed about 70 different people, all of which, as a collection, was very valuable to Ned Potter in writing the biography. Financially, it has been one of the most lucrative books published by the Naval Institute.

FRANK: Of course, the admiral was dead by that time.

MASON: Oh, he was dead by that time, yes. Well, then we rocked along with the program. Some of my colleagues wanted me to concentrate on the enlisted men and not bother with the officers.

FRANK: Senior officers.

MASON: My idea was different because, as I say, it goes back to my roots in biography and the men who have helped make policy and who were in command at battles and that sort of thing, who had the overall point of view, which I felt, as an historian, was quite valuable for the record. But, nevertheless, I tried to straddle both ways. I remember going up to the naval retirement home in Philadelphia when it was there—it's now down in the south somewhere—and I spent a week there interviewing people around the clock. But what I got was nothing in comparison to what I had been getting from these men like Nimitz. Nimitz at one point commanded two and a half million people, you see, men and women. This was quite different from a man who saw the whole operation, the whole battle from where he was down in the engine room or someplace.

FRANK: You had sea stories.

MASON: Sea stories. It was a collection of sea stories.

FRANK: Anecdotes, sea stories.

MASON: They were loveable people and I enjoyed them very much, but I could see that this was not the record that I was trying to establish, but it didn't sit well with some of my colleagues. Even Frank Uhlig was quite opposed to me on this thing, and Roger was gone. So here I was. Well, as it turned out, if I had followed that tack, the program would have been discontinued when the Naval Institute in a year or so came upon hard times financially. The board was all for cutting it down and a lot of people lost their jobs at the Institute because they were cutting out and mine a vulnerable project because it was the newest one, you see,. Also, the staff was not really backing me up very much, and I didn't have access to the board.

One of my great antagonists, I suppose you might call it, was Admiral [James F.] Calvert [Superintendent of the Naval Academy]. For some reason or another he wanted to axe that program right then and save so many thousands of dollars a year for the Institute. Well, what saved me was the fact that I had persisted in developing a program such as I later on expanded on. Ed Hooper by that time was head of Naval History and was very ecstatic about the whole thing—he still is.

FRANK: Yes.

MASON: And Ed, on his own—he didn't consult me—but he came over to the Naval Institute and had a long session with Bud Bowler and convinced him that this was a very valuable program from the historians' point of view, and that by no means should it be discontinued. Then they made a better financial arrangement wherein Naval History did subsidize, in a sense, the program and continues to do so. So that was a crucial point, but it came to be crucial because of the nature of the program.

FRANK: At that point, you could have died or it could have succeeded.

MASON: Yes, yes.

FRANK: I remember you were telling me about the financial straits.

MASON: Well, they were in very great financial straits for a period of almost two years, I think it was, and then it began to pick up and now the publishing program is so lucrative that they don't seem to have any worries.

FRANK: No, no. Getting back to the Nimitz interview, I think that was one of a few, perhaps the only interview you conducted in which you used no tape recorder.

MASON: Yes, that is, I mean, all the others permitted tape recorders. The admiral was of two minds on the subject himself. Judge Eller was helpful with the admiral because he had served with him in the Pacific and he was the repository from all the admiral's memos and collection of photographs and all that. And through the years he maintained that relationship with the admiral. So he more or less made it possible for me to set up a date with Admiral

Nimitz and I remember calling him from New York or from New Jersey where I was, on a Saturday night, I guess that it was. I was due to go out on Sunday night and to see him on Monday and the balance of that week. I remember calling him because we'd had correspondence and he had indicated that he was somewhat doubtful about taping his recollections. So I called him the night before I was due to go out and said, "Admiral, I'm coming out at such and such a time and I'll call you on Monday morning when I am established in a hotel and we can find out when I should come out to your quarters," which were Quarters Number 1 on Yerba Buena Island. So this was fine. I said, "Shall I bring the tape recorder?" He said, "Yes, bring it."

I got out there and I was ensconced in my hotel in San Francisco and I called him on Sunday night and said, "I'm here and I brought the tape recorder. What time shall I come in the morning?" Well, of course, the admiral said 7:30, which is Navy time, I suppose, hard to get a taxi and get over there. Anyway, but he said, "Don't bring your tape recorder." I thought about it a little. He was a very gracious, lovely man, and we had a nice conversation, and I said, "Admiral, you know why I came out. I was going to interview and tape your recollections for our collection at Columbia and for the Naval History Office in Washington. And here you won't let me tape, but this is what I propose to do. When I write sermons and deliver sermons, I don't like to read a manuscript and I don't like to have a full manuscript in front of me. But I do jot down key words, in case I suddenly have a lapse of memory or something, I jot down key words that will trigger me into my thoughts. Now, I propose that while we talk here, that is if you don't mind, I jot down some key words and immediately after I leave you I'm going back to my hotel room, I have my tape recorder, I'm going to reconstruct the whole interview, the questions and answers, using my key words. Do you mind?" He said, "No, I don't mind," and he didn't mind.

As a matter of fact, when I got back to New York and they were transcribed, he corrected the transcript and sent it back to us, you see, with only one section that he was deleting, and that was a very personal thing on his part. He was a very sentimental man and this was something that brought tears to his eyes when he told me, and so he did not want this on the record. Well, so.

FRANK: Did that have to do with the war period?

MASON: Yes, it had to do with firing somebody.

FRANK: Yes, he was quite sensitive about that.

MASON: He was very, very sensitive. And so, at the end of the week, he said, "Have you talked with Charlie Lockwood?" Charlie Lockwood being one of his buddies, you see.

FRANK: Submarine commander in the Pacific.

MASON: Yes, it was Lockwood and Spruance and Nimitz, they were a triumvirate and very close to each other and they're all buried down there, I guess, together with Kelly Turner. Well, he said, "Have you talked with Charlie Lockwood?" I said, "No." He said, "All right, I'll call him." He sat down and he called him on the telephone and set up a date for me that

particular trip to go down to Los Gatos and talk with Charlie Lockwood. I did and out of that came not a series of interviews because Lockwood had written seven books on his career in great detail, and had worked in Hollywood on some picture that was based on his career. So we had a very nice friendship with Charlie Lockwood.

At the same time that he called Charlie Lockwood, he said, "Have you talked to [Raymond A.] Spruance?" I said, "No." He said, "I'll call him." Picked up the telephone, and I can still see his expression, thoughts went through his mind and he hung up and didn't call Spruance, because Spruance was of his mind, he didn't want to talk for tape. This was borne out in later time when I had very extensive interviews with Carl Moore who was Spruance's dear friend and chief of staff until they had to have a new arrangement because of aviator requirement. I talked with Carl ostensibly because he was so close to Spruance and the idea was he was going to tell me all he knew about Spruance and he was going to include Spruance's letters to him, which he did, 1,100 pages I think, based on no so much Carl's career, which wasn't that significant apart from his relationship with Spruance, but it was because Spruance wouldn't talk on tape. Carl himself and Judge Eller, I guess, had Spruance out to Carl's home in Chevy Chase one time with the tape recorder. They were bound and determined to get him to talk and he wouldn't talk. So that's how obdurate he was about talking on tape, just as much so as his friend Nimitz was.

FRANK: Talking about tape recorders--and I'm sure the OHMAR membership will be pleased to learn of your views--you've been a consistent user of reel-to-reel.

MASON: And still am, actually.

FRANK: And still are, haven't gone to cassette at all?

MASON: No, I suppose I'm old fashioned, older than you, and I'm so enamored of the reel-to-reel. Maybe it will last my time, I don't know. They're beginning to play out and they tell me at Columbia, "You better get with it and get with the cassette because we can't get any more machines." But they still repair mine and it seems to work.

FRANK: That's the Sony TC 800-B, isn't it?

MASON: Yes. And I tried mightily to get a new one. When I was in Hawaii a couple of years ago, I went to the Japanese people who had Sony interests there, but I could get nowhere. However, I did learn from people here in Washington who repair Sonys, they have seen them in the Caribbean and I do understand that they still make them for Latin American trade and perhaps you could get one in Japan, I don't know, but I haven't been to Japan.

FRANK: What do you see the future of the naval history program to be? Now, Paul Stillwell has taken over from you, but he is also editor of *Naval Review*.

MASON: The *Naval Review*, which is a very big job.

FRANK: Yes, it is.

MASON: But it's cyclical, you see. There is one issue a year which is the May issue of *Proceedings*. It takes the place of *Proceedings*. And when he approaches that—well, he has a certain amount of work all year long that has to do with the *Naval Review*. He has to line up his authors. He has to maintain a very close contact with them.

FRANK: Deadlines and everything else.

MASON: Yes, and be certain of the trend of their thinking and all that. There is a tremendous amount of detail involved in all of that. So it does take up a lot time and I don't know how much he is going to devote to oral history. He is very much interested in oral history, but up to the present time he hasn't been able to do much interviewing. He tells me with my backlog he is still involved because I couldn't just drop a complete program and have it all finished, you see, you can't do that.

FRANK: So you continue to interview for him?

MASON: No, I don't do any interviewing for him, but he is working on a lot of manuscripts—and there were maybe 20 manuscripts, something like that—that were in various stages. Some of them have been out for correction and they hadn't returned them and you know how that is, to get people. Sometimes it takes them a couple of years to really be moved to do something.

FRANK: That's a lot of the oral histories.

MASON: So Paul is involved with all of that and being introduced to the problems of oral history through that experience. I've continued with the Arleigh Burke project on unification and I have one more volume to complete on that. The interviews are all complete and he has done his text, which is in Burke's case quite different from an ordinary oral history. I know you raised eyebrows about the one with Harry Hill. That was not a traditional oral history interview, but Harry Hill insisted upon that. He insisted on writing his account of the battles for Tinian and Saipan and so forth. He wanted all the details to be exact, and he didn't think this was possible with an oral interview. He had to be in control of all the facts, and so he did that. Then he opened himself up to questions at the end. Well, that's not traditional, of course, and that's the only one that I've done of that sort. In Arleigh's case, for the unification program, he has done a stupendous amount of research, a tremendous job.

FRANK: I'm glad to hear that.

MASON: And he's had lots of help here in Naval History in doing all of this, but he's done a lot of it himself. Then he wrote a narrative on the whole thing, typed it all himself and gave me a copy of the narrative and then we had sessions on the narrative—questions and answers—in which I attempted to draw out elaborations on certain points he makes in the narrative, but also, here again, the broader point of view. Arleigh is a very special naval officer,



as you know. So I've always had a biographer in mind and so I, in drawing him out, I've tried to develop as completely as I could his thinking, his philosophy in all sorts of areas—politics, everything—tried to get all of this on the record, using the narrative as a basis for this kind of interview which is far more than just Navy.

FRANK: The national strategy and national politics and everything.

MASON: Well, you see, all during the Eisenhower regime he was an unofficial consultant to General Eisenhower in the White House. This came about because Arleigh, early on when Eisenhower had only been in office for a couple of months, Arleigh dragged the Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of Defense into a conference with the president because they were at loggerheads on the subject of the draft. How Arleigh got into it, he can't really say, he just got dragged into it. Anyway, it really was something and I think Eisenhower, who bawled him out for this, I mean, disputing his superiors, in a military sense to do this, you see, in front of the Commander in Chief—but I think that Eisenhower truly admired the spunk of this young fellow who came in as Chief of Naval Operations. As a result, and not too long afterward, Eisenhower used to call him over to the White House at 5 o'clock in the afternoon or something like that and they'd have a drink together and Eisenhower would bounce off of him ideas he had on this or that. He wanted to get his reaction. First he started to do it only in military things, but then it branched out and it became political, it became everything. He was a confidant of the president for the balance of his term as president. So Arleigh is a very special person and for this reason I used this opportunity with his narrative to stray from the subject of unification and drag in all sorts of things, as I say, with the idea that this will be useful someday to a biographer.

FRANK: I had a question before and you caused me to recall it regarding your interview with Nimitz. Did you prepare questions specifically for the Nimitz interview and was that the only time you've done it for an interview?

MASON: No, I didn't really prepare specific questions and I never have. I prepared in the sense that I prepare myself in terms of background. I try to do everything I can to have an adequate background in a particular area that I think we're going to talk about. But then I rely on the spur of the moment to come up with a question. Walter Lord taught me that very early on at the Naval Institute. Walter has been terribly successful in his books and many of them based on lots of interviews, but he has always maintained he doesn't believe in the oral history technique. He's like Barbara Tuchman.

FRANK: Barbara Tuchman, yes.

MASON: Nevertheless, he told me this, that he had started out very idealistically, he'd be writing a book and he had his next chapter in mind when he was going to see some gentleman or someone, and on the night before very carefully he'd prepared a set of questions that would get for him the kind of information he needed for the next chapter. Then he gaily started out. Well, he learned first that this was disconcerting to many people to have a typed list of questions that you are going to throw at them and so he switched his techniques at that point and he said, "All right, I'll memorize these questions and then I'll present them and they won't know that all of

this had been done in advance.” Well, that was an utter failure because after a few times he learned he never got to the bottom of his list, they got sidetracked. There were all sorts of suggested avenues opening up by what the person said, and so he wanted to pursue them and seek what information was at the end of that road, and he never got to the questions. So he finally ended up doing what I do, which is simply to play it by ear, to have an adequate background or hopefully have an adequate background and then come up—trust to the spirit to lead you on at that moment.

FRANK: Well, I think you and I are unique in a sense of the programs we’ve had. I’ve often said that I’ve served in the Marine Corps from the Spanish American War to Viet Nam, and I dare say that you’ve served in the Navy from the earliest to the latest. What we’ve done, we’ve built a cumulative knowledge which is unique to us, which Paul is not going to be able to take over. He has got to start his own accumulation. He’s got to accumulate on his own.

MASON: Exactly. And it takes time.

FRANK: It certainly does.

MASON: Well, of course, he has this advantage in that he has been working on *Proceedings* and he’s done a tremendous amount of reading of manuscripts and so forth. I’m not sure that he—well, I know that he doesn’t have the same approach that I have. I’m more interested in the larger factors, the economic issues and the political factors and all that sort of thing. I’m more interest in that, I suppose, which is natural. We all have our interests. He is much more interested in the type of ship that was used and the gunnery, the missiles, and all that sort of thing, which I dealt with and had them described in many cases where I thought it was pertinent, but it wasn’t of that consuming interest to me.

FRANK: The mechanics weren’t. I know, I have it, I’m sure you have it, you have a perception that while conducting one interview, there is something that will kick-off in your memory from a previous interview—a name, an event, an occurrence—and you are able to build up this accumulation this way.

MASON: Exactly, and this is a tremendous help, really, in developing a picture which isn’t complete in one biography but maybe six or seven biographies. But for the research person who comes along and has a proper index, he has it all there. And it is of very great importance. Yes, it is a cumulative knowledge that is very personal.

FRANK: If you refer to an individual by his nickname—“Well, Pug said so and so and such and such and I know that you were involved in the event”—is able to bring an—

MASON: You know how important that is, to strike a responsive chord in an interviewee. He perks up. “Why, this man know what he is talking about, he does know.” And so there fore, he opens up on all the more.

FRANK: That’s the old Cornelius Ryan shoe story about Frau Rommel, if you recall,

r4eading the minutes of the Arden House Colloquium. She said, “How did you know about that?” And she proceeded to tell about her birthday, which I remember quite well.

MASON: I’ve often heard a man say, “How did you know that?” Well, sometimes I could tell him how I knew; sometimes I didn’t think I should tell him, so I didn’t.

FRANK: Yes, yes.

MASON: There again, you have to use some discretion in what you reveal and in what you don’t reveal. Very often, and I suppose you do too, very often I have far greater knowledge of what the man is talking about than I ever indicate to him because if I indicated to him he’s not going to be so expansive—I already know, so why should he tell me? You’ve reached that relationship where he’s telling you, he isn’t telling you for the record, he’s telling you because you’re interested and you know, and so you better not know too much.

FRANK: Yes, that’s something I learned early on that some of these people, you’re on such a keen wave length with, that you begin to question, he’ll answer it before you finish the question and his answer—as researchers read the transcript later—they don’t know what the question was and they certainly won’t know what the answer was—or what you’re talking about. But you two knew about it.

MASON: Yes. And I don’t think you can afford to let that develop too much because then you are going to lose out in what you get for the record.

FRANK: Right, right. You said you are not doing any interviewing now, but finishing up the Burke.

MASON: Oh, yes, I’m doing some more. I’m doing some interviewing now. I’m doing Bishop Moore.

FRANK: Oh, that’s right, for the project up in New York.

MASON: Yes.

FRANK: Paul Moore. I hope you get a lot about his Marine Corps experiences.

MASON: Oh, I did.

FRANK: Did you really?

MASON: Quite a bit. It was a very short career, you know, in Guadalcanal because he was wounded, almost mortally, but, yes.

FRANK: I think he won one or two Silver Stars.

MASON: Yes. It's very significant as an event in his life. And of course, it's useful in interpreting his later career and his dedication to the homeless and the poor. It was a tremendous impact that Guadalcanal had on all of this which I've drawn out because I know him so well and I know his career. So, he's willing, without hesitation, to tell me these things, you see, when I ask him.

FRANK: What is your—I don't know if *Weltanschauung* is the appropriate term, but what is your outlook on oral history? What is your overview of oral history? How do you see it?

MASON: Well, I think that it's a tremendously valuable modern technique for the accumulation of resource material. I really do. It's a modern answer, and I cannot go along with people who disparage it. There aren't too many now. There were at first when you and I began.

FRANK: Oh, sure, yes.

MASON: All historians—not all, but a very great number of historians and especially the noted ones did not look with great favor on oral history. Allan Nevins had to face that barrage, really, or critics of the thing. And I know that I in a very lesser sense have faced it, and I know you have, too. But I think some of that has fallen by the wayside now. It's become a far more acceptable technique. But really, don't you think you have to distinguish between oral history projects and what they propose to do? Your project and mine at the Naval Institute were quite different from a lot of others, most of the others actually. The Columbia program is quite different from some of the state historical societies and some of the local oral histories, which are laudable in their own field.

And the labor historians—I wish I'd been cognizant of oral history in the days when I had some knowledge of the labor movement. Because I did, as a youngster, my uncle—my mother's brother—was president of the Illinois Federation of Labor, and he was a very dear friend of Samuel Gompers. He told me so many stories of Samuel Gompers—I mean, the whole beginnings of the labor movement early in the century. I went with him to labor meetings in various places and I was terrified. Sometimes I thought I was going back into the days of the French Revolution, I mean, this sort of thing because they were so violent. He had a way with these people that was very—so I wish that I had known something about oral history in those days because I could have captured a lot of interesting social history. One of the subjects at George Washington University that did fascinate me was American social history in the nineteenth century, the beginnings of the labor unions and all sorts of movements that came to a head toward the end of the century.

So I do think that one has to distinguish between the purpose of this project and that project and honor all of them if they're done with integrity and honesty.

FRANK: Do you have a feeling that some people in the field of oral history try to make it more than it is?

MASON: Well, I suppose one could hazard that guess that maybe some people do and

maybe it centers around personal ego and self-glorification to build up a project that reflects your bias.

FRANK: I wasn't thinking so much in those terms—as the feeling on the part of some people that oral history is the be all and end all, and that it is much more important in the whole realm of an historical collection than it is.

MASON: Well, I think that you can go to excess in every area and you can get much too enthusiastic about any one endeavor. I think you've got to keep a level head in viewing the whole spectrum of oral history and its projects nationally and internationally. I think you keep it in proportion. Well, you get people involved, individuals and their own predilections.

FRANK: Well, we've covered quite a track here. I appreciate your coming into the office on a hot Saturday afternoon and at least it is cooler than it is going to be in your car going to the Eastern Shore. Thanks a lot, Jack, and Godspeed and all good wishes in your retirement. I hope that doesn't mean that we're not going to see you anymore.

MASON: Oh, I think not. I think I'll be down.

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