

(Tape 25)

James A Palmer
RAIM (ret) 1941
Portsmouth VA
1958

October 22, 1998

I am now at Jim Palmer's. It is a fairly cool day with a little bit of wind and a little bit of traffic nearby. I think we are getting good reception. Jim, it's yours.

"I would like, first of all, just to compliment Sam on his project. It appears to be a fabulous one and I hope I can make somewhat of a contribution."

With the rest of my class, I graduated in May of 1941, shortly before the war. It was the last really small class at the Coast Guard Academy. We graduated 22; it was supposed to be 50, but we never even got to 50. It went from 49 down to 22 before graduation.

We scattered into the four winds and being fairly down in the class, I didn't have much choice as to my first assignment. It was up to the Amalga, the base in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The ship itself was an ROGO since the Cal Johnson drag caught her and joined them. It wasn't much of a ship, as some of you might recall it was 190-foot vessel built in 1911; a sister ship with a camper that was sunk in World War I in Biscay Bay while on escort duties. That is right across the bay from New Orleans, Louisiana.

UNALGA

MOG SMIT

of the TAMPA

60 miles

As it happened, three of our class, Joe Hahn, who was the senior man, Bob Goldman and I were supposed to be the watch officers. Lieutenant Commander E. B. Smith was the Commanding Officer; some of the senior people here might have some recollection of him. The exact anyhow, so I don't know how

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unusual a situation that was. It was ~~pitched~~ there. He first was assigned as the Engineering Officer and then the job opened up and he assumed the Exec's job. I think he was ^{on it} actually aboard ship at the time. It had been a coal-burning ship with a reciprocating steam engine, but at this time it was oil-burning.

We picked up and installed some extended after it when the ^{UMALGA} Amalga was to install some depth charge racks on the stern and we picked the depth charges up at Key West on the way to Puerto Rico. It was an interesting job, I think, for anybody interested in that type of career. The area was a fascinating one. Pretty much unchanged from the way the Caribbean had been since the turn of the century. Puerto Rico, for instance, was not developed in any sense. The people lived pretty much as they had for the first part of the century. It was a really fabulous experience.

As the war came on, we had a few patrol duties, some harbor entrance patrols, but we did have a chance to get around the various Caribbean Islands. It took some civil engineers near Antigua to establish its use as a naval base and also to determine whether it would be appropriate for an airforce field. I think that most of these things ultimately happened. I recall, among other things, that the charts we used in Antigua were British admiralty charts from about 1854.

Another interesting project while I was aboard the Amalga, was some repair work done to a four stacker that had been torpedoed by a German submarine. It blew

the whole bow off forward of the gun. People in the officers quarters were sleeping there. Some were lost and some were able to climb outside back toward the ship. The submarine came to the surface then with this four stacker lying there without a bow. I don't recall the name of the ship, but it was able to back down faster than the submarine could proceed on. So it backed into Port ^{OK} Castries Harbor in Saint Lucia.

The Coast Guard ship ^{UNALGA} Amalga was sent down with primarily Coast Guard personnel. The Warrant Carpenter had a lot of qualified carpenter's mates and they had an estimate of the material they needed. We proceeded there and with this Coast Guard expertise built a wooden bow for this destroyer and then we preceded it under escort on up to San Juan. In early ¹⁹⁴² ~~1982~~ the Caribbean was a hotbed of German activity. We were all aware that the Tampa had been sunk by such activity in World War I. There was no watertight integrity on the ship. The ^{WARD ROOM} boardroom and the quarters were below water and most of us, as we would come off watch, if at all feasible, would sleep on deck rather than going below.

^{page} Shortly thereafter, the ^{UNALGA} Amalga was decommissioned and I was assigned to the Marion as Commanding Officer. The designated Commanding Officer became ill and was sent to the States and they needed someone in a hurry, so orders came down ^{and} at I was fortunate enough to get that assignment which really, in terms of my whole Coast Guard career, was one of the more interesting ones. The homeport was at Charlotte ^{Amelia} ~~Emily~~ in Saint Thomas. However, we were never

there. When I took over the ship, she was in a small yard in San Juan harbor. I recall that the Coast Guard was still quite in the budget, even four or five months after the war had been declared.

On board, there was a whole list of things to be accomplished, of course. The electrician aboard the ship, who happened to be a First Class, approached me and said that we needed a new ship service generator. I tried to get this added to the work list, but couldn't swing it in view of the budgetary problems that the Coast Guard was even then having.

About a week after I took over, we left San Juan as the escort for five vessels to be dropped off at various places in the Caribbean. The first ship we dropped off was in Charlotte ^{Amelia} Emily. We went on down and had a navy ^{CAPS} to the Redwood, as I recall, because German submarines were hitting vessels ⁱⁿ and roadsteads and in harbors of the Caribbean. They had actually entered Port ^{OK} Castries Harbor, which is one of the most beautiful small harbors in the Caribbean. In fact, it had torpedoed a ship at the quay, sank the ship, backed and filled while people were ^{firing} glaring at them with rifles and whatnot and went on out. Subsequently to the Redwood and other efforts they had put the harbor entrance in that ^{CAPS} So we escorted the Redwood ^{CAPS} down and dropped her off at Bridgetown, Barbados.

My orders directed me there, but I thought I had a few hours so I put a liberty party ashore. It was a small ship, although we did have a crew of about 36. No sooner did they get ashore than I got orders to proceed on to Grenada, then on down to Trinidad for a stay in Trinidad. I put a shore patrol ashore under the control of a very competent seaman I had aboard. He was not a seaman, he had been **chief seaman** and in present-day terms he would have been an alcoholic. He was a very competent person, but when he would go ashore he would usually lose control of himself and lose a few rates. At this time, he was First Class. He took the party ashore, but when the party came back, having picked up everything ^{one} else, this fellow was still ashore, so we had to leave without him.

About four months later he got back to us with a letter from the Commanding Officer of the Redwood, who said he was the most competent ^{CAPT} ~~Boson's~~ mate he ^{Boatswain's} had ever had. After he sobered up, he had apparently reported to the ^{Capt} Redwood and worked with it for several months and finally got back around to us. We then took the ship down to Grenada and then on down to Trinidad. We had been having trouble with our ship service generator from the word go, tying the thing together with all sorts of string and whatnot. At Trinidad the Navy had a maintenance facility so I went ashore and approached them and it was no problem to them. So the Coast Guard never knew it, but we got a ship service generator **... ..** I could go on from there, but this one sequence of events that happened in a few months was, to me, a real experience.

We had proceeded up to Saint Lucia where there was a Navy operating base on the West shore of the island, about 15 miles where there was a little bay inlet north of Port ^{DK}Castries Harbor. Our orders directed us in there and we just laid in waiting for our orders. It had been at a Navy patrol plane squadron, but apparently **priorities in ship didn't** and there were no planes operating right up there at the time. As one of the several young officers around there, we'd go out fishing sometimes in recreation boats. The young naval officers at the base would organize this thing and I went out with them several times. Finally one day they asked me to go out and they were going down to Port ^{OK}Castries Harbor, which was just a few miles South. I just figured it was about time to be getting orders, so I said I'd better not go. They went on out and entering Port ^{OK}Castries harbor, this 28 foot Navy work boat was blown sky high by a mine that had been put in there by that submarine that had entered the harbor and sunk that ship at the pier. The mine was activated by passage after passage of some vessel, so this 28 foot work boat finally tripped it. Nobody was killed, but people were severely injured in this thing so I was lucky I didn't go with them.

The Navy out of there was operating mine sweepers, well they weren't mine sweepers, but they were blowing up mines all around the area just like the one that the 28 footer had blown up. Newly commissioned naval officers with little background manned them. They would come in with their ^{DK}magnetic ^{DK}characteristic ^{of}with the ship all shook up by this explosion and whatnot. I set up a

training force there for them in swing shifts on how to get their compasses back to working order.

Shortly thereafter, we got orders to proceed up to Dominica where a tanker had been torpedoed by a submarine. It was lying close to shore and for some reason or other the submarine didn't follow up and sink it, and it was lying there with a hole in one of its tanks. We were directed to pick it up and escort it in to San Juan, which we did without any trouble; except upon arrival at San Juan. Those of you who know the nature of that terrain, you are in the North Atlantic on the North Shore of Puerto Rico and the Easterlies blow year in and year out and it is usually a fairly miserable time for small boats and small ships, including the ^{CAPS} Marion.

We arrived off the entrance to San Juan harbor about two o'clock in the morning and I didn't want to lie out there with the possibility of submarines being in the area. So, with our directional light, which you senior officers will be familiar with, we were communicating with the harbor entrance patrol boats to ask them to open the net up and let us in. They ^{said} ~~allowed us out~~ and it was closed for the night and that was it. I asked them to contact the Operations Officer of the Caribbean Sea Frontier, to whom I had reported the last time I was in ~~from a tray~~. His name was Captain Van deCarr. ^[phonetics] I asked him to please call him and see if they wouldn't open the thing up for us and sure enough they did. I don't know how I got through. There were no lights or anything and going into San Juan harbor, at two

o'clock in the morning, riding up ocean swells in this place with no buoys and nothing to help you guess as to where you were was a real experience. We got ourselves and the tanker in that night. This was a lifetime in a few months for this ship.

Another time, we had arrived at Charlotte ^{AMALIE} Emily, the only time we were there. Most of those crewmembers that were married had their families in Charlotte Emily, so we had granted liberty as we came in. There was a US submarine base there and there was an old marine field, which is now called Truman Field, but then it was Bourne Field. It had an open-air theater on the side that sloped to the mountain there and I was watching a movie after eating at the Officer's Club. They sounded off for Captain Palmer, that's the term the Navy used to contact the Commanding Officer of a ship. I reported and had orders. A large convoy enroute from Trinidad to Guantanamo had been attacked by a group of German submarines and some of the ships had been hit and others had not. They had divided the convoy into two groups; one group of ships who were not hit went on a faster pace and the other, to which the ^{SAFE} Marion attached itself, was left with a few other escorts.

By this time, it was approximately nine o'clock in the evening, so I had the problem again of getting my crew back. We also had the problem of getting out through the ^{harbor entrance control} harbor ensign control. We had only one signalman aboard, a quartermaster, who was really qualified to deal with ^{OK entrance OK} harbor ensign control

policies. People would burn your communications lines if they possibly could. He wasn't an alcoholic, but he was a drinker and they had to carry him back aboard. Here he was working the light and the challenge; of course, to the **harbor entrance control** was that he would just hold the thing down so he would receive anything they would want to send. He was able to do that, although they had to hold him up, two men, one on each side, while he was getting their authorization to open the net up and let us on out.

We went out from there and joined this group that was at the edge of a hurricane that had just passed, which wasn't very comfortable on the Marion. We proceeded on to Guantanamo and had several other interesting experiences.

About this time I got my orders to flight training. While ^{UNALGA} aboard the **Amalga**, I had always wanted to fly. I had put in a request for flight training when it became available for my class. I almost turned ^{it} down when I came in, or tried to, because I was in the midst of such a rewarding job there. But I went on to flight training and ^{omit} proceeded to **.....**, **drive Charlie there**, and go down to Pensacola, where my first child was born. I went through the **PBY** program and I was scheduled to finish in late July of 1943.

My first daughter was born July 28, 1943, so I approached ^{the} Commanding Officer of the Squadron to see if he couldn't slow me down. Charlie ^{TIGHE (35)} Tye was the Commanding Officer of the final PBY Squadron in Pensacola at that time. Sure

enough, he slowed me down enough in my progress so that I was able to give my daughter some attention. I think she was 12 days old when we left Pensacola for Port Angeles, Washington by car and drove diagonally across the country going through all the states you can image up through Colorado and whatnot. We thought while we were there that we would stop by Yellowstone. So we drove into Yellowstone and of course, there was no traffic on the roads in those days. During the war you had to have some reason to justify gasoline. We got into Yellowstone Park and it was officially closed. But the custodians put my wife, myself and the baby up for the night in their quarters.

We went on from there to Port Angeles. There was a war going on and the domestic aviation assignments were not too satisfying, but it was a place where I learned to fly and became qualified and acquired a little confidence to carry me on through the rest of my career in aviation. I guess you could volunteer for things. There was a program that came through whereby a couple of specially equipped PBY planes were going to be crewed and one of them was to fly up and down the West coast ^{doing} some work, while the other was going to the Aleutians.

The Aleutian plane was essentially crewed by a group of wild men who had been with the patrol squadron up in the North Atlantic, very competent people. They were very exuberant individuals. I have contacted most of them and they all turned out to be successful in life. They were all Coast Guard. There was an

officer with whom I had gone through flight training who was designated as the pilot's Commanding Officer in charge. There was a very competent individual by the name of Bob Polk, ^[Phonetic] whom some of the aviators might recall, and a pilot whose name escapes me just off hand. This crew went down to San Diego where we spent six weeks going to various technical schools there, to qualify them to manage all the electronics that was aboard this plane.

We had three radars. One with the old Yogi antenna, which was low-frequency radar and not microwave, and the conventional PBY radar (that little dome over the cockpit) which I think was a 9 cm radar. We took an old 3 cm PBM radar and put it in the blister, so we had three different radars aboard. Our role was to check out racons. A racon was a device that a radar triggered and you were able to determine your distance from this. You were also able to get your bearing and some useful navigational tips. They have used things like that since, in our domestic airways. We were also charged with doing baseline extensions and ^{OK} loran stations that were going up and being changed and whatnot. So we had an interesting job to do in the Aleutians. That was another satisfying job.

Returning from there to Port Angeles, I soon got orders back to Puerto Rico of all places, this time as the Commanding Officer of the air detachment at San Juan. We were there for just a year when the post-war retrenchment came about and the detachment was decommissioned.

From there we went to a command station ^{at} that Floyd Bennett was Commanding Officer for all the time I was there. My one recollection of that experience was the great variety of planes an experienced pilot was expected to fly. We had PBMs, PBYS, B17s, JRFs, SNJs and two helicopter types. Although I had gone through helicopter school, I never really considered myself efficient with helicopters. In those early days of the helicopter program people sort of specialized in them and those who didn't were just on the margin. That was an interesting, typical peacetime aviation assignment. The Coast Guards ⁽³⁸⁾ grow ⁽⁴²⁾ so many competent people. Tex Williams took over as engineer and Bill Jenkins was there; such a fine group of people. We were there from 1946 to 1948.

In 1948 I got sent to the Naval postgraduate school, which in those days was at Annapolis. I took a communications program. This was an interesting experience being with this group. There was one other Coast Guard officer and the rest of the group were naval officers. Many of them were aviators. The Navy, in support of their aviators at Annapolis, had a facility of JRFs. That was a typical Coast Guard aircraft and I was the only person that had experienced them, so I had checked out all the Naval aviators in our group in JRFs and they went on from there. The JRF was an amphibious, twin engine, 10,000-pound aircraft and for certain duties it was very adequate, in others it was marginal. It was a pleasant plane to fly just for recreational purposes and flight time, which was what we were doing at Annapolis.

From there I spent one year at the Coconut Grove air station in Miami. It was too short a time, but it was a pleasant experience. Swanson was there as ^[Phonetic] Commanding Officer. Bob Wallen ^[Phonetic] was Exec.

I went from there to Coast Guard headquarters as the head of the Aviation section in the Communications division. I was there for four years, which was too long. I found it to be a rewarding experience. You learn how the Coast Guard works. The job I had was involved with aeronautical communications, so I had the opportunity to participate in four or five international conferences on aviation communications matters. There are several technical arms of the United Nations. One of them is aviation matters. It is called ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organization) and the Latin countries call it OACI. In that job I went to a couple of conferences in Montreal, one in Manila, and one in Buenos Aires. I had an interesting and rewarding experience.

From there I went to a fabulous assignment as a Commander in the Philippines. The Coast Guard at that time had five Loran stations and had a 190-foot vessel for logistic purposes and two JRFs that had ^{replaced} been PBVs. Our job was to support these Loran stations. I was there for two and one-half years. Joe Johansen, whom you will be speaking to soon, was my Exec for awhile and it was a fabulous experience and had some great flying experiences and an opportunity to get to know the Filipino people and understand their society. It was also an

opportunity to work closely with the Navy there, which we did. So it was another top assignment.

From there, in the middle of the winter, I was assigned to Traverse City, Michigan. We left Sangley Point where the Coast Guard facility had been, on a Coast Guard R5D, on a flight back to Honolulu. It was almost like having your own private plane. There were myself, my wife and our four daughters. We left from Sangley Point, about one half hour North of Manila and about half way to Okinawa, which was going to be our first night's stop. We lost ^athe propeller, so we had to return to ^{Sangley}San Juan and I recall my 2-year-old at the time, upon arriving back at Sangley Point, she couldn't understand how the same people we just said goodbye to were here to greet us when we landed. That was repaired and we went on to Okinawa and then Tokyo. They planned it so that this plane received routine maintenance while in Tokyo and that gave us several days there. On the way back, our first stop was ^{Iwo Jima}Iwojima, where we were attacked by a small dog up on top of Mount Suribachi. From Iwojima we flew to Guam, then to Wake, then to Midway and then on back to Honolulu. 2 words

From there we flew to Traverse City and I recall that the only hitch in that whole operation was flying from Chicago to Traverse City by way of Grand Rapids. In getting there I found out that the flight I was scheduled to go on was somehow cancelled, so I didn't have a flight. In frustration, we got a cab driver to take this family of six all the way to Traverse City. It went pretty good; it was snowing all

the way. Here it was in January and in Traverse City it had snowed several times before and probably heavy snows also, but they would melt and whatnot. But this was the snow that had settled down and I don't think we saw ground until near the end of April. And that was my five-month tour. I had orders back to Washington D.C., which was probably my least satisfactory tour.

There had been a series of aviation accidents in the United States. There had been two transport planes that had collided over the vicinity of the Grand Canyon and I forget how many people were killed, but certainly many since they were large planes. There had been a military/civilian collision over Maryland and whatnot, so there was a lot of concern about the safety of civil aviation.

In order to deal with that, Congress set up an organization called the Airways Modernization Board. It was primarily civilian, made up of a lot of experts in various fields. They brought in a lot of military, also experts, and here was somebody who had a little communications background and whatnot in aviation matters, so that was the reason I got my short term in Traverse City, but it was not a happy one for me. I never felt that I was making any significant contributions, so I was able to talk them into letting me out in three years. It had its satisfying moments.

The Air Force brought one of their radar specialists in and he was supposed to develop the plans. To backtrack a moment, this thing called the Airways

Modernization Board was a very technical organization and it worked outside the old CAA (Civil Aviation Authority). To broaden this, they established the Federal Aviation Agency, which is current today and has the responsibility over all aviation matters flying our airways in the United States. The Airways Modernization Board became the Bureau of Research and Development of the Federal Aviation Agency. I stayed with that for the remainder of that tour. There was an Air Force officer with whom I worked who was assigned by the Air Force to this organization to coordinate the development of the use of the Air Force radar system for use by air traffic controllers. That had been his specialty in the Air Force and he was well qualified. He became ill and they assigned me this role, so I coordinated between the FAA and the Air Force and wrote up the first agreement for the use by the Airways of the Air Force radar system. There were several other projects of one type or another, but that is the only one that I really got any satisfaction from. I met a lot of fine people who were uniquely qualified in the field, but I didn't view it as my life's work, so I got out as soon as I could, which was three years.

DINNER

After three years, I was assigned to Denner Key, the Coast Guard Air Station in Miami, as Commanding Officer. This was one of the last of the seaplane stations, where there was no airstrip; they operated off the water. However, Opalaca had been declared surplus by the Navy and so the city took over much of it, but the Coast Guard had the authority to fly here and it did. It was an

Opalaca-Locka

adequate piece of property, with a hangar and support buildings and is there today.

During this tour in Miami, the Cuban Crisis came up. Overnight, our operation increased by just about a factor of three. Planes flew from all over the country into the Miami Coast Guard station. By that time, we had enough going in *Opa-Locka* **Opalaca**, so we were able to split our operations. We had a barracks there and we created a mess, a hangar and support. So we really had two operations going with the emphasis on **Opalaca**, because that could be a 24-hour a day operation. The water operation had been a 24-hour a day operation, but we were phasing out of that as we brought all these people in who were not experienced in seaplane operations throughout the day and night. This was also an interesting experience. I did have one complaint about the whole thing. They were so hush-hush in the district about it that here I was a Commanding Officer in a station and the first thing I knew about increasing our ^ecompliment of planes was when I got classified orders in that these planes were flying in at that time. I was not involved in any of the planning, thinking or considering of how this facility was going to be used. At that time, when they first came in there, we were only operating out of **Denner Key**, the water operation. So, it was a difficult time to get the thing organized and put together. I will say that money was no consideration in ^gbringing **Opalaca** up to operational snuff. We received all the help we needed there and we did a pretty reasonable job.

From Miami, I came here to Portsmouth and that's really why we're here today. We spent three years here and by that time I was a Captain. I was the ^{SAR} Star Officer and worked as the CO's District **man** at the time. Then there was Admiral Lynch and Rocky, who were both very outstanding officers. As we usually do in a District staff, we had a **Conference** staff and had a well-run organization. In the process, I met a lot of fine people in this community. When retirement came about, with my daughters scattered up and down the East Coast and all these friends here, and with the best weather on the East Coast of the United States, I considered it the best of both worlds here. It's not a Monterrey or maybe even a Puget Sound, but it's a great place to be. I spent three years here as a ^{SAR} Star Officer and worked with Jim Mosely and others.

Search
and
Resume

I spent a short ten months as the Base Commander at Charleston. That was another short tour, but this time I was a party to my early transfer because Art Engle one day called me up and asked me if I would like to go to the Academy as Assistant Superintendent. He had just been designated the Superintendent and the Commandant apparently told him he could choose the top jobs, so he asked me if I would be interested. Without any ^{hesitation} **provocation** I allowed as how I was interested and he said "you'd better check it out with Amanda". He didn't know my wife at the time, but my contact with the Engle's was through his brother Ben, primarily. So they didn't make many important decisions without contacting one another. So I went to the Academy as Assistant Superintendent and served for three years. That was another highlight of my career.

Then from there I went to one of the other top assignments. The last of which is a really interesting Target Zero. Not everybody can experience it. I went to Juneau as District Commander. I was there from 1970 to 1973. During that tour, the Coast Guard took over. We evaluated whether we needed Kodiak. When I think back, flying into Alaska for the first time way back when I was flying out of Port Angeles as I mentioned earlier, across from Yakutat to Kodiak, I remember how impressed I was with that large Naval Air Station. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that some day I would be there. The Coast Guard, from the standpoint of headquarters, evaluated very carefully because it is an expensive operation. The question was would it be more expensive or less effective operationally not to have a base there for these big cutters that they operate in and out of there. Also we had a need for a good strong aviation arm and we have it there. I think that was a worthwhile project. We made our own district in-house study with project officers and we developed our justifications and how we were going to use the facilities and what the future growth might be. On the basis of this, we supported the project. Admiral Bender questioned every decision we made and we had to rejustify it to him, but he would have been at fault if he hadn't done this. I would imagine that the Coast Guard feels that it was the proper decision now.

At that time the Alaska Pipeline was being considered and the construction had been started. The Coast Guard got involved by checking the river crossings to

see if there was any involvement in the Federal Government and there was, so we had to clear certain things and had certain procedures. We didn't have a helicopter appropriate, but we chartered a helicopter and took a couple of our engineers and qualified people and flew them the whole route. We visited all of the native villages and communities to find out the historical background of this body of water, how it had been used and how it might be used in the future. I wasn't directly involved with that, but I think that was an interesting job for those who actually did it. Alaska is full of stories, but I'm not going to spend any more time there. It's a fabulous place and practically everybody who was assigned there fell in love with it in one way or another. A classmate and good friend of mine, and also my first Chief of Staff there, was Greg Schmidt. He stayed on and is living in Anchorage and sure loves it.

From there, I went back to headquarters and a job that I didn't feel comfortable with. The two jobs I had in the Coast Guard that weren't optimal in my mind were that one and my job with the Airways Modernization Board and the FAA. Short of that, if I'd had my own choice, there was no way I could have chosen better career in the Coast Guard.