

This tape was made for the Memories of New Bern Committee and consist of an interview with James Wallace (Mike) Holton of New Bern conducted in New Bern on May 6, 1992 for the Transportation Task Force. This is tape is assigned number 1506 and the interview was conducted by Bill Edwards, interviewer number 1500. The tape begins with biographical data on the life of Mike Holton. Mike Holton will read this biographical information.

Mike Holton: My birth date is 1921. The name that I was titled with is James Wallace Holton, but everybody knows me as Mike. I was born in McAllen, Texas in Hidalgo County. My parents name are Christobel Rowe Holton and Eva J. Rowe. My grandmother raised. My sister is June Holton Keel. We had about fifteen relatives living in one house. It was a nineteen room house we lived in with fifteen relatives. The street we lived on was Spencer Avenue. Playmates and games we played, home entertainment, I think the basic thing that we did when I used to follow the big boys around in Spencer Avenue was to go over to Crockett's field and steal watermelons. The playmates I had around there were Spec Tyson, Jimmy Menius, Monk Fulcher, Goose Lancaster and several others. The church and Sunday school I attended was Centenary Methodist Church at which Mr. B. M. Potter was the scout master of Troop 13 at that given church. Illnesses and medicine, growing up, we didn't go to doctors. All we took was calomel and then castor oil to clean you out! (laughter) The most memorable event in my childhood was watering Tom Mix's horse in McCarthy's field during a circus. My childhood in Ghent in grammar grades were the teachers.

I had several teachers that I was quite impressed with; Mrs. Waters and Miss Eleanor Marshall. Then as I progressed through education, I had a friend of mine, Spec Tyson, that we were what we called "Tombstone" buddies. We grew up together and are still together. We went through grammar grade and high school together. I started studying voice when I reached high school level and Mr. Bill Hodgkins was my voice teacher. We won the state contest in quartet four times in a row, which we kept the cup. Then I won the North Carolina state baritone contest one time. After that, we progressed on into high school. Spec and myself were unfortunate enough to be thrown out of the eleventh grade and to be put into the hall where we didn't have a homeroom. I think really basically I could say this, that Spec was the problem, not me. (laughter) Of course, during those interim years of high school, I worked at Belk's Department Store on Middle Street.

We used to go down to the river and go swimming at Crabby's and sailing out on the river with the boys that had sailboats. We didn't have a sailboat; however, Mr. Fran Ferebee had one and we used to sail with him quite often. Of course, all the churches would have parties down at Morehead and we'd go down. On a Sunday, any given Sunday during the three months of June, July and August, you could go down there and have a free meal. Because we would go down and become Baptist one Sunday, Methodist the next Sunday and Presbyterians, etc. Each Sunday down there they'd say, "Mike what are you?" I'd say, "I'm a Baptist", and then the next Sunday I'm a Methodist, etc. (laughter)

We would thumb a ride down with Buck Jones. Buck Jones used to pick

us up. He taught Sunday school at the Methodist church and he'd say, boys meet me at the bridge and I'll take you down, which he did. Then he'd say, meet me at the bridge and I'll bring you home, which he did.

But we would go down to Morehead and have a wonderful time. To digress a moment, we played basketball and football of which I enjoyed very much. We had a reasonably fair team. There were several prima donnas on there. Not me. Some other boys wanted to be the stars, but basically, I think I was. (laughter) We had a lot of swimming. Not a lot of swimming events, but we used to swim quite a bit out in the Neuse river.

After leaving high school, I went to Elon College. As a matter of fact, they gave me a scholarship of which I thoroughly enjoyed. But let me back up a moment. In high school, I went to Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and was offered a scholarship in voice. Of course in those given days, we didn't have any money to support it. Nobody in New Bern had any money. However, I also went to Julliard summer school and studied music in Lake Chatauqua, New York several times.

I had several opportunities to progress in music. I was given a job with Bubbles Becker in Chicago to sing at the Trianon Ballroom when I was sixteen years of age, but my grandmother wouldn't let me go because she thought that all musicians were queer. Upon entering Elon College, I thoroughly enjoyed it from the people that I met and also the music that was there. They had a wonderful music department. A Mr. Pratt was head of the music department. Mr. Tommy Edwards was my voice teacher. We would tour the state of North Carolina. I attended Elon and I was a soloist for two years for the college. During that period

of time at Elon, a CPT program came up, which was a pilot training program that was a civilian pilot training program that the government offered to young men. There was possibly going to be a war at that time. This was in 1940 and the beginning of '41. I took this course and continued in that course until I completed it. Then, I went to North Carolina State college. I went for a semester there and took up secondary. Then, I went to All America Aviation and went through four more courses. If you take all of them together, I've been through over fifteen flight schools in my flying career.

Bill Edwards: Where were these courses held? Did they start out in New Bern, the CPT?

Mike Holton: No. The CPT started at Elon College, which was backed and financed by the government. So, the government paid for all of it. It was completely free. I went from Elon College to State College to Wilmington, Delaware and used to fly at Mr. Henry Du Pont's private airport. I met Mr. Du Pont several times. In inviting me over to his home, I was awed by all the wealth that I saw. As you enter the gates, the gates were twelve feet tall. The brick walls was three feet wide with glass on top. Upon entering the foyer of his home, Mr. Henry B. Du Pont, had a table in there that looked like a child's table. Of course being from New Bern and not knowing any better, I asked him the price of this table. He told me it was Napoleon's table and it cost \$20,000 in 1941, in the earlier '41. Mr. Du Pont was a wonderful man. After leaving there, I proceeded to take a check ride and was sent to Griffin, Georgia to instruct in an instructor's

program. I was the youngest flight instructor in the southeastern training command. I was twenty years of age and I was teaching pilots that were thirty years of age and had many, many more hours than I had. I was teaching acrobatics. Upon completing Griffin, Georgia; and I also might enter this into the conversation, I met the woman that I eventually married, but that's another story.

BE: Tell us how you meet her?

Mike Holton: We went to a dance one night and she was playing records that I didn't like. So, I went over to stop the record machine and in the process she walked over and said, "We're not supposed to do that." That's a typical statement that I've lived with for over forty-eight years that I've been married to her, "We're not suppose to do this." (laughter) I should have known better. I have another story to go along with that. After leaving Griffin, George, I went into the United States Army Air Corps at the 3rd Command in Memphis, Tennessee. But I had to go through some more training down in Macon, Georgia. In the interim of being in Macon, Georgia, she came down to visit me one time and she said, "If we don't get married this weekend, I'm not going to marry you." This was six o'clock in the afternoon on a Sunday afternoon, March 26 at six o'clock. I said, knowing that I had an out because it was six o'clock, "I didn't have a marriage license." I knew I was home free and I said, "Well, I'll marry you". Then she said, "Here's one here", and she took it out of her pocketbook and gave it to me. We turned and walked into the Presbyterian church in Macon, Georgia.

I married her at 6:10. I put her on a bus at 6:30 because I had to be back at the base at 7:00. She went back to Georgia and I didn't see her anymore for two weeks. When she returned after two weeks, we had a real nice room in the hotel and she was just beautiful! So, we were upstairs shucking off the clothes and a knock comes on the door and says, "You're in the wrong room." So, we packed up and moved to the room he gave us, which had four beds in it. Now when we got down to the other room, the clothes came off again and all of a sudden the door knock and here were five cadets out there saying, "This is our room". So I called the desk and the desk says, "Yes, you're in the wrong room." So as we go out the door, they said, "You're in the middle room of the two rooms we were previously in." So we go in that room and there's nothing in there but a floor lamp and a chair. So he said, "Go out and I'll get you a bed installed." So, that's the end of that. (laughter) After graduating from the Air Force schools that I went to in Macon and also in Blytheville, Arkansas, I was sent to Brownsville, Texas to fly fighters and fly the P-51, the 38, the 39, 63, and the 47 and the 51. I then left and was sent to California to test 51's at North American Aircraft factory, ferrying airplanes in the process from the east coast to the west coast and also shuttling aircrafts to the Russians in Anchorage, Alaska, Attu, Chimian, and Fairbanks, Alaska. After my stint of time in the Army Air Corps, I came back to New Bern wanting to open up a flight service here, which I'd help to open.

BE: When was this?

Mike Holton: 1946. I opened it up and became the manager of New Bern airport. I was the first manager that New Bern airport ever had. I might bring this up, I was also back when Lt. Nott was here.

I was a scout in Troop 13 and that was the day that we went over to help people stay out of the areas they weren't suppose to be in and that was the day that Lt. Nott was killed. I watched him, with the Marine Corps, do a loop and go straight in the ground. But returning to New Bern, I started over at the airport with the help of Bennie Baxter who had the money to finance the airplanes, and I had the pilot to run it. So, we started an operation. During that process of operating over there, I kept remembering something about the Confederacy. I used to fly with a Confederate flag on my hat when I was in the service. Some of you will remember, all the stores all over the United States started putting out caps with the flags on it.

I was the originator of the first flag that went on a cap. Also, I originated the Confederate Air Force. At one time, we had nine thousand members all over the world. Cherry Point was loaded with the Confederate Air Force boys and we had just a wonderful organization and had a lot of fun with it. Also, Albert McSorley helped me tremendously in the organizational policy we were under. After my stint of operating New Bern airport, I operated Burgaw and also Beaufort Airport in schooling as chief pilot of all three bases. Then, I was hired by Piedmont Airlines in 1948 where I stayed for thirty-three years. I was a chief pilot, simulator chief pilot, test pilot, check airman and standardization pilot. In my career of flying I have

possibly flown 37,000 hours in that category, give or take, and I have flown 157 different airplanes. My job at Piedmont Airlines; of course, I flew the line and I flew many times down through New Bern here and flew a lot of people that you might classify as stars, movies stars and people of renowned substance in the government. I used to really enjoy flying one man from Trenton, North Carolina, John Larkin, who I consider one of the finest men I've ever met. John used to get on the airplane in Raleigh. In those given days and time, we didn't allow drinking on the airplane. But John would get on and come up front and say, "Mike, I got a six pack"; they'd just come out, and he said, "What do you think?" I said, "I don't know anything about it John. If you drink them, I don't want to see you drinking them." He said, "Thank you very much." When he left the airplane, there would be six cans of beer left in the seat. But he was a wonderful man. The routes of Piedmont, which started in 1948, went to Cincinnati and then they went to Louisville and as far south as Atlanta and as far north as Norfolk. But then as Piedmont grew, we began to go into New York and Chicago and still as far west as Pittsburgh. Then eventually, Piedmont went all the way to the west coast and also down into Florida. We covered numerous states. I can't recall all the number of states we covered, but you can take about every state east of the Mississippi and we had some part of it. Now, I might mention one other thing in talking about the United States Army Air Corps. When I was in California, I used to see all of the movie stars because they were all stationed over at the 4th Ferry Command. My gas boy was John Payne.



I think you might remember him. He was from Roanoke, Virginia incidently, and he was a nice man. He was my gas boy and he was a great big hulking man. I used to see the Four Horsemen that used to be on "Filber McGee and Molly's" programs. Also, I'd go to parties over at Palm Springs, and that's where I saw Kay Kaiser. I sang for Kay Kaiser one night over there.

BE: Tell me who you flew with while you were doing all that flying, Mike.

Mike Holton: Well, you've heard the statement "God is my co-pilot." God was not only my co-pilot, He was my chief pilot. He was my ground school instructor. He was my doctor. And He carried me over many, many hurdles that possibly I couldn't gotten over without His help. I always go back to Isaiah 40:31, "And those that wait upon the Lord shall gain renewed strength and they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not feel faint." Those are the things that I live by and think of. But there's one other thing that I'd like to say here that I think would be apropos for anyone concerned about what poetry can be and mean to a pilot; "You love a lot of things if you live around them; but there isn't any woman and there isn't any horse, not any before or after, that is as lovely as a great airplane, and men who love them, are faithful to them even though they leave them for others. Man has one virginity to lose in fighters and if he loses it to a lovely airplane, there's where his heart will forever be." Having been in the air for that total number of hours, you can readily appreciate the number of close calls that I had; engines out,

engines on fire, brakes failing, going into a building. But it all goes back to one thing, with the help of the Man upstairs, as we all say, I got through it successfully. Well, to go back to New Bern.

"Dear old New Bern, the land of enchanting waters, 57 points of historic interests", I used to say this on this on the airlines when I was coming from New York flying people to Myrtle Beach. I would tell them all about New Bern. They thought I worked for the Chamber of Commerce. I would tell them about Blackbeard used to be here and I would tell them about Middle Street and about Lynn Cohen. Lynn Cohen used to sell firecrackers and little smutty books we could buy. That's where I learned a lot sex. However, I worked for Belk's Department store and Mr. Kennedy was a wonderful manager. Then, we'd go to Jacob's and we'd go to King's and hang out. We had the Blue Law here which no theater could be opened until nine o'clock on Sunday night. Everybody went to church on Sundays. Then, we would go down to the Women's Club and have all our dances or up in Stanley Hall and play our basketball games, which Frank Dunn owns now, or did own it, or still owns it. However, those are the buildings that I think I'm more familiar with. I didn't go into the Elk's Temple building. It stood as an edifice for people that I didn't know anything about. I didn't know what the Elk's Lodge was all about. Also, the Masonic Lodge.

I joined the Mason's when I first came home from retiring. I used to think they had the biggest choir in the world because they wore choir robes. I found out differently. Those are the buildings I enjoyed. Also, Central High School. That building had a lot of memories

and still has a lot of memories. We only had eleven grades. It was just a wonderful time and wonderful teachers. I might mention one person that I've written down here. Her name was Mrs. Mims. She was my French teacher and she was one pretty young'un! I was in love with her and I called her frequently in Greenville, North Carolina. I think she's eighty some odd years of age. It's wonderful to be taught by somebody so caring as Mrs. Mims. I know this is a rambling story, but I've got to digress one more time to when the street cars were running down Spencer Avenue. I was a little boy, maybe three to four years of age. This old man that ran it was one tough human! He would literally urinate in a cup and hold it when the boys would jump on the back of it; not me because I was too young, but the other boys would jump on the back of it and he'd dump it out on them to keep them off of the street car. It would run all the way down to the end of Ghent. At that time, I think it was only six blocks. Then it would turn and go all the way back down to East Front Street. Another item about New Bern after the war. I was at the airport looking at the flying magazine of which a display of the of Gull Hawk was on the front of it. We were commenting. Robert Thomason of New Bern; I think you'll remember him. His mother was a seamstress on Pollock Street and a lovely lady. Bob also went to work with us in Piedmont Airlines. We were sitting there looking at the airplane and here comes Al Williams flying across the airport. I told Bob, that's Al Williams. I got out and looked and he came around and did his procedures to slow the airplane down and drop the gear. I told Bob, his gear's not down.

I said, "we'd better run out to the intersection and give him a waive off." So, we jumped on it. In the process, I picked up a fifty pound CO2 bottle and put it on the side of the car and held on to the Ford side running board and we drove out to the intersection. I was waiving my coat and he continued to come in and slide on his belly. The fire started way behind him and we were trying to put out the flame before it reached him, but it was so fast, we couldn't. So, I ran up and jumped on the side of the airplane and there was Al Williams sitting there. All he asked me was, "Wasn't the gear down?" I said, "Mr. Williams, the gear wasn't down, but don't worry about it!" We dragged him out of the airplane. The airplane was burning pretty good when we got him out. Other than that, he's done so much for aviation, I think that they tried to slide that under the carpet.

We flew to California for retroe fit of a/c. After landing, I told this director of operation, I said, "Listen, I'll bet you that this guy knows where New Bern, North Carolina is." He said, "Couldn't possibly." So, he said, "I'll buy you dinner." I said, "All right."

So, we asked the cab driver, "You know where New Bern, North Carolina is?" He said, "You mean Middle Street, Pollock Street and the Neuse River?" I said, "Yep. Okay." So, we bet again. We literally bet again. We got on an elevator going up to our rooms in the San Francisco Hilton. I said, "Do you know where New Bern is?" The man was standing there with a hamburg on, dressed beautifully. He was an elderly gentleman. He said, "I guess I do. I stayed lived on East Front Street with some family during the war." So then he wouldn't bet me anymore.

Then we drove down to Carmel, California. When we were down there, we went in an restaurant and I said, "Are you ready to try again?"

He said, "Yeah." The restaurant owner was a Greek and he comes over and I said, "Do you know where New Bern is?" He said, "I sure do and I never want to go back there." He says, "I was stationed at the Army base in New Bern." I remember one other thing that was so impressive to me while I was taking CPT. I would come home, and my grandmother rented rooms to people all over the world, and we had a lieutenant staying with us and he was in an Army camp off of Oaks Road, which later turned into a prison of war camp. I can't remember the name of the camp. I wish I could. That's about it for right now. Piedmont's operation; we initially started with two airplanes which were DC-3's or converted C-47's that were used during the war. Eventually, we moved from DC-3's up to 404's. The unique thing about Piedmont was we always operated in the black. We never operated in the red. Never! In the whole operation of Piedmont.

BE: You talking about money now?

Mike Holton: Money-wise, we never operated in the red. We always had a black area that we worked in rather than a red area operational wise. Then after leaving 404, we went to the F-27; then we went to the F-227; then we went to the Japanese YS-11; then we went to the 727; and then we went to the 737. Then the last airplane that Piedmont operated under our certification was a 767. Those are all the airplanes that we flew when we were working for Piedmont Airlines. We never bought but four new airplanes. All of our's were airplanes that had

been renovated with exception of the 737 and the 767 and the 227 and the F-27. They were all new. But the others were not. The speed that we operated under was in a category; in the DC-3, it was 150 mph; and then we moved up to 200 mph; and then we moved up from that to 230; and then we moved up to 300; and then we moved up to mach speeds.

The 727 would operate at .86 mach or .87 and on a downhill, you'd be up to .97, which is nine tenths, ninety-seven one hundred's of the speed of sound. After coming out of the war and managing the airport, we taught approximately, and this was under the GI Bill, we taught approximately 500 pilots in a period of two years at New Bern airport.

That was with four instructors. I was a chief pilot and there was Bob Thomason and there was Baxter Slaughter. His father, incidentally, was the superintendent of the Methodist church here in New Bern at one time.

BE: Baxter went on to be a Piedmont pilot.

Mike Holton: I got him the job. And also Bob Thomason. I used to give Baxter his check rides and Bob his check rides. Baxter and Bob and myself and Albert McSorley, I can say that we did check out about 500 pilots here in J-3 Piper Cubs. (Picks up in different topic) His father was a wonderful actor and he, himself, was a wonderful actor.

His mother owns this big famous house in Hollywood. I'm trying to remember the name of it now.

BE: The Barrymore's?

Mike Holton: No, not Barrymore. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. was in the lobby in New York at LaGuardia airport. I saw him. He looked

at me and I nodded and walked on down. I had my camera with me so I took a picture of him when he was walking down. He's six feet six.

He's a tall man! Striking looking! He says, "You don't want a picture of me." I said, "Yes, I do", and I took three or four of him. I announced he was on the airplane and I said, now, just don't mess with him and let him read his paper. I was just kidding with him. They all laughed and they didn't mess with him.

I flew him down to Roanoke. Then I took the pictures and mailed them to Pickfair in Hollywood and they in turn to sent them to where he was living. I think he was living in New York at that time. But he signed them. I got them in a book for the kids. But they won't know who Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. is. No way! Then, I flew Elizabeth Taylor around. Man, she's something to see! I mean, she is one good looking woman! Absolutely beautiful! She was married to a senator from Virginia at that time. She would go down to Martinsville to see the races because he loved the races. He'd go down and she'd go down. She was just as friendly as she could be. I'll never forget when she walked on, I said, "Hello, Elizabeth!", and she said, "Almost." That's the truth. Then I went back and she rubbed my arm. He said, "Leave the Captain alone." She said, "Shut up." She turned around and said, "Shut up. I'm talking to him." But anyway, you got enough. That's enough mess from me. You know what I mean.

BE: (Picks up in the middle of another topic) You know, it's out at the baseball park.

Mike Holton: To go again, when I was 12, 13, in that particular

area of life, I used to sell peanuts and coca-colas out at the Kafer Park. Mr. Murray Pugh was there as the umpire. You could always count on the Ferebees to put on a good show because they'd end up fighting Murray or if Murray Pugh wouldn't fight them, they would fight each other. That would be Fran and Little Bill and Bill and the tall banker.

You could always count on the Ferebees to put on a good show. One thing that I certainly want anyone knowing about my life in New Bern I owe to my grandmother, Mrs. Eva Rowe. She was married to Captain Will Rowe, who was a former steamboat captain. He used to come down on the old Forsythe down to New Bern. My grandmother was never my mother nor my father nor my sister nor aunt nor uncle, but she was always there when I needed her, and I owe everything to her! Plus the fact, that the one other thing she did that was so memorable to me, there was never a human being that came in this town that needed something to eat or a place to sleep. I can remember people sleeping on the front porch during the war. I'd come home from college in the beginning of the conflict, prior to December 1st, the house would be completely filled with people sleeping in the hallways, my room was gone, and so forth. I would imagine over that five year period that people coming in and living and staying there, there was somewhere in the thousands of people who went through her house. Okay, one more thing I want to remember on Middle Street. When we were growing up, as you well know, the boys in my category and my age bracket at that given point in time, we didn't have a lot of money but we could always count on some of the storekeepers to come to our assistance or our



aid. One person in particular would be Mr. Sam Lipman. You could go in his store and if you didn't have any money, he'd say, "Don't worry about it! Bring me fifty cents a week or fifty cents a month.

Whatever you want, you pick it out, you got it." I think that's a tribute to the people that live in New Bern; to trust and to allow us that privilege and that latitude.

END OF INTERVIEW