MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

ROBERT C. O'BRYAN

INTERVIEW 1504

By Bill Edwards, interviewer, number 1500. This interview is with Robert C. O'Bryan who is now living in Cape Carteret, Swansboro, North Carolina. This is interview number 1504.

Bill Edwards: What does the "C" stand for?

Mr. O'Bryan: Carl. That was my father's name. They never called me junior. I was named Robert Carl for my dad, and my oldest boy is also Robert Carl.

BE: What was your mother's full name?

Mr. O'Bryan: Her name was Lillian Buckman O'Bryan. All from Kentucky.

BE: Where were you born, and when?

Mr. O'Bryan: I was born in a small community. You could hardly call it a town, but it did have a post office, and that's about all. I think there were eighteen families and thirteen cows. There could have been more inside the city limit. (laughter) We of course were outside of city limits on a farm on the Ohio River down in Meade County, Breckenridge and Meade. Both of those counties touched our home farm which was about 300 acres.

BE: So, that was in Kentucky?

Mr. O'Bryan: In Kentucky. My father and mother met there. He was singing in the choir, and she was a relative of the Priest. We were Roman Catholic. She came down to visit her cousin, the Priest, and met my father who sang in the choir and fell in love with his bass voice; and he with her beauty, as he thought. And she was a sweet lady. Anyhow, that's where they met. That's where I was born, in this little town called Mooleyville.

BE: When was that?

Mr. O'Bryan: I was born on February 13, 1920.

BE: You're a year younger than I am.

Mr. O'Bryan: Yeah, I'm just a boy. (laughter)

Be: Well, tell me what brought you to New Bern?

Mr. O'Bryan: I migrated with the Marine Corps. I joined the Marines before World War II. My mother, before she married my father, years before, had gone with a Marine who is still a close friend of our family. He and his wife used to visit with us a lot. He thought the world of mother. He was a Marine and used to play baseball and was a track runner in the Marine Corps. Most of his time was spent in China. As a young boy, that always had a lot of allure to me thinking about those wonderful Marines. Back in those days, they were sort of a shock troop. They had to meet certain physical requirements in height and size and so forth before they took them in. Of course in later years, they dropped many of the specifications. It was still sort of an elite corps. When I saw that the Japs were sinking a few ships off the west coast, there was some talk with this friend of mine, we used to call him Uncle George, about the Marines, and I kept thinking about that. I was in my second year of college. I said, "We're going to get into something out there. I would like to get in and get lined up early and maybe get to play baseball in the Marine Corps in China." (laughter) So, I joined the Marine Corps. Of course, I went through World War II and married a local girl out in Jones County. I married the sheriff's daughter out there. As the story goes, I was in charge of munitions,being the ordinance officer in the Marine Air Corps that I was attached to. Ordinance with the Air Corps had to do with the armament on the aircraft as opposed to in the Army and the ground Marines; trucks and all the other stuff is called ordinance. Ordinance was the guns and the handling of the munitions.

BE: Let's back up just a minute and tell me how you got to be an officer.

Mr. O'Bryan: I joined the Marines as an enlisted man. While overseas, it became very obvious that the pilots who were handling all of the administrative jobs in the squadron; that would be Adjutant, Ordinance Officer, Field Safety Officer, etc., all were handled by pilots. But as we got into the fracas out there, we got into war, these officers were kept too busy at their trade of flying their aircraft and positions began to open up for ground officers. In going through the records they found out that I had leadership ability from the day I joined the Marine Corps. I was a platoon sergeant at Paris Island and had had a supervisory job throughout. I was at that time a Tech Sergeant. I had moved up rather fast in the enlisted ranks for the same reason, leadership; and also, I had more education than some of the boys did even though I was not a graduate of college. So, they went through the records there and found that I had qualifications for an officer and asked me if I would be interested in giving up my enlisted rank to become an officer in the Marine Corps. Obviously, I accepted and moved up from there.

BE: Did you go to Quantico?

Mr. O'Bryan: No, this was overseas.

BE: It was a field promotion, in effect then?

Mr. O'Bryan: In a way. It wasn't what they call a spot promotion in the field. I had to go through a very rigorous course in Samoa under a General Larkin there who was in charge of training. In fact, I trained as a Second Lieutenant, which I became at that time. I was training Majors and Captains who were being prepared to go into Guadalcanal in jungle warfare because we had had it there at the school. That's what they were specializing in, was jungle warfare. So, I became a teacher at the school in running these officers through before they went into the canal. Then very shortly after that, they attached me to one of the raider units and took me out of aviation for a while. When my Commanding Officer found out what had happened to me; he sent me over there for a commission so I could come back and take over ground ordinance, and all of a sudden he found out I was gone. So, he located me. They had moved me up toward the canal, and by using the various administrative powers that he might of had as the Commanding Officer, he eventually got me back into aviation. Of course when we got back into the states, they used that schooling background that I had, and with what experience I'd had in the field, to put me in charge of teaching pilots the proper dive angle for the release of bombs from fighter aircraft from underneath the aircraft. In fact, we came here to Cherry Point. At that time it was known as O&R, Overhaul and Repair. It changed it's name two or three times. We designed a mechanical unit to go underneath the fighter plane to release a ll.75 inch rocket. They were preparing that to take Brest, France. Then, we moved to the west coast into the Inyo-Kern dessert and started practicing with those rockets. I was handling the crew that used what we called a rake. It's kind of like looking through a harp with the strings at varied angles. As the craft would reach a certain string, looking up the wire on the harp, you would say, "You're now at the drop point dive", and they would learn the proper dive and how to get away from the rocket itself when it was released because it would explode and the plane was still coming down. They'd go through their own debris. So, they had to learn how to pull up. So, I was doing that work before being transferred to the east coast. Upon reaching the east coast, of course, I was attached to the group that opened up out at Oak Grove, one of the outlying fields of Cherry Point. I met the sheriff's daughter in Jones County and married here.

BE: And what was her name?

Mr. O'Bryan: Anne Creagh. Anne and myself raised four children.

BE: When were you married?

Mr. O'Bryan: I was married in May of 1944 in St. Paul's Church here in New Bern. I spent my honeymoon of one night at the old Queen Anne Hotel. (laughter) That was the extent of my honeymoon.

BE: That was '44? That was still during war time then.

Mr. O'Bryan: Oh yeah.

BE: I remember you used to tell me about some of the pilots playing touch and go with some of the trucks on Highway 17.

Mr. O'Bryan: Yeah. These boys were young, and they were trying their expertise out with the aircraft in playing with the vehicles on the highway. It was of course against military rules, but they would do that. We in ordinance had to prepare what they called "the sock", that they pull behind one airplane for the others to shoot at for gunnery practice. My department was of course in charge of all of that as well. I saw a pilot burned up one time at Oak Grove as a result of that. The pull cable was wire. As he was coming in to release the cable, before he released it, he pulled the thing across the power lines off one end of the field at Oak Grove and set his aircraft afire with the AC current that ran up that wire before the release. He came in a blaze and burned up before they could get him out. That was sad to look at. He was beyond help. No one could get near the thing. It was too hot, even with their fire gear.

BE: That's tough. Tell me about your children. I know them and have known them, but let's get it on the record of their names.

Mr. O'Bryan: Well of course Robert. Robert was the oldest one, named after myself and my father. They were two years and a month apart. We dropped two years and a month each time. Robin in August. Two years and a month later, or a month earlier I guess it would be, in July, John Michael was born. And then Nancy, the daughter, was born two years after that. And then it seemed it was all over, but eight years later here comes Pat, Patrick O'Bryan. The older three all were graduates at Carolina. The last one went to East Carolina. He wasn't much of a student. He specialized in girls and having a good time.

BE: Like his pop, huh?

Mr. O'Bryan: Not exactly, but maybe so. But anyhow, as you know, Patrick got a fatal disease and we lost him four years ago. We lost him in '88. So, those are the four children that we had, and of course, three are still living.

BE: Where are they?

Mr. O'Bryan: They're pretty well scattered. The oldest boy just got back from Alaska. He was there for eighteen years working in the beginning with the Air Force and then as a tech rep representing a company that supplied electronics to the Air Force from what they call E systems. He's now back at the home of E systems in charge of the outlying fields like he was doing before. He would work two weeks in Fairbanks, Alaska and then one week in Shemya in the Aleutians, so he was back and forth while he was there. The second boy, Michael, went to Brazil in charge of a plant down there for Burlington Industries. He had to learn Portuguese. They gave him a crash course up in New York. They met him at the airplane, and the man told him, "This is the last English you will hear or speak until you leave here two weeks from now." So, he was sequestered in a room in some hotel there, and everything that he heard was Portuguese; tapes and everything else and the people that waited on him or that he was in contact with. And he didn't speak anymore English to anyone until he finished that crash course. Then he went down and was able to at least know what was going on in talking to the people. He had a pretty fair understanding. I guess since he had Spanish in school, I suspicion that there was a lot of the language that was similar in Portuguese. I understand it is. I'm not a linguist myself.

BE: Neither am I. What about Nancy?

Mr. O'Bryan: Nancy was a dental hygienist. She started out here in New Bern with Billy Hand right after she graduated at Carolina. She married a local boy that she went to school with in high school out in Jones County. That marriage didn't last. She put him through college up in the mountains while she was a dental hygienist there. After he graduated, why, he found himself another gal and took off. Then she remarried and had two beautiful daughters; of course, we think so.

BE: Naturally.

Mr. O'Bryan: Naturally. That marriage failed. I think it was for several reasons. I'm not one to say that there is only one side at fault. But to make a long story short, she's married to a very wonderful doctor. They fell for each other. He loves her daughters, and they're doing great. He's teaching family practice under a grant from the University of North Carolina. He's originally from Arizona. He's also the only doctor in that county (that takes in substance abuse and family problems) that encompasses Asheville. What is it? Buncombe?

BE: Forsyth? No, that's Winston-Salem. Buncombe County.

Mr. O'Bryan: Buncombe. He has three different offices in Buncombe County. He works a half of day in the mornings in family practice, teaching family practice. Then in the afternoons and evenings, he's handling drug addicts and family problems.

BE: Rehab?

Mr. O'Bryan: Not necessarily rehab, but the whole bit. They're referred to him from the hospitals. He works with them and with their families trying to help them get back on their feet. That's a dedication in itself to deal with those kind of people.

BE: Indeed it is.

Mr. O'Bryan: Yeah. Alcohol and drugs.

BE: Let's get back now to some of your early memories about the Marine Corps, and New Bern, and let's get into the bus company.

Mr. O'Bryan: When I first saw New Bern, of course, I was in the Marine Corps. They dropped us in here from Quantico, Virginia. They had two planes in the Marine Corps, big transport aircraft. One was on the east coast and one was on the west. They looked like; what do they call these trailers that all line up and go around the country together? Those silver trailers.

BE: Air Streams?

Mr. O'Bryan: Air Streams. These aircraft looked just like that. They had no paint on them. They were just aluminum on the outside, you know, shiny. One on the east, one on the west. They dropped us over here at what was then Mitchell Field. We started putting up tents and setting up for the Marine Corps there. That was my first good look at North Carolina. The people of New Bern took the Marines into their homes just like family. It was the most wonderful setup that any military man ever had. The people here were just as gracious as they could be. They'd line up around the field at four o'clock in the afternoon with their automobiles and pick us up, bring us to town, take us into their homes. And whatever partying was done, was done with these people. But like all military, somewhere in the group there's a bad egg, and he causes a problem at somebody's home or at one of the businesses in town, and that just puts a lid on all the rest of them. But anyhow, that was my first visit to New Bern.

BE: What was that date? Do you remember?

Mr. O'Bryan: That was approximately in November of '41. Because very shortly after that, I was sitting in what was then Clark's Drug Store at the corner of Middle and Broad Street. The MP came over and said, "Sarge, you gotta get back to the base, war has been declared."

BE: Well, you came before Pearl Harbor then.

Mr. O'Bryan: And then I found out that Pearl Harbor had been hit. They immediately had us to move these aircraft back to Quantico to have armor plate put under the seat where the pilot would be safe from ground fire. We were using the prop jobs back in those days, the Grumman's.

BE: F4U?

Mr. O'Bryan: No, that's Corsair. These were the old Grumman aircraft. Some of the numbers of the craft have disappeared from my memory over the years, but they were biplanes. They had two wings. Then we got the F6's which had the single wing, also Grumman prop jobs. Back in those days the guns were synchronized to shoot through the prop. They were right in front of the pilot. That was quite a feat in itself, making sure you didn't have the thing out of sync and shoot the prop off your own craft.

BE: That was part of your responsibility, wasn't it?

Mr. O'Bryan: Yes. The Marine Corps had sent me to school prior to that to Jacksonville, Florida. I learned two trades down there. One of them was armament, and the other was aircraft mechanic. I came out third in a group of ninety-three that went through the aircraft mechanic's course and never used it. I'll never know why because it was a pretty good thing in your record to be that high in a class of mechanics. But mechanics always kind of came natural to me. I think they do to a lot of farm boys. They keep their own machinery up and have a pretty general idea of how things work. I enjoyed it. So, that brought me into New Bern. After having been here for a little while; that's when we were working on that aircraft to fire rockets, and they sent me to the west coast. My wife moved out there with me. I met Anne, of course, while here, and married Anne. They sent me on out to the west coast, and she followed me out pregnant with our first son. Not too long after that, why, I came on back east. The boys had gone out. And if you recall, the Army took Brest, France, so we didn't have to use that aircraft for that purpose. So what they did, they started using these Liberty ships and broke them up into carrier aircraft service detachments. CAS D, they called it. All of our flyers split up into these CAS D's and went back overseas, but

I was stuck out there teaching rocketry from aircraft. Then eventually of course, came on back east. But I got out of the Marine Corps while on the west coast while running that school out there. My wife, in Jones County, did not like the military life of an officer. She thought the officer wives were a little stuffy. She enjoyed the enlisted wives. She didn't like the Officer's Club and that sort of thing. She was really a down to earth sort of girl.

BE: I remember.

Mr. O'Bryan: She was not happy in the service, and so I said, "well, you know, I've put a number of years in, I guess this is the time to get out." I came back to Pollocksville, her home. I bought into a business out there with my brother-in-law, her brother, for a while. It was a combination grocery store, service station, etc., like these small stores in a rural community. I did this until I could decide whether I could find work here that would be satisfactory or go on back to Kentucky. I had a job waiting for me in Kentucky if I ever got out; automobile accessories and tires and so forth, with people that I had worked with before in Kentucky as a youngster while I was going through school. But anyhow, my father-in-law, the sheriff, got in touch with Libby Ward. This was all politics back in those days. Libby, as you recall, was a senator and was spoken for at one time as being a possible Governor.

BE: I remember that.

Mr. O'Bryan: The Governors was taken from the east one time and the west the next. When it came back to the east, why, Libby's name was high on the list. Libby, and also George Hughes, were pretty well involved. Hughes was county attorney for Jones County and also involved in politics a little bit. He very much wanted me to go with the inheritance tax division. He said, "When you're dealing with that much money, some of it's bound to rub off on you." That's the political way to look at it I guess. Libby said, "If this boy's got anything; we've had to hire whatever we could get during the war, and if this son-in-law of yours has got anything", talking to the sheriff, he said "He could very well work up to be an officer of the company."

BE: Anne was Sheriff Creagh's daughter?

Mr. O'Bryan: Yes, my wife. So, that was the contact that was made. They sent me down to Jacksonville to the station that had been allotted to Libby as a partner by Mr. West who started this bus line. Libby and First Citizen, who became the trustee of the company when Mr. West died, operated the Jacksonville bus station. So, I actually started out working for Libby Ward and First Citizen's when I worked at the Jacksonville bus station. I started out as a baggage agent handling baggage. The Marines were just getting out of the Marine Corps and so they were coming off of that base in droves. It was a good time to learn the business. So, I began to learn ticketing and the general work that has to be done around the terminal. In fact years after I left there, why, David himself was sent down there in the summer time by his father.

BE: David Ward?

Mr. O'Bryan: David Ward. To work in that bus station. He later became a director of the company. They kept me there for six months in Jacksonville. Then they had an opening in Morehead City for a terminal manager there, and they sent me to Morehead City. Very shortly after that, they lost management at Cherry Point. They said, "He's worked for the Marines for a long time, he can run both." So, I ran back and forth between Morehead City and Cherry Point and operated those two terminals. Back in those days, and even those years in the war, there were no weekends. You didn't have Saturday and Sunday, or even Sunday in the military during the war. This bus business was requiring the same thing. I was working about seven days a week. It became obvious to Mr. Hall that you can't continue to work a person like that. You'll burn them out, you know. They were delighted with the enthusiasm that I was throwing into the job. So, they worked me good, and it did me good. I enjoyed it. It was a business that kind of stuck to me. I started to mention earlier in this session, so many people retire or beg for retirement as soon as they can get it. Early retirement, you know? I actually enjoyed working every year that I worked with Seashore. And the reason for it I think was because it never became boring. There was always something happening that was different. Each day was a new challenge. That made it a good job for me because I would get bored if I didn't have something going all the time. Shoot recognized that I guess because he gave me free reign when he moved me in as traffic manager years down the line; and not too many years.

BE: Do you remember the approximate date of that?

Mr. O'Bryan: It was in 1948, not too long after I got with the company. I joined them in March of '46. No, that was not when I was made traffic manager. They moved me into New Bern to manage the city bus line and to work as assistant to the traffic manager. So, I did both. They had bought the company from Kenneth Jones who was operating a city bus line here. They bought it from him figuring they could use the management that they had at Seashore right here, and certainly it wouldn't cost a lot to operate it. They had this big garage, so they wouldn't have to add anything there. As it turned out, we operated a pretty good little bus line here for a while.

BE: I remember that. They did a good job.

Mr. O'Bryan: Thank you. It went pretty good for quite a while. It came time that we had to purchase new equipment. The old equipment that we had purchased from Kenneth began to give out. It became obvious after a while that maintaining parts for too many different types of vehicles was very expensive if you kept them in stock. That's why UPS became so famous, I guess, was because the immediate need of parts for these garages that were waiting on automobiles of almost a hundred different design in parts. They couldn't afford to stock this stuff, and so you had to bring it in overnight. So, we found that trying to operate the big busses on the Seashore line, and handling these small buses on the side, and trying to keep parts for all of them; unless you put out quite a sum of money and set up a stock and then use maybe one or two type buses for your city bus line, it wouldn't be practical to try to do that. So, it eventually was turned loose.

BE: For the city buses?

Mr. O'Bryan: For the city buses. So, it was deemed not practical to continue with both. At that time, we were also getting rid of a lot of the older Seashore buses and trying to handle the same type of equipment for everything. We first were dealing with MCI, General Motors, and then later on, we began to buy some Eagles which were built by a firm on the west coast and also coming out of Canada. So, we were trying to put everything as much alike as possible, trying to standardize. We were trying to standardize the equipment so that with a much smaller part supplies, we could supply all of the equipment. That way you're not tied down with such a tremendous inventory, which is very expensive, and we did so. We did operate right up to the end with a combination of MCI and Eagle they called them, Eagle buses. They were the big over the road jobs.

BE: Yes, I remember those. They were nice.

Mr. O'Bryan: The company began to expand almost immediately when I joined. We picked up another bus line out of Aurora, running from Aurora down by Campbell's Creek through Hobucken and down in there. We made some trades with one of our other major bus lines, Carolina Trailways, whom we later became a partner with, with these purchases that took place. We kind of straightened our bus line out. It was pretty well chopped up. We were operating into all little places like Harkers Island and down to Atlantic. We were handling the mail and other things by bus down in that direction; anything that we could to try to make the bus lines pay off and give service. We were very service oriented. I was taught to be that way, and we kept it up. We did that as many years as we could, Bill, in trying to give as much service as we could as reasonable as we could for the travelling public. But as you know, it became more and more expensive to buy equipment and parts and everything as we go along, and rates had to follow along with it. Labor was also a very expensive item. We were labor oriented. You had a driver for every bus and a mechanic to take care of that bus and ticket agents to sell tickets to ride on that bus.

BE: And baggage handlers.

Mr. O'Bryan: And baggage handlers and cleaners and so forth. So, we had a lot of people involved. When the labor unions came in, it became very difficult to make a dollar. I don't want to get too far ahead of myself. I expect you got a lot of this from my former boss, Mr. Hall, who certainly did a tremendous job and taught me so much about bus operation. Shoot was a natural mechanic. His mechanical mind, he got a lot of that from Mr. West who started the company; who, as you probably have on other stories from Shoot, was an inventor. When I came here, they had a Lincoln automobile and a bus, both being operated by steam. Shoot has told the story to me and possibly to you of taking off in that steam bus and drive up to a filling station and say, "Fill'er up. No! Not with gas - Water!" (laughter)

BE: Yeah, he told me that story!

Mr. O'Bryan: Those things were strong. He said you could pull it up to a concrete wall and then just open that throttle, and he said that thing would climb right up the wall if you keep putting it to it and if your wheels wouldn't start digging a hole.

BE: He told me about it, and I think it was Baxter's Jewelry store he almost went in. It went up over the curb.

Mr. O'Bryan: That was still here when I came into New Bern. Middle Street, I remember on the corner there, very close to the corner, was the old Green Door Restaurant. I've had lunch there many times. And then years later of course, we had J. C. Penney on the corner. Oh my! There have been many changes in New Bern.

BE: Yes sir.

Mr. O'Bryan: As you know, there were no cars built during World War II. Everything was put into the military. As the automobile became more into use, they started building more automobiles and building up more highways through the years. This all was taking place while I was growing with Seashore. As the automobiles permeated these new highways that were being built; do you remember Governor Scott, "There will be a hard top road to every farm", and pretty soon we had all of these hard top roads, and they all wanted an automobile to operate on that beautiful road. As the automobiles were saturating the highways, there was always an Uncle Joe coming along or an Aunt Maude that would pick these people up who would ordinarily be out there waiving their handkerchief for the bus to stop. They'd pick them up on their way to the market, and they just weren't there. The over the road pick-up gradually dropped, dropped, dropped, dropped, until we had to begin to reduce the size of the fleet. Since we would have less people to haul, we'd began buying larger buses that would accommodate more people. We didn't have as many routes trying to reach all of these little places that we were serving before where there was no one to pick up. Because someone would come along, Uncle Joe with his truck or somebody, to pick 'em up to take them to town. That meant that fleet was reduced from about 110 buses down to about 40 or 50 buses; getting away from the smaller type bus to make all of these side trips. We were using our larger buses on the main routes and the smaller ones feeding into them which worked out very fine for those years when we had the business. And of course the bases also were reducing as the Air Force people at Seymour-Johnson as well as the Marines at Cherry Point and Camp LeJeune were leaving the area. We got down to, as I said, about forty buses in the fleet; the larger buses. By the time Mr. Hall retired, back in '76, I believe it was, he may have told you the exact time, we realized that the over the road passenger was getting to be a real problem to continue to operate as many routes as we had. But the name of this game is "service". To hold a franchise, you've got to give service. You have to put equipment over the road, and if you can't haul enough people, you gotta find out some other way to do it. So, we went after all the package express business we could get, and that helped us quite a bit. It was quite a high percentage of our business. But more particularly, we wanted to fill seats on these buses, and so we went into the charter business wholesale. We put more sales effort into the charter game. By that time, I had been traffic manager for several years in charge of sales and terminals. We put all of our effort into that, and that had a lot to do with, I think, the reasoning that Shoot and his board had in selecting me to take over the company when he retired; the fact that was that I was sales oriented. We needed that extra business. By the time Shoot retired, and shortly thereafter, we had almost converted all of our efforts to charter because the over the road business had almost disappeared. There had been so many bus lines that were discontinuing around the country that they weren't feeding people by bus into us nor could we get our people to all destinations as we could at one time by bus. And the automobile, again, was still just saturating the new highways. They were still being built. So, we put our whole effort into charter business. At the time that I retired, we were one of the larger charter carriers in the eastern part of the state.

BE: Were you still operating as a common carrier at that time?

Mr. O'Bryan: Yes. As a common carrier, you had under the law an incidental right of charter and package express and so forth. There were only a few carriers. You know, we had a lot of fly by nights that went into the charter business because that was fairly lucrative because you don't move the bus until you have a load. So, you got all your seats filled when you move. I'm jumping way ahead, but I'm sure you don't have a week to sit here and listen to me. A peculiar thing happened after this bus line was sold. The county I was living in, Jones County, became very concerned about the weather situation we have along our coast; the hurricanes, tornadoes, and high water problems. Even if we didn't have a bad hurricane, we had a lot of water problems; areas cut off and so forth. All by acts of God. I was very much interested in the community in which I lived, and the county, as well as the company that I served, and I was interested in how we could better take care of these problems when they come. You might also remember back many years ago I was elected to the town board, and very shortly after that, mayor, of the little town that I came from out here in Jones, Pollocksville. I was mayor of that town for twenty-five years and on the board for a total of twenty-eight. In fact, I've been made an honorary member of the League of Municipalities because of that tenure. Anyhow, the county and my town were very much concerned with the lack of communications during these hurricanes. We didn't really know what was going on. That was before we had as much media coverage as we have now. And even then when the electricity goes off, you lose most of that. So, I kept trying to figure out how best to handle the situation. I remember one particular thing that happened. I was also elected as director of Civil Defense in Jones County. I had telephone communication up almost to the very last during one of the early hurricanes. The radio was putting out information that it had gone by our area. The information I had from the FAA was that we were in the eye. And so I knew not what to do. I couldn't contact anyone in the county to say "Disregard the report coming over the radio. We are in the eye of the storm and everything will be reversed shortly. The winds will be coming from the opposite direction." So, that indicated to me that I had to have some means of contacting the people around the county. I got in touch with an old friend by the name of Edwards, Bill Edwards over in New Bern, and was directed to a Mr. Parker who was the head of the EC, the emergency coordinator by ham radio, in the area. He said possibly he might be able to give me an idea of what would be the best route to take. Mr. Parker suggested that I go immediately for a general class license, not even wait for novice, that I go for a general license. Back in those days it was called under those circumstances, unless you went directly to the FCC, a conditional license, which was the same as what is now a general. I studied for about six months, intentionally cramming, to pick up the proper information on the operation of the ham radio and to learn the code. After learning enough of it to pass the examination, I got my conditional license, and then contacted Mr. Edwards again. He in the meantime, had picked up this same title in Craven County. He suggested that we get together and possibly work out something between the two counties since all the emergency services were in New Bern that served Jones County; hospital, fire, the whole thing, to see if we couldn't coordinate and have the county out there to help us get some communications started. So, we did that. We put up these ten meter radios in many points of Jones County. We covered the county with them, and then placed another one on top of the emergency center here in New Bern which was the old St. Luke's Hospital in those days. So, Bill and myself went around sticking these things in the area just everywhere we could find anybody that would take one and learn how to operate it and be able to handle communications. We would have communications from all areas. Well, that was the beginning. Then as we got deeper into ham radio, I became involved statewide and became the section emergency coordinator under the state manager who was at that time an old Navy man by the name of Barney Dodd. I remember his call, W4BNU. We just lost Barney this past year; dying at his favorite sport. He was out on a boat near Salisbury fishing in a lake, and as he drew back his arm to cast his line out, why, he dropped with a heart attack. He died very happy.

BE: He must have.

Mr. O'Bryan: But he appointed me as section emergency coordinator for the state, and in so doing, we worked out through many nets that we operated. One very important net being the one that Bill and myself coordinated with the old gentleman, Mr. Parker, who was Mr. Radio in this area. We collaborated with Mr. Parker and got a net started that would handle emergencies during these hurricanes, and it became very effective. In fact, during the hurricane that took the outer banks, I forget the year, one of our hams was the last ham that went over the bridge onto the island. A fellow out of, what's the name of the town just the other side of Raleigh? It's a street that goes right by the state fair grounds by the same name. This ham lived in Hillsborough and he was a real sharp man with ham radio and was very interested in operating ham radio. He got over the bridge with a van that he operated. It was just full of radio equipment. When he hit the outer banks, he took a hammer and tied it to one end of his antenna and threw it over a telephone pole and took the other one over another tree or telephone pole to pull up an antenna and set up right beside the sheriff on the outer banks. That became our headquarters for that terrible storm that wiped that island.

BE: Was that Hazel in 1954?

Mr. O'Bryan: No, it was after that. I forget the name right now, Bill. But anyhow, we took our turns in operating these emergency nets. I remember it was like the old type telephone you used to have to where you get the operator and then the operator would transfer the call to whomsoever. Well, we had the same thing called a net control on ham radio. I remember I served one night from eight in the evening until four in the morning as net control during that thing to pass information from this ham on the beach out there. I was giving weather and so forth to Seymour Johnson Air Force base and passing information to the Red Cross in Atlanta and to the Marine Corps at Cherry Point who was supplying the water and various other necessities to the people on the island.

BE: What was the name of that net?

Mr. O'Bryan: That was called the Coastal Carolina Emergency Net. It would take care of everything along this coast, and it's still active. Believe it or not, they have just recently set up an award for the best operation in ham radio to any ham in the net, and it's called the Al Parker Award. That award is a certificate with the various remarks that you would put on that type of certificate, but it's the same certificate that was originally designed and drawn up by Bill Edwards. That was handed to a man by the name of, the comedian has the same name as this ham, Andy Griffith. Andy Griffith got the first award. This ham operator lives at...

BE: Brandywine Bay.

Mr. O'Bryan: He lives in Brandywine, and he received the award as being the best emergency all around ham operator in the area. And he received a certificate that was designed by Bill Edwards.

BE: How about that! (laughter)

Mr. O'Bryan: I found that communications was a very important item in just about everything that we do. I have become an avid communicator in trying to use it wherever it can be helpful. Before I took the helm of the company, I requested from the boss and immediately got his approval, he saw the wisdom of putting a tower up at all of our division points and antennas on those towers where he and myself from our automobiles could stay in communication with our entire company at all times.

BE: You're talking about Seashore now?

Mr. O'Bryan: Seashore Transportation Company. We had one in Beaufort at our division there; one in Jacksonville, and the main one being here in New Bern. We had these towers up with communication by six meters, that handles the transportation frequency. In the case of hurricanes and other problems, we had control of our bus line. We could move them where they belong, we could get them out of danger, and we could move people, and we were in communication at all times. During the terrible situation that existed when the military returned from Vietnam, if you recall there were a lot of terrible things happening between the black and the white military back in those days. They got in some terrible brawls around these military bases and many of them would happen aboard the buses bringing the Marines back in from liberty. The whites and the blacks would get into a big brawl. So, we put radio communication on all of our equipment that served between Jacksonville and Camp LeJeune. We tied this in with the Provo Marshall's office and the local police so that the driver could, with the press of a button, let someone know he was in trouble. We've had drivers thrown off the bus. One of them got a broken hip. They'd just take over, you know, they're drunk and brawling and having quite a time. They got rid of those type people out of the service after Vietnam. They have a pretty good bunch of people down there now. You don't have to use that.

BE: Do you remember any particular instances with buses in hurricanes? Did you have any serious problems in that regard?

Mr. O'Bryan: Well, yes, there's been some peculiar things happen. I never realized that a bus would float like a boat. We had a bus head from New Bern to Raleigh, and the driver got just this side of Cove City and the banks had overflowed of the ditches on the side of the highway. These highways were built up through there. It's kind of a pocossin country. They were built by pulling dirt up out of the land.

BE: That's old US 70.

Mr. O'Bryan: Old US 70. And this driver got somewhere between here and Cover City. I imagine out here about the location we call

Clark.

BE: Bachelor Creek probably.

Mr. O'Bryan: Yeah. Anyhow, this creek broke lose, overflowed, and was coming across the highway. The driver said, "I think we can make it." These buses ran pretty good in water. They didn't give too much trouble. But the water was so deep that it just picked the bus up and carried it off into the edge of the woods. I remember the amazing thing that happened to the people on the bus. This bus leaned over on its side, and these windows for safety reasons were push out type and the window shield is the same way. They could be kicked out. So, these people would kick out the windows on the upper side, and they were sitting up on the bus there waiting for somebody to come and get them. This one guy was sitting up there with no shoes on. We tried to figure out when we went to get them, what happened to his shoes. He didn't remember, but he got out of them when he went through that window. He jumped hard enough he left his shoes behind. (laughter)

BE: Maybe he kicked them off when he kicked the window out.

Mr. O'Bryan: Yeah. There was another one. You know, there used to be pick-ups all along the highway. You'd pick them up and leave them off wherever they happened to show and wherever they happened to live. That would be to the consternation of the drivers now days with the volume of traffic on the highway. But the bus would stop and let them off at any point. They said, "I live over here in the woods to the right", why, the driver would stop and let the man off.

One of our boys coming from Rocky Mount, got between Kinston and Cove City, somewhere in that area, and the fellow said, "Stop, I live right here." So, he pulled off the side of the road and opened the door, and when the guy stepped off the bus, he left his hat right up in the air. He stopped right at a culvert! (laughter) He left his hat up at the level of the bus went right straight down, and you could hear him Whoooooaaaaaaa!! Oh my! We had one by the name of Shepherd, a bus driver. I'll never forget him. He always had a little sing song as he would come up into a little town. He would get into Pollocksville out there which as you know is very small. Back in the years when I first became mayor, it only had 500 people. I think it's 287 now. It's not growing very fast.

BE: Not much.

Mr. O'Bryan: The old people are dying and the young ones are leaving, so there's not that many around. But as he would come into Pollocksville, he loved to play that air horn. He would go Wha---wha--wha-wha-whaaaaa as he would come down in to Pollocksville. It's got a little hill like, you know, as you come down. And he'd say, "Anybody wants to drink, smoke, spit, or chew, it'l be five minutes in Pollocksville on both sides of the road." (laughter) He had this little sing song for each town that he would come to, and the passengers loved it.

BE: I'll bet they did.

Mr. O'Bryan: Drink, smoke, spit, or chew.

BE: It kept him from being bored too.

Mr. O'Bryan: Yeah. And the people of that town, they'd hear that horn and they knew that Shep was coming through. Oh, those were enjoyable years. All of them. Even with the problems. It keeps you alert.

BE: I'm sure you remember the tornado that tore through Jones County and then came on over into Craven.

Mr. O"Bryan: I do. I do. Very fortunately we didn't have any equipment that got in the headway of that storm. But I recall the trailer park that it hit over in James City as it passed through here.

BE: It pretty well demolished several houses over there in Jones County too.

Mr. O'Bryan: It did. Back to ham radio. That storm came through Jones County and as CD director, you and myself would always do the same thing; we'd go out and assess the damage. I was going on what is known as the old Oaks Grove Road out where the base use to be at Oak Grove, and off to the right I saw half of a house missing. The lady came out, and it happened to be a very sweet colored lady that helped a lot of people raise their children in that area. She was sort of a midwife on delivery and also took care of them. In fact when my first wife died, why, she stayed with me for a little while looking out for my babes; keeping their clothes clean and so forth, back and forth. Her husband was in the Navy. I pulled up with my ham radio in my car in front of her house and placed a call by ham radio to Norfolk. She told me what ship he was on. They phone patched me to that ship and was able to tell the man what had happened to his family and he got immediate leave to come home and square them away. A Navy man - ham radio. So, it has proven very helpful.

BE: I think all of this is interesting, and that's what this is for, to interest people.

Mr. O'Bryan: I wrote a history of Seashore up to a point. When these last two guys bought it, I lost interest in it. I didn't like what they did. I didn't like them. They raped Seashore to pay off that interest on purchasing the two companies. They immediately sold off the best equipment we had and also the assets of the company in the way of properties.

BE: That's typical of these leverage buy outs, is it not?

Mr. O'Bryan: Yeah, it sure is.

BE: This is an interview conducted for the Memories of New Bern Transportation Task Force with Robert Carl O'Bryan at New Bern, N.C. on April 22, 1992. This is interview number 1504 conducted by W. J. Edwards, interviewer number 1500.

END OF INTERVIEW