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AN INTERVIEW WITH REAR ADMIRAL WILLIAM STUBBLEFIELD  
FOR THE  
NOAA 50th ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY  
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Molly Graham: This is an oral history interview with Admiral William Stubblefield for the NOAA 50th Oral History Project. The interviewer is Molly Graham. Today's date is Friday, November 13, 2020. It's a remote interview with Admiral Stubblefield in Martinsburg, West Virginia, and I'm in Scarborough, Maine. We will start at the very beginning. Could you tell me when and where you were born?

William Stubblefield: I was born in Tennessee in a small town called Medina, even though we were not living there at that time. My mother and father were in Nashville, but she had her sister in Medina. We'll come full circle. When I was about five years of age, we then moved back to little-small town Medina. We used to joke that the town was so small, before anybody new moved in, somebody had to die. The population was pretty static for many years. So about seven hundred people.

MG: Your family was based in Nashville, but you were born in Medina. Were you born in your aunt's home?

WS: In my aunt's home. Yes. My mother was a nurse and was practicing at the time in Nashville. Then my folks were divorced when I was five. My mother went back to Medina and then started again, continuing her nursing career.

MG: I wanted to ask you a little bit about your family history before I ask you about your childhood. It sounds like you come from real good stock. I was reading about your family. Maybe start on your mother's side.

WS: My mother's side came from – I think the earliest we know of was 1635. They came to this country, the Tilghman family, and then they moved from Virginia to the western part of Tennessee. My mother's folks were cotton farmers, and they spent the whole time – let me interrupt. This is a beautiful thing about this format. I can interrupt and go down a rabbit hole if you will. Let me ask a question. How much do you know of your great grandparents?

MG: Almost nothing.

WS: Okay. How about your grandparents?

MG: Only a little.

WS: Okay. I think that's true for most of us. Every year, my wife and I host all the living cousins on my mother's side of the family in West Tennessee at a wonderful lake, Reelfoot Lake [State Park], which was formed by an earthquake in 1811-1812. Wonderful catfish. For the last several years, I've been asking all the cousins, "We need to capture memories of our grandparents." I don't want to have the standard genealogy – born a certain day, died a certain day. I want to pick up some of their personality, their character. It took me about five or six years to finally convince my two older cousins. One was an English professor at the University of Tennessee, who just retired, and the other one was a lawyer who had been the President of the Tennessee Bar Association. These two very talented people agreed to work with me. We spent just about a year, and we started with our grandparents. We were able to fill in the gaps as we

remembered them. And it's funny that we remember different things about them. The English professor focused more on our grandmother whereas I focused on my grandfather. We were able to balance our memories. Then we took the next step with their children, our uncles, and aunts, and parents. Then we took it to our generation and filled in that blank. Once we did the basic work of the grandparents and captured their life story, then we farmed it out to the other cousins. I just had it published probably about three weeks ago, about a hundred and seventy pages with a lot of photographs. But it tells the story of our grandparents. That was our main thing. Other folks can relate to the more recent relatives, but my main thrust was the grandparents. Also, both of them – my other two cousins – are very much into genealogy. They wanted to have the full genealogical tree. That's fine. We have that for context, but the big thing was the character and personality of our grandparents and our parents.

MG: That's really what we hope to get through oral histories, too, the stories, emotions, and personality. That's wonderful that your family did all of that work. Often, people want to do that when it's too late to do so.

WS: One of the stories that I didn't want to lose was [about] my grandfather. My grandfather was very poor, never had a lot of money, and raised six children during the Depression on forty acres of cotton farms with mules. He never learned to drive. In the fall – two of my cousins, my brother, and myself, all between the ages of six to nine or ten – would spend a month helping to pick cotton. This was before the time of mechanical pickers; all the cotton picking was done by hand. In our case, small hands. After a week of picking, we would go to the cotton gin on a Friday night on a mule-driven wagon. It's out of pure Americana. But it was very honest work. During the 1930s and 1940s, all the farmers would borrow from the country store for the year, and when the crops came in, they would settle the debts. On one occasion, the country store, unfortunately, caught fire in the late summer. It burned down with all the records. My grandfather, without very much money – never had very much money – went to the store owner and said, "This is how much I owe you," and paid him every dime. He was the only one out of the group that did that. That's the sort of memory that I did not want to be lost. It would never be captured anywhere else. But it should be captured somewhere because it shows you the character of my grandfather.

MG: It seems like your mother inherited his altruism.

WS: Yes, very much so. In fact, all of the aunts and uncles did. One was killed in the Second World War, fairly early in the war. My mother was a nurse, a profession she deeply loved. By that time, we had moved back to the small town of seven hundred. On a given night, there would be five or six people waiting in line, very patiently, to have their smallpox or tetanus or whatever inoculation was needed at that particular time. I don't know where she got the serum. I know she never charged anybody that had a shot. She gave her services for free. I never thought about how she got the serum itself. Anyway, she did this because she recognized a community need, and something that she enjoyed doing. She was always known as "Miss Mutt." She hated her given name, Jessie Geneva. When she was first born, an uncle supposedly came by and said, "I don't know what you're going to name this child, but it's the ugliest mutt I've ever seen." [laughter] My mother took that as a badge of honor, and she loved the name Mutt with all of its connotations. The people would be waiting patiently in line for Miss Mutt to come home from

work. Then, as soon as she finished the dinner, she'd take her needle and, and syringe, and [inoculate] those folks that had been waiting in line. Unfortunately, my brother and I, being the sons of a nurse, were always tested for how sharp the needles were. Every time I go into my friendly doctor's office to have blood drawn; I am amazed in how sharp the needles are. In those days, they were not. They were very painful.

MG: You poor thing.

WB: Poor thing, yes. But in various ways, all the family were very giving. Looking at the old pictures, they were a very handsome family. And they remained close. We would get together for Thanksgiving, and it was always a tradition that men and boys go out in the morning to hunt rabbit. In those days, deer and big game were not to be found. Rabbits were everywhere. The rabbits shot in the morning, along with a chicken would be our Thanksgiving meal. For the meal, there were probably twenty-five or thirty of us around the table in this very small house of my grandparents. And beside every plate, there was a little dish for the buckshot in the rabbit. As somebody would eat, they would feel a piece of buckshot in the rabbit meat and put it in the little dish. That was tradition – not the little dish so much as the getting together for hunting rabbits and enjoying the fellowship. We did that for both Thanksgiving and Christmas.

MG: This was your uncles and cousins who would go hunting?

WS: Well, it'd be all the men, yes. This was when I was probably all the way from, say, five or six up to twelve to fifteen. So yes, it was all the uncles and my male cousins. Nobody ever viewed it as sexist. But the women just did not care to go. Another thing about this, again, it probably could be viewed as sexist. As a kid, I was always so impressed that around this huge table, the women always would be served first. But we never would eat until the blessing had been given. I thought, as a child, how gallant the men were. In retrospect, the poor women's food was getting cold. Then men were last to be served, but they were served the hot food.

MG: [laughter] Good point. You had started to trace your family history back to the 1600s. I am curious if you could provide a little context for that era. This was pre-slavery when there were indentured servants from England working in the cotton fields in Virginia.

WS: Yes. The indentured servants, I think, were on my father's side. My mother's family came over, initially landed gentry. My mother's family consisted of Reed, Brown, and Tilghman, among others. The Tilghman side has been traced fairly extensively back to William the Conqueror. As a child, I was so proud of this fact until my cousin, the English professor, said, "Yeah. Probably every English person in the world today traces their ancestry back to William the Conqueror." And there's probably truth to that. Anyway, there are some interesting stories of various ancestors. But the interesting ancestors seemed to have stopped once they sailed across the Atlantic. There are few really noteworthy folks on either my mother's or my father's side. They were good, solid people but their accomplishments did not rise to the level of being historically recorded. There is some indication that one of the leading Indians leaders was integrated into the family, but there's no firm verification of this. There are some side stories of at least one murder which supposedly happened that has never really been explained. But as far as someone that was well-known, well-recognized, we have very few of those. I'll slip to my

father's side very quickly. The only one that I know of some noteworthiness, was during the Civil War, a relative went into the war as head of a division. He was a senior sergeant, maybe even an officer, in one of the battalions in Tennessee. He came out as a buck private. He had a reputation of drinking too much, being late for all the battles, being a laggard, and not doing anything. He went in the war as a leader; came out of the war as low as you could get. I'm not sure that speaks highly of the Stubblefield Family, but again, they were solid people by and large, but no one that is particularly historically noteworthy. But picking up on your point, and again, with all families, there are so many tentacles going out. The longest in the States were the Tilghman's in 1635. I am sure, even though I've not traced it back, there are probably some that came over as indentured servants, but we tend to identify with the ones that are most illustrious.

MG: I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your mother. She was born in 1915. She really came of age during the Great Depression. Did she share stories about her childhood with you?

WS: Some but not extensively; that goes back to era of people reluctant to talk about themselves. From what I remember the farmers, of which my Grandparents on my mother's side, were not as much affected by the Depression as were the people living in the cities. For the farmers based in places in the South as in West Tennessee, the Depression is something experienced but didn't suffer. They had a tough life anyway. They grew their own crops. They raised their own meat. The Depression did not make quite the same impact, I think, as if you were in the industrial North, and lost your job. I never heard my mother speak a bad word about her childhood. She enjoyed her childhood. She enjoyed her family. She enjoyed his siblings. But that was her nature, I rarely heard her speak a bad word about anyone or anything. After she was divorced from my father, she remained in very close contact with my father's parents and would go out of her way several times a year to return to Nashville, which in those days was probably about a two-three-hour drive, to be sure that my brother and I were not separated from my Stubblefield grandparents. I never heard her speak a bad word about anybody. I think she really felt that way throughout her life. She never complained about anything. She had some pretty hard times – divorce and very little money. But she kept that all to herself. Never complained.

MG: Where did her interest in nursing come from?

WS: I think mostly from a sister, her older sister, who wanted very much to be a nurse. But her parents, my grandparents, had not yet accepted that a woman, one of their children, should be a professional. The older sister had to give up her dream of becoming a nurse and went to a local business school and became a secretary, which was quite acceptable in those days. I think she planted the seed for my mother's aspiration to become a nurse. One of the stories my mother [told] was she valued human life. She was in Nashville, and on one occasion, she was asked to help witness an execution. And she did that. She said it was one of the most traumatic events in her life, and she swore she would never do that again.

MG: Did that impact her feelings about capital punishment?

WS: Molly, I don't know, because when I was a child, we did not have social media for one thing. We did not have the range of news that we have today. Issues such as capital punishment

were never discussed. It was just kind of accepted, and nobody really challenged it. I know that she personally did not want to witness that again. Her position on capital punishment, I don't know. If you asked me forty years ago, fifty years ago, what my position was, I would not have had a position. I think that was just the way it was with capital punishment and many other things. We just accepted things for what they were.

MG: Where did your mother get her training?

WS: At Saint Thomas [Hospital] in Nashville.

MG: Is that where she met your father?

WS: That's exactly right. I'll come back to that in just a second. Just before my mother died, she visited my wife and I in West Virginia. She and my stepfather would come up two or three times a year. My mother had been fighting multiple myeloma for five years. They gave her five years to live. The doctor once said he had never seen anybody fight harder to live than my mother. I think the reason my mother fought that hard was that her father lived to be ninety-two, and she was going to live to be at least that old. She was not about to give up. Anyway, on her last trip to visit, she and I spent several hours after everybody else had gone to bed, and she started telling stories of her childhood that she had never told before. I may have picked up bits and pieces in the past, but never in this condensed version. But one of the things was that as a young child, she'd go to school on horseback, before cars. On a cold day, she would hop on a horse and ride the six or seven, eight miles into school and then ride it back. There are these side stories that I never thought about. She met my father while she was in nursing school. One of her best friends in nursing school was the sister of my father. That was an "I have somebody I want you to meet" sort of a relationship.

MG: What can you tell me about your father's life up to that point? Where did he grow up? What was he doing at that time?

WS: He was in a town called Old Hickory, just outside of Nashville. The town's claim to fame was the presence of a huge DuPont chemical plant. My Grandfather worked there as a chemist assistance. My father was an untrained but highly successful constructional engineer. I don't know if he had any formal training at all, but he ended up building several nuclear power plants. As engineer in charge, he built nuclear plants in Arkansas and in Florida and perhaps others, which carried him throughout most of the US. I think that was one of the reasons my parents got a divorce. He was gone more than he was actually home.

MG: What do you remember up until the age of five, living in Nashville? Do you have memories from that time?

WS: Yes. Small instances tend to stick with you more so than big instances. I remember two things. I remember when my uncle was killed in the Second World War, and the news was sent to my mother. I don't remember my father in this incident, but I remember my mother getting the news and crying quite hard, as one would expect. I started crying along with her. Some friend came and said, "Come on, Bill. Why are you crying? You did not even know your

uncle.” She was right; I was just mimicking my mother. The uncle had gone to war shortly after I was born. The other thing, one Christmas, my brother and I were given two ducks. We named one duck after my grandfather, Papa Reed. The other duck was named Donald, for obvious reasons. Well, in short order, one of us jumped off the bed, and poor Papa Reed was in the line of fire. Papa Reed was squished, leaving us with only one duck. In time Donald got fairly large and my mother knew it could not be kept in our small apartment. There happened to be a very lovely park in Nashville, not far from where we lived – Centennial Park. It’s still a beautiful place to visit. In her wisdom my mother said, “We’re going to carry it and give it to the duck population in Centennial Park.” My brother and I were quite heartbroken. My mother said, “Don’t worry. The duck will always remember us, and we’ll visit the duck.” We carried Donald and gave it to the other ducks in Centennial Park and watched it waddle away to join his colleagues. Then every weekend, we’d go back. Donald never forgot us. It may not have been the same one each time, but every time we walked toward the ducks with some bread in hand, one duck who would be ahead of the pack in coming to greet us. In our minds it was always Donald who was coming back to greet us.

MG: That’s a great story.

WS: Another quick story there.

MG: Go ahead.

WS: We had to move out of the place we lived in because a relative of the homeowner was coming back from the war and was going to take the apartment. That prompted us to move to Medina. Prior to moving, however, my mother had hope to stay in Nashville. We were walking, looking for apartments. I was probably four, and my kid brother was three. That was not one of our favorite things to do –walk around looking for apartments. I remember complaining, and my mother kept saying, “Yeah, I know you’re tired. But there is a perfect place, just an absolutely a magic place, that we’ll get to once we round a couple of corners.” Well, we did round those corners, and it was our home, an apartment. The point is mothers are gifted about weaving stories to satisfy and keep the children amused, satisfied and patient.

MG: I understand. Your brother was born just a little over a year after you were born. Were you fairly close growing up?

WS: We were very close growing up, yes. I think eighteen months’ difference. Very close and remained close all of our life. He, unfortunately, died of lung cancer; he had been a prolific smoker since we went to college. He tried several times to quit. Finally, after many attempts, he did quit. He was so pleased with the fact he had quit smoking. Unfortunately, within six weeks of that time, he was diagnosed with lung cancer and didn’t last long. He was a very gifted man. He had much of the talent in the family.

MG: Where does his name, Jere Don, come from?

WS: Jere Don. It’s spelled differently, too. It’s J-E-R-E, which is a woman’s spelling. Molly, I don’t know. That’s an interesting question. I probably did know at one time, but I don’t know

now. I don't know of any Don or Jere in our family. On my side, there was – William was named for my father, my grandfather – there are a lot of Williams in my family, but there are no Jeres, and there were no Dons. I don't really know. I think just a mother's prerogative to name their son whatever they wanted. It's an interesting question.

MG: Can you tell me a little bit about this period of time when your parents split up, and you moved to Medina? Was this disruptive or hard for a five-year-old child?

WS: Not for a five-year-old child. It must have been exceptionally hard for my mother with the uncertainty. But again, as I mentioned earlier, she never complained. Never let us know about it. All I remember is a steady even individual. She enjoyed life. She enjoyed life immensely. Things would please her, and I never really saw her get depressed. The exception was at the very tail end of her life when she realized she was not going to win the battle of cancer.

MG: Can I ask how your relationship with your father developed from then on out?

WS: Yes. My mother never said anything bad about my father. Even though I'm sure, like in all divorces, there were problems. My brother and I would get Christmas gifts, sometimes unusual Christmas gifts. I remember a box of oranges on one occasion or a box of apples when he was living in the Pacific Northwest, but very little communication. He was not a communicator. That carried over. He got that from his father, and it actually carried over to my brother some. My brother was not a communicator either. I did not hear very much from my father for much of my developing years. When I was in College, he resurfaced – resurfaced in the sense that he happened to be in Memphis while my brother and I were at Memphis State. He reached out and made contact. Over the years, we continued this contact. Never close contact, but enough that we kept up with where he was. One of the reasons that I don't think there was a sense on my part to establish close contact was when my mother remarried in 1953, she married probably the most wonderful man I've ever met, an individual that I developed phenomenal respect for. For someone coming into your life when you're about thirteen, there were some difficult times, but in short order I realized what a quality individual he was. I have long since shifted the title of "father" from my natural father to my stepfather. Over the years, when I got to know my natural father a little bit better, I welcomed the contact, but there was no closeness that I was going to try to establish. Now, as he got older, I did have the occasion to get to know him a little bit better. Plus, one of his multiple wives I got to know very well. In fact, I still keep in touch with his last wife, even though they were not living together at the time. I was doing a little bit of genealogy, trying to do genealogy, and trying to pick up my father's family. I asked him to give me a little bit of history, and I got this handwritten note back, and I saw this list of wives. I was kind of taken aback. I did not know this story.

MG: Tell me a little bit about your stepfather. Was he someone from Medina?

WS: Yes, he was. He was a farmer, very smart and wise in most ways. He graduated from high school as valedictorian and served in the Army Air Force during the Second World War. I learned never to try to best him in Trivial Pursuit or knowledge of U.S. history or geography. When he first came into my life, he was running for and was elected the trustee for the county. To some of the folks that came in to work as his Deputy he said, "After two terms, I'll step aside



so that you can run for the job.” I think he always regretted making that promise because he enjoyed being the trustee so much. But it was a promise and with all of his promises, he intended to keep it. This comes back to the point that we were talking about earlier with my grandfather. He was not about to renege on a promise made to a friend or colleague. He went from being trustee to a rural mail carrier, a position which carried a Federal appointment. He was a good friend with the member of the U.S. House of Representatives, who appointed him to the job. He loved that job in the sense that he could get up very early in the morning, five o’clock, and by not stopping to visit he would be finished with his circuit by noon. He’d have the rest of the day to do what he loved to do best, farming or working in his very large garden.

The family had a farm, and my brother and I were accepted into my stepfather’s family very quickly. As a consequence, my brother and I actually had a parcel of land on which we raised cotton. During the cotton-picking season, we’d take all of our buddies out to the cotton field. They would pick for us. We’d pay them, and then we’d take the cotton to the gin. My stepfather’s family welcomed us in so many ways. Molly, you’re very good. You get me on these little stories, and I start talking, and we may never get out of my childhood. [laughter] But another story, again with a farm, is when I was in 4-H, I wanted to raise a cow. I went out to one of my stepfather’s brothers and bought a cow. The cow soon had a beautiful calf, except the calf developed what was, at that time, identified as Hoof-and-Mouth Disease. This meant my calf had to be put down and every cow in that county was quarantined. Because my calf had Hoof-and-Mouth Disease nobody could sell their animals. At that time, I would not have won a popularity contest in the County. I am obviously overstating it a little bit for I was not actually blamed but the disease had an impact throughout the county. I do remember going out in the morning, having to ride a bicycle about three or four miles from my hometown to get to the farm. Then, I run through the wet fields, trying to find the cow, stick my head in her belly so I could milk her and release the milk pressure. I never saved the milk; it just went in the ground. I’m telling these stories to demonstrate lessons learned from my stepfather’s family. To this day, I remain exceptionally close to all of them.

MG: Something else from your childhood that I wanted to hear about was a scary incident with a tractor?

WS: Well, truck, a tractor-trailer. This was before my stepfather came into my life. My mother was back in Medina, nursing a lady dying of cancer. When the lady died, we moved into her house, which was a beautiful old southern home. It was right on the corner of two small city streets. My cousins, my brother, and I were playing in a fairly deep ditch that ran beside the road. A tractor-trailer attempted to round the corner. The cab made it okay. The trailer did not and ran me over. Fortunately for the others, there was a small tree that stopped the tractor. They were behind the tree. But I was hit. I was run over, and the tractor-trailer could not get up the steep bank, so it backed over and ran over me a second time. Then it pulled over me the third time. It was sitting on top of me and then had to pull off from there. It was pretty brutal – both lungs punctured, a lot of the bones broken. Everybody knows everyone in a small town, so the funeral director, who drove the ambulance, used a hearse for an ambulance in those days, took me to the hospital, which was about eighteen, nineteen miles away. My mother kept saying, “Faster, faster.” My mother being a nurse realized the severity of my injuries. “Faster, faster.” Later, the ambulance/hearse driver said the car had never been driven as fast in its life. When we got to the local hospital, my mother was told, “Sorry. There are no rooms available. We don’t

have any place to put you.” Plus, they said, “He’s not going to live through the night.” That’s a hard thing to say to a mother. But they added, “We can put him in the prison ward.” I spent that night in the prison ward just on the edge of not making it. My mom said there were two prisoners, both Black gentlemen. One of them was as kind as you could imagine. If it had not been for him, emotionally, she might not have made it through the night. Anyway, the long story was, the lungs healed, as the bones healed, I spent a hot Tennessee summer in a full-body cast. I was looking at pictures the other day. The cast started at my neck, and my fingers stuck out, my toes stuck out; everything else was this total body cast. These were the days before air conditioning. How I survived, I don’t know. It must have itched terribly, but I don’t remember that. I do remember instances such as my first-grade teacher, who was with me almost every day, making sure I did not fall behind in school. This lady was so amazing. She lived to be about a-hundred-and-seven and in her later years, recognized as Tennessee Teacher of the Year. The kids hated her because she was of the old school, but the parents thought she was the very best; in most cases she had been the teacher of the parents and grandparents. Later in life she was living at home by herself and doing all of her ironing in a little small house where she had to pull down the stowaway steps to get to the ironing board. On one occasion, she fell down, and broke a lot of bones, especially in her face. The next time I was home, which was about two or three weeks after her accident, as I always did, I went by to see her. This little lady, probably one hundred and five at the time, looked at me, as soon as I walked in the door, without saying, “Hi, Bill,” or anything else – the only thing she said was, “Bill, it took you long enough to get here.” [laughter]

MG: She still had a good sense of humor.

WS: She had a wonderful sense of humor, a wonderful lady throughout.

MG: Your accident sounds like such an awful experience for a six-year-old. What was your recovery like? How long did it take to get back to normal?

WS: All summer. All summer, yes. I had two bouts as a child where I spent the summer in the hospital or in a bed at my home. The other one was when I was twelve or thirteen; I had rheumatic fever. I was one of those fortunate ones that came through rheumatic fever without any prolonging ailments. But you didn’t know that at the time. As such you were very, very cautious. Fortunately, my folks bought me a television. I spent my whole days watching soap operas. To this day, I can tell you every incident in those soap operas. Also, since those days, I’ve never watched a soap opera. Two summers of my childhood I spent in a hospital bed or in a bed.

MG: Oh, boy. You mentioned the experience in the prison, and it reminds me to ask about the Jim Crow era. [Editor's Note: Jim Crow laws were the segregation laws against African Americans that existed from the late 1800s to the 1960s.] The South was racially segregated.

WS: Yes. There’s another [story] with a prison if I can skip ahead. Shortly after my folks got married, my father got a Black man out of prison. He was getting ready to be paroled. I remember we went to pick him up in Nashville and carried him back to Medina. He lived in just a little shack of a place behind the main house. Now I would take great exception to it today but

then that was the norm. He had been in prison for murder. The rest of the African American population was very, very nervous about him. They would not have anything to do with him at all. As such he was basically isolated, spent a year living in the crudest of crude places— just a little shack. In some regards, however, he was one of the kindest individuals that I think I’ve known. My brother and I were growing our cotton. We did a lot of the work. We would get started early in the morning during the cotton season and be picking shortly after sunrise. For those who have never picked cotton, on every boll, there is a very sharp end, which until your skin is harden, cuts and tears your hands to pieces, especially on a cold, cold day. I remember this African American guy when he came in; he said, “You fellows sit right here. You boys sit here.” He built us a fire, and he would start picking for us. We kept warm, and he did the work through his generosity. Then, the day his parole was up, he walked off. He was gone, never to be heard of again. I have no idea who he was, but he left an imprint on my heart of being a fellow you would not expect great kindness from. To us, he was an exceptionally kind person.

MG: Growing up, were your schools segregated?

WS: Oh, yes. Very much so. Yes, all the way through. The schools were segregated. We did have a small African American population in our town on the other side of the railroad tracks. We did not play with the kids. We knew some of their parents. Again, this is the Jim Crow era. We knew the parents [in] a subservient sort of relationship; something that I would not tolerate today, but as a child, it was the norm. Going back to the schools very quickly, we turned out during the fall to harvest the crops. This meant we started school right after the Fourth of July, [with] no air conditioning, and it’d be just hot as could be. The most difficult part that I remember was trying to write your notes. Your body would be full of perspiration, and the paper would just be wet. Again, you didn’t complain because that was to be expected. That’s what everybody did. You never complained if you don’t think you’re any worse off than the other guy. In our case, we thought we were just as good as everybody else as far as conditions go. Our conditions were not poverty. I’m diverting very quickly. This bit about poverty is all perception. Bonnie and I have traveled quite a bit through the world. On one trip, we were in a remote part of India with a very, very small group of fellow tourists. One of the people in our group commented on the poverty we were seeing. The guide was very quick to come back at him and said, “These people don’t live in poverty. They live comparable to all their neighbors. They may not live by your standards, but they are not in poverty.” That was the way we felt. Again, without social media, you did not know how the folks in Pennsylvania or Los Angeles were living. We were very happy where we were.

MG: How did you take to school? Tell me about the subjects you liked and the teachers you had.

WS: Oh, I had wonderful teachers. What courses did I like the best? The teachers? Say hi, Tess. [Editor’s Note: Admiral Stubblefied’s dog comes on screen.]

MG: She looks like a sweet dog.

WS: She’s a beauty. She probably the smartest golden [retriever] we’ve ever had, the smartest dog we’ve ever had. You might ask why we called her “Tess.”

MG: Yes, I'm curious about that.

WS: Okay. Prior to Bonnie and I moving to West Virginia – our professional lives kept us on the road a great deal. That was the main reason we chose never to have children because we were traveling all the time, one or both of us. We didn't even have, I think, time for an animal. But when we moved up here, I moved up here first. Bonnie was still working in DC for about three years. I wanted to have a dog, and Bonnie said, "No, it's going to get in the way of our travel and everything else." I said, "No, no. I've put it off all of these years. I'm going to have a dog." She agreed to a dog, and we named it Proxie to represent all the animals I could not have. I wanted horses, Billy goats, chickens, hogs, everything imaginable. I couldn't get those, even though we have enough land for it. But we did have a dog named Proxie. We kept the same theme – another dog was named Suri, short for "Surrogate." Well, this one came around, and I'd been angling for a Tesla for several years. My practical Scottish wife said, "There is no cause for that." I'd given up on ever getting a Tesla. This dog entered our life, and it was picking up the same theme as Proxie and Suri. We named her Tess. Then, lo and behold, shortly after Tess came, another Tesla came. This is Tess-one; the thing I drive around is Tess-two. Okay. Going back to the question about schoolteachers, I can truthfully say I never had a teacher that I did not like or one that I did not respect. I had some that stick out in later years more than others. But I always liked them all. As far as courses, we had no choice. We were a small school. Everybody took the same courses. You had no such thing as electives. They were all the same courses. I think history is one that stuck out. Unfortunately, I did not have the mathematics range that I wish I'd had. I did well in math in high school, but it stopped with algebra or geometry. In my professional career, I was always hindered by the fact I did not have more math courses. But that's my only real drawback. The teachers were great. In a small town, small school, there's a personal treatment to everybody and the teachers did a great job.

MG: Good. You were about thirteen years old when your youngest brother was born?

WS: Yes. How did that change things?

MG: I'm not sure it changed very much. My other brother and I were old enough to appreciate the new life coming in. We always felt like a big brother to him. There was enough separation that we never did things together as siblings. We were the older brothers. We remained very close. In fact, to this day, we talk at least once a week. I remain very close to him. There, however, was not the same bond that I had with the brother which was one year younger than I am.

MG: Getting back to school, you wrote that you played basketball. So I was curious about that experience.

WS: Yes. We only had one sport in school. [With] my size, I think I would be better at football. As a consequence, I played basketball like most folks play football; I lowered my head and drove for the basket a great deal. I am not blessed with a lot of talent. I'm not the tallest guy around. I'm certainly not the fastest. The more I worked on my shot, the worse it became. I was not a good scorer. I was not a good rebounder. I was not good at anything, except

persistence. I refused not to work very hard. My brother had all the talent. I had the ability to say, "To heck with it. I'm going to continue doing it." I ended up being a starter for two years and honorable mention in All-West Tennessee, in basketball. I thought for a guy with absolutely no talent, that was not too bad. Years later, I'm watching one of my nephews play. This nephew had good size, and he was a good athlete, and had an opportunity to do fairly well, but chose not to. He got bored. I think to myself, "Here's a total contrast to what I was." He had all the talent but did not have the stick-to-itiveness. I only had the idea that I was not going to be denied. That trait, I'm not sure where it came from, perhaps from my mother, has served me well.

MG: Can you tell me the story about how you and your brother would break into the gym?

WS: Yes. We lived right behind the school. We discovered fairly early how we could crawl in the crawl space underneath the gym floor and get into the gym via one of the locker rooms. After getting in we would put blankets over the windows and turn just one light on, so there was not a lot of light coming from the gym. But people noticed that we were there. We were reprimanded two or three times. Again, in a small town, you knew the principal and knew all the teachers. We were reprimanded, but I don't think very seriously. We just kept ignoring the reprimands. After five or six times, the principal said, "Okay, if you want to break in, here's the key. You don't have to break in anymore." After this we could turn the lights on, and we could practice, and all the other kids would come in that wanted to play, but we always treated it a privilege. We were very respectful in making sure no damage was done, and nothing was left behind. It was one of those symbiotic relationships. We got what we wanted, and the principal was accommodating us. As a consequence, I think it made us better ballplayers. I certainly think it made us better people.

MG: I think you wrote that you and your brother were charter members of the Beta Club. Can you say what that was?

WS: The Beta Club is an academic society in high school. We were a small school and didn't have a lot in the way of academics, but we had an opportunity. I think it was because of a principal that came from a school that had a Beta Club. He put us in contact with a neighboring town. My brother and I, and a couple of other folks, brought it to Medina. We were the founding members of the Beta Club.

MG: Would you have competitions or club conventions with the Beta Club?

WS: No. We did not when we were there. Hopefully, that matured through time. Again, I think I did this when I was in my senior year, perhaps my junior year, but I think it was my senior year. So no, when I was there it had not matured to the point that we were in competition.

MG: You were also an Eagle Scout. How did you get involved with the Scouts?

WS: Again, with a small town, there was not a lot to do. The Scouting program was one. Unfortunately, the Scoutmaster got crosswise with the National Scouting Association. Most of our colleagues that had been in the Scouting program went into a kind of a social organization. They kept together, but they did not have the structure of the Scouts. My brother and I were far

enough along, I guess, when the split occurred that we continued to pursue our Scouting program. I think we were either the first and second or the second and third Scout in our hometown. In fact, we were the only ones. The Scout group disbanded totally after we got our Eagle Scout. So yes, we were one of the very few in that small town – one of three or perhaps one of two to have it.

MG: What year did you graduate from high school?

WS: 1958.

MG: I want to ask you about the next steps, but do you mind if we take a quick break?

WS: Go right ahead, yes.

MG: Hold on just one minute.

WS: I'll see you in a couple of minutes.

[Tape paused.]

MG: We're back on. As you are getting ready to graduate high school, I wanted to ask what you imagined you'd be doing next?

WS: Go to college. [laughter]

MG: Actually, before we talk about that, I also wanted to ask if you had jobs growing up. You mentioned picking cotton.

WS: Yes. Being in a small rural area, we were never short of work. The crop season basically was ten months a year. Using cotton, for example, they were plowing, preparing the land, and then chopping cotton, which a lot of the kids would do. We picked strawberries. We pulled tomato plants to be sent up north. Cabbage was a big thing. We would all go pack sheds adjacent to the railroad and pack cabbage, tomatoes, or whatever crop was in season which gave us another opportunity for of entertainment. When you're kids, you can find a lot of ways to entertain yourself. One was box car tag. The box cars were filled with farm produce for shipping. When there was nothing to pack, we would go into one of the box cars and close the doors and play tag. There was absolutely no light which made the game of tag more of a groping game. Fortunately, the box cars were never hooked and carried away while we were playing our boxcar tag. In addition, I worked for the city for a couple of years. One incident – a couple of these two things together – I'd been working in the pack shed, which was right beside the railroad track. But then I was working for the city, driving this truck, which I did not know very well. I was going across the railroad track, and I saw a train coming very fast. Shortly before that, on two different occasions, two of my good friends' father had been killed when a train hit the car. I could see this train coming. The one thing in my mind was to get the truck off the track. I put it in double Low. I don't believe today's vehicles have this gear. Normally, the truck doesn't stop in this gear but that time it did. The truck jumped one foot forward before

going dead. The people in the packing shed, doing the cabbage, said the train didn't miss me by more than three or four inches. Growing up in Medina provided a lot of chores, but they were good – good work. We felt an obligation. I don't know. I guess maybe it was our parents. None of us went without. But we felt an obligation to be somewhat self-sustaining. We knew we were going to have food on the table. We'd probably have clothes on our back. But for our bicycles, our shotguns, and the like, we got that through picking cotton, chopping cotton, working at the pack shed and the like.

MG: This was during the Cold War. Would you have air raid drills in school?

WS: We did. Yes, we did. Probably somewhere in high school. I don't remember when. Yes, we would always hide under our desks to be sure. But after that, we took turns, the fellows did, to go down to the jailhouse, which was never used, but it did have the only siren in town. We'd have our binoculars. We had our airplane guides. Each of us would spend a couple of hours scanning the skies, anticipating these Russian planes to be flying over Medina, Tennessee, and dropping bombs. In our minds, the threat was made more real in that Medina is within ten miles of a large ammunition arsenal. In many respects we felt and were treated as the frontline observers. I'm not sure how long this lasted, but it lasted long enough that I had a vivid memory of it.

MG: How did you choose to go to Memphis State, now the University of Memphis?

WS: Because some of my friends had gone there, people that I played basketball with and from other schools. Not so much my classmates. I don't think any of them— there were only seventeen in my graduating class, but several folks that I got to know, either through Boys State or playing basketball, were going to the to Memphis State University, now the University of Memphis. I did not go there, unfortunately, for academic purposes. I went there for the continuation of my years without great responsibility, I guess, even though I did not view it that way at the time. It was a period of maturation. From a small town, where I'd been class officer every year, captain of the basketball team, and all that sort of stuff, obviously known by everybody, not only my classmates but my classmates' families and everybody else, going to a larger school where I was not known at all, I had some real trouble coping with it. I was in the fraternity, and I felt guilty about the fraternity because it was taking money out of my folks' pocketbook. At that point in my life, I was kind of wishy-washy, in the fraternity and out of the fraternity, the whole bit – the same thing with school. I thought I wanted to major in chemistry. I discovered very quickly that I am great at memorizing stuff. I'm less good at the concepts and understanding the basics. My wife, Bonnie, understands the basics. I memorize. I was doing very good in chemistry and all the classes until I took a standardized test and realized I was near the very bottom. The basic concepts I did not know. Anyway, I had fun in college. I had a great time. But it was social. It was a maturation. Through time, I learned how to cope in a world outside of my small hometown. I think I may have mentioned this – when I got ready to graduate, I was trained to be a teacher. I thought I would be a high school basketball coach and a chemistry teacher. As I neared my graduation, I realized that this did not really appeal to me. I took some practice teaching, and quickly found that was not my forte. Then I looked around and said, "Holy mackerel, Bill. You don't have any skills. You have a mediocre academic history behind you. You have no marketable skills." That's the one time in my life that I think I

panicked a little bit – “What am I going to do the rest of my life?” – being forced into a profession I decided I had neither the desire nor was equipped. So that’s where the Navy bailed me out. I talked my college roommate, who was a better student than I was, into joining with me, not knowing which military branch. His girlfriend liked the uniforms of the Navy. We were not really tied to one branch, so we both joined the Navy and [went to] Officer Candidate School [OCS]. Unfortunately, he did not fare very well. You go to officer candidate school, and the whole time you are there, you are under extreme pressure. Everything is driven by fear. The worst of all the fears is to go into the Navy as enlisted personnel, which is not true. Being enlisted personnel is fine and fits a lot of people. That’s not what we were told at OCS probably as a motivation to study and work hard by not failing. We were told being an enlisted man is purgatory and Hell all wrapped together. Everyone lived in fear of flunking out of OCS. My college roommate did well in college, but he did it in a system by working hard. He would spend five hours working on a subject. But in OCS, you didn’t have the five hours; it was collapsed to thirty minutes or so. He just couldn’t cope. He flunked out; he went into this Hell-purgatory world, and he’s not the only one. We would be so cold that when somebody flunked out, we would grab their mattresses and sleep under multiple mattress. The heat of these old buildings was really nonexistent. You would give up a meal just to take a hot shower. You were cold all winter. We were there [from] October through February. That was a learning experience. I really felt sorry for my college roommate, but we’ve kept in touch over the years. He did well in the Navy, enjoyed his time in the Navy, and has had a very successful career since then. This fear that had been instilled in us was just a means to motivate us to work a little bit harder. But what they did not understand – maybe they understood it, but it was not portrayed to us – that everybody learns differently. I’m fairly quick about picking up stuff. I cannot put it in context as well as others, as I said earlier. My wife, Bonnie, probably would not have survived well in Officer Candidate School because she’s not quick in picking something up. But give her enough time to absorb, and she is much, much smarter than I am in so many areas.

MG: I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your time in college. You were there at a fairly interesting time. This was when the first Black students were admitted, and the “Memphis State Eight” came on campus.

WS: Yes, yes. I don’t remember too much about Blacks being on the campus. I do remember a high school classmate of mine, one year younger, from a family that was raised very close to my family. I knew all the kids very well. He was then and remains to this day an activist, and he felt he should be promoting the Blacks on campus. Unfortunately, the fellow I’m talking about, was not large in stature, wore glasses; he was a little pipsqueak if you will. The biggest thing about him was his mouth. I remember, on two or three occasions, he would walk into the student union or barbershop – he did not go to school there, but he would come in as part of the group and start promoting the rights of the African Americans. Well, there was very little tolerance in the late ’50s. He, more than once, was literally physically picked up and thrown out. I remember once he took on the quarterback – a very popular quarterback at Memphis State. The quarterback had little patience for my young friend. That’s probably what I remember as much as anything. I don’t remember unrest on Memphis State’s campus. Now, when I went back to school, at the University of Iowa, for my master’s, this was the Vietnam War. I vividly remember a lot of unrest at that time, but that was about ten years later than what we had at Memphis State. As we think back in time, we put a different flavor to it, but I don’t remember,



except for this isolated incident with my friend from high school, any real problems. By the same token, I was in a fraternity that promoted segregation and the southern culture. At our annual party, annual banquet, everybody dressed up in Confederate uniforms and the like. Today, I don't take great pride in that. I still keep in touch with my college brothers if you will. I respect them. They're good people. But I don't like that particular image. In fact, as I was putting together the book, I referred to much earlier about three generations of my mother's side of the family beginning with my grandparents, one of the pictures I was going to use was when I was dressed in the Confederate uniform. I felt very uncomfortable with the photograph and what it represented. I took it out. The original is in my photo library, but it's not going to see the light of day. I do not have the courage of a John Lewis to be standing out in front. [Editor's Note: John Lewis, U.S. Representative for Georgia's 5th District since 1987, was a Civil Rights activist and leader in the 1960s.] We look back in time and wish we had had that courage.

MG: I think it's an interesting way to measure historical changes in attitudes.

WS: I will come back to this later. I had convinced myself through the years that if I lived [during] the Revolutionary War – since the military trained me for this, that I saluted and said, “Yes, sir,” and followed my orders without any question, I thought at one time that I had ingrained that to the point that I was conditioned that if I had been in the Revolutionary War, I probably would have been a Tory, as opposed to a Patriot. That bothered me a great deal. It was only later while in NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] and fighting for organizational survival, I realized I would not have been a Tory. So that burden that I carried for many, many years was finally thrown off.

Before we leave my time at Memphis State University, I would like to tell a story. During a couple of my summers, I worked in Yellowstone which produced wonderful memories of fun times. Also, some adventure. On one occasion, I was with a group of friends hiking into an area seven to eight miles from the road, an area called Heart's Lake. After arriving at our camping area, one of the girls started feeling ill and felt she should return to the employee cabins. She, I believe, was having difficulty with her monthly cycle. I agreed to accompany her back to our home base, West Thumb. Prior to leaving, I asked the ranger assigned to the Heart Lake area the best way to return, the route we hiked in was very hilly. He suggested a route with less hills but not as well marked. And that is way we took. Shortly after dark, we found ourselves in the middle of a geyser basin surrounded by pools of boiling water. And we lost our trail. I asked my hiking companion to stay in one spot and I was crawling on my knees attempting to find the trail going forward. I finally found a horse hoof print. From there we eventually found a trail but were not sure if it was the trail we wanted. But with little choice, we took off on this trail. Remember, now it is dark, and we were using flashlights. Shortly after getting on this trail, we heard a sound behind us. When we walked it walked, when we stopped it would take a couple of additional steps before stopping. We did not know what it was, only that it sounded big. The one thing that we hoped it was not was a grizzly bear, because we knew of recent incidents where campers, especially women, were mauled and killed by a grizzly. For the next several hours, we kept walking on a trail that we didn't know for sure where it was going, and this large animal behind us, and the batteries in our flashlight were becoming weak. Not a pleasant situation to find ourselves. Between three and four in the morning, we finally came to a road. We had been on the right trail after all. At that time in the morning, there are not many cars. When we saw a car coming, we took no chances. We went to the middle of road.

The car fortunately stopped. When we explained the circumstances, they were happy to pick us up. Prior to leaving, the car shined its lights into the woods along the trail which we had left. There peering at us was a bear with a dish pan face and hump on its back ... a grizzly.

MG: Wow. Interesting experience. Remind me how this opportunity to go to the Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island, came up. Did you walk into a recruiting office?

WS: In effect, yes. Yes, I did. When I realized I was at a dead-end – I was going to graduate in a few weeks without anything to do, I did walk into a Navy recruiting office. Again, I don't know if we took a battery of tests or not, but I test fairly well; that's only part of one's intellectual quotient. But I do test well, so yes, I had no problem getting in. Some other colleagues tried to do the same thing. They were unsuccessful.

MG: You mentioned it was cold in Newport. But tell me more about the experience. What was the routine and curriculum like?

WS: Intense in that you were cold everywhere you went – cold in your barracks, cold in the mess hall, very cold outside. If you got demerits, you'd marched them off in the coldest of cold weather. Fortunately, I guess I was too frightened. I didn't get a lot of demerits. But I remember the coldness. I remember the intensity. This fear of failing was probably, in hindsight and reflection, by design. There were not the physical demands that you find in the Marine Corps, but there was the mental, the emotional, which was every bit as severe as what you had in the Marine Corps. We did not have a Camp Lejeune, but we had a situation that you were trained and conditioned to be ready all the time. They put you in situations that you had to work as a team. A lesson that I learned in college kind of parrots the same thing. We had an instructor, a student instructor, that left the room and told one of the students, a classmate, the answer to a question. When he left the room, the other students asked this guy, "What are the answers?" He was very quick in sharing. The instructor came back in and said, "Was there anything being shared?" This was shortly after the Korean War. We, as a class, had the honor code. We said, "No, nothing was shared." He said, "That was the right answer." We knew there had been something done wrong, but we were not going to squeal, if you will, on the others. That same thing carried over to Officer Candidate School. We were constantly – our little group – pitted against everybody else. You had to depend upon your colleagues, your immediate colleagues. Whatever the drill was or simulation, you had to depend upon those. I think that part of the training was very successful and got what they wanted. The intimidation I found to be less successful or at least less admirable, but the fact that we depended upon others was both successful and admirable.

MG: After Officer Candidate School, did you have more training, or did you get your first assignment then?

WS: For my first assignment I had envisioned being on a glamour ship, a destroyer or cruiser, where you can walk around, like in the Humphrey Bogart and John Wayne sort of movies. I'd done fairly well in class. Again, because I have a strength – I can memorize things fairly easily, and that's what was required in OCS. I was in the upper part of my class. Now, the fellow that was the very last member of the class and later a shipmate, to this day, remains a very close

friend. How he struggled through, I'll never know, but he was the last member of a thousand-member class. Anyway, I did not get my dream ship. I got a minesweeper, which is a wooden boat. Ours was one hundred and eighteen feet long, a coastal minesweeper. On the ocean – and it doesn't have to be heavy seas – the ship rides like a cork. There is no rhyme and reason to it. It just bounces this way and that way and this way. With most ships, after a short period of time, you pick up the rhythm of the ship, and you can adjust to it; with the minesweeper you cannot. To make matters worse, when I went to minesweeping training in Charleston, South Carolina, we had an old boatswain's mate, who was going to teach all of us young officers how to sweep mines. Well, he did that fairly successfully. But he did not like officers. He especially did not like new officers. He was intent on making everyone seasick. Man, he was successful. Through my three years on a minesweeper, once we got underway and when I was on watch, on the hour and the half-hour, to the minute, I would get seasick. To be overly descriptive, it was – bile. It was blood. It was whatever the case may be. It was miserable. But I never stepped down from a watch. I had responsibilities. Even though I'd be on my knees every thirty minutes until I got off watch, perhaps this goes back to my basketball experiences, I refused to quit. But what comes around goes around. As I was fixing to leave my three-year tour on the minesweeper, this boatswain was assigned to me. He didn't remember me, but I remembered him. I said, "Mister, expect your next two or three months, until I leave this ship, to be total Hell. Even with that, you're still going to be ahead of this deal, but I'm going to try to get my pound of flesh." And it was. I gave that guy as much grief as I was legally allowed to give him. But the minesweeper was, in many regards, a fun tour. But it was a hard tour because we'd be putting heavy equipment over the side. On a ship, once the equipment gets even two inches off the deck, it is very hard to manage, swinging every which way, even though we have guide wires. Putting this equipment over the side in some pretty heavy weather with a ship moving every direction was a dangerous job. I participated in a safety panel for the Chief of Naval Operations, where I spoke about our experiences on the minesweeper. I mentioned how we handled the heavy stuff on the minesweeper. Everybody agreed the most dangerous job in the Navy were those folks on the flight deck of a carrier, with the little paddles. That was really dangerous. But everybody also agreed that minesweepers were probably the second most dangerous job in the Navy. Nobody got hurt, but my job and all mine warfare officer's job were to ensure safety. I was extremely conscious of who did what. You learn stories as you go through life. We were putting this brand-new sophisticated mine warfare equipment over the side. As we were getting ready to put it over the side, I went up to the chief boatswain – to this day, I can remember his name, (Behanic). I said, "Behanic, you've been doing this over thirty years, and I'm brand new, but are you sure you're doing it right?" He, in effect, said, "Ensign, I know what I'm doing. Leave me alone." So, like a typical young officer, I put my tail between my legs, and I left him. Around three o'clock in the morning, we got a call from the bridge. The equipment has been lost. I called Behanic and said, "we're in a load of trouble." He said, "What's this 'we' stuff? You're the lieutenant, not me." [laughter] So I learned my lesson. If you have responsibility, at least stick with your guns. As it turned out another ship got too close to us with their mine equipment and actually swept our equipment. It was all caught up in a rig and we got the equipment back, but lesson learned that I don't care how brash the fellows you're working with are, if you have a responsibility, you better at least have some say-so because, if things go south, you're going to be the ones walking the plank, not them.

MG: Can you remind me what year it was that you graduated from officer candidate school?

WS: Yes, 1962.

MS: Okay. How many months were you on the minesweeper?

WS: I'm sorry – '63. How many months was I on the minesweeper? Probably around three years.

MG: Three years. Okay. What would you do in between trips, when you'd come ashore?

WS: Actually, the minesweeper, we were ashore most all the time. We did a few longer trips, but most were day trips. 'We'd spend the night at home. But one of the trips – we were in Charleston, South Carolina, participating in joint operation with other ships – the big boys, the destroyers, the cruisers, the landing craft carriers, all that. Our skipper, who was the captain of a very small ship – in hindsight, I don't think he had a lot of self-confidence. But it was going to be his way of showing off to the big ships, to the big commanders, how great an officer he was. He was ecstatic for the opportunity. As we were steaming from Charleston, South Carolina, to join the other ships, it was his birthday. I knew that. I had the cook make a cherry pie, which was his favorite. As the cook came in with the pie, the Captain begin beaming from ear to ear. The only time he ever said a kind word to me the whole time – as junior officers, you do not get very many kind words. He said, "Stubblefield, I finally have faith that you may in time become a halfway decent officer"; I was really ecstatic. Well, I was until the captain bit into his bite of cherry pie. The cook had used pitted cherries, and he bit down on a pit, broke the tooth, and so we had to break off from the joint operation. He had to explain to everybody – he had to run in. His chance to be a hero was destroyed with a piece of cherry pie. We got back, and he lost his chance for glory. Going back in that night – that was not a good day for me. We were tying up alongside a pier, and since we had not announced we were coming back to port, the ships were not ready for us to take the lines. Well, finally, the Quarterdeck watch on one of the other ships saw us. He came in and started handling the line. Well, as a young officer, not too savvy, I was giving the guy grief because he should have been more alert. Well, I had my full wool Naval Bridge coat on, and as we were getting ready to tie up a ship coming in behind us, bumped us kind of hard, and I fell over the side. Here, with a big woolen coat I was getting ready to sink to the bottom – and I was in the Cooper River in Charleston, which has very strong currents. Without missing a beat, this guy, the one which I had just berated, jumped in and pulled me out. A lesson was learned. Be careful who you fuss at because they may come to your rescue.

MG: This ship was based out of Norfolk, Virginia.

WS: Norfolk, Virginia, yes. But in this case, we were operating out of Charleston, South Carolina for a short period of time. But Norfolk, Virginia, yes.

MG: Was your next assignment in the Arctic?

WS: Well, on an icebreaker out of Seattle. This is where everything turns around. I went from a ship that was hard, with few creature comforts, the work which was difficult, and I did not find it particularly exciting, to an icebreaker that was, to this day, one of the best experiences of my

life. I worked with a wonderful captain, worked with great officers. The Captain of the Burton Island was Lt. Commander, Charlie Gott. He was not an imposing figure, short and thin and had started his career as enlisted during the Second World War. The Icebreaker was his only command but what a skipper he was. The crew loved him, as did I. We remained very close friends until his death 10 years ago. We worked from the Arctic to Antarctica, and places in between, and a lot of good stories at all of those. I'll tell a couple of stories in the Arctic. Most of the favorite stories are with Antarctica. But in the Arctic, we were supplying T-3, or Fletcher Ice Island which was a model for the 1968 movie Ice Station Zebra. This scientific base, which was on an ice floe in the Arctic, was named for Joe Fletcher, who, to me, was just a name at that time, but later became a mentor and a very close friend. He was the first person to set foot on the North Pole, but he did it via aircraft. He was a wonderful man and a great scientist. Anyway, we were supplying Fletcher Ice Island. We did not have good navigation in those days. Everything was radar, and the shoreline adjacent to the Arctic ocean is gentle slope with no distinguishing landmarks. Before GPS, navigation relied heavily on radar and if you cannot pick up any landmarks – you don't know really where you are. We ended up being in Russian territory. We got this very cryptic message from the Secretary of State or maybe the Secretary of Defense – “What are you doing invading Russia?” This was in the Cold War days. “What are you doing invading Russia's territory?” We did not realize we'd had, but we were there. “What are you trying to do? Start the Third World War?” About that same time, two [Russian] Bear aircraft flew over us. These are huge aircraft, comparable to our B-52. They were so close to us, Molly, we could recognize the pilot's face in the cockpit. From the air turbulence generated by these two large aircraft, our Icebreaker was rolling probably fifteen to twenty degrees. We began to believe that we were seeing the beginning of a war. If I can – well, I'm not going to ask permission. I'm going to do it anyway. A subset of that story was one of my shipmates on the icebreaker, a guy by the name of Gene Lacy, was a chief warrant officer, went from the icebreaker to the USS *Pueblo*, the Navy ship that unintentionally strayed into North Korean waters, and was picked up by the North Korean navy. [Editor's Note: On January 23, 1968, North Koreans boarded the USS *Pueblo*, and the men on board were held as prisoners of war until December 23, 1968. Gene Lacy was among the men captured and was later awarded a Prisoner of War Medal for his actions during the USS *Pueblo* incident.] He and his shipmates spent a year in a North Korean camp. I talked to him later. He said the North Koreans were the meanest people he'd ever seen. They would literally walk across the street just to kick a sleeping dog. Lacy was the one that arranged this famous photograph, long before your time. The sailors of the *Pueblo* were giving the standard American Christmas greeting. That's what they told the North Koreans. It was everybody giving the high sign, the middle finger. The North Koreans let it go because they thought it was a standard Christmas greeting until they found out later, and Gene said that he was practically beaten to death. They were not happy campers. As a follow-on to that story – Gene was the officer of the deck at the time that the North Koreans started chasing them down. They could have probably gotten back to international waters, but the captain panicked and stopped the ship. When they had the court of inquiry after the crew was released, the captain said it was Lacy that stopped the ship over his objection. The Captain was trying to put all the blame on Lacy. Fortunately, everybody else on the bridge said it was the captain that did that. The Captain, Lloyd Bucher – I guess is his name – did not show true colors. Okay. I got sidetracked. With the icebreaker in the Arctic, it got me to places such as Point Barrow, Alaska, and I love off-the-beaten-path places. They had a research facility for animals. I spent some time at Point Barrow and found the people to be absolutely fascinating.

But I found that they were afraid of cameras. Maybe less so today than they were then. I tried to take a picture of somebody, and you were not allowed to. You especially could not take a picture of a child.

MG: What was that last thing you said? You couldn't take a picture of what?

WS: Of a child. They were so colorfully dressed. They looked like Eskimos that we all think of, which they were. They were wonderfully dressed. But we had to be very circumspect in what we did. While at Pt. Barrow, I bought a pair of muckalucks, beautifully decorated. They were great but the skin had not been prepared for use outside of the Arctic. The fat had not been completely removed. Years later, while at the University of Iowa, the full impact of this lack of preparation became obvious. The smell from these boots was overwhelming causing me to discard a pleasant reminder of Pt. Barrow.

MG: What was the military objective of this assignment?

WS: The icebreaker was kind of outside the – we were part of the Department of Defense, no question about it. But we did not have Department of Defense duties. We were a logistics supply more than anything else. I'm going to correct myself in just a second. Now, the main objective was to resupply Fletcher Ice Island, which we could not. The ice was so heavy we could not get to the research station. But we had a secondary objective – this is what got us close to Siberia – [which] was to monitor all the Russian transport ships, look at their configuration, look at the deck covering, and try to make a deduction of what they might be carrying. This was intelligence-gathering of how the Soviets might be resupplying the northern coast of Siberia. But we did not have a heavy military presence. We did have a gun, but I'm not sure we ever operated the gun. We would not have been a formidable challenge in a time of war.

MG: I think, in your notes, you talked about some encounters with penguins in Antarctica.

WS: Now we're going to Antarctica, which, of all my travels, I think this was the highlight of my seagoing years. Yes. We were going down to cut a channel into McMurdo Bay for the resupply the National Science Foundation facility there. Again, it had no military purpose other than logistics for the national need. There were actually three icebreakers, two others besides the Burton Island. We were charged with cutting the channel. We got the channel cut, and the supply vessels were coming into McMurdo Sound the very next day. The morning after the completion of the channel and the day the supply vessels were to arrive, we got up only to realize a huge iceberg had floated into the channel, blocking the channel. [After] a quick assessment, we did not have a chance to cut another channel before the supply vessels arrived. Someone came up with the idea that maybe we could push this iceberg out of the way. We had three icebreakers all nudging up on this huge iceberg, and we did; we pushed it out of the way. It was an operational success. The photographer that worked for me happened to be flying that day and from the helicopter he took a picture of the three ships and the iceberg. This picture, which I have hanging in my house, also appeared in every major magazine and newspaper in the free world. Now one of my jobs in both the Arctic and Antarctica was to fly ice reconnaissance in the helicopters to find the best path through the ice. A couple of lessons learned. One day, I looked out the window, and the helicopter was on fire. I mentioned it to the pilot (Ed

McCauley?) and said, “Hey, Ed, we’re on fire.” He looked over and said, “So we are.” He didn’t say anything more. We got back, and we landed safely. I said, “Why didn’t you get alarmed?” He said, “Nothing we could do about it. If we’re going to crash, we’re going to crash. Nobody would ever be able to get to us. We were the only helicopter there, so we would have been dead. There was no reason to get worried about it.” But this guy was so nervous that when he drank a cup of coffee, he’d have to take two hands. A bowl of soup, he could not use a spoon. He’s just shaking every which way. But, put him behind the stick of a helicopter, and he was steady as could be. The story goes that when he left the Navy, he flew commercial for many years and never shook. He just shook when he was on the ship. Another occasion, one of my first times flying as an ice observer. We were looking for the best ways to get through the ice. The shortest distance may not necessarily be between two points. Well, I directed the ship over an ice ridge, and by the time we got back to the ship, it was still pounding, trying to get through that ice ridge. The captain, who was a dear soul and remained an exceptionally good friend until the day he died, said, “Bill, I’ll never have you fly ice reconnaissance again because what you did to us in this day.”; thank goodness he relented but I never made that mistake again. But to the penguin stories – two or three penguin stories. One was when I was on a Penguin rookery. Penguins have two natural enemies. One is the leopard seals – excuse me, I’ll start with the first one. One is a killer whale, and the second is a leopard seal. Now, in the case of the killer whales, I saw on numerous occasions that a killer whale would come up beside the ice, raise the upper part of its body clear of the water, do a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree circle, spot a penguin on the ice, then dip under the ice, right where the penguin was, would raise up, breaking the ice with their back. The penguins would be very vulnerable and generally caught by the killer whale. But in this case, we’re on dry land, a little island where the penguins laid their eggs and raised the young. There were two leopard seals swimming back and forth adjacent to the island. The leopard seals get their name honestly; they look like a leopard as far as coloration. They have a tooth set like a leopard as well, and very vicious and aggressive to penguins and perhaps humans. There’s never been a known attack of a leopard seal on a human, but several dogs have disappeared on the ice and are suspected to have been killed by a leopard seal. Anyway, we saw these two leopard seals swimming back and forth as did a group of penguins returning from several days at sea. Upon seeing the leopard seals, the penguins went into a football-type of huddle. From the football huddle, two penguins swam diagonally toward the two leopard seals and were quickly killed; blood and feathers everywhere. In the meantime, the rest of the penguins got to shore very quickly, but all safely. A few minutes later, another group of penguins came in, saw the two leopard seals, huddled, two swam toward the leopard seals, and then the rest got to shore. That repeated itself three or four times. The obvious question is, how were the [two] penguins identified? Were they self-identified? Were they peer-identified? Were they old? Were they young? Were they ill? Or just obnoxious? Nobody seems to know the selection process. On the ship at the time, we had a foremost animal behaviorist from a museum in New York. He was studying the leopard seals. Unfortunately, he was not with us on the penguin rookery. When we got back, we told him the story. He said he had heard about similar events. He said he would have given anything to have been able to witness the account. This was the day before the iPhone, so we were unable to record it. The other kind of interesting thing is there’s not very much ice on these penguin rookeries. The penguins took full advantage of the small patches of ice and made parallel trails on the ice. Penguins going in one direction would be in one trail. When they wanted to reverse course, they wait until they got to a crossover to go to the other trail. They never ran in the face of each other. Another story of the

penguins – if the ship gets stuck in the ice, and you get stuck quite often, the quickest way, the best way to get it out is to shift the water ballasts very quickly to break the friction. That worked a lot of the time but not all the time. The other way was to put explosives out and literally break the ice up by the explosion. On one occasion with a very expensive operation being stalled because the ship was stuck, we were ready to set a charge off, when a little penguin waddled up to the explosive charge. We would leave the ship to scare the penguin away but by the time we were back on the ship, the penguin had returned to the explosive charge. It appeared that the penguin had a new best friend. Finally, after losing patience, the Captain said, “Okay, blow the explosive.” I turned to the boatswain's mate, “Okay, boatswain, trigger the charge.” He looked at me and said, “I can't do it.” Then, I looked at the captain and said, “Captain, you do it.” The Captain said, “I can't do it.” We sat there for several hours, this multi-million-dollar operation, until the little penguin decided to go somewhere else.

We'd be on the ice, playing touch football, and the penguins would join us. They were not very good at football, but they were pretty good at drinking our beer. We would feed them the beer, and they looked like little folks on New Year's Eve with a tuxedo uniform, just wobbling back and forth after they had the beer.

MG: What kind of penguins were they?

WS: These were Adélie penguins, small and lovable. On occasions, we ran into some emperor penguins. Adélies will be maybe eighteen inches high. The emperors could be as much as three feet high. The emperors are not to be fooled with. One of our sailors, who had been conditioned with the Adélies by picking them up and cuddle them, thought he could do the same thing with the emperor. The emperor just, with his flipper, reached out and broke the guy's arm. After that we stayed away from the emperors.

MG: How long were you on this duty?

WS: I think eighteen months or so. Before I tell you about the end of the duty, I am reminded of a couple of other stories. I had an opportunity, while in McMurdo to fly to the South Pole. I was struck by the fact that at the South Pole, there's redundancy everywhere. There are two living spaces. There's separated bedrooms, separated eating area. Research, work area, everything – there's redundancy, all remote. The reason being for fire. Because, in case you have a fire, you have to have someplace to retreat. But I take some pleasure in saying I made it to the South Pole. Another story was with dogs. New Zealand had a base very close to the Navy base at McMurdo. There, the New Zealanders used dogs rather than mechanized equipment; why, I don't know, maybe from nostalgia. When I could, I joined the New Zealanders on a short dog sled ride over the ice. The first of these occasions, as we were harnessing the dogs, they got into a fight, eight or nine dogs who appeared to have one purpose and that was to kill the others. The New Zealand musher said jump in and stop them. My reaction was you must be crazy, I am not about to wade into the middle of a dog fight. He said go ahead, the dogs may attack each other but they will not bite you. He proved to be right. After this, I was never hesitant to wade in to stop a fight.

I spent a lot of time in Antarctica, but only one trip to the South Pole. The icebreaker was fun duty. I think it was one I would have gladly spent the rest of my career. Going from the



Arctic to Antarctica and places like New Zealand, Hawaii, Australia, and in between are fun places to visit. There are stories that I'll not repeat here – the port visits in Australia and New Zealand. But the icebreakers – you asked a question a while ago, what was the military operation? There was no military operation. The realization, I think, came to the Department of Defense. After I'd been on the ship for maybe two years, or a year and a half, the icebreakers were transferred to the Coast Guard. Ours was the last ship to be physically transferred to the Coast Guard. I was the last person to walk down the gangway of which I take some pride. Well, that's not exactly correct. I was the last icebreaker Navy sailor. Then it became Coast Guard icebreaker sailor.

MG: Was that because military efforts were shifting towards Vietnam at the time?

WS: No, I think it goes back to the basic question you asked earlier. What military role did the icebreakers have? And they had none. It fell more under the operational mandate of the Coast Guard than it did the Navy. Vietnam had been going on quite actively at that time. In fact, I asked to be transferred to Vietnam on a swift boat. The power -to- be in the Navy sent me in another direction, which I sometimes regret. My colleagues here said, "You served during the Vietnam period. Where were you in Vietnam?" I said, "I didn't make it." I did ask to go, but I never made it.

MG: What inspired you to want to serve in Vietnam? This was during a time period where a lot of people were avoiding service if they could.

WS: Not idealistic, to be sure, because I'm not sure at that stage that I had a strong ideology implanted. I've always enjoyed adventure. The icebreaker provided a unique sort of adventure. I felt that the swift boats in Vietnam would have provided a comparable suite of adventure. I also had a sense of duty to serve my country. Probably these were the driving forces. But it was not ideology. I have subsequently visited Vietnam. I hope we can come back to ask that question later in the chronology because I have a totally different view of the Vietnamese than what we had in the '70s. Several examples made me have a real change of heart about Vietnam.

MG: I will add that to my notes. I'm wondering if I should ask you about your service in Bermuda now or if you'd like to take a break for today. How are you doing for time?

WS: I'm fine. How long have we been talking?

MG: About two hours.

WS: About two hours. Let's go through the Bermuda and Grand Turk stories, and that would be a convenient time to stop. I was, when the icebreaker was being transferred to the Coast Guard, subject to be reassigned. My time was up. I thought about getting out, but I had enjoyed the icebreaker so much that I decided to extend my duty time. I'd had a couple of to augment to the regular Navy, which meant that you did not have a fixed time of service; you were in until retirement, but it also gave you certain advantages. The sailors that had augmented were regular Navy and were viewed different than us reservists. But I chose not to augment, so I remained a reservist in the Navy the whole time.

While on the Icebreaker, I'd heard about a Naval group tracking using SOSUS [Sound Surveillance System] array. My first assignment was in Eleuthera. But before I even left the icebreaker, Eleuthera fell off the table. I went to Hatteras for training, and then to Key West. Both were quite interesting. But then my first assignment was in Bermuda – a lovely place. I found out early, though, that the locals in Bermuda never really cared for the “permanent” visitors. On the surface, they did until they found out that you were not a tourist and that you were there on a daily basis, and then their whole attitude changed. But that's where I learned how to track submarines. The submarines could be tracked for several thousand miles when sound emitted from the vessel becomes trapped in the SOFAR (Sound Fixing and Ranging channel) zone. In the deep ocean, pressure, temperature, and salinity combine to allow the sound travel for very long distances. This zone occurs at approximately 3,000 feet. The theory behind SOSUS is to have a series of receiving hydrophones located in this sound channel and developing the understanding the acoustic characteristics of each of the sound sources. It was said that not only could you recognize a particular ship, but you could tell when the engine watch was changed by the variation in the sound; each engineer would change speeds differently.

One interesting story happened shortly before I got to Bermuda. After a Russian submarine was picked up a by SOSUS, a P-3 aircraft was deployed to locate it precisely, by dropping hydrophones and sonobuoys around the detected submarine. On one occasion, a Soviet submarine was detected close to Bermuda. This obviously generated a great deal of excitement. A P-3 was deployed, and the sonobuoys dropped. They had the submarine exactly pinpointed. Pretty excited about it. Then the submarine disappeared from the frequency on which it had been detected. A few days later, they detected the submarine on a different frequency again generating a lot of excitement. So, they do the same thing – sent the P-3 out, drop the hydrophone, sonobuoys, prior to the submarine disappearing from the monitoring frequency. It happened the third day. It happened on the fourth day. Then the Navy brass came to the realization, because every time they detected the submarine, it was on a slightly different frequency, that the submarine was actually changing speeds, knowing fully well when they fell in our threshold of capability for detection that we'd send the P-3 out. The Russian submarine was actually monitoring our detection capability. Instead of us tracking the submarine, it was a submarine tracking us. Once we came to this realization, we stopped sending the P-3, at which time the Russian submarine disappeared, not to return.

From the lovely island of Bermuda, I was transferred to a to the desert island of Grand Turk, where I was operations officer and executive officer. Grand Turk is only about seven miles long, a mile and a half wide. It is a British island. In the days of sailing ships and before refrigeration, Grand Turk was made into a desert island by cutting all the trees. The island had a perimeter higher than the interior part of the island. By flooding the interior and cutting off the return to the sea, the sea water would evaporate due to absence of shade. The resulting salt residue was recovered and sold to the non-refrigerated ships. For much of its history, Grand Turk was one of the wealthiest of the Bahamian islands.

The result for today is there is little land beauty on Grand Turk because it was/is a desert island. But the water around it is lovely. But in addition to the lovely water were the lovely people. I think other than the icebreaker – maybe as I go through my chronology, there'll be other stories equal to it, but along with the icebreaker, Grand Turk was one of my favorite places because of the people. It was absolutely delightful everything that we did there. On one occasion, I had been on a submarine because the SOSUS system works closely with the US

nuclear submarine fleet. I had promoted the idea that the more we knew about the submarine the better we could work together. As a result, I was the first from the SOSUS system to ride on a submarine, which was both interesting and fun. We were doing war games. The captain tried to get me involved by asking me to serve as the communicator with the other submarines. Obviously, the sound was through the water which is muted and hard to understand. With my Southern accent it soon became apparent that the other submarines could not understand what I was saying. The captain was very gracious, but after several minutes, he said, "Okay, Bill, why don't you look at something else. I'll take care of the communication." I learned that talking through the water is not one of my strengths. While on the submarine, the *Scorpion* disappeared. The *Scorpion* was the second of the nuclear submarines that went down. The first one was *Thresher*; that happened probably [in] '60, '62, '63. [Editor's Note: On April 10, 1963, the atomic submarine USS *Thresher* sunk in the Atlantic Ocean, killing all 129 crewmembers onboard.]

About five or six years later, the *Scorpion* went down. The first thought was a Russian submarine sunk our submarine because we knew a Russian submarine was in the area. Immediately the submarine went from a kind of relaxed working environment to an all-hands battle station, took me close to Grand Turk, and threw me in a rubber dinghy, and said, "You're on your own to get back to Grand Turk." They took off to go to battle. Grand Turk, along with the other SOSUS stations, were able to triangulate and realized the sound characteristics of the *Scorpion* were that of an implosion not an explosion. From the SOSUS information it was quickly determined that the disappearance of the *Scorpion* was not due to an attack by the Russians.

The duty on Grand Turk was a lot of fun. We may come back to this in a few minutes, but about this time, as far as chronology goes, my lack of being a good student as an undergraduate started gnawing on me. I really felt a desire to go back and prove myself in the academic setting. This can be "to be continued" anytime you want to.

MG: Sure. I just want to ask you a couple of follow-up questions. Why was the cause of the loss of the *Scorpion*'s controversial? Even today, there are a lot of theories about what happened. I know the Navy investigated. Was it because this was the Cold War era?

WS: Yes. In the Cold War era, we immediately defaulted to: "It was the other guy. We were being preyed upon. The other guy took advantage." The military probably learned it several times, but we certainly learned it at Pearl Harbor, that if you're too relaxed, if you do not respond to a crisis appropriately, especially when you're considered to be enemy attacked, you've lost, you've lost ground. The Navy had two assumptions they could make. One, the Russians were involved, or the Russians were not involved. Everything the Navy and the military teaches you, you had to take the first assumption until the first assumption is proven not to be correct. That's exactly what happened. What caused it to sink? I think you've obviously done a little bit of research. The shipyard had done some faulty welds. When the *Scorpion* was on station in the Mid-Atlantic, it was running some drills. As they changed depth, what would normally have been okay, too much pressure was placed on the hull, and the welds gave way.

MG: What year did this occur? Was this 1968?

WS: That sounds right, yes.

MG: There were a few other submarines that were lost around this time. So I was curious if you felt threatened to be on a submarine? Did you feel like you were a target?

WS: You said other submarines lost?

MG: I thought I read somewhere that the *Scorpion* was one of four submarines lost that year.

WS: Molly, you're ahead of me. I do not know of a single submarine. Now, there was one lost in the Med [Mediterranean Sea], and I don't know the name of it. [Editor's Note: Rear Admiral Stubblefield may be referring to the French submarine *Minerve* or the Israeli submarine INS *Dakar*. Both were lost in the Mediterranean Sea in January 1968.] Bob Ballard was instrumental in finding that sub [USS *Scorpion*] several years later, but I don't know the year of that. I do not know of similar submarines lost, perhaps I am wrong but if there were, none were raised to the level of the *Scorpion*. Now, it could have been other subs that made a contribution to the fairly aggressive response from the Navy. I'm not going to say it was not. I was just not aware of that. I just thought it was a natural – what the Navy had been trained for. One of the ships went down under mysterious conditions where the enemy was in close proximity. You take no chances. You respond. But there may have been others. I might have to do some research on that because I did not realize that was the case.

MG: I might be wrong and have gotten my notes mixed up.

WS: Well, you may well be right. It may have been a sub like the one in the Med that went down that was never associated with a Russian ship. You're probably right, and I'm wrong.

MG: Well, I think this is a good place to put a pin in it for today. When we pick up for next time, I'll ask you about your time at the University of Iowa, NOAA, and the whole rest of the story.

WS: Yes. Iowa was another fun place. Texas A&M – yes, I've had a very good life. I'd like to hope it continues for several years. Where we put the marker in – it's been a very good life.

MG: Well, I'm really loving hearing all about it. I appreciate the time you've spent with me so far today.

WS: Well, I apologize. I'm talking too much. Obviously, I'm not going to be in the category of that individual a one-hour interview, and it was a very good interview. I don't satisfy those criteria.

MG: There's no such thing as talking too much for an oral historian. I really appreciate the way you're telling me these stories. It helps paint the picture of how things are unfolding in your life and career. You are making my job very easy.

WS: Well, I appreciate that very much. You're very kind.

MG: Well, thank you for all your time. This has been such a treat.

WS: Okay, fine. Thanks, Molly

MG: Talk to you soon. Bye-bye.

WS: Bye-bye. Have a great weekend.

MG: You too.

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Reviewed by William Stubblefield 1/17/2020

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