

Narrator: Joe Evjen

Interviewer: Matthew Forrest

Location: Silver Spring, Maryland

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Project Description: Interviews with members of the crew and scientific party of NOAA Ship Mount Mitchell, a hydrographic survey ship deployed to the Persian Gulf in the wake of the Gulf War to conduct an environmental assessment of the damage caused by the retreating Iraqi Army's firing of Kuwait's oil wells.

Principal Investigator: Matthew Forrest

Affiliation: NOAA's Office of Coast Survey

Transcript Team: Fantastic Transcripts

Abstract: On June 19, 2020, Matthew Forrest interviewed Joe Evjen, a member of the National Geodetic Survey. The discussion focuses on Evjen's involvement in the 1992 Persian Gulf cruise of the NOAA ship Mount Mitchell. Evjen, born in Gainesville, Florida, and raised in a family with naval and farming backgrounds, joined the NOAA Corps after graduating from the University of Florida in December 1990. Evjen's first assignment was on the Mount Mitchell, where he participated in deep-sea bathymetry in the Gulf of Mexico and later the Persian Gulf for the ROPME cruise. The ship undertook various scientific tasks, including deep-sea bathymetry, oceanographic studies, and shallow water surveys. The crew faced logistical and operational challenges, such as retrofitting the ship for different missions, navigating the Suez Canal, and adapting to diverse cultural interactions with international scientists. During the cruise, Evjen observed significant environmental conditions, including high sea surface temperatures and natural oil seepages in the Persian Gulf. The ship's company had to manage resources carefully and collaborate with scientists from various countries. Evjen recounts unique experiences, such as interacting with local populations, navigating complex geopolitical landscapes, and participating in scientific dives, including one with renowned oceanographer Sylvia Earle. Evjen highlights the challenges of transitioning from hydrographic surveys to oceanographic missions and the importance of maintaining flexibility and adaptability in operations. The interview concludes with reflections on the cruise's impact, Evjen's subsequent assignments, and the lasting memories of his time aboard the Mount Mitchell.

Matthew Forrest: Good Morning. My name is Matthew Forrest. I'm interviewing Joe Evjen from the National Geodetic Survey. The date is June 19, 2020. The time is 8:10 AM. We are meeting remotely on GoToWebinar. I'm located in Woodbridge, Virginia. Joe, where are you located?

Joe Evjen: A basement in Silver Spring, Maryland, a couple miles north of the offices downtown.

MF: Okay. So our interview is to discuss Joe's involvement in the 1992 Persian Gulf cruise of the NOAA ship *Mount Mitchell*. This is for the NOAA Voices Oral History [Archives]. Joe, can you tell me a little bit about your background, where you're from, your childhood, where you went to school, and so on?

JE: Sure. I was born in 1967 in Gainesville, Florida. Genetically, I'm from Minnesota. Both of my parents are from farm stock up north. My dad was briefly in the Navy during the exciting times of the '40s. My brother went to the Naval Academy. Three sisters later, I was born. Let's see. We had a little sailboat growing up. I got it wet only occasionally in Florida lakes. Went to the beach to go camping every Christmas. I wouldn't say I was an ardent fan of the ocean because we were – Gainesville is the driest, more Georgia-type place in Florida, down the spine of north central Florida. Growing up, I was active in the Boy Scouts. That was my one outlet I really enjoyed. When I graduated and went to college, I decided to do something that was as close to orienteering as I could find, and that got me into the surveying and mapping program at the University of Florida. The surveying and mapping books were full of pictures from the Coast and Geodetic Survey, so good on historians for keeping those photos and good on our PR [public relations] folks for getting them out into textbooks. So graduating college, I thought I wanted to either join the Peace Corps or join the NOAA Corps after spending a summer working with Commander Dave Minkel – I guess, back then, Lieutenant Dave Minkel, in the National Geodetic Survey offices.

MF: What year did you start with the NOAA Corps?

JE: So, let's see, graduated Florida [in] December 1990 and got into the BOTC [Basic Officer Training Class] '89 class of January '91. We got to watch the Persian Gulf War on the news while we were taking training. My brother was still in the Reserves. At that point, he went over to Saudi Arabia and ran a port defense unit north of the big Air Force base there.

MF: After you graduated Basic Officer Training Course, BOTC, you reported to *Mount Mitchell* directly?

JE: Yeah. *Mount Mitchell* was my first ship and first assignment. Let's see, so long ago. The first year, the ROPME [Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment] cruise was a year after the war, so in 1991, we did deep sea bathymetry in the Gulf of Mexico, which was nice. We got to go to a variety of ports in the Gulf of Mexico. But the deep-sea bathymetry is really just mowing the lawn, way off in the middle of nowhere, so not a lot of traffic, not a lot of anything else. We saw whales when the weather was nice. But otherwise, it was – we called it "beam until you scream" because we would run multibeam, and that's what we

did. But being in the officer corps, we got involved in both driving the ship and the science mission, so we would go back to the plot room, which is just aft of the bridge, and watch the contours as they were being drawn. I think when you hover your Google Maps over the Gulf of Mexico, and you see all that interesting topography, a lot of that came from the *Mount Mitchell*.

MF: Yes, if I remember correctly, a major underwater feature down there is named Mitchell Dome for *Mount Mitchell's* work.

JE: That was, well, I think it was named Mitchell Dome while we were there, or it was for other work. But [as] part of the writeup of the survey reports, the captain, Skip Theberge, thought it important that we try to name some of the features that we found, so that was an interesting take on an engineering project to try to wrap some history into it.

MF: You served on *Mount Mitchell* for a sea tour. Where did you go after that?

JE: The *Mount Mitchell* was – the three summers was deep sea bathymetry, then the year of the cruise to the Persian Gulf, and then we started shallow water bathymetry. Following *Mount Mitchell*, I went to a land assignment with the National Geodetic Survey, where I work now, and helped out on what we called a HARN party, High-Accuracy Reference Network, so we were using relatively new GPS dual-frequency equipment to reposition a lot of triangulation stations and benchmarks to tie them both to a new higher-accuracy GPS reference system. Following that, I went back to sea with the NOAA ship *Rude*, and we worked mostly [in] Mid-Atlantic and North Atlantic ports, Portsmouth Harbor, New York Harbor, and the Virginia Capes, doing multibeam. That was it for my NOAA Corps career. Then I came to work for the National Geodetic Survey, and I've been here ever since.

MF: Great. So on the ship, as you were a junior officer, you didn't really have a wide range of responsibilities and collateral duties. What were your collateral duties?

JE: Yes, in the recruiting video, they show someone reading a book at sea, and that is a blatant lie. They keep you busy with duties from sunup to sundown and then sometimes midnight to four o'clock in the morning. So let's see. I did not run the ship store. I'm trying to remember some of my collateral duties. I was part of the diving group. The *Mount Mitchell*, one of its features was a bow thruster, which we didn't use all that much, but it was nice to have handy, but it was very un-useful when we were out doing deep sea bathymetry because we thought it was pulling air bubbles down under the hull and impacting the survey quality, so we built these bow-thruster doors, giant pieces of plywood that we would wrestle with scuba gear and dog down over the bow thruster every time we left port and then before we went into port, we'd yank them off, so pretty basic ship's husbandry diving from the *Mount Mitchell*. It came in handy when we started doing shallow water work to go dive on wrecks and find out what it is the fathometer was looking into. Of course, we did diving in the Persian Gulf as well. If you listed twenty of them, I could probably tell you had eight of those jobs. But I don't remember the collateral duties.

MF: You had done a full field season on the *Mount Mitchell* before the 1992 deployment. Did the notification that the ship was going to be deployed to the Gulf, did that come midseason? How did that come down to the ship?

JE: I'm trying to remember. I think, by the end of field season 1991, we definitely knew that something was going on. They put us into drydock. We didn't have any down seasons because, yeah, we retrofitted from deep sea bathymetry to everything for the ROPME cruise and changed captains. Then, we re-retrofitted for shallow water bathymetry and changed captains again the next winter, so it was a lot of work involved. Yeah, so a change of captains, change of XO's [executive officer], I believe, and ops officers, usual dumping of some of the junior officers that we brought on board. We weren't understaffed when we went out. They brought on enough junior officers that we had a good complement. By that time, I guess I was one of the old salts on board, with eleven months under my belt. I said we did deep-sea work and didn't have a lot of traffic to deal with. But one of the interesting parts of doing the bathymetry work is that we were always working under a survey needle, so we were trying to position the ship straight down a track line, and so we got really good at turning the ship and putting it right onto at least an imaginary line, so did get some good ship handling as a result.

MF: Absolutely. When word did come down that the ship was deploying to the Persian Gulf, which was a remarkably different op area than the ship was used to, how did you react personally?

JE: I probably would have reacted if I were older and wiser. But I was young and dumb and fatalistic enough to know that this would be a hilarious failure that we would all survive or a very interesting success. I guess, knowing enough about the bureaucracy of how things work, I knew that this was something that NOAA was attempting that we weren't necessarily good at. [laughter] We weren't necessarily used to. There were a lot of unknowns involved. But comparing my experience to my brother's, he definitely had a whole lot of unknowns, and we had given a year for things to cool down. There were just basic things, like supplying the ship – we didn't have a lot of understanding of what we could get, so we put seven months' worth of canned milk onboard, just brought a lot of things on, did a lot of worrying about how to get things done. The trip through the Suez Canal was a bit of a mystery. Even successfully doing it twice, it's still a bit of a mystery. [laughter] I don't know if there is any official way to get through the Suez Canal. You just get there, start handing out cigarettes, and eventually, you make it to the other end. That's my take on how you get through the Suez Canal. I was comfortable, but I was not sure how it was all going to play out. I wasn't sure that anyone was sure how it was all going to play out. Captain [Richard] Permenter was really great because he was an old salt, and he had been around the world, and he had seen worse things than this, so he added a sense of calm and a sense of wry humor that put everybody into a good working mood.

MF: Absolutely. You mentioned the transit through the Suez Canal. I wanted to ask about the transit from the US over to the Persian Gulf. Departed Norfolk, if memory serves, sometime in January of 1992. Is that correct?

JE: I would have to refer to the logs. It was definitely early. The trip was exciting just because we were able to change time zones. That meant shorter watches going east. That was nice. [laughter] And getting to see Europe, getting to go through the Mediterranean, seeing the Rock of Gibraltar, those were all exciting to me.

MF: How was the transit across the North Atlantic, the North Atlantic in winter, being notoriously difficult?

JE: I would say it was unremarkable. Yeah, it's a 220-foot ship, so it's a little hard to throw around. The worst weather we've experienced in my career was always in the Gulf of Mexico, so I don't think the Persian Gulf threw much at us— the Persian Gulf trip. Either we lucked out or whatnot, but it was uneventful. I was excited we got to follow a great circle route, so deflecting the compass a couple of degrees per watch was the highlight of the trip. [laughter]

MF: So you transited across. You made it to the Mediterranean and then to the Suez Canal.

JE: Yeah. Well, first, we did an overnight in Port Said, which is just part of the confusion, I suppose, with traffic, you have to get a group together going the same direction. So, pulled into Port Said, Egypt, which was interesting because we had effectively been away from humanity for a while at that point. Crossing the Atlantic Ocean at a stately ten and a half knots is a slow trip. Immediately thronged by small boats. People clambering aboard to try to sell us stuff, which is not something you usually do to a commissioned vessel of the United States. But they were just interested in selling stuff, so they would jump over the railing, set out a little carpet, set out some trinkets, and wait. [laughter] The boat they were on immediately took off, so there was no sending them away. We were rammed by a tugboat that was bigger than the *Mount Mitchell* and that we didn't call. I was with a radio down on the railing, down on the aft deck. It stove in the side of the ship pretty good and then just disappeared. I think they thought they were coming to help us, or maybe they were confused. Maybe they were being asked to help a different ship. But it was completely mismatched to the size of the boat. Like I said, it was probably bigger than the *Mount Mitchell*. Its keel just stove in the side of the railing. Then they took off when they realized they weren't helping, so it was a pretty chaotic introduction into the Middle East. Things quieted down a little bit after that, but, yeah, there was a crew that brought on a Suez Canal light, which is just some giant, antique piece of junk that I don't know if it even worked, but they hung it off the bow of the ship, immediately sat down and sold trinkets for the duration of the trip and then, when they got to the south end of the Suez Canal, hit it with a fire ax. It dropped into the water, and they jumped overboard. [laughter] Working in the Caribbean, I got the impression that any place the British had been, they left a history of competent bureaucracy. But Egypt they left untouched somehow.

MF: You mentioned personnel boarding the ship who were not necessarily expected or welcome on the ship, selling trinkets, and so on. What sort of security precautions did the ship take for the transit and for the work in the Gulf?

JE: I wouldn't say we had obvious security precautions. I'm trying to picture the security posture. This was a decade pre-9/11, but post-Gulf War. I think we were welcomed as liberators everywhere we went. I felt reasonably safe. If anything, I would say the security was on the other side. When we stopped in Jeddah, which is the gateway to Mecca in the Red Sea, there was a group of security guards who were not protecting us. They were protecting Saudi Arabia from us. Similarly, there was a high-security posture just about everywhere, which I found not unusual. In areas where guns are cheap and security guards are cheap, you throw a lot of security out there. I guess it was just something we weren't expecting when they were clamoring

overboard. Probably we shouted at them in a completely useless language. But yeah, it was what it was. Just an interesting introduction to a different culture.

MF: Absolutely. So, you cleared the Suez Canal, and then it was around to the Straits of Hormuz to the Persian Gulf. You said you stopped in Jeddah between starting work –

JE: Stopped in Jeddah, and we got a tour of their mall, in which the guards loaded us in and locked us into a van, drove us to the mall, marched us around the mall, and marched us back into the van, and drove us back. But I thought that was generous. The Red Sea is beautiful. Oman is beautiful. You could film every Star Trek movie in those two places and not have to worry about any other locations. Those are great exotic places to be. I was hoping we could dive in the Red Sea, but we made good time instead. Started to get some introduction to the US naval operations transiting through the Red Sea. It was interesting to talk to them. They were definitely on a different posture overseas than they were in US waters and definitely a more commanding presence and interesting on the radio communications. When you'd speak over the radio, you tried to put yourself on the bridge of the other ship, so you can say, "Ship transiting past the three buoy into Pensacola. I'm the small white vessel four miles off on your port bow." But the Navy always spoke like everybody knew who they were and everybody knew where they were. They were talking to the ship six miles out on their bow, which is over the horizon. They were bullies, the US Navy, but we learned to work around them. They may have taken up some of our oceanographic monitoring equipment off the bottom of the Persian Gulf too. In hindsight, they probably look a lot like sea mines. Because we had anchored, I think, current meters with railroad wheels as anchors, and they would float up various levels above the ocean floor, right down the throat of the Persian Gulf, so right where the ships come through. I think we were down well below the draft of any of the ships, but mine-clearing equipment may have come through and taken a lot of them.

MF: Interesting. So once you got to the Gulf and got on project, what were working conditions like on the ship?

JE: They were nice. They got steadily warmer as time went on. And towards the end of the hundred days, I think we were worried that the sea surface temperature was in the high eighties, and that was the kind of water we were using to cool the ship, so it was getting to the point where things were going to get very uncomfortable very soon. I applaud anyone who lives there twelve months of the year. I guess my take was that it was kind of a rough and tough environment. The Persian Gulf is cold, and then it's hot. It's salty. It has a lot of natural seepages of oil, so things that live there are tough. We didn't see a lot of oil offshore. The shore crews, of which I was not a part – Steve Thumb, Lieutenant Thumb, went ashore with some of that work. They saw the oiling on the beaches. But we didn't see much impact offshore, to my unscientific eyes. We saw the ravages of pollution outside of the cities, I would say. But we also saw a lot of very beautiful clear waters, really nice reefs.

MF: The project was much different from the ship's normal mission. You went from offshore and coastal hydrographic survey to really an oceanographic cruise. What challenges did that present to the ship's company in shifting posture from one line of work to very much a different line of work

JE: Yeah, I would say everybody was stressed. We tried to bring as many people on board as we could. They all wanted different equipment, so we had CONEX boxes up on the decks to provide uncomfortable office and storage space for some of the scientists. Berthing, the ship holds a lot of people. I guess we didn't necessarily need the kind of crews that the launches would require, so we probably filled some of those berths. But yeah, it was going to be a mix of the regular crew with the scientists that came and went, scientists from a lot of countries, from a lot of cultures, so an interesting time for those berthing areas back aft. I wouldn't say that we – I guess the berthing areas up forward, where the officers live, were full. But other than maybe the chief scientist, I don't think we saw the comings and goings that the rest of the crew saw. I remember an interesting story. We were most of the way over there when – and the wheelings and dealings were still continuing – there was a request from one of the organizations that we not fly the US flag on the ship because we were a UN mission. It was interesting because the captain came down to the wardroom. He brought the whole crew in. He said, "I want to do what the crew wants. What do you think?" One of the ABs, able-bodied seamen, whom we had borrowed from Seattle, gave an interesting, impassioned speech that pretty much swayed the crew. He said, "This is an opportunity we have to do good. If this is one hurdle we have to jump through to do it, let's do it for the good of the planet." He pretty much had everybody on board. Then somebody else spoke up and said, "We can get it and have the flag too." It was a very polite conversation. Everybody was open-minded. It was interesting how the feeling of the crew just shifted from one side to the other. We said, "Yeah, take us as we come. We want to do all these good things. We're just going to do them with our flag." We kept it, and it wasn't a problem. They like haggling over there, so everything comes with a story; everything comes with a little wheeling and dealing at the last minute. We weren't used to that, particularly when it comes to getting supplies for the ship. They're also very – you have to read through the language that they're very – they really don't want to offend you or disappoint you, so when you ask, "Do you have a hundred gallons of diesel fuel or something like that," and they'll say, "Of course we do. It would be embarrassing if we didn't." Then you show up, and they don't have any. [laughter] But they can get it. If God wills it, they will have it. It was a frustrating way to do business, but we made it through somehow.

MF: Do you remember any other logistical challenges of conducting the day-to-day operations on the ship and then of imports and so on being, again, way outside the ship's normal operating area and conditions?

JE: I would say, at my level, I think we did really well. The scientists would come in the morning and offer completely divergent ideas of what to do. Some wanted to go north; some wanted to go south. Everyone needed the small boats, so it was definitely a challenge for the chief scientist and the senior officers to decide who got the boats on what days, who could cooperate with each other, whose missions were completely incompatible, and no, they couldn't burn all the gas in the first three days and leave us with nothing. I commend the senior officers on doing all that. I remember very well the chief scientist was really great at really listening to everyone and then getting them to make concessions to meet the capabilities of the ship.

MF: So, talking about the science party and visiting scientists on the ship, this was an international project. There were scientists from many different countries – the US, countries all over Europe, countries all over the Middle East.

JE: Every Middle Eastern country but Iraq, I believe.

MF: Yeah, it being the regional organization for the Persian Gulf, I understand, was the sponsor for the cruise or was the [inaudible]

JE: Yeah. ROPME, the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment. They still call the area the ROPME Sea because no one can agree whether it's the Arabian Gulf or the Persian Gulf.

MF: So, from the work perspective certainly sounds challenging. How was the cultural interaction with scientists from such completely different regions, completely different countries, some of which were not the best of friends at the time?

JE: I'd say it went rather successfully. As busy as I was, my interaction would be – on the bridge, they would come up a few distinct times per day and ask which direction was Mecca, which, when you get that close to it, changes rather rapidly, so it's important to have a good compass there. Working on the small boats – I'm trying to remember. They weren't involved in the diving that I did. I would say that the missions that I was personally involved in, I don't remember working too closely with the scientists. They work on the shore teams or doing some of the other work. I think everybody got along really well. Then, to people whose countries were not the best of friends, I would say any antagonisms were at levels far above the personal level, so at a personal level, everyone wanted to get along really well. I think it worked out there.

MF: If I recall correctly, the cruise took place over Ramadan. Were there any special concessions that you remember as far as mess times, galley, and so on to accommodate the Eid every night?

JE: Yes. Again, not a strong memory of mine, but I think the galley never closed. Again, we're dealing with a NOAA ship that was pretty old at that point, used to working the way it worked. I think there were a lot of rules when it comes to how to feed and when to feed that were pretty well established, and all of that kind of had to go out the window. I suppose we lathered the cooks with a lot of overtime to get them to effectively never close. I think they set a lot of food aside and made it just a come-and-go, take-as-you-want kind of situation late at night.

MF: Interesting. Do any other experiences with the scientists stand out? Is there any particular story that you think stands above the general experiences?

JE: No, I'll just relay the one where we left Saudi Arabia without the Iranian scientists because Saudi Arabia wouldn't allow the Iranian to land in Saudi Arabia, so we had to truck across the Persian Gulf just to go pick him up. We came in pretty close. I don't know that we had a lot of formal radio traffic, but it was definitely a planned trip. They knew we were coming to meet him

offshore. They were bringing him out on a small boat. We weren't met with a small boat. We were met with either a fast frigate or some sort of small destroyer that was definitely bigger than us that came straight at us, not at ten and a half knots. They were doing thirty or more. We had to throw hard right rudder to avoid crashing. They were running small, fast boats up and down the coastline burning smoke to obscure the coastline, which is a defensive maneuver. But it was generally much more chaotic than it had to be. We simply needed to go over and pick up somebody. We got him, so that worked out. But it was as chaotic as it could possibly have been. Other experiences, no, I'd say I enjoyed – I was Sylvia Earle's life-support system for a couple of dives. Others might say that we were dive partners, but I don't think she ever turned back to look at me. [laughter] As working divers, we're used to holding hands and working very closely in low-visibility conditions and really paying attention. They drill into you in the NOAA safety and the diving safety program that you are looking out for each other. Dr. Earle just took off. She looked like Peter Pan, just flying away. I was one of those clumsy children trying to keep up with her. I carried her spare air tank, I guess. But those dives were interesting. We did some night diving, trying to catch the coral spawning. Those are just, yeah – seeing the reefs and the reefs at night, those were just really gorgeous, really beautiful memories.

MF: Absolutely. What can you tell me about the ports of call that the ship visited? Where did you call? What can you tell me about your experiences ashore?

JE: Muscat, Oman, I liked the best. They were really laid back. The town of Muscat is surrounded by hills, so it's reasonably compact. They had a nice souq, which is a market, an open-air marketplace right next to the port that was fun to walk through. Compared with my brother's experience – he was stuck in a field for six months in the same place; we got to see just a little bit of everything. We stopped in Qatar. We stopped in UAE [United Arab Emirates]. We stopped in Saudi a couple places, [and] Oman a couple of places. I'm probably forget – Bahrain. So, we got a nice tour of all different places. By and large, I think we had – except for Jeddah, we were able to get out and about. I had my mountain bike lashed to the top railing of the ship, and so I'd put on my spandex bicycling uniform, including a pink spandex shirt, and I went out riding around the town and out of town any chance I got to get some exercise. I felt comfortable doing that. I was probably an alien-looking presence there. I don't think there are a lot of bicycles or a lot of pink spandex. But that was my diplomacy. I would say I liked Muscat the best just for the navigability of the place. It was compact enough that you could find your way around and still see the ship and figure your way back. All the other places kind of blend together after that. Muscat was one of the first places we got to get out and look around. Lots of shawarma stands. Lots of souqs. Pakistani culture, I would say, was the dominant culture of the places we got to see. You could see the palaces on the hill. There were definitely folks running around in Rolls Royces. But I would say it was my impression that ninety to ninety-five percent of the population of every place we went was Pakistani workers. We [were] just immersed in further east culture.

MF: Interesting. Do any interactions with local residents, local people stand out to you in particular? What was your impression of the local attitudes, especially towards Americans in the wake of the Persian Gulf War?

JE: Yeah. I think being part of the ship's officer corps, we got – well, the captain was always getting invited off the ship to be wined and dined, or dined, at least. We were caught in the wake of that a few times, got to go to a few dinners in our dress whites. Very, very generous people. They liked entertaining. I'm left handed. I'm almost debilitatingly lefthanded, so I was always nervous trying to sit on my left hand and not use it to eat. But I think, culturally, they were comfortable with us being us and our curious ways, so I don't think we ran into any issues. Like I said, I was out riding my bike, so I caught a lot of curious stares. I did go up. I'm trying to remember the – there's a port on the south side of Oman. It has a big mountain and then a plateau into the empty quarter. I was determined to get my bike up over the ridge, so I got pretty far away from port, pretty far away from town, ran out of water. [laughter] I guess they were Bedouins or something like Bedouins, with camels, but didn't have any long, deep conversations with them, just passing through. I did make it up to the top of the hill, but just barely because I was definitely low on supplies. I had to turn around. There was a fair number of expats. I do remember interactions with expats, so people there for the oil industry. We learned about the – I think it's called the blue light notebook, some recipe for buying nonalcoholic beer and re-fermenting it to make it alcoholic beer again. I took up with the Hash House Harriers, I guess in, at least in Qatar, they called us out for a run through the desert. That was really enjoyable because we got out into the desert and did a bit of a wild goose chase type run that the Hash House Harriers do around the world, so that was fun. They ended up with a bonfire. They were excited to see new faces, so we were always welcomed, I guess, wherever we went. Because my dad's cousin lived in Bahrain, he invited me to dinner with him and his family, so I got a more intimate dinner with at least the men of the family because the women were in another room. I just remember the old man with the hair dyed shock red. That's my memory of it. [laughter] I don't know the significance of that. But if he was passing it off as natural, it wasn't working.

MF: So the project was a hundred days. You spent a hundred days in the region. And then, the ship transited back home. There was still the survey mission to be done. What can you tell me about the transit home?

JE: My only memory was we got to stop in the Azores on the way back. Strangely enough, there was another NOAA ship that had pulled in. They were at a pier far away from us, so we could see them, but we didn't necessarily interact with them. Just dialing back a bit, I think the cruise, the hundred days, was exciting just because there was always something different going on. We were heading to a different area. We were doing different work. Like I said, we did some fisheries trawls. We did a lot of diving to pick up samples off the bottom. We did physical oceanography with current meters. We did a lot of sampling, a lot of small boat work, a lot of shore work, so it was definitely exciting just because of all the different things we got to do. I'll mention another interaction with the locals. I'm not sure how it turned out. But somehow, at two o'clock in the morning, the ship ended up – stopped, all the lights on. We had tangled in props with a fishing dhow. So, these are small wooden boats. They don't show up on radar very well. They're just crawling in all the shallow areas of the Gulf. They try to stay away from the tankers because they're not that stupid. But our ship tended to go places that the tankers didn't, so we ended up interacting with them a lot more. Somehow, we got the nets. I don't know if they were fishing for us because I think we got away from them with a combination of machetes and cash. We hacked ourselves free, and we threw money at them. I don't know if they were, if that was their goal or whether it was just a complete accident, but it was odd how, during a

transit, we could get tangled in their nets. It still doesn't make sense to me. The Azores are nice. It's like Switzerland will be after global warming melts all the oceans. It was just little nice Swiss mountaintops surrounded by water. I thought the locals were crazy because I took a bike ride maybe twenty miles out to nowhere and then turned around and come back because that's about the only roads they have out there. I swear all the drivers were driving over a hundred miles an hour. It felt stupid how fast they were going. When I got back in town, I learned I was on the route of a Le Mans race, so they definitely were going well over a hundred miles an hour. But all of them missed me. Yeah, I liked the Azores. I'm still not sure, because of the bike trips, how many continents to check off. I'm claiming that the Azores are part of Africa, so I can say I rode my bike in Africa and Asia and Europe and North America.

MF: After the Azores, you headed back to the US. What was the first port you called upon your return? Was it Norfolk or somewhere else?

JE: Yeah, came into Norfolk. The Marine Center had hired a plane with a "welcome home" banner. I remember the deputy of the Marine Center hailing us on the radio with "Salaam alaikum," to which I was supposed to reply, "Alaikum salaam," but I flubbed it. I said, "Salaam alaikum" back to him. I'm trying to remember if that was the year we talked to the space shuttle as well. I believe it was because they were doing some overhead observations. I don't know the criticality of our talking with them, but we did get an exciting – because of the level of technology back then, we did have a satellite phone, which was new to us and exciting. A satellite phone rang on the bridge, and I picked up. It was the space shuttle calling, so I got to put the space shuttle on hold to go talk to a few scientists.

MF: Wow. Do you remember which shuttle it was?

JE: No.

MF: Wow, what a story, though. You returned to Norfolk. Was there any sort of culture shock or adjustment required to being back in the United States and back in a very familiar place after being in such a different place overseas for so long?

JE: I remember just a sense of exhaustion. [laughter] I'm not sure why. Let's see. I remember the totality of my experience I summed up back then as I'm so glad I did it once, and I'm glad I don't have to do it twice, that it was an interesting place. I think I was taken by the frustrations with just dealing with communicating through the cultural differences, particularly when it came to whether you can rely on supplies or not and just how inefficient everything seemed over there. I guess I come from an engineering mindset. I want to see facts and figures and as few and clean of them as I can. To them, everything is a story. Everything is full of color and fictions. [laughter] But I guess I've softened a bit, so I wouldn't mind going back, I suppose. It's probably a nicer place to visit if you're not trying to get things done, but I wouldn't say we necessarily had a culture shock. I do remember one of the junior members of the deck department, who are responsible for small-boat operations and ships' husbandry, painting, chipping, lots of unfun work – he had missed his girlfriend so much during the trip that he racked up lots of money in satellite phone bills, to the extent that I don't think he came back any richer than he had left. I remember that struck me as just a lot of waste of effort for him to leave his

girlfriend, miss her and, as a consequence, make the whole thing worthless. A good O. Henry story there. You mentioned security. I guess bringing on Captain Permenter probably wasn't an accident. He was a Vietnam vet, I believe, so he had experience working in chaotic situations. And I don't think we had any obvious change in posture. I think all the junior officers in the winter in-port will take an opportunity to go to Norfolk for rifle training to get a little ribbon and marksmanship training to get another little ribbon. But I don't think we did anything different than anyone else had ever done. But Captain Permenter, I do remember him coming up onto the bridge unannounced when we were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean – just unannounced, coming up and blasting away with a shotgun, something he liked to do, which kept you on your toes. Another story. When we were in one of the ports in Saudi Arabia, one of the guards got bored – the guards that are protecting Saudi Arabia from us – got bored and came aboard the ship and just started wandering around with his semiautomatic rifle in a safe but ready stance, just kind of peering around, smiling. Couldn't really speak any form of communication other than waving, so we ushered him off the ship. And captain told me – he was going away on one of these dinners, and he said, "If that guy comes back onboard, start the engines and leave." [laughter] He came back onboard. At that point, it was late enough at night; I was still deliberating whether to start the engines by the time the captain came back. I was a little disappointed with myself that I had not followed instructions to a T. But I think it was probably commensurate with the offense. And I think I was told afterward that that guard was a relative of somebody's and that he probably didn't belong there. But he got the job anyway, and he got punished as a result. I don't know anything beyond conjecture there. By the way, I'm wearing my cruise T-shirt, so it's got the Gulf – I'll call it the Persian Gulf – on the front. On the back, it's adventures of the oil crusade. It's got a picture of a junior officer who looks a lot like Lieutenant Jason Maddox. And he's saying, "Whip me, beat me, ROPME," ROPME being the acronym for the ROPME Sea. It's a little stained with bike grease and other things but still holding on after close to thirty years.

MF: Yeah. So after returning, after the ship returned to the US and everyone settled out, you eventually went back on normal work. Where did the ship head for its first project immediately afterward?

JE: Yeah, having a hard time piecing the timeline together because I know the cruise was only a hundred days, which for a NOAA ship is a rather light season. We usually do two hundred to 220 sea days a year. You don't just quit because there was still plenty of year left. I don't know. I guess we made it down to Mobile for shipyard to get ready for shallow water work, so bring the launches back on board. I don't remember when that field season started, so I don't think we had a lot of downtime. Like I said, I was getting ready to rotate off that year, but we started working off the Virginia Capes. I don't remember if we got anyplace before I headed out. Again, a lot of overtime work getting procedures spun up for doing launch hydro, something our sister ships did in an uninterrupted stance out West. The East was mostly chartered by then, so the *Mount Mitchell* had stood down from its job. But I don't think we – I guess we must have borrowed a lot of procedures from the *Rainier*, the *Mount Mitchell's* sister ship, who was still working up in Seattle at that point.

MF: You mentioned your T-shirt, the almost 30-year-old T-shirt from the cruise, which you do have on right now. Are there any other artifacts, souvenirs, things that you brought home,

physical things that you brought home from the cruise that stand out in your mind? Would you be interested in having them cataloged and documented at some time in the future?

JE: Sure. So let me think. I did buy – I bought some gold and frankincense and myrrh because I thought that was appropriate [and] brought those home for Christmas presents. I was not and still am not an expert in buying any kind of jewelry. But they have jewelry stores like we had 7-Elevens. They're basically everywhere, and they all look the same, and they all carry the same stuff, and all higher weight of gold; I think the sales pitch was not necessarily in the beauty of the piece but how much gold it contained, so twenty-four-carat gold. The workmanship I didn't think was all that great. I didn't have anybody I wanted to lavish jewelry on. But I remember some people coming back with these just garish chest plates full of something you would hang on a pharaoh only after they died kind of thing. I bought a – I think it's called a dashiki, so a white pajama-looking costume, I'll call it. I've never worn it, except perhaps as a costume. It's not that functional an outfit. Somewhere along the way, I had the top piece, the black rope, and the red and white checkered cloth. My apologies. I don't remember what they're called.

MF: The kofia?

JE: Yeah, that sounds right. I remember we, in one of the ports, we'd seen a lot of overturned rubble coral, including one which was a nice coral head of this finger-like coral that was pretty big, about four or five feet across, and brought that up. Somebody ended up with that underneath a coffee table. We brought a sea snake on board in a fishing trawl. One of the scientists had thought to catch it in his hands. I don't know if he dispatched it, or it was dispatched rather quickly after that because they're rather venomous. I have the tail of that somewhere in a drawer of knick knacks – sharks' teeth and manatee bones, things I picked up over the years but has not seen the light of day in a long time. I could possibly find that. I brought home a lamp, a small brass lamp, but nothing good ever came out of it. I polish it every once in a while. But yeah, I wouldn't say we had – we didn't have too many opportunities to go shopping. There was only so much room in a stateroom to bring things home, so I think that was the bulk of my shopping. But I do remember I enjoyed the shawarma stands. You definitely look for the shawarma stands where all the flames are running because if it's just one tepid little pilot light of a shawarma burner, that means that meat's probably been there for a week, and so better off to get the fresher stuff. Sorry, there was one more. Oh, computers, so I think the floodgates opened a bit as far as purchasing. The XO saw the opportunity to buy computers. Back then, I guess the IT security requirements were a lot less restrictive, so we just went into town with a blank check and wanted to buy a bunch of computers. And they were a little different in that they came with a keyboard that had lots of characters we weren't used to using. They came packed with pirated software, the entire hard drive. It was just assumed if you were buying a computer as an added service, they would just fill it with all sorts of software of dubious origin, so they all came loaded with all sorts of – it was everything – games and Microsoft and what have you, so we had to strip a lot of that stuff out to make room for the data.

MF: Wonderful. Is there anything else you'd like to tell, any other stories that stand out, any experiences, any impressions that you had that you might want for the record?

JE: I think if we got into a reunion-type situation, where we started throwing stories back and forth to each other, that I would come up with a hundred more. But I'd say the vignettes in my head, I think, have already come out this morning, so you've done a pretty good job. But Captain Permenter could probably have me going. I remember, at one point, we were supposed to – we were in a small boat. We were asked to go ashore on a small island in the middle of the Persian Gulf and collect some samples. We were approaching the island. It was a whaler, so we were going at a pretty good clip, a Boston Whaler, open boat. There was a lone resident of the island. As we got as close as we could so that we could see him, I think it was his job to stand on shore and to hold a gun over his head. We took that to be a sign that we weren't supposed to get much closer, so we abandoned that one. I do remember we ran another trip, we ran that whaler long enough that we were low on gas, and we were low on sunlight, and so we, out of a sense of caution, we shut down and just floated. The ship came over to pick us up and hauled us in just before sunset because, again, the ship moves a little slower than the whaler. We got as much science as we could get done that day. I remember one of the current meters – they were built with a charge on a – when you sent a signal down, it would decouple and float away from the anchor, and it wasn't doing that, so we devised a grappling hook, and we just started driving around in circles. And eventually, we grappled it. I guess we weren't – but then we had to go down and do a dive on it. That was an operation that – it wasn't a planned dive. It's something that we plan rather on the fly. And again, it was a low-light situation. And it was out in a deep water, open water channel type situation, working the proximity with the ship, so we had to get to the small boat that had the grappling line, work our way down the line with a larger line, tie off the equipment and then bring that over to the ship, so that was an interesting dive. We did recover that meter. That was good. I think somebody recovered a bunch of the meters for us because they were just completely unresponsive, and we couldn't pick them up on sonar or anything, so somebody may have come and cleared them while we were there. But I was just reading the ROPME website this morning that a lot of the stations that we had established are still being used for monitoring purposes, so that's good. The *Mount Mitchell* was the first one to set up a lot of these places. Like I say, probably a thousand stories in my head, and I think you've heard what I consider the good ones. But if I got on a call with Captain Permenter and some of the other folks, we would probably come up with many more. [laughter] If you want to hear great American music, go to any bar in the Persian Gulf. All the singers are Filipino, but they can play and sing spot-on replicas of US pop songs.

MF: All right. Well, I think, unless there's anything else you would like to share, I think that brings us to a conclusion. So thank you, Joe, for your time. Thank you for your service to the organization and to the country. Thank you for sharing the stories of this tremendous cruise and the tremendous project, and your experiences of it.

JE: You're very welcome.

MF: All right.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 1/17/2022

Reviewed by Joe Evjen 2/1/2022

Reviewed by Molly Graham 2/3/2022