Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Admiral Freddie Jeffries on June 27, 2024. This is a remote interview with Admiral Jeffries in Schertz, Texas, and I'm in Scarborough, Maine. I'm wondering, Admiral Jeffries, if you could just start at the beginning. Can you say when and where you were born?

Freddie Jeffries: I was born in Ripley, Tennessee. I was born April 12, 1939, more than eighty-five years ago, and grew up on a farm.

MG: Tell me a little bit about your people. I'm also curious to hear about the farm.

FJ: Okay. Well, my people, of course, were Black in the rural South, so things were hard back then. Being on the farm there's a thing on the farm that says you can never go hungry because you can grow your own food and produce your own stuff. So, that's what we did. We were subsistence farmers, more or less, working from year to year. We started off being sharecroppers, but then we moved on. Later on, my dad bought a farm when I was in high school. That kind of propelled me and made me think about higher things more than farming. I left there and left high school and went to college. That was a stepping stone to getting into the Coast and Geodetic Survey.

MG: How long had the original farm been in the family? How long had they been sharecroppers?

FJ: All their life, as far as I know. My dad bought a farm when I was like fourteen/fifteen years old.

MG: What kind of farm was it? Were there animals to tend to? What were your roles and responsibilities at the farm?

FJ: Yes, we had cows. We milked them every day to get milk, and we grew hogs. The main crop was cotton. Grew a lot of cotton and some corn to feed the animals with. That kind of farm. It was horse and mule farming back there then. We didn't have a tractor originally, but we later got one to go on the farm.

MG: You were born in Ripley. Were you raised in Ripley? Was the farm in Ripley?

FJ: Oh, yes. I lived in the same house until I went to college. We bought the farm that we were sharecropping on.

MG: Okay. Tell me a little bit about Ripley. What is it like there?

FJ: It's just a country town with a square and some stores around the square. It's a town of about four thousand/five thousand [in] population at that time. It's probably less now because people have left the farm. Now, Ripley's in a different county than the county that I lived in. We lived in Haywood County, but Ripley was the closest town. Brownsville is the county seat for Haywood. So, all my schooling was in Haywood County.

MG: I was also curious to ask you how you were named Freddie and where the name came from. Were you named after someone?

FJ: Well, that's my dad's name, so I was given the name Freddie. So, I'm like a junior almost. We got different middle initials, but that was my daddy's name.

MG: So it's a family name?

FJ: Yes.

MG: In the survey you sent me before our interview, you mentioned that you can only trace your family tree back to the 1880 census and that the 1880 Census records were burned. So, what do you know about your early family history?

FJ: Well, as I said, my wife did some research, and we can only go back to 1880 because of the records being burned. Before that, we were just coming out of slavery, so we don't know much about what went on prior to 1880. Except I know my great-grandfather on my mother's side was born a slave. He was born in slavery and grew up out of that.

MG: Can you tell me a little bit more about your grandparents? Did you know them?

FJ: Oh, yes. I knew my grandparents on both sides of the family. With my paternal grandparents, we kind of grew up on the farm with them, in a separate house but on the same farm. We were working with my paternal grandparents.

MG: Had they been alive during slavery?

FJ: No. They were born after slavery, in the 1870's.

MG: Did they ever tell you about that period, the Reconstruction period, and what that was like?

FJ: No. We were rural and country, country being the area outside the city limits, so got our news by word of mouth, so to speak. Not much about any of that.

MG: Where were your mother's people from? Where were her parents from?

FJ: They were all local.

MG: Have you ever discussed slavery as a family? I'm curious to know if it's impacted your life, your values, and how you think about history.

FJ: No, we didn't talk about that at all in my growing up. It wasn't even taught in school because Black people in my county couldn't vote when I was growing up.

MG: Why was that?

FJ: Well, most people were farmers and sharecroppers and they were told, point blank, "Hey, if you vote, you got to move." So, that started the Great Migration north. Haywood County didn't allow Black people to vote until after the Civil Rights Bill, the Voting Rights Bill. People didn't vote until 1965. in Haywood County, Tennessee.

MG: Did you know people who were moving north because of that disenfranchisement, or for other reasons?

FJ: Oh, yeah. I knew a lot of people who ended up moving north.

MG: Tell me a little bit about any other stories your grandparents or your parents shared with you about their childhoods.

FJ: Well, they were poor people like me, [who] didn't have much. My mother's family bought a farm in 1919. We still have that farm in the family. Any property was handed down from my grandparents on my mother's side. My dad's people grew up in a different town. They didn't bring much into the family.

MG: Do you know how your parents met?

FJ: Probably at church. We grew up in horse and buggy days in the late '30s, early '40s. Most people didn't have automobiles at the time, so the social events were church events. Sometimes, people would go to town and go to Ripley on Saturday nights. That was the social event. We'd go to the movies on Saturday night, theoretically, after farm work. But most people met in the community and at church, so it was a community-based thing.

MG: What kind of church did your family attend?

FJ: We were Baptist. We were Protestants. We went to the Baptist Church.

MG: Was that a big part of your upbringing?

FJ: Yes. Yeah. I've been in the church all my life because some of my earliest experiences were church experiences.

MG: Were they positive ones?

FJ: Yes. Very good.

MG: Good. Tell me, do you have siblings? What's the rest of your family like?

FJ: I'm one of twelve, so lots of siblings. I'm the second oldest in the family.

MG: Tell me about growing up with so many siblings and your relationships.

FJ: Well, we were a house divided, six on my side, six on the other side. So, if there were fights or squabbles, siblings would take sides immediately. My mother ruled the house and kept order and things like that. My dad was working in the field. We did not have a traditional school season. We got out of school early in the spring to pick strawberries and working the crops. After July 4th, we went back to school until Labor Day. We were in school from July 4th until Labor Day, and then we got out Labor Day to pick cotton. We were out until almost Thanksgiving, and then we'd go back to school again. So, we had a split season in the South back then.

MG: I also wanted to ask if your family was impacted by the Great Depression. I know they had a farm so they could grow their own food. Did they struggle during that time?

FJ: I think everybody struggled. We didn't talk much about that. But everybody was poor, so everybody was equal, and nobody could look down at anybody else, so to speak.

MG: Well, tell me a little bit about the schools you attended growing up.

FJ: Well, we went to Rosenwald schools, I think it is. [Editor's Note: The Rosenwald schools were educational facilities built between 1912 and 1932 to provide quality education to African American children in the rural South. Funded by philanthropist Julius Rosenwald and local communities and supported by Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Institute, over 5,000 schools were constructed. These schools significantly improved educational opportunities for African Americans during a time of severe segregation and inequality.] They were built by one of the rich folks who came back and built schools in the South. A little bit of history on that: I understood that they were all facing North and South because people were thinking about going north toward the North Star. I went to Currin elementary school whih was a community school and then to high school in Haywood County. We only had one high school in the county; that was in Brownsville. We were bused to the high school but had to walk to the local community – neighborhood school – elementary school.

MG: That was Carver High School.

FJ: No, Currin was elementary, and Carver was high school, in Brownsville, Tennessee.

MG: Carver High School has a really interesting history. It was originally the Freedmen's School for Blacks. I saw in its history that there was a Principal Jeffries, and I wasn't sure if there was a family connection.

FJ: We were distant relatives. We could never quite make the real connection. But my grandfather used to talk about Professor Jeffries, and I knew him personally. My first homeroom teacher was Mrs. Jeffries, his wife, so it was Jeffries, Jeffries. [laughter]

MG: We've been talking about a few towns; there was Ripley where you were born. The school was in Brownsville, Tennessee. I also kept seeing Nutbush in my research, too.

FJ: Nutbush is not really a town. Nutbush is a community that's three miles from my house, and that's the home of Tina Turner. Tina Turner lived closer to Nutbush than anywhere else. That's where Nutbush is located – two stores and a cotton gin. It's just like she described it in her song. We lived in the St. Luke Community. She lived in the Nutbush Community.

MG: I actually have the lyrics to "Nutbush" in front of me and watched her perform it as part of my research. You were family friends with Tina Turner.

FJ: Yes, we were. We rode the same bus to high school. We were friends. My sister was married to Tina's first cousin, my older sister. So, we've known each other all our lives basically.

MG: That's incredible. Tell me more. Her original name was Bullock, I think.

FJ: Yes. Her maiden name was Anna Mae Bullock. She was a good basketball player, quick, kind of like in her videos and movies. She was a year behind me in school, so I don't know what kind of student she was. I knew she could play basketball and sing.

MG: She was known as a singer back then.

FJ: Yes, she was always in the talent shows. We didn't know that she would make it big after she left the country – the country is the area outside the city limits – but she was always in the talent shows in high school.

MG: Did you know her sister, who was also fairly famous?

FJ: Yes, I did. I knew Alline, her sister. Her sister was older than she was and older than I am. Yes. I knew the family.

MG: Did you stay in touch with her throughout her career or follow her career?

FJ: Well, off and on. I would go to her shows when she'd come to towns where I was working. She didn't come to small towns like Brownsville or Ripley. The last time I talked to her was in San Francisco, California when she was starting again after she and Ike were breaking up. An interesting story. I went to her show in Oxnard, California, where I was stationed at Point Mugu. My future wife was with me. Tina saw me in the audience and invited me to her dressing room afterward. I went to the dressing room, and my future wife went there before I did and was holding the door, telling me I couldn't go in because those Ikettes didn't have any clothes on. [laughter] Tina was saying, "Come on in, homeboy." I said to Helen, "Hey, let me in. You're not married to me." [laughter] It's okay for me to see the Ikettes with no clothes on. [laughter]

MG: Well, how was the show?

FJ: It was a real good show. Yes, absolutely.

MG: Yeah, she was incredible. Did you score any points with your future wife that you knew Tina Turner so well that you could go backstage?

FJ: Well, she never liked Tina after that incident. [laughter]

MG: You come from an area where a lot of other blues musicians come from. It seems like a musical area. Hambone Willie Newbern and Sleepy John Estes were names I read about.

FJ: Yes, I see those names in the museum, but they were before my time. Yes, you see a lot of musicians out of the area. It's an area where there are a lot of musicians. Isaac Hayes grew up in the next county southwest of us, Tipton County, which abuts Haywood to the west.

MG: What do you think accounts for that?

FJ: I don't know. I guess it runs in some families. It didn't hit my family. We've got the Delta Museum, and they've got pictures and recordings of some of those people that you've mentioned – Sleepy John Estes and others.

MG: Is that music you enjoy, even if you can't play it yourself?

FJ: Oh, yeah. It's kind of like the old saying goes, "I can't play the piano, but I know music when I hear it."

MG: Before we talk about high school, tell me a little bit about your elementary school education. Do you have teachers who stand out to you, or do you remember other experiences?

FJ: Oh, yes. We had a two-room school. You went first through fourth in one room. And then you went fifth through eighth in the other. My fifth through eighth teacher, Mrs. Izora Bowers, was very important in my life. She encouraged me and taught me a lot, taught me most of what I know. I really appreciated her because when I got to high school, the kids started calling me smart because there was a lot of facts that I knew that others didn't appear to know. It wasn't real important then because we all thought that we would be farmers all our lives. My elementary school teacher encouraged me to study because she thought I was capable of succeeding in high school. Going to high school at that time was important. Most people didn't go because we didn't have a bus originally for transportation. About four years before I started high school, my dad got a job driving the bus. So, they started busing the "country" children to the high school. But before that, if you didn't have a relative in Brownsville, which was like sixteen, seventeen miles away, you couldn't go to high school because you had to have somebody in town to live with because of lack of transportation. That's what growing up in the western part of Tennessee was like.

MG: Did the Supreme Court decision, *Brown versus the Board of Education,* change things for you and your school or the busing?

FJ: No, we had the bus before *Brown v. Board of Education*. That happened when I was a senior in college. I was living down the hall in the dormitory from the first fellow who

graduated from the first integrated high school in Tennessee in 1957. His name was Bobby Cain. We lived in the same dormitory.

MG: This was in college?

FJ: In college, yes.

MG: What were your feelings about going to high school? Was that something you wanted to do? Would you have preferred to stay on the farm?

FJ: Oh, no. I preferred going to school. Picking cotton and working on the farm is something that you have to want to do. I didn't necessarily want to do it, but it was a necessity at that time. Every day in school was a day that I didn't have to work on the farm, except after school and before school. Working on the farm involved repairing fences, splitting wood, rounding up stray animals, and feeding them every day, in addition to the crops. There is never a holiday on the farm.

MG: And what about your siblings? Did they all attend high school?

FJ: Oh, yes. We all graduated from high school and college.

MG: Was there a special teacher in your high school experience or someone who also saw something in you and supported your education?

FJ: Oh, yes. My history and English teacher was very important. Miss Miller taught history and English. She was a very strict disciplinarian, but you couldn't play around and joke and jive in her class. You had to get to your lesson. Mrs. Jeffries and Professor Jeffries encouraged me and kept me involved in my studies. Professor Jeffries had retired from the school system and was the county extension agent.

MG: Were you involved in other activities in high school, such as clubs or sports?

FJ: No, nothing except intermural sports, the 4-H Club, and Future Farmers of America, which Professor Jeffries was the leader. I didn't play on the football team or basketball team. In fact, we didn't have a football team at that time. But we would play during recess. Certain classes would play against each other.

MG: What else stands out to you about this time in your life? Were you making friends? Did you start dating around this time period?

FJ: [laughter] Yes, I did. I started dating and made friends. I didn't have a car, so most girls were not interested in me. We didn't have a car in the family. Being out in the country, you got to catch a ride with somebody to go visit your girlfriend and even go to town on Saturdays and Sunday evenings. Those kinds of things. So, dating was a Wednesday night and weekend affair. Of course, then, you had to leave the girl's house at nine o'clock. Actually before dark,

theoretically in the summertime. It was interesting. It helped if your girlfriend attended school with you, but never in the same classes.

MG: How were you thinking about your next steps? Did you know you wanted to go to college?

FJ: No, I didn't. I didn't know I wanted to go to college until I was getting ready to go into my senior year of high school. I told my dad as he was giving me the reins to the mules early in the spring to go to the field. I had decided that I was going to catch him at a vulnerable time and tell him that he was going to have to buy me a car. I told him, "If you want me to help you make a crop this year, you're going to have to buy me a car," He said, "Well, that means you're going to have to drop out of high school and get yourself a job and buy your own car." Then he went into a lecture. I think I made a mistake. I told my mother first that I wanted a car, and she told me, "Oh, son, that's a big thing. You got to talk to your daddy about that." It took me two weeks to get my nerve up to talk to him. I did not know anything about "pillow talk" at that time. He had plenty of time to get his speech prepared. He pointed out the families who had cars in the community, and that's all they had. They didn't have anything else. They were sharecroppers like us. All they wanted was a car, and they had it. I told him, "All my friends got cars." He said, "Well, ride with them." He pointed out the various people that had cars, and that made sense to me. So, I grabbed the reins to the mules and left to go into the field trotting because he told me that he thought that I wanted to go to college and that he and my mother were going to try to send me. I could either have the car or go to college, so I chose going to college. He pointed out all my friends who had cars. Some had money and a car, but most didn't have money, but all they had was a car. That's as far as they wanted to go, was just to get a car. That's how I ended up at college.

MG: How did you get to college?

FJ: I, of course, caught a ride with somebody else. I got there and found out immediately that I was in over my head because I registered to go in engineering. The dean of the engineering school told us on the first day, "Hey, shake hands with the person on each side of you because next year, one of you won't be here. I decided that I would be there, but I found out immediately that my high did not prepare me for engineering. So, I studied hard, worked with friends, and was able to graduate in four years.

MG: What made you interested in engineering in the first place?

FJ: Well, my grandmother got the local newspaper, *The Commercial Appeal*, out of Memphis by mail every day. I started looking at who paid the most money. I originally wanted to be a doctor, but I knew that required much more schooling than anybody in my family could afford. So, I found out that people were hiring engineers. That was about the same time that the Interstate Highway System was being started. So, I chose engineering based on looking in the newspaper and seeing how much money they made per year – what the salaries were. So, I probably would have been a teacher had I not been reading the newspaper and looking at the articles [about] who was hiring and what was going on. By the time I graduated from Tennessee

State, a historically Black college, there were no Black engineers hired anywhere in the state of Tennessee. We knew that we were going to have to leave the state to get a job.

MG: Yeah, I wondered if you were worried that it would be harder to find a position as a person of color.

FJ: Well, yes. We knew that. Our professors told us in our classes that we were going to have to go to some other state to get a job because there was one engineering firm in Nashville. But other than that, the only engineers there were teachers. The industry was not hiring Black people at that time in the South.

MG: Did you ever get to meet a Black engineer in the field who could help share a little bit about their career path?

FJ: No, never, other than my instructors.

MG: Were you considering attending other schools other than Tennessee State University?

FJ: No, Tennessee State was the only school that was available to me. I could not attend UT [University of Tennessee] or any of the white schools because they were not integrated at the time. So, Tennessee State was the only school that was available to me. There was Fisk [University], but they didn't offer engineering – and schools like that. So, Tennessee State was the only engineering school basically. We had students from other states. The other states – Alabama, Georgia, Arkansas, Texas, Florida, and Mississippi –would pay the Black students to come to Tennessee State. They would pay them the same amount of money that they would have to pay to go to Ole Miss [University of Mississippi], LSU [Louisiana State University], and various other state schools. So they could come to TSU and study engineering. They were rich kids in the engineering school in our opinion. We Tennesseans were poor, but that's the way things were back then, so it didn't bother me any.

MG: Tell me again about your roommate. You said he had graduated from the first integrated school in Tennessee.

FJ: No, he was not my roommate. He was down the hall from me. His name was Bobby Cain. He went to Clinton High School in Clinton, Tennessee. Before that, they were busing him and the Black students in Clinton all the way to Knoxville, which was perhaps forty miles away. So, they integrated Clinton High School first. Bobby was the only senior in the class, as far as I know. He graduated the same year that I did – 1957 – from high school. We met in the dormitory at Tennessee State.

MG: What did he say about that experience, if anything?

FJ: Nothing. We knew that segregation was the law of the land at the time, so it didn't bother us. We just wanted to get an education. I had followed the stories in the newspaper because the Tennessee National Guard was sent to Clinton to remove the protestors.

MG: Can you tell me a little bit about the campus at Tennessee State University? I read that during this time period you attended, there was a lot of expansion taking place.

FJ: Oh, yes. I hardly recognize the place now. It expanded a lot since I left. It was expanding then, too, but not as fast as it did after I left. The University of Tennessee was trying to move into Nashville, and Tennessee State won a suit against them because they didn't need two state schools in the same town. Tennessee State ended up getting that money. I probably shouldn't be talking about that, but I read the newspaper articles. Tennessee State now has two campuses, and the football team plays in the Tennessee Titans stadium. I was reading that they're the only college team that plays their home games in a professional teams stadium. Now, we still have the hole that we played in. We play one or two games in the Tennessee State stadium, but most of the home games are downtown in the Titan stadium. I have recently seen articles that Tennessee State University is the most underfunded historically Black college in the country. Supposedly, they are owed more than two billion dollars.

MG: Did you play sports when you were in college?

FJ: No, I didn't play sports at all, but Tennesee State University was well-known for its teams. Many gold medals in the 1960 Olympics. I took all my time to try to get my degree. I had siblings behind me who wanted to go to school, too, so I couldn't tarry. They needed my financial support.

MG: You graduated with a degree in engineering?

FJ: Yes, civil engineering.

MG: What did you hope to do with that degree?

FJ: To work in engineering somewhere.

MG: I think I read in your survey that you had a job at the post office in your senior year of college. What was that like?

FJ: [laughter] Well, it was a Christmas job. It was part-time temporary. It was interesting. I learned a lot. I had a special chauffeur's license, which was a CDL [commercial driver's license] nowadays, because I could drive my dad's bus sometimes when I was at home. So, they gave me a job driving a mail truck, picking up mail; we called it "robbing the boxes." You're robbing the post office box, those blue boxes that you see. I would go out in the morning early, pick the mail up, bring it back, and deliver it to the downtown Nashville Post Office. So, that's what I was doing, basically at that. That lasted for two, three weeks at the most.

MG: Because it was a busy time.

FJ: Yes. Because it was Christmas season.

MG: What was that first summer after college like for you? How did you spend that time?

FJ: I went straight to work for the Coast and Geodetic Survey. I came to Washington. It was interesting. I didn't know anybody there. I spent my first week there at the YMCA. Then, found a place to live and moved out. It was all learning. They gave me a stack of manuals and books and things to read so that I could start doing my real job. I read those and started working and had excellent supervisors [and] excellent trainers. It was really interesting.

MG: How did you learn of the position in the first place?

FJ: I saw something about it in one of my books. Then, when I graduated, I applied to fill out an SF-171 form for government service, and I just sent it to Washington. Apparently, somebody saw it and offered me a position. That's how I ended up in the Survey.

MG: What was the position?

FJ: It was a civil engineering position. That was the job title: civil engineer. I was working in the Photogrammetry Division in the Coast and Geodetic Survey.

MG: What did you know about the Coast and Geodetic Survey before joining?

FJ: Just what I saw in the book. I saw a picture of a field party. One of my survey books had a picture of a field party and talked about what they were doing. So, that's how I found out about it.

MG: What were the manuals they gave you to read?

FJ: Oh, training manuals and job description manuals, those kinds of things. So, that's what I was reading, orientation material.

MG: Tell me a little bit about your supervisors and your relationships with them.

FJ: I've always had good supervisors. I've never had a supervisor that I didn't get along with because the saying that we have says, "I may not always be right, but I'm always the boss." I've always felt that way. The boss tells you to do something; my work background tells me he says do it, do it, and do the best you can.

MG: Who were your supervisors?

FJ: My first supervisor was Creighton DeMarr in the Photogrammetry Division there. He was my immediate supervisor. Then we had other people like Captain Mike Swanson, Larry's dad, who was the chief of the division. He was an interesting person. I got to know him a little bit after being there for a while. I didn't know about the Corps. I thought he was a naval officer. He used to talk to me about Larry because we were about the same age. He was in the Corps.

MG: What were the responsibilities of the Photogrammetry Division? What were you tasked to do?

FJ: Well, my task was checking the mathematical problems for airport surveys. We were doing airport surveys in my section. People in the field would go out and do the survey and would send their work back into the office, and all the math had to be checked and verified. So, I got my first assignment. I finished it. My supervisor said, "Well, you didn't initial it." I said, "Well, suppose something's wrong with it." He said, "Well, that's why you initial it; so we'll know who to hang." Right away, I learned before you put your initials on something, make sure it's absolutely right. That stuck with me throughout my whole career. Later on, I found out that the higher-ups would look for my initials when something came out. If my initials were on it, then they were okay with it.

MG: That must have given you some confidence that you were good at what you're doing.

FJ: Well, It took a while. It takes a lot of training. You have to study and try to keep up with the latest technology. I pass that on to the people that work for me – "Hey, when you do work, put your initial on it. Don't put your initial on it unless it's right because if it's wrong, I'm going to know it, and I'll come after you."

MG: This feels like a period of rapidly changing technology for the Coast and Geodetic Survey. I don't know if you can speak to that a little bit.

FJ: Well, we had in our section what I call the first computer that I know of. It was about the size of a room. We had one guy who worked on it. I forget names now because that was more than sixty years ago. But we would tell him what to do, and he would do it, and it would take all day. When I first started, we were doing the calculations with logarithms. That's the same year that they bought ten-digit "Frieden" calculators. So, we started doing the calculators. We've come a long way since then. The ten-digit calculators sitting on the desk were the latest thing that we had. I remember I had to move from one desk to the other, and I grabbed my ten-digit calculator and moved it. My boss scolded me and told me, "Hey, you can't do that. You got to wait for the man to come move it for you." Growing up in the country, we didn't have people to help us do things. We did everything ourselves. That was my first knowledge of people moving your calculator for you from desk to desk.

MG: Moving it was someone else's responsibility.

FJ: I didn't know it was somebody's responsibility at the time. When I changed chairs, I just grabbed my calculator and moved it. "No, no, you can't do that. You got to wait for" whoever it was to come down and lift that up and move it for you because that's his job.

MG: Were you ever trained on using the giant computer?

FJ: No. I was only in that section for about a year. Then I moved to a different section where I was using what we call the planographs, the stereotype instruments to do things with. I never got computer training in that section because we were doing the calculations manually.

MG: What was this thing you were working on in your second year with the Coast and Geodetic Survey? How did your job change?

FJ: I went into a different section. It was just reading aerial 3D photographs with the stereo instruments. We were doing that. After that, I went out into the field.

MG: What was that like? I think in your notes, you said you went from Maine to Florida. Was this an opportunity to see parts of the country you hadn't been to yet?

FJ: Well, in a way, yes, absolutely. But it was a part of the civil engineering curriculum. Early on, because things were segregated, they wanted me to change from civil engineering. Civil engineering paid a lot more than cartography. They wanted me to change to cartography so I wouldn't have to go out into the field and be subjected to the discrimination that they knew I would be faced with. I told you I had excellent supervisors. So, the head people started coming down and talking to me every day. My immediate supervisor asked me, "Why are they coming down here every day talking to you?" I told him, "They want me to change my job title." He said, "For what?" "Well, they want you to change to cartography?" He said, "I can't tell you what to do. But you think about it." He was shaking his head no! "You think about it long and hard before you agree to that." So, I thought about it long and hard and finally told the supervisor I was not going to change. So, they said, "Well, we got to send you out into the field because that's the requirement for being a civil engineer in the Coast and Geodetic Survey," So, I went out into the field.

MG: Did you encounter discrimination there?

FJ: Not from the government. When I went South, I had to use the "colored" bathrooms in places. I remember the last party that I was on before they made me supervisor. We were in Myrtle Beach in South Carolina. The boss made it known that he had talked to the people so I could use the men's room, where we had trailers and property and government trucks parked. I could use the men's room instead of the "colored" room because he had made special arrangements for me. The local people were amazed that a – quote – "colored" boy was doing stuff that the white boys were accustomed to doing. So, I encountered that in South Carolina and in Florida. But it was nothing. I'd just say, "Hey, the times are changing," and kept doing my job.

MG: Were there any other engineers of color in this department or that you were working with?

FJ: No. I've never worked with another Black engineer ever.

MG: How did that make you feel to have to have these accommodations and to have these conversations?

FJ: It didn't bother me. I grew up in the South, and I knew things were segregated. So, I was accustomed to that.

MG: Were there lessons in this for your colleagues to see how inconvenient and discriminatory these laws were?

FJ: Well, I think most of them understood because they were living in the South, too, and working South to North. We would work North in the summer and South in the winter. I could not live in the same hotels in the South that my colleagues lived in. For instance, in Myrtle Beach, they had commendations on the beach, and I was over behind the tracks, so to speak. What we call it – the other side of the tracks – over by the intercoastal waterway. That was not an issue. I needed a job and needed money. I wasn't facing discrimination in my work. My supervisors were always good and always kept me on the right path. They made sure that my peers were not discriminating against me. I was proud of that.

MG: I'm having a hard time imagining what this all looked like and felt like. It's a time we've evolved a little bit from, but not all the way.

FJ: Well, it's interesting. It didn't bother me because, as I said, the civil engineering degree paid more money. So, a lot of times, I was making the same amount of money as my supervisors because, a lot of times, they didn't have degrees. They had worked their way up. So, when they hired me, I got a letter saying that I would be a GS-5, seven, nine, and then I would compete from nine to fourteen. So, I felt like the road was clear. There were typically no engineers in front of me. So, I was always moving on and moving up. And I felt that way throughout my career.

MG: Good. Can you say more about the work you were doing in the field? What were you doing from Maine to Florida?

FJ: Well, doing surveys, I would go from airport to airport, and they would tell me which airport to go to and would write a letter to the airport manager and tell him that Mr. Jeffries and his survey party would be there at a certain time. I would be there. There were sometimes when Mr. Jeffries would show up, and there was shock on the airport manager's face, but they soon got over it. [laughter] Things like that. One manager told me, "Mr Jeffries is the white man in the car he's driving. You're messing with me." I convinced him that we were there to do the survey. They provided the office space and let his airport staff know that the survey crew was there and that we would do fine, and we did.

MG: How were you recruited into the Commissioned Corps? It wasn't the NOAA Corps yet.

FJ: They were closing down some of the field parties because we were funded through the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration]. So, my party was closed – did close – and they moved me back into the office in Portsmouth, Virginia. I was there working in the office and again, the boss started coming to me, talking, whispering to me. My immediate supervisor and some of the others started to ask me, "Why does he keep coming in here talking to you?" I found out later that I was sent to Portsmouth so I could teach the people there how to use those stereo instruments that I'd been using in Washington, the photographic instruments, but nobody told me that. The head boss, the division chief, set up training after hours to anybody who wanted to learn how to use his new instruments – it's a possible promotion, but the training was scheduled

at 7:00 PM. I guess I was supposed to teach them how to do it, but I didn't show. The next day, everybody was looking at me funny. "Where were you? Where were you at 7:00 last night?" I said, "I don't need to learn how to do the instruments. I already know how to do it." "Well, you were supposed to teach." "Well, somebody should have told me that." [laughter] After that, they started scheduling the training during the working hours. But the boss kept coming in, and what he was trying to do was get me to talk to the recruiter. The recruiter wanted to come over and talk to me because there were no Black people in the Corps, and I had the qualifications. So, I said, "I'm not interested in the Corps." I guess I played a hard bargain. But when peers started asking me, "Why is he coming in and talking to you?" I told them and [they said], "Well, go and talk to the recruiter, but tell the boss you want to drive his government car." I still had a government car assigned to me. But he drove a government car to work every day because he picked up the mail in Norfolk and brought it over to Portsmouth. I was actually in Portsmouth. So, he had a new government car, and I had a new personal car, too. I had a new car with air conditioning and stereo and everything that a young person needed at that time – more than I needed, actually. "Tell him that if he'll let you drive his car, then you'll go there and talk to the recruiter." So, I told him, "Well, if you let me drive your car, I'll go and talk to the recruiter." "Oh, yes. Yes, yes." So, I got in his car, and it was interesting. He pulled the car up to the front of the building. Everybody was looking at me getting in his car because nobody had ever driven his car before. It was one of the Chrysler Corporation cars with a shift on the dash that went up and down. I didn't know how to drive his car. He had to come back out and show me. Everybody was looking and laughing. [laughter] But then I went over and talked to the recruiter, and he started telling me about the Corps. Now, I had met some Corps officers because the party that I worked on in South Carolina had two Corps officers working there. My job was to train them how to do some airport surveys. Of course, nobody told me that then, either. When I was in South Carolina to do the airport survey, we had a much bigger party there doing shoreline work, but nobody on that party knew anything about airport surveys, so they sent me there. When the survey was complete, then they pulled me off the party and sent me off as chief of my own party.

MG: Sent you off to the NOAA Corps?

FJ: No. I was still a civil servant at that time, but I went down to Florida. My first job was in Gainesville and Orlando airports. I did that, and then it was summertime, so I went up to Upstate New York and into New England. The second year was when they shut the party down and moved me back to [the] Norfolk area. I was recruited to the Corps right out of the Portsmouth Office. I didn't have to move because the training was in Norfolk, right across the river.

MG: You said earlier that you, at first, didn't want to join the Corps. What were those initial feelings?

FJ: Well, I didn't because he wanted me to be an ensign. I told the recruiter, "Hey, quit wasting my time and your time because I will not come into the Corps as an ensign because it doesn't pay nearly as much as what I'm making as a civil servant." Somebody looked at the regulations, and the regulations said that you could get seventy-five percent of your time in grade if you were doing professional work. So, I came in as a full lieutenant. That was not a good thing for some people, but it was okay for me and for some people.

MG: What do you mean by that? How did you know it was not a good thing for some people?

FJ: Well, because people who were lieutenant JG [junior grade] and who were beneath you were not happy. Even though I was doing the same kind of work that they were doing, the numbers on the (linear list?) are precious. So, if somebody is one number senior to you, it means that you could have to say, "Yes, sir. No, sir" to them. [laughter]

MG: Were you aware that you were going to be the first Black member of the Commission Corps?

FJ: Oh, yes. Sure, I knew that. Yes.

MG: What were your feelings about that?

FJ: It didn't bother me. I was the first in everything I was doing.

MG: You were used to being first?

FJ: Yeah. The Corps, the organization, as far as I know, would always say that they would hire some if we could find some qualified. I think the word came up one time – "Well, what about Freddie?" – in one of those meetings. That's what sent them looking for me, so to speak.

MG: Was Harley Nygren the director of the Corps at this time?

FJ: No, an admiral named Admiral H. Arnold Karo was the director of the whole Coast and Geodetic Survey.

MG: Did you get to know Admiral Karo?

FJ: Yes, I knew him. I knew him from my early work because when you were out in the field, you had to send a telegram to him every week – it just went to the office; I'm sure it didn't go to him personally – telling him where you were and when you expected to move and those kinds of things. So, every Monday morning, I sent a telegram to Admiral Karo. I'm sure there was somebody on the staff that kept track of those kinds of things because they had to send mail to you, checks and all that kind of correspondence. So, we had to keep him informed.

MG: Did you do the Corps training?

FJ: Yes, I did. That's where I met Captain [Carl] Fisher and a whole bunch of my peers. They laugh at me now because there were two minorities in that class, and we both got tickets in Norfolk. The only two people with tickets. Fisher laughs and says I'm the only person they knew who could be driving in the middle of a convoy and get pulled out and get a ticket. I told the policemen kindly – my peers didn't like that. I was driving the government car, and there were six of us in the car that I was driving. They were giving the policeman a hard time and told him he was discriminating against me and that kind of stuff. So, I told them, "Hey, just shut up.

I'm used to this. When he starts swinging his baton, he's going to hit me and not you, so just let me do the talking." So, I told him, "Hey, I'll meet you in court," and I did. The judge threw the case out. So, that ended that. My classmates and the instructor all shook their heads in disbelief.

MG: Who was the other minority member of the Corps class that year?

FJ: A fellow named Robert Riviera. He was a Hispanic American. He also got a ticket.

MG: What was the training like?

FJ: I enjoyed it. I had already had a lot of training. They had given me the civil engineering training and that kind of stuff. It was interesting. Most of my peers had never been in a class with a Black person before. And I hadn't been in many classes with white guys. They were amazed that the stereotypes they had didn't exist in the class. They found out I could learn almost as quickly as they could. So, everything went fine. The training officer was always on his toes. In my class, we had a tanning contest, so everybody was tanning. I was going on nonchalantly. The day of the "tan-off," I just stood behind somebody in the circle and stuck my arm in the group. [laughter] Everybody started laughing, and the circle broke up. The training officer said he knew that I had been accepted when that happened. [laughter]

MG: Yeah, I imagine there were some social humps to get over in this period.

FJ: Well, it didn't bother me at all because I grew up in the South. As I said, my peers in the Corps were amazed because when I joined the Corps, being the first, news people were there – newspaper articles – and they were wondering what all the rigmarole was about. They were excited at first to know that they were joining something where there was somebody that the press was after and all the interviews and that kind of thing. Even interviewed the admiral and asked him why I was a lieutenant and the rest of the people were ensigns, and he told them I had had experience; I had worked for the organization for four years, so I was given time for the professional work that I had done and was doing.

MG: What was your first assignment after the training?

FJ: I went to an officer assignment on the ship *Surveyor*. Being a lieutenant, I was the fourth officer on the *Surveyor*. My duty assignment was to relieve the officer on duty [OOD] on the bridge and operate the engine order telegraph when the captain was maneuvering the ship.

MG: Before I ask you about the *Surveyor*, I just had another question. You mentioned that there was some fanfare around your presence in the Corps, and there was some press. When I went to research for this interview, I could find very little about you and your experience. So, I was curious if you kept any of those articles. I would love to scan them or read them.

FJ: Well, the Norfolk papers did the articles and, of course, the Black magazines and those kinds of things. To answer your question, no, I don't have any of them. When I went back to Norfolk as the admiral, they pulled up the original articles and those kinds of things to write their articles about the "first Black admiral" in NOAA taking command of AMC. There's nothing about me

during the training. Norfolk has no record of me being there. The judge threw out my speeding ticket record because the entire convoy was speeding. [laughter] So, I don't think you'll find anything about me in the area. I just kind of kept my head low and stayed quiet.

MG: Well, I'm glad we're getting this on the record today.

FJ: [laughter]

MG: Where was the *Surveyor's* homeport?

FJ: That was out of Seattle. It was, I guess, the biggest ship we had at the time. I didn't want to leave Norfolk. I wanted to be in Norfolk because I had a sweetie there. But going out to Seattle, I think that was the best thing because the ship was big enough that it could integrate its complement of officers into the Corps. That's the middle of the grade, so you got people below you and people above you. A smaller ship would not have been able to do that because I would not have known what to do, and a lieutenant starting from the bottom up would have had much more ship experience than I had.

MG: Yeah, that's something I meant to ask you about, too. Was ship handling, rules of the road, and those kinds of things new to you in your training?

FJ: That was taught in the training class. We were not taught ship handling, but it is taught to new people now. So, when we all went to our various ship assignments, we knew the rules of the road. We didn't know anything about ship handling and that kind of thing. I found out later that most of the people didn't know anything about ship handling because it was something that you had to learn from the captain who let you handle his ship and the captains didn't want you handling their ship. On the *Surveyor*, my job had me on the bridge for all maneuvers, so I learned by looking. They want to do that themselves. I later on, on another ship, got a captain, George Poor, who was an excellent ship handler and later became a pilot. He didn't mind me handling his ship. He taught all of the officers and me ship handling and taught us well, I think.

MG: Up to this point, had you spent much time on the water or on boats?

FJ: Oh, no, not at that time. I grew up in the middle of the country, so we didn't have water around us. My only experience on boats was when I worked on the last field party that I was on with a large group of people. We were doing shoreline work, so I did a lot of boat work then but not ship work. You had a small boat, and you'd go up and down the coast during your work there. That was when I was sent to Myrtle Beach in South Carolina to do that airport survey that, unbeknownst to me, I didn't know that I was sent there to do that.

MG: Can you say more about what the purpose of those airport surveys was?

FJ: Well, we made the nautical charts and the airport charts. Each airport has runways, and they had to be surveyed and measured because you have to have an elevation, an azimuth, and a distance. Those numbers on the runway mean something; it means that's the direction that the runway is aligned. For example, a runway with eighteen on one end and thirty-six on the other

means the runway is aligned north/south. So, you have to measure those with the theodolites accurately. You have to measure the distances and chart the obstructions around the airport. Anything that's a foot above the runway, even lights along the runway, are obstructions. You had to survey all of those. You had to survey the trees out at the end of the runway, the buildings, and all those natural and manmade features. You've got a cone that the airplane takes off on, kind of like a salad bowl, and you have to survey that cone all the way around and locate all the obstructions in that circle of responsibility, for lack of another word, around the airport. So, that's what the surveys were for.

MG: What year was it that you finished your training and started on the *Surveyor*?

FJ: That was 1965. That's the year that I joined the Corps.

MG: How did you get out to Seattle?

FJ: I drove. I had my own car.

MG: Did you go with anybody?

FJ: No. Two of my classmates went to the *Surveyor*, but they went separately. Because I had advanced standing, I had some leave that I could use. Now, they came in as deck officers, so they were commissioned after the training. I got my commission on the first day of class, so I was earning leave. I had, I think, three days of leave that I could use along the route, plus travel time. I had about a week to get to Seattle. They had to go straight to Seattle because they didn't have any leave. They went on, and they got there before I did.

MG: Well, I'm just so interested even on this cross-country trip. Tell me what you saw and what it was like.

FJ: Well, I had been traveling before then. As I said, during the airport surveys, we surveyed in the North during the summer and in the Southern states during the winter, so I was used to traveling, so driving across the country was no big issue. One of my classmates, Capt. Smith, told me, "Don't get gas when you first enter a city because you're hauling that weight across." He's no longer with us. "But you're hauling that weight all the way across town." That made sense to me. On the trip out there, I ran out of gas twice because when you get out West, you see the signs up – "Last gas for 150 miles," but you see a sign that says that there's a town fifty miles away. My thought was certainly, if there's a town there, they've got to have some gas. Well, you drive ten miles out, and then the sign points you out across the field, across the desert somewhere to the nearest town. The first time I ran out, I ran out a mile before an exit. So, I put my car in neutral and coasted all the way down there. I was out in Wyoming. There was no stop sign at the bottom of the exit, so I kept going. It was a cattle gap – a cattle gate thing. I didn't stop, so I coasted around and drove right into a grocery store that had a gas pump. I went in, and the lady said, "Well, I didn't hear you drive up." [laughter] I said, "Well, I didn't literally drive up, but I need to get some gas." The next time I ran out, I ran through Yakima, Washington. I figured out that you don't know the last gas station unless you know the town. The classmate that told me about being out West, didn't tell me how I would know the last gas station. So, I ran

out just before getting to Seattle. Some people stopped and took me to the nearest gas station. I bought some gas and made it on to the next place.

MG: Good thing you had a little extra time to spare.

FJ: Well, it didn't take long. I was only stranded for a couple of minutes before somebody came along and stopped. That's the thing about out West; I liked that they would stop and help you anytime they saw you along the road. That's the thing about the Western states because towns are few and far between.

MG: Well, this was also the era of hitchhiking. People use hitchhiking as a means of transportation.

FJ: Well, I used my thumb to stop somebody. [laughter] They stopped and took me back to town so I could get some gas. My friends used to tell me that I was the luckiest guy in the world because of a lot of incidents like that – just lucky. Coming from the Baptist Church, I have to say blessed.

MG: Blessed that you found the right kind of help?

FJ: Yeah, blessed that – my whole career, so to speak, because I can't think of many bad things that happened in my life at all. Most things were good and good experiences.

MG: That's good. Did you ever pick up any hitchhikers?

FJ: I have along the road. Sure, absolutely. I've picked up a few people, people in uniform mostly.

MG: Yeah, this was the pre-Vietnam War era. Were you picking up people who were on their way to Vietnam or on their way to training?

FJ: No, people who were on leave. Sailors get liberty, and soldiers get what they call a weekend pass. The travel distances vary, but you must be able to get back to your duty station in one day. They're trying to go somewhere. Because you have to be back at a certain time, they're along the road hitchhiking. I would always pick them. I wouldn't pass them by.

MG: Any other stories from this trip?

FJ: Not from my first trip. When I got to Seattle, there were two fellows waiting for me. They were two well-known Lieutenant JGs, and they were going to let me know that I was not going to be senior to them. I will not name them. I let them know that my instructor told me that JG was lower than a full Lieutenant. I was not having any of their bull. We remained friends and golf partners long after retirement until one of them passed away. They both worked for me later in our careers.

MG: I think it helps if you stand up to people who are trying to bully you and let them know that you're not going to stand for it.

FJ: Well, I did, and it worked out just fine.

MG: What were your accommodations in Seattle? Did you stay aboard the *Surveyor*?

FJ: Yes, I stayed aboard the ship the whole time. I was single, so I did not seek accommodations ashore, although I don't think I would have had trouble finding accommodations. I was senior enough that I had a single room on the ship. The only time I ever had a roommate was when we had extra people – usually scientists – going out, and they would fill all the rooms up. The younger officers would have roommates – the ensigns and JGs. I would be the last person to get a roommate becuase the rooms were assigned by rank, and all of the rooms on the upper deck were singles for the senior officers.

MG: What was the *Surveyor's* purview? Where were you surveying?

FJ: Well, we went surveying the Pacific Ocean, all the way, I would say, from Hawaii to the Aleutian Islands was what we would usually run. But we also had some stops at some of the islands that we've never heard of before, like Palmyra, Christmas, and Fanning Island, those kinds of places where we would have to deliver mail and some minor supplies. Those were Pacific Island people. Another young officer was on the ship, an ensign named Mel Asato, who was Hawaiian. The executive officer would always send Mel and me to deliver the mail because Mel's hair looked like theirs, and my skin looked like theirs. So, we were friendly and always got a friendly reception.

MG: Who directed you to do that?

FJ: The captain ultimately, but the executive officer and operations officer made the day-to-day assignments on the ships.

MG: Was Harley Nygren on that ship with you? Did you work under him then?

FJ: Yes. He was on there, eventually, but not at first. On that ship, I sailed with four people who made admiral, and Harley was one of them.

MG: Wow. Well, tell me a little bit more about that experience. There were a number of pictures of you on the Surveyor that I found online – taking a sun sight on the bow of the ship.

FJ: Well, in the Pacific, and I guess the Atlantic, too, because Captain Fisher told me that it was his duty aboard one of the ships that he was on. In the Pacific, you don't have control – when I say control, I mean things like – well, control on the highway would be a street sign that says, "Broad and Main." You don't have those in the ocean. [laughter] You get out to places that are desolate, and you got to take sun lines and star shots for navigation, pretty much like Columbus did when he bumped into America. Theoretically, we knew where we were headed and what we'd run into. It turned out that my shots – because of my experience being on the survey

parties – were more accurate than my peers. The captain designated me, in addition to my regular duties, collateral duty, getting up in the morning at twilight and in the evening at twilight to take the star shots and the sun shots at noon. So, my day was all broken up into eight hours of regular work plus these three assignments to do the star shots in the morning, the evening, and at noontime. So, that's what we're doing. We needed those to navigate because our LORAN was not reliable. We were making nautical charts and charting. So, that's what we use for what I call control or fixes. Control was to let you know where you are. That's what those were all about. The captain, as I said, was not Harley; that was a captain named Sobieralski. He would do the computations. I would just do the shots and turn them over to him. He would do the computations and plot to where we were when. That was one of my collateral duties. We used those positions to correct our "dead reckoning" lines.

MG: Did you have a land assignment after the *Surveyor*?

FJ: Yes, I did. I was assigned to Point Mugu, the Navy base in California. Their job was developing and perfecting missiles for all the services and then developing the specific missiles that they needed. Missiles were shot and recovered, and they needed accurate geodetic positions so that they could know where the missiles were going. The thing was down there, if you don't know where you're shooting from, you don't know where you're going to land. We had the Pacific Missile Range. I was assigned, as chief, special projects party, and liaison officer, to go up and down the range and survey places there. I had a party of surveyors that went with me to various places along the Pacific Missile Range, out to Hawaii, Kwajalein Island, and various other places where the missiles would land. They would shoot them in California, and they would land out there. They were checking accuracy that way.

MG: Was this in support of the war in Vietnam?

FJ: Ma'am, all of that was – the Navy was developing the missiles for everything, all wars and those kinds of things. That's what that was for. All the other services used the missiles, but the Navy was developing, testing, and perfecting them at that time. This work was top secret and required special clearances to gain access to the range.

MG: Interesting. How did you find this work? Was it enjoyable? Challenging?

FJ: Extremely. I enjoyed all of my assignments. I laugh now and say that I never had a supervisor chew me out theoretically. As I said, I got along with everybody. That was really enjoyable work, being in California and traveling up and down the West [inaudible] and the western part of the Pacific, again, islands that I had never heard of at the time.

MG: Yeah. What was it like to travel to these faraway places?

FJ: It was interesting. I enjoyed it. I was going there to work, and that's what I did. Most places that I went to, I would take the first day and drive around and see what was going on there. Those islands were small, so you didn't have to do much driving. Hawaii, I had been to many times but hadn't been to some of the islands that I had to go to on my second assignment. The *Surveyor* worked out in Hawaii a lot. Then, when I got to my land assignment, I went to

different islands, like Kauai, the Big Island, and O'ahu, and went to Hilo. In fact. I've been to all the islands that you can go to theoretically, either on ships or on that assignment.

MG: I might have my dates wrong, but wasn't there a large tsunami in Hawaii in '64?

FJ: Yeah. I was a civilian at that time. That's right. There was a large [tsunami] that hit the big island in '64. On the *Surveyor*, we were doing surveys off the big island part-time because the lava was flowing, and we were out surveying in the ocean to see how far the lava was flowing out there. That was one of our projects during that time.

MG: Interesting. I was curious if people were still rebuilding from the tsunami.

FJ: Oh, yeah. In fact, they're still rebuilding. That's a big tourist area now. Of course, they had the fires out there last year. [Editor's note: In August 2023, Hawaii experienced devastating wildfires, with Lahaina on Maui being particularly hard hit. Fueled by drought and strong winds from a passing hurricane, the fires spread rapidly, causing significant loss of life and property.] They're still rebuilding.

MG: Admiral Jeffries, we've been talking for an hour and a half. Do you want to take a break or keep going? How are you doing?

FJ: I'm all set, ma'am. We can keep going.

MG: You mentioned earlier that while you were at Point Mugu, you saw the Tina Turner concert with your future wife. Is this where you met your future wife?

FJ: Yeah, I met her when I was at Point Mugu. I got promoted at Point Mugu. We have what we call a wetting-down party. I only knew the people that I worked with and one or two other people at the time because I reported out there in November, but I went straight to Hawaii. I got back to Point Mugu in December. My promotion date was January 1st. One of the guys in the Navy who was there and who worked close with my group was invited to the party. He was married. He said, "I've got some friends. Is it okay if I bring them?" I said, "Sure." He brought some friends, his wife, and two other ladies. One of them turned out to be Helen, my future wife. So, I met her at my wetting-down party. I always told her that she crashed my party and was not invited. [laughter] She could never live that down.

MG: Well, good thing she did crash the party.

FJ: I think so. Right.

MG: Tell me a little bit about her, her name, and her background.

FJ: Her name at the time was Helen Ginn, G-I-N-N. She was a teacher and had been teaching there for a couple of years in Oxnard, which is where Point Mugu is. She was originally from Pennsylvania. She could trace their history back much more than I did because her great-grandmother was a white lady. She could trace a history back to Ireland or somewhere, but I

didn't follow that much. When I went to ICAF, there was a fellow there whose name was Ginn. I got to know him well, and I asked him where he was from. Turns out, their families were from the same place, same plantation, but looked different, of course. [laughter] He told me that he knew he had Black relatives.

MG: Oh, interesting. When did you get married to Helen?

FJ: We got married in 1971.

MG: A few years later?

FJ: Yes. I met her and left California. Went to graduate school at the University of Michigan. After I graduated from there, we got married in January, the next year, after I graduated in the spring.

MG: Was your education at the University of Michigan an assignment with the Corps?

FJ: Yes. They paid for my education at the University of Michigan.

MG: Well, tell me a little bit about that. How did you choose Michigan? What did you study?

FJ: I studied Geodetic Engineerig and Geodesy, and Michigan was one of the schools that offered the program that I wanted. Ohio State was also offering that, but all my peers went to Ohio State, and nobody had gone to Michigan. I didn't know about the competition between schools at the time, but I chose Michigan because I had friends who lived in Michigan. I didn't have any friends who lived in Ohio, so I figured I'd be closer to my friends. It turned out that I could have gone to either school and would have been probably equal distance from my friends.

MG: How did you deal with the cold weather in Michigan?

FJ: It was rough at first. I shouldn't say this, but I reported there on January 2, 1969 without a winter coat – coming from Seattle and California. [laughter] My girlfriend in California was amazed when I told her, "Hey, I'm up here, and I don't even have a winter coat." She sent me a coat immediately. I learned to cope with it.

MG: What years were you in Michigan?

FJ: January 1969 to April 1970.

MG: Tell me a little bit about your graduate school experience.

FJ: It was interesting. Michigan was almost as segregated as the Corps. [laughter] I found out after I got there that they were almost lily-white because they didn't accept many students from Detroit. A student from Detroit had to go to the state school, which was Michigan State. There were a handful of Black people there in teh graduate program. It was interesting. I enjoyed my experience there because there were more Black ladies there than Black men. So, it was good. I

found out that going to school – it's an assignment, but you have to make your grades. As long as you make your grades, everything's fine. So, you get the school holidays off and all those kinds of things. I enjoyed going to school and did go back later for two more degrees at other schools.

MG: When was that?

FJ: In 1983, I went to ICAF [Industrial College of the Armed Forces]; that's the senior service school. Associated with that, you could take extra classes and get a degree from George Washington. So, I got a degree from ICAF and also from George Washington University.

MG: Wow. Was studying geodesy a way to help you advance in your career with the NOAA Corps?

FJ: I think so. Looking back, people who did get advanced degrees did better than the ones who didn't. So, I think that was helpful. Being the devil that I am, I asked my detailer, "Why do I get a chance to go to school all the time?" She said, "I'm going to make sure you go to school until you learn some sense." So, every time a school opportunity came up, I jumped on it. There were some doubters among the senior officers when I joined the corps because I was a graduate of a "historically Black school." Ad she had heard the rumbling and grumblig and wanted to prove them wrong.

MG: Oh, good.

FJ: I think that helped.

MG: It was around this time, when you were in Michigan, that ESSA [Environmental Science Services Administration] became NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration]. Was that significant?

FJ: The Coast and Geodetic Survey became ESSA at the same time I joined the Corps. Just within a few weeks, the Coast and Geodetic Survey became ESSA. Then, in 1970, I guess it was, it became NOAA. It didn't make a difference. My job title and description didn't change. I was still doing the same thing, so it didn't matter what the name was. I was back in Rockville when the name changed, when it became NOAA.

MG: That was for another land assignment.

FJ: Yes. After school, they immediately sent me back to the Washington area to work in geodesy since my degree was in geodesy at the time.

MG: Can you talk a little bit more about that? Where were you in the organization, and what were you doing?

FJ: I was in the office, again, checking the work from the people who were out in the field, doing those surveys. That was the office assignment that I got assigned to after school.

MG: Who was the director of the Corps at that time?

FJ: I believe it was Admiral Powell. I'm not sure. But I think it was Admiral Powell.

MG: Tell me a little bit about how your career unfolded from there.

FJ: Well, I got married during that assignment. [laughter] We had our oldest daughter. Then, two years later, I got reassigned to sea, so went back to Seattle, and I was executive officer on the ship *McArthur*. That's where I really cut my ship-handling teeth because I walked aboard the *McArthur,* and the JGs were handling the ship. We moved from one side of Seattle into the locks where our base was. The captain was sitting in his chair, smoking a cigar, and didn't say a thing to the ship handlers. I had never had that experience before because I was on the *Surveyor,* and the captain or a pilot always docked the *Surveyor* and it was always an adventure. So, there I was, executive officer who was in charge if the captain gets sick or falls overboard – whatever. And I had no ship-handling experience. When we got ready to leave Seattle, I tapped the captain on the shoulder. I said, "Cap, I think I want to take it out." He looked at me, said, "What the hell?" and went back and sat in his chair. I've been handling other people's ships ever since then. So, I took it out. I was amazed. We went through the locks. When I turned it over to the JGs after the locks, they looked at me and said, "You know, you're a good ship handler." I didn't dare tell them it was my first experience.

MG: You're very brave. Aren't the locks fairly narrow and the harbor there congested?

FJ: But my job called for me to be the man in charge after the captain. So, you couldn't do it yesterday, so you may as well do it today. That's always been my experience.

MG: What kind of ship was the *McArthur*?

FJ: It was a Class III. It was surveying. We did the tide and current surveys and a little bit of nautical charting that year. It was interesting. The captain's wife was sick off and on during that year. I ended up being the acting CO [commanding officer] more than half the time that I was on there. Then, during the winter break, they assigned me to another ship, the *Fairweather*.

MG: The *Fairweather* went up to Alaska, right?

FJ: We all went to Alaska, ma'am. All the West Coast ships would go to Alaska during the summer. I understand that *Fairweather* is permanently based in Ketchikan now.

MG: Tell me a little bit about your time on the *Fairweather*.

FJ: I spent two and a half years there, and it was an interesting time. I don't say much about it. I did a lot of work on the *Fairweather* because I knew ship handling and I knew how to be the captain and all that stuff. I was frequently called on to do those duties.

MG: At that point, were more minority officers joining the Corps?

FJ: No. At that time, there were three Black officers in the corps. At that time, the Corps required you to have an engineering degree or a degree in the "hard sciences." I tell people all the time all the generals want Black people with engineering degrees: General Motors, General Dynamics General of the Army, the Air Force, Marine Corps, General Electric, and everybody else. The money is not comparable. That's why I told the recruiter when he was after me, "Hey, I'm not going to take a cut in pay to go into the Corps, so go find somebody else." So, that's why they, I think, gave me credit for time served.

MG: While you were on the *Fairweather*, I was thinking your family must have missed you a lot at this point. You had been out to sea for so many years.

FJ: Well, on those ships, we would go to sea during the summer, perhaps from April to November and be in-port at seattle for repairs and maintenance for the next season. But most times, most of the ships would have what we call a midseason break. So, we'd come back into Seattle for perhaps two weeks during the summer. It was later on when the big ships would go out in the spring, like the *Oceanographer* that I later served on, would not have a midseason break in Seattle because we'd be out in the South Pacific somewhere or in Alaska. Other than that, you were gone for three and a half, maybe four months, and then you'd be back at home for a couple of weeks. So, that's how that worked.
MG: Did your family move out then to Seattle?

FJ: Oh, yes. My family moved. I always caught up with them or they caught up to me. They didn't always move when I moved, but they would move. My last sea assignment, I was on the *Oceanographer*, and my wife came out and bought a house about six months before I was getting ready to get transferred off. So, I got transferred off and went back to Washington. It was a year and a half before she came back there because we had a daughter graduating from high school, and she wanted to graduate from the same high school. She stayed out there until our daughter graduated. My wife and the rest of the family moved back to Maryland, and my daughter went on to college. So, my daughter, theoretically, never lived in the house that we bought in Washington for my last Washington assignment.

MG: Did your wife continue to teach as a profession?

FJ: She taught off and on. After all the kids got old enough to go to school, she started going back to teaching. Then, she moved into different positions. She was the director of drug education in Maryland. So, she got out of teaching but into the administrative part of the education system.

MG: How long were you on the *Fairweather* for? Until what year?

FJ: I think I left the *Fairweather* in '75, I believe. I can't remember exactly, but I left the *Fairweather* and went to another liaison assignment at Fort Sill in Oklahoma with the Army.

MG: Remind me where Fort Sill is.

FJ: Fort Sill's in Lawton, Oklahoma, about seventy miles south of Oklahoma City.

MG: What was your assignment there?

FJ: It was pretty much like the assignment at Point Mugu. The Army needed somebody to teach them surveying because they needed to know the positions for the big guns, and they would fire them. At Fort Sill, you could hear the guns firing over the base half the night sometimes because they had the East Range and the West Range, and they would shoot the guns on the East Range. We were living in the center, and you'd hear the guns, the cannon balls flying over, and you could see the streaks going to the West Range. So, they needed to know if I'm here and pointed in this direction where will it land? So, that was my position, to help them locate certain places to shoot the big guns from and to. This was for practice and training purposes.

MG: Interesting. Was there a large NOAA Corps presence there, and how did you integrate with the Army folks?

FJ: No, it was just me. I worked in a division that did those surveys for the field artillery, so it was my job to help train them and go with them from time to time and make sure that they were doing the job right. But mostly, it was an office job and liaison duties. I was responsible for coordinating training activities with other foreign liaison officers and the Weather Service in NOAA. Fort Sill is in the heart of "tornado alley."

MG: At this point in your career, were you enjoying your career path? Did you ever think about getting out of the Corps and doing something different?

FJ: [laughter] Well, yes, I thought about getting out, but they kept giving me more responsible positions and kept promoting me. I look back at my civilian peers. We used to compare what we called our green things. You'd get checks, and they were green, like a punch card. We would compare our green things, and mine was always a little bit bigger than theirs. So, I kept staying on. My attitude was: if I get an assignment that I don't like, then I'm going to get out. But I never got an assignment that I didn't like because they were more responsible and more responsibility. For instance, when I did move to the *Fairweather*, that was a larger ship with different duties. That's the way I felt about it. The captain's "night orders" specified that I be called after midnight for any command decisions. I had never encountered that before, so I wondered what would happen if a special situation arose at 11:30? Two days later, I got my answer. I was called to the bridge to help him.

MG: Was there work you preferred to do over other work?

FJ: I don't know. I enjoyed everything. I would tell my COs I needed two weeks to learn the job because frequently, I would go to jobs, and they would be vacant, so I had no overlap with anybody else, so I didn't know what it was I was supposed to do. I'd say, "Hey, give me two weeks to learn my job, and then hold me responsible after that." That's what I did. Look at the directions and the instructions and find out where the skeletons were in the closets. I learned some of the people, and it worked.

MG: Admiral Jeffries, do you mind if we take just a two-minute break?

FJ: Sure, absolutely. Go ahead.

MG: I'm going to pause the recording, and I'll be right back.

FJ: Okay.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

MG: What was next for you after Fort Sill? Who was giving you your assignments?

FJ: The NOAA Corps personnel office, that's in Rockville. They do the assignments based on guidance from the personnel board. We got an assignment board that meets probably once a month. They look at people who are due to transfer. They pick the assignments based on your "dream sheet" that you're best suited for, [which] is the way it should work, I think.

MG: What was next for you?

FJ: After Fort Sill, I went back to a ship. I went back as CO of the *McArthur*. I was the Captain. Of course, having had previous experience on there, I guess they gave me rough duty, so to speak. We surveyed Glacier Bay and Icy Bay in Alaska and San Francisco Bay. There are icebergs in Glacier Bay and Icy Bay in Alaska. Currents are strong in San Francisco. So, I had a small ship down there, working in the bay with heavy traffic and strong currents, and shallow despair.

MG: It was a challenge.

FJ: It was a challenge. I think the average depth of San Francisco Bay is about three feet, so you got to stay in the channels and those kinds of things. But we had small boats that would go out and put the current meters into the areas where they needed to be if they were outside the channels that the ship could navigate in.

MG: Does anything stand out to you about the second time on the *McArthur*?

FJ: I enjoyed it. The duties were different. I was the real CO and not the acting CO most of the time. My experience as XO [executive officer] suited me for being CO because I knew the people. I knew the work, and the CO did not keep secretes from me. I knew the issues. It was interesting. I thoroughly enjoyed it. Hated to leave, but after a certain time, then they move you on to something else.

MG: What was the something else for you after the *McArthur*?

FJ: After the McArthur, I went to PMC as Chief of Operations in Seattle.

MG: At the PMC [Pacific Marine Center].

FJ: PMC. I was chief of operations, and I really enjoyed that assignment. I got a chance to work for the admiral, that most people couldn't get along with.

MG: Who was that? Can you say?

FJ: I hate to name names. I had met him and his family on a flight from Kansas City to Denver when we were both junior officers. I was in uniform, and he introduced himself. We got along fine. I walked in and told him I needed two weeks to learn my job because, again, the people in front of me had retired, both the civilian and the officer who I was replacing. He agreed that I could have some time to learn my job, and I did. I told him that I had heard from the people beneath me that nobody could do anything right for him. I told him, "Hey, I do things right, and if it's not right, tell me, and I'll get it right." So, he did. He started trusting me, and we got along fine.

MG: Chief of Operations at PMC sounds like a big job. What did it entail?

FJ: Well, you were in charge of ship operations and in charge of the electronics division and the marine engineering division. The chief of operations was the person that the ship captains talked to when they needed something. Frequently, they need things, and you have to go up and talk to the admiral about it. I remember one time when the *Oceanographer* was laid up. I found out that I was the Captain-in-Charge of the *Oceanographer*, even though I was chief of operations. So, that was a part of operations, and I found out about that through the back door. One of the other ships needed a piece of equipment off the *Oceanographer*, and when it was laid up, the edict was made that nothing would come off that ship. A captain told me, "I need this equipment so I can do my job." So, I went up to the admiral's office and told the admiral, "Admiral, I know what you said. I know you said no equipment comes off the *Oceanographer*. But I want that captain to have that equipment. Do I give it to him with your blessings, or do we make a midnight acquisition?" "Well, what's a midnight acquisition?" "Well, when you leave here, he and I go over there and get the equipment off there and put it on that ship. And you find out about it later. That's a midnight acquisition." [laughter] He said, "Well, yeah, go ahead, let him have it." So, that was a funny thing that happened. Everybody knew that he wasn't going to get that equipment, but I told the admiral, "I want him to have it. Do we give it to him with your blessings, or do we make a midnight acquisition?"

MG: I'm going to have to borrow that term. I like that.

FJ: Apparently, he hadn't heard of that term before. But he asked me, "What is a midnight acquisition?" I told him. He said, "Yeah, let them have it."

MG: What else about that role stands out to you?

FJ: Well, I enjoyed it. As I said, I got a lot more responsibility, I think, than the others before me or even after me because I went there with the attitude that, I guess, I didn't know what to expect because I knew the characters involved. We did well.

MG: Were you also overseeing fleet schedules, where the ships were going, and who was on them?

FJ: Yes, yes. Yes. That's what the operations officer does; he oversees that and oversees where they're going, the projects, and makes sure that they're equipped for the projects. That's why I had to tell the admiral we were going to make a midnight acquisition if he didn't agree to let that equipment go peacefully. I was also responsible for coordinating with the Civilian Personnel Office to provide suitable candidates to fill vacancies in the crew.

MG: How long were you in this role for?

FJ: For about two years. I don't remember exactly. My assignments, except for ship assignments, were typically shorter than most. I almost always had to move with assignments. This was the first assignment where I changed jobs without having to relocate. I did cross the pier from the *McArthur* to the *Fairweather*.

MG: How did you take to that? I'm someone who really likes my feet firmly on the ground and for whom change and moving don't come easily. Did you mind moving around so much?

FJ: Not really. It was okay until my kids started getting into high school, and then they started making friends with other Corps kids. On my next to last move, this particular admiral that I'm talking about, I had to go and talk to him because he wanted me to stay longer. I had the impression that he didn't want me to come there when I came, and I told him so. But he wanted me to stay on. I told him, "Admiral, that's been my legacy. Nobody ever wanted me, but nobody wanted me to leave. So, I've got to go." "Well, you're not loyal." "Well, yes, I am. My kids are old enough; now, they're asking questions. They see their friends and Corps members' children in the same classes with them, and they're asking me, 'How come we have to move all the time, and our friends don't move?'" I said, "Pretty soon, I'm going to have to start answering that. I move because you all are trying to make the Corps look like it's got Black officers everywhere" – is the real reason. But that didn't bother me because every assignment had more responsibility. I figured, "Hey, I'm going to learn something new, and the kids can make friends anywhere they go, and they still do now, even though they're grown."

MG: Tell me about how your family developed. How many children do you have? When were they born?

FJ: I had five children. My son died about seven years ago. He got caught up in this fentanyl thing.

MG: I am so sorry, Admiral Jeffries.

FJ: Died of a drug overdose. Now, I've got four daughters, and they're all professional girls. I've got two engineers, an oral surgeon, and a psychologist. The surgeon and psychologist have their offices with the Jeffries name on the door.

MG: That's incredible.

FJ: So, they're doing well.

MG: It's always a good sign when your children follow in your footsteps. That means you set a good example.

FJ: Well, I tried to get some of them to join the Corps – those generals were after them, so they went private and worked in the industry.

MG: I'm always struck by how difficult joining the Corps must be for mothers, having to move so much and be away from children for so long. It can't be an easy path.

FJ: Well, I don't know about that now. When I retired, they were just starting to take women into the Corps. They were all single, theoretically. Now, a few got married, but I don't think any of them had children by the time I got out. The first lady who joined the Corps was with me on the *Fairweather*. She had spent a year on the *Oceanographer*.

MG: Pam Chelgren.

FJ: Yes, ma'am. They transferred Pam to the *Fairweather*.

MG: Tell me about working with Pam. Was there any kind of kinship with you both being "firsts" in the Corps?

FJ: [laughter] Well, ma'am, Pam was different. She was the first and didn't mind you knowing it. She had a reputation, and I'm sure if you talk to her at all, you will know about it. It's funny. My wife invited Phil, the fellow that I relieved at Point Mugu. She knew him. We were in Seattle, and his ship came in. The *Oceanographer* came in, and she invited Phil to dinner at our house. He asked her if he could bring a date. She said, "Sure." His date was Pam. She was a perfect lady. None of the stuff that we heard came out during the dinner engagement. Then, the next morning, she was to report to the *Fairweather*. We arrived at the gangplank at the same time, and I motioned her to go ahead of me, and she did. "Women first." We got to the quarter-deck. I opened the door for her, and she walked through, turned around, looked at me, and said something derogatory. I told her, "Come back out! Come back out!" [laughter] We had a little session right there before she even reported aboard. I told her, "You go in, and you report to the captain. Then, you come straight back to my office." So, we had our session, first session, and we got along fine after that.

MG: Good. I'm glad you worked out the kinks.

FJ: [laughter] Well, my management training told me that you handle deviant behavior the minute you see it. So, when she walked through the door, turned around, and didn't say "thank you," but said something different, I had her come back outside, and we're going to try this again.

MG: That story makes me think you must be a really good parent, too, because that's what good parents do; they nip that behavior in the bud, and they do it with firm respect.

FJ: [laughter] She and I laugh about that now, even. We talk to each other two or three times a year and laugh about our first meeting. I said, "When you stepped aboard the ship, you weren't the lady that you were the night before." She just said, "Well, I have to find my proper linear position. I had to see what I could get away with." That's what I find a whole lot of people do: start off trying to see what they could get away with, and when they find out that they can't do what they used to do, can't do what they did on the ship before them, then things work out just fine.

MG: Well, I'm glad you found some commonality.

FJ: Yeah. No, no, it worked fine. I told her that I had gone through the same experience that she was trying to go through and I would help her in any way I could. She had an issue down in California because a lady reporter came aboard the *Fairweather* to interview her and follow her on her daily work. I had briefed her the night before and told her, "Pam, anything you say is on the record. If you can't read it in the newspaper, then don't say it." So, the lady got through the interview and told Pam, "Off the record, what do you really think about those men on the ship?" And she told her. [laughter] She came to me the next day with a newspaper, crying and going on, "They really said it. She told me it was off the record." I said, "Well, lady, what did I tell you the night before? I told you anything you say is on the record." [laughter] We got over that, and everything was okay. She talked about us being male chauvinist pigs and all that kind of stuff. It wasn't really true, but she had to say that to maintain her image.

MG: Remind me, after your time as Chief Operations Officer, what was next for you?

FJ: I went to the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. So, back to school again.

MG: Oh, tell me about that.

FJ: It's the best year of your life. You're there with the movers and shakers, and all the other services, and all the other – well, not all, but most of the other civilian agencies where they're training people to be SES's [Senior Executive Service]. They didn't tell me this at the time, but that's where people go to get trained to be admirals and generals. It's called senior service school. I found out about that during my time as chief of operations because we used to get the *Navy Times* and *Army Times*, and I would sit there and read them sometimes. I saw where they had this school where they trained people and had a golf course going right through the campus. So, you had a good time. You played golf after school, you got training, and could end up with another degree if you were successful there. I went there. I actually applied for it. My detailer, again, told me, "You don't have enough sense yet. I told you we'll send you to school until you learn some sense." So, away I went.

MG: Was being an admiral a goal for you?

FJ: Ma'am, I never thought I'd be anything. I came in at a time when things were segregated, so I never got into the admiral's office. I figured if I kept my nose clean and did well, I'd probably make O-6. I did that and kept doing my job, I guess. So, they kept me in. I really intended to get out early and become a pilot like one of my captains did. The captain that taught me ship handling became a pilot and was handling ships, the big ships that come in and out, tankers and those kinds of things. That's where the money is. In fact, I had lunch with him about two years ago. He told me, "I thought you were going to be a pilot." I told him, "They kept promoting me and kept moving me. I took some courses, but never was in one long place long enough to get my license." So, he shook his head. He told me he thought I would be good. I could handle ships real well. He thought I'd be good as a pilot. I told him, "I tried, but every time I'd get started, they'd move me."

MG: If you could rewind the clock, would you have gone out and into the private sector?

FJ: I don't think so. My attitude was, hey, if they give me something I don't like and somebody makes me mad enough, I'm going to leave. But nobody ever did that.

MG: After this additional year of education, what did you do next?

FJ: I came back into the office in Rockville as executive officer in the Office of Oceans and Marine Assessments under Dr. John Hayes, and that, too, was a good assignment. He was an excellent supervisor. This was the first time that I had worked directly for a political appointee. He kept telling me all the time, "Hey, when I get through with you, you're going to be an admiral." It kind of went over my head and on and on, and I didn't think much of it. After two years of that – I had a lot of administrative duties I had to do. In that office, it was kind of political. I had to write a whole bunch of congressional letters, had to respond to all those kinds of things and make sure that the administrative work was done well. He was a political appointee. So, he was more into the politics of things, and I was into the operations. Then, after about two years there, the admiral that most people could not get along with called me down to his office. I went down there, and he told me he wanted me to go out and be the CO of the *Oceanographer* – bring it out of mothballs. I told him I'd heard that Phil – Phil was the guy that I relieved at Point Mugu. I heard that Phil was going to get that assignment. I'd be happy to go to the *Oceanographer* after Phil left. Well, he said, "Phil's not going. Phil's going to retire. So, I want you to go." [laughter] He said, "I see you looking at that ship every time you come down to my office." There was a model of the *Oceanographer* in his office. As I said, I had been de facto CO of it when it was sitting there in mothballs because anything that needed to be done, I had to make sure we got it done. "I see you looking at that ship every time you come to my office. So, why don't you go out there and bring it out of mothballs?" "Well, I need to think about it, admiral, because I'm an O-6, and I can't go any higher. So, if I leave you mad, who cares?" [laughter] So, I thought about it for a while and then decided to go out and bring the ship out of mothballs. So, I did that. That, too, was an excellent assignment because I, at that time, thought I was a good ship handler, but that ship handled so good – handled just like a golf cart, as far as I'm concerned. So, I was able to train all the young officers. But the thing is, you get a new crew. So, what they would do is give you members from certain other ships, similar ships, and people don't give you their best people. They send you their losers if they can. [laughter] So, there I was, starting the ship with the whole bunch of people who would rather stay where they

were. Now, some of the people were good. Some of the people were excellent – outstanding. A few came becuase they had sailed with me before. A lot of them got outstanding performance ratings at the end of the first year. But some I had to let go before we even sailed because they weren't up to, quote, "my standards." But we sailed on time and had a good time.

MG: Why was the *Oceanographer* in mothballs in the first place?

FJ: Because of budgetary reasons. Well, of course, everything NOAA does is funded by Congress and the administration, and sometimes you have good budget years; sometimes, you have lean years. When you have a lean year, you have to end up laying up a ship. Every year, you defer maintenance because you don't get enough funding to maintain all operations. So, we went through a lot of that. So, the [*Oceanographer*] was mothballed because they didn't have funds for it. During the time when he wanted me to go back after they got some special projects, they were able to fund it.

MG: What was the *Oceanographer's* purview? I forget if that was on the East Coast or West Coast?

FJ: She was on the West Coast out of Seattle. All of my sailing was out of Seattle. The *Oceanographer* was a Class I ship and was considered the queen of the fleet. At the time she was "laid up," she was considered "the admiral maker." She had taken that role away from the *Surveyor*.

MG: About what year was this?

FJ: I went to the [*Oceanographer*] in, I believe, 1985. January of 1985 and was there for two years. Then [John] Callahan relieved me, and I never looked back at what happened to her after that, except newspaper articles where she was laid up again.

MG: What was your experience on the *Oceanographer*?

FJ: I enjoyed it. When you're CO, you've got your own cabin. The cabin for the [*Oceanographer*] was almost like an apartment. You had like a one-bedroom apartment on the [*Oceanographer*], whereas on the other ships, you were cramped into a room. And it rode well. It was a good riding ship and did duty in the South Pacific for the most part, except we went up to Alaska my last year aboard. We went up to the ice in the north. We had a project up there. For about a month on a Fisheries and Marine Mammals Research study program. We did some follow-up studies that the *Miller Freeman* had normally done.

MG: Was the *Oceanographer* a hydrographic vessel?

FJ: She was strictly deep-sea surveys. We were doing currents and weather and that kind of work along the equator and other places down in the South Seas. So, it took me places like Australia, Peru, and Ecuador, places like that. We would in-port in those places. We had an emergency stop in Samoa and an in-port in Tahiti.

MG: What stands out to you about that time and those travels?

FJ: I enjoyed it. We got to see Tahiti and Samoa and those places that, if you never see again, it'll be a day too soon because they're basically third-world countries. I enjoyed Australia. It's big. I didn't particularly like that culture because they treated the Aboriginals like America treated Black people back in the '40s. When the ship pulled in, there was a big newspaper article showing a picture of me as a captain, so the Aboriginal people would come there and stand outside the ship, trying to get a glimpse of me. I would have an open house. "Come on in. Come on. Come to the cabin and have coffee." My crew knew that every day if a crowd came, I'd open the ship up for open house, so the officers and crew would give tours through the scientific labs and working areas as needed.

MG: What impact do you think that had on the communities you were visiting?

FJ: I don't know. We were just there for a short time, like two weeks. I couldn't see. But I found out after the fact that if you're American, no matter what color you are, you're considered a white man down there. So, I was treated differently than the local people who looked like me. The town we went into was Townsville, which was about fifty or sixty thousand people, so everybody saw the newspaper article, and everybody knew me. So, I could go to the golf courses and to the restaurants and things, and everything was just fine.

MG: Were there things that the crew on the ship did to celebrate crossing the equator?

FJ: Yeah, we always had equator-crossing ceremonies. We had the ceremony for the equator and the hemisphere, the Golden Dragon ceremony where you're in yesterday, today, and tomorrow at the same time. We had that ceremony where the date changes and time changes. Then, you change from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere. Those were always big celebrations, and then you do the ceremony after the ceremony we had on the fantail.

MG: What about officer and crew behavior on the ships? Did everybody get along and do what they should?

FJ: Oh, yeah, we didn't have any problems as far as I know. If there were people who didn't get along among the crew, the executive officer's duty is to straighten that out immediately because you can't have people fighting and hating each other out in the middle of the ocean because you can't put them off. They can't walk on water, I don't think. Crew members are fine. Everything's fine. You typically don't have to lock your doors because nobody's going to steal your belongings because where are they going to put it. Ship life, to me, is an excellent life.

MG: How long were you on the *Oceanographer* until?

FJ: I was on there for two years. I got off in January '87.

MG: Where did you go next?

FJ: I went to the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research (OAR). I was the executive director there. Dr. Fletcher was in charge at that time. He just, in my opinion, turned the office over to me because, again, he was a political appointee. He told me his job was political. My job was to run the office. Admiral [Francis D.] Moran, at the time, was director of the Corps. When I got there – I had known Admiral Moran from my *Fairweather* days. I met him in Hawaii on my first trip on the *Fairweather*. He was the director of the Corps. So, I went down, and I was going to raise hell with him – "How come I got to move every time I change assignments?" After listening to me and me raising hell with him for a while, he said, "Well, you look at the people that you're replacing." He said, "I used to be down in that office." He said, "The guy that you replaced is an admiral." I had told him the guy that I relieved three assignments ago was still in the assignment that he was in. He was a captain, too. He said, "Maybe you're going somewhere, and they ain't going nowhere." I said, "Admiral, you need to put that in writing somewhere so your successor could see that. You're moving me around everywhere. Maybe I'm going somewhere. Maybe those other people aren't." He looked at me and laughed [inaudible]. But he was right down the hall from where I was. So, that's why I ended up giving him a hard time my first day. So, I thoroughly enjoyed the assignment because, as I said, Dr. Fletcher told me what my mission was over there. So, I ran the office. That office had, at that time, oversaw twelve scientific labs. Now, you mentioned PMEL [Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory]. Well, PMEL is under that office. I had to write the performance report for the director of the PMEL and the other eleven labs, all SES'ers. So, they would come to me for issues and problems they had. They would give me a call, and I would help them solve their issues.

MG: What would be an example of a problem?

FJ: Well, I'd frequently have personnel problems at one office, and I'm not going to name the office. I had one guy who had been using excessive government money for his job. His job was to fly from place to place. I'll mention the lab. It was the sun lab out of Boulder. His job was to move from place to place and do sun surveys and various things. But he was extremely obese, and they had been buying two tickets for him. [laughter] I don't remember his name. I told him, "Hey, the government only pays for one ticket. So, if you got to have two tickets to sit on the airplane, then you've got to buy the other one." So, that was a problem. That's one problem that I had to solve. They would come to me with those kinds of things. They knew that the government shouldn't be buying two tickets for one person. My issue was – I'm not going to tell you to lose weight. I'm not going to tell you anything like that. I'm going to tell you, you're going to have to buy your own extra ticket.

MG: I wonder if that was incentive enough to lose the weight.

FJ: No, I didn't care whether he lost weight or not, as long as he did his job. But we would buy one ticket. The government was going to pay for one ticket. If he needed two seats, then he was going to have to pay for the other seat. That was an issue that came to me immediately. Again, my thing of solving deviant behavior the minute I see it, I solved it, and I never heard from that again. So, those are the kinds of problems that you do. Then, of course, the labs are always underfunded. So, they're always calling me about funding. "Can you find some money

somewhere and defer it over here to my office so that I can do this project or that project?" So, you're busy trying to do that all the time because you want people to be able to do their job.

MG: Right. I also wanted to ask how the promotions worked. How did that process work?

FJ: Well, it's like the other services pretty much. You need time and grade, and you need to be performing as well as or better than your peers. Otherwise, you will get jumped over, skipped, passed over. That's how they worked. You get a performance rating at every job you go to; at least, you get a performance rating every year. On that rating, you can indicate what you want to do next and what you would like your next assignment to be. I never specified an assignment. I just said, "Something with more responsibility." I guess my detailer and the people in the reassignment office would figure out something with more responsibility and put me in it. [laughter]

MG: Were you in Seattle when the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill happened?

FJ: Let's see. No, I wasn't. That's the year my daughter graduated from high school in Seattle, and she had an Exxon scholarship. She was worried about how that was going to affect her scholarship. I told her, "Exxon has plenty of money, so it won't affect your scholarship." I was back in Washington at the time. That's the daughter who never lived in the house that we bought in Maryland because when my wife moved back from Seattle. My daughter went straight up to Rensselaer [Polytechnic Institute] to go to engineering school.

MG: We're getting into the late '80s and early '90s. I'm just curious if you can say how your career with the Corps wound down.

FJ: Yeah. I had that assignment at OAR [Oceanic and Atmospheric Research]. We had our family reunion. We have a Jeffries family reunion in July. "I'll be going to that in two weeks." We had that family reunion in Germany. We went over. My sister's husband was in the Air Force, so we went to Germany for the family reunion. Everybody asks me, "How'd you end up with a family reunion in Germany?" I said, "Well, have you ever heard of the Black Forest?" [laughter] So, it gets a big laugh. At any rate, I got a phone call from Admiral Moran. I wasn't there to take the phone call, but he told my sister [to] have him call him back. Calls from Germany are extremely expensive. So, I could never get him because we had a time difference. Every time I'd call his office, he'd be out or not available. I came back to my regular job. One of the secretaries, after two or three days, told me, "You act like you don't know you're going to be an admiral." [laughter] Well, I didn't know, but I figured a call from Admiral Moran when I was on leave meant something. I said, "What are you talking about?" She said, "Well, you know you're going to get promoted." I said, "No, I didn't." At any rate, that's how I found out I was going to be an admiral, and I got promoted. I went over to Admiral [Sigmund] Petersen's office as deputy director of the Office of Marine and Aviation Operations. I was over there for three months. Then, they reassigned me to Norfolk [as] the director of the [Atlantic] Marine Center. I was there for four years. After four years, I retired because I had thirty years of service. That's the retirement ceiling. Your pay and retirement benefits top out at thirty years of service. Young people start looking at you after thirty years and say, "You need to retire." We used to give Admiral Nygren a hard time all the time, telling him he didn't have the decency to

retire and let somebody else have a number. Because if an admiral retires, everybody all the way down the line gets a promotion. We would give him a hard time because I had known him from the *Surveyor* days, my early days, my first ship assignment. He came there as XO and moved up to CO when Admiral Taylor left. That was the ship where I served under four people who made admiral. I could give him a hard time. We played golf together and everything. He started me playing golf while I was at Fort Sill. I called him and wanted to talk to him about something, but he was out. His secretary told me he was out in a meeting. She said, "Well, you know him. I can tell you where he is. He's on the golf course." [laughter] So, the next day, I was giving him a hard time about being on the golf course. I said, "How did he think we felt to have to be out there trudging along in the mud while he played golf." He told me, "Freddie, my boy, if you ever want to be anything anywhere, you need to know how to play golf." So, I said, "I hear you, boss, I hear you." So, I went out the next day and got myself some golf clubs and some golf equipement. I started trying to play golf after that. So, after getting back in the areas where he was, I would always challenge him to a golf game. The last game we played, I beat him. So, I was satisfied. [laughter]

MG: How did you feel when you made Admiral? What was that like for you personally and professionally?

FJ: It was good. As I said, I never thought I'd make admiral. I knew I was doing as well as my peers. But still, the thing is, if there's going to be a promotion, they're going to get it, not me. So, to find out that I was chosen was good. Another first. I went on into it with good thoughts and good feelings.

MG: I'm looking at a picture of you and Commander Evelyn Fields, and I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your relationship with her.

FJ: Well, we've known each other basically since she came into the Corps. I still contact her [and] talk to her from time to time. We never served together. I think that, at one time, she was the director of the personnel office. I was chairman of the personnel board, a collateral duty. So, we would be in meetings together. That's my only contact with her profesionally. She came out and was CO of the *McArthu*r that I had been on. The *McArthur* had, in fact, two Black COs. I asked the powers that be, "Why'd you put her on the *McArthur* as opposed to one of the other ships?" They couldn't tell me, but I knew what the reason was. I kind of greased the path for her and that people aboard were used to working with a Black person. She came to Seattle. There are now, but back when I first went there, there wasn't a handful of Black people in Seattle. So, again, I say that the Corps was trying to look more integrated than we were.

MG: How do you think the Corps is doing with diversity today?

FJ: Well, ma'am, when I saw the Corps in my rearview mirror, I didn't look back; I looked forward. So, I don't know.

MG: You retired in 1994?

FJ: 1995.

MG: Okay. This was a tricky time for the NOAA Corps. There was the threat of elimination taking place.

FJ: Well, I was in Norfolk. I was isolated from the political discussions that goes on in Washington. I know they were talking about closing the base then and moving it somewhere else. They did eventually move some of it to Charleston, I understand, at least a part of it. But that was after my time. We put one ship down there in Charleston, South Carolina, when I was director of the Marine Center. I went down to Charleston for that. They were talking about moving the base over to Newport News. That was a big thing that went on during my four years there in Norfolk. But when I left, I've only visited Norfolk once since I left in 1995.

MG: Was Norfolk where you reconnected and worked with Captain Fisher?

FJ: Yeah, we had been on different coasts for sea assignments. He had one assignment in Seattle. There were four members of our class who were left in the Corps by the time we all made captain. We all had commands that were going to be in Seattle. One captain, who was moving the ship from Norfolk to Seattle, didn't get there before I left because he had engine problems all along the way through the Panama Canal and everywhere. So, he didn't get there. I left before he got there. We were going to have a picture of the four remaining members of the eighteenth officer training class, all with commands in Seattle at the same time. I was CO of the [*Oceanographer*]. Carl was the CO of the *Rainer*. Glen Schaeffer was CO of the *Fairweather*. And Fidel Smith was bringing the *Mount Mitchell* around to be in Seattle and moving it to Seattle from Norfolk. I left in January. He was still trying to get issues solved along the way there somewhere on the West Coast when I left, so we [weren't] all physically there in Seattle at the same time. But we were in command of the "heavies," so to speak, the big ships. Then, Carl came back East. We were in Washington at the same time but in different locations. When I went back as admiral, Carl came down as my deputy when my original deputy retired.

MG: Is there anything else you want to say about your career with the Corps? You mentioned in your paperwork that you were a trailblazer for so many reasons.

FJ: I enjoyed it. I was able to have a good time because I had good supervisors. Everybody I had treated me fairly, I think, at least in my opinion. I learned a lot from everyone that I had contact with. I learned something from everybody. I mentioned the six admirals that I was assigned to ships with; I learned something different from every one of them. They weren't admirals when we were aboard ship, but they went on to become admirals. I enjoyed that. I found out that they all had one thing in common: they would talk to you. They would speak to you and treat you well, and that's a common factor of every admiral and general that I've known so far.

MG: What has supporting NOAA's mission meant to you, environmental stewardship, charting, and all of it?

FJ: That's glorious. Coming off a farm and being involved in something that big has meant the world to me. It expanded my thinking, my education, my views of life and people – everything.

I think I'm alive today because of my work in the Corps. All my original peers are gone, my non-NOAA peers.

MG: What do you mean? How do you think it's contributed to your long life?

FJ: Well, that good fresh salt air and the sea, for one thing. The fact that I was able to move around and learn about different places, different people, different things. You go to different countries. You try different food. You experience different cultures. It's just a happy life.

MG: Yes, what an opportunity,

FJ: Yeah. One guy used to say, "Every day in the Coast Survey is like Sunday on the farm." I heard that, and I said, "Oh my god, he's right."

MG: What does that mean?

FJ: Well, on the farm, you're working every day, you're scrubbing around, and scrub clothes and what have you. You could wear a necktie in the Coast Survey every day if you wanted to. You only wore a tie to church on Sunday on the farm.

MG: Admiral Jeffries, how have you spent your retirement years?

FJ: Just kind of lounging around. I've retired-retired, so to speak. I've done a lot of volunteer work. I used to volunteer at Fort Meade in the automobile hobby shop when I first retired until I left Maryland. I'd go in there on Sundays and help the soldiers and sailors and military people work on their cars. Then, I volunteered for the community center, teaching golf for Maryland Parks and Recreation. Then, I came down here to Texas, and I've been doing taxes during the tax season. I just like being around people, helping people.

MG: I'm so glad we connected. It has been a treat to meet you and hear about your life and career. Are there other things you want to share with me or get on the record?

FJ: I don't know. But if you think of anything, call me back. I'm available anytime if I don't have something written on my calendar.

MG: I hope I do because I would love to stay in touch.

FJ: Yes, ma'am. Please do. If you think of questions that you didn't broach, call me back, and I'll tell you everything I know.

MG: All right. I sure will. I really appreciate your time, your service, and all of the stories you shared with me. Thank you.

FJ: Well, thank you.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/11/2024

Reviewed by Freddie Jeffries 9/14/2024
Reviewed by Molly Graham 10/10/2024