



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Interview of

MASTER CHIEF RADIOMAN CARL CONSTANTINE, USCG (RET)

Fourth Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard

Conducted by **DR. DAVID ROSEN, PACAREA HISTORIAN**



INTERVIEWER: This is Dave Rosen up in Juneau, Alaska, interviewing Master Chief Carl Constantine. And I'll let you take it from here.

CONSTANTINE: Okay. Fine. Now I can't tell any lies. You've got me on the tape recorder.

INTERVIEWER: Well, if it makes you nervous, we'll turn it off.

CONSTANTINE: Old sea stories.

INTERVIEWER: No, it's up to you, if it will make you nervous.

CONSTANTINE: Well, I joined the Coast Guard while I was in high school. I joined the reserves in February of 1957.

INTERVIEWER: And where were you at, do you remember?

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. When I graduated from high school, that was during the draft, so I had to do my time, you know. You had an obligation during those years that you had to do.

So, when I graduated from high school I went active service. I went to radio school in Groton, Connecticut, in 1958. Before I went to radio school, though, I had gone down and worked at the Coast Guard base in Terminal Island, California, and I learned what chief boatswain mates were all about, pretty loud fellows at that time. They guided me through learning how to clock boats. I served on 40-footers at the base.

I served on an 83-foot boat for a while, learned how to paint, learned how to -- out at the bay. Let's see the 83-footers were wooden hulls. I'm sorry. Those were, you know, the old wooden hulls. That's where I learned how to calk and paint.

And then my, like I said, I learned how to -- I was down in the 40-footers and helped out its crew members at the base while I was waiting for my orders for radio school. I got my orders, went to radio school and graduated and got back to Southern California, and they put me on the cutter *Minnetonka*, 255-foot weather ship. They used to call them "white elephants." So that was my first duty right out of radio school.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go on the *Minnetonka*, do you remember?

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. We went to a -- in between -- our primary duty on the *Minnetonka* was weather stations. Weather stations, before satellites, we used to sit out between the Ocean Station November. They all had designations. Ocean Station November was an area about halfway between Hawaii and San Francisco.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

CONSTANTINE: And we would sit out there and relay weather information, and we would relay aircraft information back and forth to the mainland via communications. There would be an area, a 10-mile square out there that we'd sit in called Ocean Station

November. And we would key a beacon, the aircrafts would use us as a homing device and fly over us and go on to Hawaii or go on to San Francisco. We did a lot of those. That was Ocean Station November.

And then there was an Ocean Station Victor that sat between Japan and Hawaii, and we'd go out on that once in a while and sit there and do the same thing. Those were long before the days of satellites, and, by the way, the primary mode of communications was Morse Code. You could not communicate voice. So the radio played a very important position in those days. They were the only communications we had with the base was the Morse Code, because the old radios would only go out a couple of hundred miles, and we're sitting way the hell out there, you know. So we'd sit in the radio shack and had 24 hours a day and send weather information in, get messages, you know, administrative messages, operational messages. The whole thing was Morse Code or CW, continuous wave.

I do remember when radio teletype started coming in. I said it would never work. You know, there would be a signal like you would try to copy, and we would run tests from San Francisco. I remember San Francisco Radio. They were our primary communications link during those days. We'd send all our traffic to San Francisco radio, and they would put it in teletypes and send it out to the weather bureaus and wherever it had to go.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. I do remember radio teletype. We would run tests for about a year on that and then just turned it off and go back to Morse Code because that was the best form of communications there was. Even though it was archaic and slow, it was reliable.

INTERVIEWER: That's what they'll say about it now in 20 years.

CONSTANTINE: So I went from Morse Code to computers in communication in 25 years.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, my God.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. After the *Minnetonka*, did a tour in Hawaii. No, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Back up. After the *Minnetonka*, I went to Radio Station Miami, Florida.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

CONSTANTINE: A place -- NMA, November, Mike, Alpha. Okay. Did

three-year tour down there. Was there during the Cuban Missile crisis, had a pretty good scare down there when Cuba was messing around there with the -- and the Russians coming in there they --

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

CONSTANTINE: One night, the National Guard, the American National Guard, attacked our station in a mock exercise, but they didn't tell us it was going to be done.

INTERVIEWER: No.

CONSTANTINE: And I almost shot somebody.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, no.

CONSTANTINE: Because they armed the watch supervisors, and here they come, you know, and I -- I didn't know what was going on, and somebody told me the next day, "Oh, yeah. We forgot to let you know that they were going to attack, a mock [attack], and here we are in the swamps, you know --"

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

CONSTANTINE: -- "and they're going to attack you, but, you know, don't panic." Well, they did attack but the problem was they didn't have a lot of supervisors. That was a scary deal.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I can't believe that.

CONSTANTINE: I thought we were dead.

INTERVIEWER: The right hand doesn't know what the left hand --

CONSTANTINE: Until a guy finally -- he had on all of this black stuff, all over his face come in there. You know, it's -- I forgot his exact words, but he identified himself as an American coming up our steps, you know. So we had that going on. That was pretty exciting.

So, after three years down there, got stationed in the Honolulu, Hawaii, at Coast Guard Radio Station, Honolulu, Hawaii. That was November, Mike, Oscar, NMO. Did three uneventful years over there. Nothing exciting went on. I just stood watches and made first class while I was in Hawaii. Actually, I made first class in Miami, first class petty officer, and went to Hawaii, stayed first class there for three years and stood watches, ate a lot of pineapple and did my stint on the beach.

After Honolulu, went to the Coast Guard Cutter, *Tamaroa* Served in the *Tamaroa* for just about two years.

INTERVIEWER: And that was Governors Island?

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Actually, the *Tamaroa*, when I reported, like I told you before, it was under the water, leaning on its side. It was over in Staten Island.

INTERVIEWER: Staten Island, okay.

CONSTANTINE: Saint George. Bay Saint George, it was called, I believe. And the exec had just committed suicide. So the morale on there wasn't too good, and I stepped right into the middle of that, and it was a challenge trying to show some leadership.

In 1966 when I reported aboard the *Tamaroa*, made chief petty officer while there. The duty on the *Tamaroa* was, once we got her floating, got the morale up, got it cleaned up, and dried her out, and it was a great tour of duty, had good commanding officers, a couple of them. I was able to do more than just be a radio man on there. I was able to break in for bridge watches and things like that, you know. So that was great. I was able to break in for OD underway watches and things like that. So I was able to get some variety of duty while I was there. That's what helped me a lot.

Let's see. Where did I go after *Tamaroa*? I went over to -- in 1970, I went to Governors Island and went to the communications center there, found out that shore duty wasn't my thing, and I went on *Gallatin*, went in serving *Gallatin*. I knew a chief radioman that was on there. They were scheduled to go to Vietnam.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-oh.

CONSTANTINE: And so I wanted to go, but they didn't go. The *Dallas* went instead of us, which was a big disappointment because I really wanted to do that. I did not get a chance to serve in Vietnam.

So I went on there and same old thing. We went to weather stations on the East Coast. We had Ocean Station Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta and Echo, starting from Newfoundland, working your way right on down past the Bahamas, down in that area, right out in the middle out there.

And then there was an oceans-to-weather station right off the Cape down there where those big storms used to brew up and come up the East Coast, off North

Carolina down there, off the Cape, and they would start -- so, Senator Kennedy, Ted Kennedy, got the Coast Guard to put a weather station out there, and we'd go along there, way back from the big ocean station. We'd stop off there for another 15, 20 days, and then we'd go in, extended our patrols out to 45 to 60 days instead of 30, you know.

So we did that -- I did that for a few years, and 1970, that same year I went on *Gallatin*, I met my wife. We were down in the Coast Guard Yard in Baltimore, Maryland.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

CONSTANTINE: And I met her there. And we --

INTERVIEWER: Was she in the Coast Guard?

CONSTANTINE: Huh?

INTERVIEWER: Was she in the Coast Guard?

CONSTANTINE: No. No. No, she wasn't, as a matter of fact. She was going to Strayer's Business College at the time. I was a lot younger then. I could hang out with the college girls.

INTERVIEWER: Forty years ago, huh?

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. Yeah. So I met her, and we went together for three years, and we got married in 1973.

I see you looking at something. Is something up there that --

INTERVIEWER: No, I was just looking at the photos there.

CONSTANTINE: That's my father.

INTERVIEWER: That, on the right?

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. That's my father. Uh-huh. That's my dad, served in World War II and Cross, the Purple Heart, and a few other things there.

President Reagan, I got to have breakfast with him a couple times when I was the Master Chief [Petty Officer of the Coast Guard]. Jan's got some nice pictures of her with him when she went up for National Spouses Day. She got a nice picture with him and an award.

And that's Senator John Tower --

INTERVIEWER: All right.

CONSTANTINE: -- with me and Admiral Gracey [Admiral James Gracey, Commandant].

INTERVIEWER: The little guy, I remember him now.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. He's the only guy in the Congress, that I was taller than. That's why I like hanging around with him.

Down at the bottom picture there, that's me giving the commission at the Coast Guard Academy to my cousin who graduated from the Academy back in 1981, I believe. No -- or '80, 1980. No, no. It was '83.

And that was President George Bush there, the first one. He wanted me to give her a commission, instead of him. So I did it. So I was able to do that. That was quite an honor.

And I've got, you know, there are different plaques that I was given, and that one up there is the Sergeants Major Academy. I visited them over 20 times and talked to their class out there in El Paso, Texas.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

CONSTANTINE: And they put me in there so-called "Wall of Fame" out there because I was one of the top guys in the Coast Guard, you know, one of the top enlisted guys in the Coast Guard, and I visited them more than anybody. They kept asking me to come up. And then I've got various assortment of silly plaques and stuff like that, you know, that people have given me over the years. Of course, you know what those things are there, a couple medals.

INTERVIEWER: Were you in Grand Haven too?

CONSTANTINE: Was I with Bacon [ph]?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

CONSTANTINE: Oh, I visited a few times. Yeah, I love to go to Coast Guard City up there. Yeah, that was fun. That was one of the highlights of every year when I'd get to go up there and visit the community and be up there with the troops and one of the neat things of my job.

That portrait there of MacArthur, that's an actual portrait of him that I used to -- a long time ago when I was in high school, I was going with a girl whose father was an artist --

INTERVIEWER: Hmm.

CONSTANTINE: -- and he painted that back in 1950 --

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

CONSTANTINE: -- from a photograph. That's a painting over the top of another painting, which I have no idea what's under there. But he gave me that, and, you know, I lived in Japan with my father years ago, right after World War II.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, is that right?

CONSTANTINE: And General MacArthur was a god in the eyes of the Japanese because he treated them so well, and he was the Supreme Commander there, and he was -- in my eyes, you know, he couldn't do anything wrong. He was like a hero to me as a young man. Okay.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

CONSTANTINE: So that's what that's about there, and that's why I got that out there. I think someday I might give it to the Coast Guard or somebody, you know. In fact, I'd give all that stuff to the Coast Guard someday.

That sword over there is a sword that my father got on Iwo Jima.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, my God.

CONSTANTINE: He found it on a person, took that.

That little thing there, that's a pretty nice thing that was given to me by the President. I'm not going to tell you I had volumes of books and stuff, all the things that I did, you know. If you're interested in that --

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

CONSTANTINE: -- we'll go through it tonight, later on. Let's see. Where were we at now?

INTERVIEWER: Let's see. Governors Island and the *Gallatin*.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. *Gallatin*. Went to Governors Island and got married, and we were at the Coast Guard Radio Station, Washington, D.C., for about a year. That's ours. That's when I first married Jan, and we moved down there. She didn't know anything about the Coast Guard. She had no idea what all the stripes were. She didn't know an admiral from a chief, which was fine because that kept her honest, and I liked that. I think most people that were around her enjoyed that too. You didn't have to -- out of ignorance but not out of spite. She didn't know anybody from anybody, and as far as she was concerned, she had to learn the hard way. So she learned and worked at knowing the Coast Guard and got very good at it, by the way. Without her, I couldn't have pulled off the job as Master Chief of the Coast Guard. There's no way I could have done it, okay, without her support.

So, after that, let's see. I come home one day from Washington Radio Station and said, "Jan, we're going to Alaska," and she -- and we both ran for the map because we had no idea -- we knew where Alaska but --

INTERVIEWER: What is was?

CONSTANTINE: -- but what it was. And what are we looking for? What's this going to be like? I said, "I don't know, but we're going to find out."

I volunteered, and in those days, Alaska was a well-kept secret, I thought. I thought that, by far, Alaska is the greatest place in the world to be stationed in the Coast Guard, and as far as I'm concerned, it's the greatest place in the world to live, as I'm doing now. So I don't mind leaving once in a while, but it's nice coming home.

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm. Did you start up in Kodiak or --

CONSTANTINE: Huh?

INTERVIEWER: Did you start up in Kodiak?

CONSTANTINE: No, I came right to Juneau.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

CONSTANTINE: Okay. From Washington Radio, I came to Juneau. I went to the communications center up here, downtown, Federal building, and I was in charge of classified material. That was my first job as an E8. Okay. Then I became E9, and I became in charge of the communication center, chief in charge of the communication center here in Juneau.

I was in that job a couple years, three years. Then I became the Command Master Chief which took me out of the communications center, and I had to start traveling around and -- you know what they were known as in those days? They were known as "Command Enlisted Advisors." Have you ever heard that expression?

INTERVIEWER: No, but that describes the job well.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. That's what they were called. So they became Command Master Chief after I retired from the Coast Guard. So it had to be after '86. We wanted to put ourselves, the Master Chiefs -- they wanted to put them so the Navy could understand what we were. So we wanted to call ourselves the same thing as a Navy job.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

CONSTANTINE: See, that's the reason they changed it, because what's a Command Enlisted Advisor? Well, what it is, it's a Command Master Chief there, sailor, you know. That's what it is. So I think it was a positive change, changing it, you know.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like it.

CONSTANTINE: The Air Force still calls them "senior enlisted advisor," but --

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know that.

CONSTANTINE: -- the Coast Guard and Navy, it is Command Master Chief.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that makes sense.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. The Army is Command Sergeant Major, and it's just like in the Marine Corps, it's a Command Sergeant Major. The equivalent of the Master Chief of the Coast Guard and the Air Force is the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. The Navy's called the Master Chief of the Navy. The Army is Sergeant Major of the Army. It's not Command Sergeant Major. It's Sergeant Major of the Army, and then that's Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps. Okay. Those are the five top in ranks, what they're called.

Okay. After we came to up here, got my heels dug in up here and loved it -- and as a matter of fact, a little fishing story -- I don't know if you're a fisherman, but when we got to Alaska, there was absolutely no place to live in Juneau. So we were in the Prospector Motel, a hotel downtown.

INTERVIEWER: Good find.

CONSTANTINE: And it was raining the day we got here, hard, and 30 days later, it was still raining, and my wife wondered what I got her into. In fact, she said, "Hey, Constantine, you know, I'm not used to this. I'm from Maryland. I like a little summer. What did we get into here?" you know.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. That's it.

CONSTANTINE: But it was neat because, when we were still in the hotel, we walked out, went up to Montana Creek, which is right up the road here. I'll show it to you later. And my first cast in Alaska, my first cast, still living in the hotel, I got a big old red salmon and grabbed that thing coming right out of the water. I said I've died and gone to heaven. So that's my introduction to fishing in Alaska.

So, okay, after my tour as Chief in charge of the -- Command Master Chief here in Alaska, I traveled around Alaska, learned a lot of stories about Alaska and the people and the Coast Guard here in Alaska.

INTERVIEWER: What years were you in Juneau the first time?

CONSTANTINE: '74 to '81. Okay. That was three different jobs I had in that time. In 1981, I was nominated for Master Chief of the Coast Guard, and the three finalists went back to Washington, D.C., and we had an interview with the Commandant of the Coast Guard, including the spouses.

She never did tell me what her interview was about. She won't tell me to this day. She said it was none of my business. I said, "Okay. That's fine. What did he say?", you know.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it's good to have a few secrets.

CONSTANTINE: She's close-lipped about it, but she had her interview, too, with the Commandant and came back to Alaska, and after our three days in headquarters back there -- the "Puzzle Palace," we used to call it.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Still do.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. Yeah. And it was very enlightening. So we came back to Alaska and went back to work here and as a Command Master Chief, and I was sitting in the head one day, and somebody's yelling through the door at me in there, saying, "Hey, the Commandant of the Coast Guard is on the phone and wants to talk to you." I said, "Yeah." You know, I said, "Yeah. Oh, yeah. Okay. Tell him -- you know,

tell him -- tell him, I'm busy, you know." I thought somebody was pulling my damn leg because I was in the bathroom, right?

INTERVIEWER: Sure, sure. They do that all that time.

CONSTANTINE: I said, "Yeah. Tell him as soon as I get done, I'll be in there."

So the guy says, "Really. He really wants to talk to you," and I thought, get out of here. So I finished up, and I went in there, and I said, "Yeah, Constantine here." He says, "Yeah. Hayes [Admiral John B. Hayes] here." He said, "How come it took you so long to answer the Commandant?" And I said -- I didn't know what to say, you know.

INTERVIEWER: What could you say?

CONSTANTINE: First time in many months, I was without words. So I apologized. He said, "I'd like to congratulate you. I have selected you as the Master Chief. That's Master Chief of the Coast Guard." I didn't know what to say. I was stunned. And so I said, "Thank you. When do you want me to report for duty?" He said May of '81, 1981.

So we went back and got ready for the job, and we had housing over at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. They provided nice quarters for the Master Chief, and we were able to entertain over there, you know, when we had to, and I went into the job in 1981.

I was in -- then, of course, I traveled all around the world twice. I was in the job five years, by the way. I was there, and the reason I was in the job for five years was because it was off the Commandant's schedule. In other words, he'd selected me as the Master Chief of the Coast Guard, but he's only going to be with me for a year, or I was going to be with him before he retired for a year.

So the new Commandant comes in, and he's got the Master Chief that he didn't choose.

INTERVIEWER: Who was that? Do you remember?

CONSTANTINE: Admiral Gracey [James S. Gracey], the gentleman right up there on the left, one of the finest admirals you'd ever meet and one of the finest people you'd ever meet in your life. Talk about caring about people, that was the man. Admiral Hayes was operation-oriented and was really good. You know how Admiral Hayes died? Got hit by a car down in Miami, Florida, while he was jogging.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, no.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Jeez.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. He used to come up here and go fishing with me every year.

INTERVIEWER: That I believe.

CONSTANTINE: Him and his wife. Yeah. So I stayed in the job an extra year so the new Commandant, Yost [Paul Yost], Commandant Yost, who came in could select his Master Chief and be with him for the full term, and that's why I did five years instead of four. I like to tell people I did five years because they couldn't do without me, but we all know better than that. So that's why I did that, to get it on there.

So, after I retired, I came back here to Alaska. We kept our home over there in the valley over there, and we moved out of a four-bedroom place back into my two-bedroom. We had nowhere to put anything, so we were pretty well packed for a while until I got my feet on the ground. I went to the University for a couple years out at University of Alaska.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

CONSTANTINE: Uh-huh. Business administration. And one summer, I had this good friend of mine, who owned the Ford dealership here in town, was putting out a request for a college student. I didn't know him then. He was putting out a request for a college student to work over there during the summer months. So this 50-year-old guy shows up and says, "I'm the college student you're looking for," you know. And he said, "You're hired." So he hired me, and I sold cars for a while, Fords and Audi and Volkswagens and Mercurys.

So, after doing that for a few years, I became the sales manager of a place called the Honda Hut. That guy offered me a good job over there as a sales manager, good money. So I took it, and I was over there for five years, and I came back to John at Evergreen, and I was his sales manager for -- I was with John for 14 years, 15 years.

Good friend of ours, wonderful man, been here his whole life, born and raised here. You want to talk about some history of Alaska, there's the man you want to talk to. Oh, he is really a squared-away dude when it comes to Alaska. He was here when there was nobody out here on Frisco Road, you know. This was a jungle out here. Nobody came out here. It was a dirt road, too many bears. And we do have bears here.

INTERVIEWER: I still haven't seen one.

CONSTANTINE: Well, I'm sure you haven't because normally we get them on our front porch here during this time of the year, but we've pretty much -- don't see too many anymore now because of the population, but they are up here on the hill behind us here. There are quite a few of them. But if you leave your garbage out --

INTERVIEWER: Right. That's it.

CONSTANTINE: -- they'll be here, or even bird feeders, they'll be here because they can smell that oil in the air. Hey, anything that's food, they'll -- that's why we take them down in the summertime because they'll just come over and rip your house apart getting -- trying to get them down. You have to be careful, yeah.

So we came out here. I went to the University. I went to work, and here I sit without a job.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it sounds like you're happy fishing.

CONSTANTINE: I am, very happy.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I appreciate your biography.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Thanks very much.

CONSTANTINE: Yeah. And I don't know what -- what the future holds right now, except to live our life the best we can, enjoy my son, my grandson. My grandson met a nice girl now. It looks like they're pretty serious. So who knows what's down the road as far as a marriage is concerned. My oldest son is not married. He tried it a couple times, found out it didn't work too well, so he's --

INTERVIEWER: That's what happens.

CONSTANTINE: -- a bachelor now.

INTERVIEWER: Why not? Well, what was that story about the takeover at Kodiak? Do you want to put that on that tape?

CONSTANTINE: Oh, sure. Sure. Well, I used to work with a communications warrant officer named Jim Tyner. Jim Tyner is an old communicator. He's an old Morse man. That's shows you how far back he goes, and Jim Tyner was officer in charge of --

he was a commanding officer of Coast Guard Radio Station, Ketchikan, Alaska, back in the late '50s and early '60s. When we took -- this is the story that he conveys to me.

When we took over the communications station in Kodiak, Alaska, the Naval Communication Stations, it was signed over to Jim Tyner on -- he went up there to coordinate the change of command, and he took it over for the Coast Guard on a little DD-214 property card. He just signed for the station, and they left, and there he was.

INTERVIEWER: The keys to the city --

CONSTANTINE: So that's the story that Jim Tyner conveys to me, and I have a feeling that it's true. You may have to do a little --

INTERVIEWER: Well that's -- yeah.

CONSTANTINE: But that's basically how we got the Naval Communication Station in Kodiak, Alaska.

INTERVIEWER: That's great. All right. Well, thanks much for you time.

CONSTANTINE: Sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

