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Carl J. Fleps (June 9, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. CARL J. FLEPS

June 9, 1972
Washington, D. C.

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Carl J. Fleps, J. stands for John, Vice President, Government Relations, The Greyhound Corporation, here in Washington, D.C., Arena interviewing, June 9, 1972. Mr. Fleps, may we begin by my asking you a bit about yourself first? For example, where and when were you born?

FLEPS: I was born in Youngstown, Ohio, on November 14, 1914.

ARENA: And would you mind giving a brief resume of your formal education and your career highlights to date?

FLEPS: I was educated in the Youngstown public schools, following which I enlisted in the Navy in order to try to enter the U.S. Naval Academy by way of the competitive examination program which the Navy has, and I was successful and entered in 1934, graduating with the class of 1938. Upon graduation I entered the Marine Corps and followed a career in the Marine Corps until I retired in October of 1956. Since that time I have had a continuing business career with several companies, two in particular--Commercial Credit Company of Baltimore, Maryland, and The Greyhound Corporation.

ARENA: And precisely when were the years that you came into direct contact with President Nixon?

FLEPS: In 1943 into March of 1944.

ARENA: And would you mind, before we go into detail, giving a resume or background of what brought the two of you together, in a way? What was he doing there from your recollection, and what were you doing there?

FLEPS: Yes. Well, I assume that somewhere along the line you have already gotten the history of the SCAT [South Pacific Air Transport] organization. But very briefly, it was a mixture mainly of Marine Corps aviation squadrons enlarged by a few Naval officers and other Naval personnel in the beginning and then later on added to by the addition of a few Army Air Force squadrons, all put together under the aegis of Admiral [William Frederick] Halsey in the South Pacific to provide an aircraft transport service to support the South Pacific campaign. The group had its headquarters based in New Caledonia in the beginning and from there up through the New Hebrides into the Solomon Islands, and as the campaign progressed, the bases of SCAT itself advanced along with the invasion, so that SCAT was always present on the ground to provide air service from the foremost combat area back to the rear areas.

ARENA: I see.

FLEPS: The organization as I remember started in late August of 1942. I joined in January of 1943, and at that time then Lieutenant Junior Grade, Richard M. Nixon, was in the SCAT operation at Espiritu Santos Island. His position there was a passenger officer 7th SCAT detachment on Espiritu. His responsibilities were basically to collect and assemble and assign the various people who were being transported by the SCAT aircraft, the R-4D airplane or the more familiar DC-3-- combat version of the DC-3. Anyway it was his job to see that the passengers all got aboard the proper airplanes, were properly manifested and so on, and that they were given the right priorities, depending on their importance to the operation, and as I say, put aboard the airplanes to be transported to Guadalcanal, which then was still the front line. And with the returning planes, it was his job to look out for the passengers arriving, but more importantly to look out for the wounded, who were the prime cargo on the returning planes. They would be brought down to Espiritu and then from there put aboard ambulances and sent on to the various field hospitals for treatment. So this was Lieutenant Nixon's main responsibility insofar as the returning passengers were concerned and, of course, a very vital responsibility. My first encounter with him . . .

ARENA: Excuse me. What was your own title at that time and your position in the hierarchy?

FLEPS: Well, I was a Captain in the Marine Corps and a pilot, a member of one of the squadrons based in New Caledonia, so that my early experiences with Lieutenant Nixon were

simply as a pilot of an airplane landing in Espiritu to pick up a load and going on to Guadalcanal and returning, landing in Espiritu and then unloading and reloading and going back to New Caledonia. And I remember my first experience with him. I wasn't really aware of the fact, in my first few days in the SCAT organization, that we had any Navy officers, and I recall going into this quonset--well, in fact it was just a tent--which was the passenger office to get a passenger manifest--the piece of paper that had all of the passengers names listed, names, ranks and serial numbers listed who were to fly on the airplane that I was flying--and I saw this Naval officer taking charge of the situation and I wondered what a Naval officer was doing there, and it was a little later that I learned that we had some Navy officers assigned to us by the fleet.

ARENA: Did you find out directly from him or from others?

FLEPS: No, I found out from others the first time. I didn't ask him where he came from. Another memory I have of some of those early trips was that. . . . You have to understand that we would land in the afternoon of a given day and unload and then we would try to get some sleep and plan takeoffs somewhere between 2:00 and 4:00 in the morning, or even earlier than 2:00 a.m. the idea being that we wanted to fly at night in order to arrive at Guadalcanal before daybreak, on the theory that we would be less exposed to interdicting Japanese planes.

ARENA: During this period, just for the record, were we still way outnumbered? Was this during the year 1943?

FLEPS: Yes.

ARENA: And we were very well outnumbered by the Japanese?

FLEPS: Well, by this time we had the situation pretty well in hand but we still, of course, were exposed to attack by Japanese aircraft. We didn't have such complete command of the air that Japanese planes couldn't sneak through and bomb at night particularly, or maybe some early morning attacks. But anyway there would be from four to eight planes marshalling for this takeoff period that I was telling you about, and all the pilots were jockeying for position, trying to be the first one out, you know, on the idea that they could get up and turn around and get home faster and waste less time on the ground. So, of course, we would all rush into operation and try to get our flight plans cleared first and then go to the passenger office and try to get our own requirements taken care of first. And in this kind of confusion, without the benefit of modern lighting

and some of the other modern conveniences, it was sort of hectic and I remember one time Lieutenant Nixon, with all these guys descending on him, finally said, "Now wait a minute," or words to this effect. These weren't his exact words, of course. But the point was, he said, "None of you are going to get out of here unless you all quiet down and let me run the show here, because I'm the guy you're gonna have to clear with." And it was all done with good humor, though, and was very effective. And all of us were intelligent enough to realize that we couldn't all be first, so then we settled down. Anyway, I was impressed with him. I thought this guy knows how to run a show here.

Well, it was only that kind of expose I had with Nick [Richard Nixon], as we called him, until September of 1943. By this time the campaign in the Solomons had advanced beyond Guadalcanal and I think we were then up to about New Georgia Island, maybe even Treasury Island, so that our activities had broadened. Also, by this time we had some Army Air Force squadrons attached to us, so we had gotten to be a pretty fair-sized airlines, and as a result the operation of SCAT was subdivided into what we called routes. And one route took us from our base up to Espiritu Santos. Another route took us from our base down to Australia and New Zealand. And then a third route, which was really called SCAT Route I, took us from Guadalcanal on, northwest through the Solomon Island area.

With this subdivision in September 1943, I was assigned to the division based on Espiritu Santos. Then I came in immediate contact with Lieutenant Nixon. In fact, he was my direct subordinate then. And so I really got to know him quite well in an official kind of way. We didn't see too much of each other after hours, but then there really wasn't much to do after hours anyway, except to eat and go to a movie. Because we tried to operate pretty much around the clock, if we weren't on duty chances were we were usually sacked out somewhere or maybe went visiting. But I have an unremitting impression of him during this time. He was an extremely efficient guy, always affable and always cool. Today we use the term unflappable. Well, he was certainly an unflappable type, with the result that I almost never had to bother with his activities. I just knew that they were going to be well taken care of, efficiently run and with no complaints. So, you know, we'd see each other and exchange intelligence as to what our requirements were for the day ahead, and the week ahead, and that kind of thing. But there just never were any problems.

ARENA: Were the duties that you described earlier when you first came into contact with him about loading and unloading passengers, especially the wounded, still the same duties when you were his superior as well?

FLEPS: Yes.

ARENA: And that remained to the end, when you and he weren't together?

FLEPS: No. It remained, as I was about to then say, to the end of my tour of duty on Espiritu Santos, which didn't last very long. That was from, as I say I joined up in September, and that continued until . . .

ARENA: September of 1943?

FLEPS: Correct, until late November or early December. I'm a little hazy on the exact time when I was detached from Espiritu Santos and sent to Guadalcanal to take charge of what I referred to earlier as SCAT Route I. This consisted of our operation through Guadalcanal, Vella Lavella, then into New Georgia Island to Treasury Island, and we were just then getting into the campaign on Bougainville. So, that's where I went. But before I left Espiritu Santos--I remember this very clearly--Nixon came to me one day and said that he had been on Espiritu Santos certainly since February '43, and probably a little longer than that, and that this area now was in the rear area, as it was. We were beginning to live quite comfortably on Espiritu Santos. We even had a place where we could get ice cream and milk shakes, and things like that. And anyway, the purpose of our discussion then was that he wanted to get into something where the smell of combat was closer. And I should add, parenthetically, that as each operation going up the Solomon Islands was planned, there was also added to the invasion force a small contingent of SCAT people, who would make the landing along with the invasion force in order to be prepared at the earliest opportunity. As soon as an airfield was captured or was ready for operation to receive the transports, we would lose absolutely no time in getting the transports to principally bring wounded out, but also to take ammunition in and other critical items that were needed for the operation. So, as we made each one of these landings we had a SCAT detachment going into each one of them.

So now, the Bougainville campaign was already planned and the next campaign, people at my level at least didn't know where it was going to be, we just assumed that it would be Rabaul, which was the next main Japanese base going up the Solomon Islands. It's actually not in the Solomons, but it was what we thought was the next logical invasion point north. Anyway, Lieutenant Nixon said he would like very much to be recommended to be in charge of the SCAT detachment to make the next invasion. And though he was a Navy lieutenant--up to that time we had always had a Marine officer, a Marine SCAT guy to be in charge of this detachment--and even though Dick Nixon was a Naval officer, nonetheless I felt so highly about him that I told him I was delighted to hear he wanted to do it and that I would certainly give him my unqualified recommendation. And I did. And the result was that he was selected to make the next invasion.

Well, as I say, I was then detached and sent up to Guadalcanal and I was out of touch with him for awhile. Then I heard he had been transferred to Bougainville and I saw him there occasionally and briefly, but he wasn't there very long before he again was detached and sent on his way to make this next invasion.

Well, it turned out that the next invasion was on a place called Green Island. Green Island is northwest of Bougainville, maybe one hundred miles or so. Green Island, as it turned out, was an unopposed landing. There were no Japs on the island at all. I never had a chance to talk to Nick Nixon about this, but I am sure he was keenly disappointed. I think he was really anxious to do something more for his country than land on an unopposed island. But in my case, he turned his usual efficient self to and got things ready in quick order. I made the first SCAT landing on Green Island, so I speak from firsthand experience. When I made the landing there he was with photographers and all the rank out to greet us, [Laughter] and I had taken a nurse along and it was very photogenic. And we got such good coverage that I remember it was shown in the news that they used to show in the theaters back in those days, because my family happened to go to a show where this thing was seen, and here we all were in the Pathé news, or whatever it was called, which was a great stroke for them. But anyway Nick Nixon, as I say, did a good job and had things very efficiently organized there. So that's where he stayed then until he was detached and sent back to the states.

ARENA: I wonder if I could ask you, again from your own personal recollections, about his level of association or the nature of his association with the three basic levels; we'll say, his superiors: you, his own level; officers who had the same grade; and then, those beneath him. And jump in wherever you want to, but from your own recollection. And maybe there were even more formal reports to that effect that you may recall.

FLEPS: Well, I think I've touched on his relationship with me and with the pilot types who flew in and out of bases where he was attached.

ARENA: And just for the record, was there ever a case when he went over your head for anything?

FLEPS: No. Never. He always had a sense of team play. I think this was in his nature, and he had a very fine sense of organization, not only of accepting responsibility but of delegating it as well. The way he runs the Administration today, for instance, comes as no surprise to me. This fits totally in line with the man as I knew him. Obviously,

on a much more expanded and sophisticated basis, but the elements were there even then. As far as his relationship with subordinates is concerned, I really can't give you great detail except that I recall having the feeling that he inspired people to do good work for him. And he had to because . . .

ARENA: Excuse me. One possible thing, were there any possible complaints that came to you from below?

FLEPS: No. His men always knew what they were supposed to do. He saw to it that they were trained and he obviously inspired them to turn in good work.

ARENA: About how many men did he have under him?

FLEPS: Well, let me think. In the division that he had on Espiritu Santos, I would say somewhere between six and twelve--up and down. In the detachment on Green Island, perhaps a dozen. My memory just doesn't tell me for sure. That would be roughly what it was, so it was in the nature of a little family of his own, you see, that he had charge of. Actually, the morale in our whole SCAT outfit was extremely good and he was just a part of that high morale organization. I remember one little incident that will give you . . .

ARENA: The more the better.

FLEPS: He had one man in his group on Espiritu Santos who had been in the invasion of Guadalcanal, who had been wounded up there and so was brought back, and then he was reassigned to us. Ultimately this man was given a Silver Star for meritorious acts he had performed while on the Guadalcanal campaign. And there were some other people, too, like that who were to get citations. So we had a little ceremony of all of our SCAT people on Espiritu Santos, and since I was the detachment Commander it was my duty and privilege to present these medals, except that I felt that in the case of this staff sergeant who was in Nixon's group that Nixon ought to have the privilege of pinning the medal on him. And so I arranged that this was done. And I remember, and I can still see the picture of that man because I could see the bond between the two. And that was the reason I wanted Nixon to have the privilege to pin the medal on him. So that may give you a little insight as to the relationship he had with his subordinates.

ARENA: How about those on an equal level? Well, for a while you were equal, in the sense that you were a fellow officer in the beginning.

FLEPS: Yes.

ARENA: Did you come across any other experiences or incidents that would illustrate how he got along with his equals?

FLEPS: No, nothing terribly noteworthy.

ARENA: You may have heard--this might be a way of going from the present to the past--that he was brought up by rather strict Quaker parents, who didn't believe in drinking, smoking or dancing, and he hadn't done too much, if any, before he got into the Navy, I understand. Did that cause any problems--maybe not problems--but did that come to your attention in any way?

FLEPS: No, it did not and I doubt . . .

ARENA: Was it commented on by fellow officers, "You don't have to bring a bottle for Nick," or anything like that?

FLEPS: No. We didn't have too much liquor around anyway [Laughter] and I suppose most of it, if there was any, was carefully hid or parceled out. But in any case, this background of Nixon's was never mentioned to my knowledge. I am sure that he never made an issue out of it, and I don't recall EVER hearing anybody mention it.

As a matter of fact, there's another side to his nature that keeps getting attention in some of the articles that have been printed on him--about him--they deal mainly with his poker playing ability. And these have all come as great surprises to me, too, because during the time I knew him, if he played poker, he did it with friends and it was no great exercise. I can assure you, it was not the way he spent most of his time either on Espiritu Santos or on Green Island, if he found time to play poker, it was seldom.

ARENA: In one interview a gentleman mentioned the fact that he thought--and maybe you might have more light on this--that the President and [Joseph J.] Joe Foss got together somehow, somewhere, and may even have left together when they returned to the states. Does that ring a bell in any way with you? Did he make that flight somewhere along the line or stop off?

FLEPS: They may have crossed paths at some time. Joe Foss was-- I'm not sure now if he was squadron Commander or not, but at least he was in a combat squadron on Guadalcanal and, of course, that's where he got the Medal of Honor, or got the Medal of Honor as a result of his exploits there. And all those guys, or most of them, at one time or another were given what we called rest and recreation trips to either Australia or New Zealand, and we flew them down on our SCAT planes. So, of course, they had to come through our SCAT operation, you know, and be transported. So it's possible that Joe Foss and Dick Nixon did cross paths.

ARENA: But you didn't have any definite . . .

FLEPS: No.

ARENA: . . . knowledge anywhere along the line?

FLEPS: No. I know Joe Foss.

ARENA: I could check with you about his whereabouts when this interview ends, from the standpoint of trying to track that information down.

FLEPS: Yes.

ARENA: This fellow seemed to be fairly certain. As a matter of fact, I'll give you his name because he mentioned meeting others in the South Pacific, a Judge [M. M.] Champlin, who was with Vinegar [General Joseph W.] Joe Stilwell for awhile.

FLEPS: No.

ARENA: And recounting running into him and possibly heard, himself, about the connection between the President and Foss, but that could be looked into later. I was wondering, also, from the standpoint of just to play on this Quaker background experience and the obvious contrast, and in a way paradox, that he would not only be in combat but in a very combatant area. Were you, yourself, aware that he was a Quaker? Did it come to your attention by accident or by design in any way?

FLEPS: No. I didn't know that about him until many years later when these facts began coming out in the press as a result of his prominence, you know, and his public life.

ARENA: What was there, you mentioned the idea of movies, but what else could a person like the President do while he was in those islands from the standpoint of recreation, keeping himself occupied, bearing in mind that he had been a student almost up to that time and a practicing lawyer?

FLEPS: Well, of course, we all spent a good bit of time reading in our spare time. This was the main diversion, and actually eating and going to the movies were the highlights of any particular day. Oh, there was a little fishing available on Espiritu if you could find time to go off and do it. I never did. I don't know whether he did either. And there were always personalities coming in and out. I used to run into friends of mine, for instance, coming and going, so I'd always make it a point to get together with them. But there was no great social activity going on.

ARENA: Was there anything like rest and rehabilitation that you know about during that period, where he may have gone to another island for such?

FLEPS: I don't think so, because the only people that got to go on the type of trip I was describing earlier were the combat flyers and the pilots and the combat squadrons, you know, in the immediate combat areas. Even there, ground crews didn't get to go on the R&R [Rest & Recreation] trips. And I doubt very seriously if the President ever got on any kind of R&R trip during the period of time he was assigned to the SCAT operation.

ARENA: As you know, many units of that war have gotten together somehow, someway, for reunions. I am wondering if that ever took place between you and the President and fellow members of that unit.

FLEPS: There is a SCAT Veteran's organization and it holds a reunion every year. I have never attended one of them and I don't think the President has ever attended a reunion as such. I know, though, there was one reunion held here in Washington and I believe he was then a Senator, although he could have been the Vice President--I'm not sure about this--and he did make an appearance at the reunion, but he didn't attend the whole reunion.

ARENA: Have you had the opportunity to meet him personally since that period?

FLEPS: Yes, I have. I have run into him about three or four times.

ARENA: And if it isn't of a confidential nature or too personal, would you want to describe what those reunions were like?

FLEPS: Yes. The first one was really quite a surprise. I was being shown through the Senate by the then Senator [John J.] Williams from Delaware one day.

ARENA: Do you recall his first name, by any chance?

FLEPS: I'll think of it in a minute. He was the famous watchdog of the country's finances for many years, a wonderful man. My father-in-law knew him well, so we were there as his guests. And then we went down into the Senate basement to have lunch in the dining room, and we were just about to go into the dining room when there appeared Senator Nixon. And this was, I guess, in about 1950-51, so obviously a good many years had elapsed since we had last seen each other in the South Pacific.

ARENA: Had you known or had you read that he had been in politics?

FLEPS: Oh, yes, I should say. The first time I saw his picture in Time magazine when he had been first elected to the Congress, and, of course, it came as a great surprise to open the magazine and see his picture.

BEGIN SIDE TAPE I

ARENA: To be sure we have that last question, to what extent were you surprised, knowing him as you did know him in the Navy, that he would make a politician?

FLEPS: Well, I think I was surprised, but I think all of us are always surprised when somebody we knew very well in times past suddenly erupts into a position of prominence, because you know, we have it in the high school annuals, "The guy most likely to succeed," and that type of thing. But nonetheless when it does happen it surprises us, which isn't to say it is a sudden surprise.

ARENA: And then I wanted to ask you--I didn't mean to interrupt--but you were about to recount what possibly did take place in the way of the meeting between you and him.

FLEPS: Yes. Well, as I say, we were about to go into the Senate dining room and there ran into each other. And Senator Williams turned to make the introductions and before he did--now mind you, this is the time from 1944 until as I say about 1951, I think--he [Senator Nixon] said, "Oh, you're Fleps aren't you?" And so it was flattering, of course.

ARENA: As a matter of fact had you remembered his name, too?

FLEPS: Oh, yes, of course, the magazine article.

ARENA: Oh, that's right.

FLEPS: So that was the first encounter. We didn't have lunch together, but we had a nice little chat there and he was very cordial and asked me to look him up, but I never did presume on it. Then the second meeting was in Wilmington, Delaware, where I happened to be included in a group that was to welcome him at the airport when he was going to come in to make a speech for the campaign of 1956, and he was then the Vice President. And again, he got off the plane and we had sort of a receiving line there at the airport, and again he remembered me, so there was no problem there, and I had a chance to talk with

him and then I sat on the speaker's platform while he gave a talk, and then afterwards was able to congratulate him on the talk.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, had you ever heard him speak in public before? Was there ever any occasion during the Navy period--I can't think that there would be, but just to be sure.

FLEPS: No, no. Well, I'm sure that he never spoke in the South Pacific. Whether he did anywhere else in his Navy career, I don't know. I never did have that opportunity to hear him.

The third time was when he was running for the Presidency in 1960. I was then living in Baltimore, Maryland, and volunteered to work for him as a volunteer in the Maryland campaign. So I made this fact known to one of his assistants and was asked in return to head up the Nixon Volunteers in Maryland, which I did. So I saw him on a couple of occasions during that campaign.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you had ever done that for anyone else before?

FLEPS: No.

ARENA: And it was just because of this personal contact with him and your personal knowledge of him?

FLEPS: Yes, absolutely.

ARENA: Were there any other occasions?

FLEPS: Well, then the last one was last year. I was invited to attend a reception at the White House which, of course, I did, and so I had a chance to talk with him for a few minutes in the receiving line there.

ARENA: Had you met Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Nixon on this occasion, and possibly any time before?

FLEPS: Yes, I met her at the Wilmington affair that I was telling you about. She was there then as I remember, and during the Nixon Volunteers affair--campaign--I had an opportunity to meet her on two occasions then. I was very much impressed with her on each occasion, I must say.

ARENA: From the standpoint of physical change, did you note anything between the war years and the political years?

FLEPS: Just the normal aging process--you know, everybody else gets older but me.

ARENA: Were there any particular experiences about your war experiences together that were recalled in these recent reunions, by any chance?

FLEPS: Well, yes, he shows a little bit of nostalgia for them, I think. He likes to reminisce a little bit. And we both build up the SCAT organization somewhat in our conversations. The usual thing, about what a superior outfit we were in, you know.

ARENA: As a matter of fact is that still in existence, or the idea of SCAT, or is that just something that was a tactical and wartime emergency arrangement?

FLEPS: Yes, it was. It was disbanded after the Pacific campaign and World War II was over. I should mention one thing which is quite important to your interview, and I haven't mentioned it yet. But when I was detached from SCAT in March 1944, I was winding up my own responsibilities and my paper work and so forth, and one of the things that I was very careful to do was write up. . . . Well, in all cases I had to make out fitness reports on all the officers who had worked under me. And in addition to that, though, there were two officers that I singled out whom I thought should be cited and given a medal of some kind, and Lieutenant Nixon was one of them.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, do you know if he did receive one?

FLEPS: I think he received what is called a Letter of Commendation from the Commander in Chief of the Pacific fleet, and that could have been the outgrowth of the letter that I wrote. I have tried to trace this down since I have been here in Washington, but the records are so fragmented now that it is almost impossible to run it down. But if my letter had been acted on, it would have had to go up the chain of command to the Commander in Chief of the Pacific fleet, who was the only one who had the authority, under the system then in effect, to issue the commendation. And I do know that Lieutenant Nixon got a Letter of Commendation for his services out there.

ARENA: For the historical record, did you keep a copy of your letter?

FLEPS: Unfortunately, no.

ARENA: But as far as you know that could still be in existence.

FLEPS: It could, indeed.

ARENA: As this interview is coming to a close, is there any question I have not raised or topic that you would like to touch upon yourself at this time?

FLEPS: Well, yes. I think in a couple of sentences I would like to say that one of the things I have always felt very strongly about, with first, Representative Nixon and then Senator Nixon, then the Vice President and then the President, is the derogation he has gotten in our public press. And I have really never been able to understand it because it seems to me that anybody that would take the trouble to know the man firsthand, and as almost any member of the press can who does write about him, should, I think, be convinced about his integrity, his sound character and his warm nature as I was. Well, I am at a loss, really, to understand why this man has been attacked so much in the press by members of the press whose integrity ought to be a little stronger and stauncher than would appear does exist.

ARENA: One thought comes to my mind, not about that necessarily, but a kind of wrap-up question. It might be a bit philosophical, but I ask this of people who knew him, we'll say, in his law school days or college days, and I think it would be appropriate at this point also. As you knew him then during that part of his life, the Navy and war years, and you know him now, what is there in him now that you could say you could trace was present at that time and possibly even emerged at that time? That might be too much, but if there were certain traits that he had then that stood out, and to what extent you still see these or you don't see these traits in him today?

FLEPS: Yes. I think it was a very clear pattern of dedication to duty is one, and patriotism. For instance, I remember in that conversation I had with him when he said he wanted to do something more active to get into the next invasion. This man really had a feeling about his country. He felt he hadn't quite done his bit yet, like the others were doing.

ARENA: And you're saying his references to patriotism one way or another in politics is nothing new to you.

FLEPS: Absolutely not. That's exactly what I am saying. Right. And his steadfastness of purpose, you know, making him seem like he is bigger than life, but really this is the kind of guy he is. He is a generally serious person but never heavy handed about anything, and I see the same characteristics in the man today.

ARENA: To what extent? Go right ahead.

FLEPS: And I wanted to remind you, also, that I did talk earlier about his sense of organization and his utilization of people, both juniors and seniors, and I think we have certainly seen this in his management of the affairs of the government.

ARENA: To what extent--without necessarily mentioning the author or the newspaper--were the accounts as you recall them of this period of his life, and as you know them firsthand, been accurately portrayed in books or newspapers or magazines? For example, you gave one example: You never had any direct contact with the poker playing. That, of course, is one of the most repeated stories. Are there others? For example, there is something I recall about a hamburger stand or making a little hamburger stand available for his men, that's one that is repeated.

FLEPS: Yes, this is supposed to have happened on Green Island. It may well have, I don't know. Of course, I made the first landing on Green Island and it was very shortly after that that I was detached and sent home, so what he did after that on Green Island--well, he could have worked up a hamburger stand, but this would be in the nature of the man, too. He tried to make life a little bit better for everybody. You know, in those days it was possible to do things one step better. If a guy had enough imagination and the way to do it, he could go out to incoming ships, for instance--they were always much better provisioned than we were on shore--and do a little bargaining with some souvenirs and get some hamburger meat and whatnot, you know. Maybe he worked out an arrangement like that, and thereby had a little better food for the SCAT people.

ARENA: As you know in this interview and in this part of the Oral History Project on the President's life, we do not go into politics per se. Where it has come up, it's as an aside, and this should be treated in that way also, in case you are doubting my motives. But did he ask you to be a volunteer for him or was this something completely from within you?

FLEPS: It originated entirely with me.

ARENA: I just wanted that to be clear for the record.

FLEPS: In fact, I didn't even see him to make the request. I've forgotten now who I addressed the first request to, but anyway I was invited to come over here and I talked to some of the people who were running the Nixon Volunteer staff, and one of them who was Pat Gray [L. Patrick Gray III], who today

is the head of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. I had known Pat as a midshipman in the Naval Academy and perhaps that is one of the reasons then why I was actually given the assignment. Pat may have recommended me, too. But I remember Pat told me he had mentioned it to the President and the President had said, "Oh, he's a good man. If he wants to help us, let's make use of him." But I never did see the President to make the request or was I asked to do the job. I did it because I felt strongly that he was the man for the job and I wanted to do all I could to help.

ARENA: You mentioning the formally trained Navy person and formerly member of the military such as Mr. Gray, such as yourself--to get a bit philosophical--obviously the President was not. If anything, theoretically, he was anything but military. Bearing that in mind, although you have pinpointed it here and there, how would you assess not only him, but you might say getting really philosophical, how about a democracy turning out someone not trained at all in a military fashion, say, career-wise, and in time of a crisis, how did you find him? And he would be one example, obviously, but you might tie it in with other similar examples.

FLEPS: Well, you are asking me to be generic now, I guess.

ARENA: I am putting you on a spot in a way, and philosophical and speculative.

FLEPS: Yes. Well, I can tell you that during the war years, of course, we regulars were in a minority compared with the non-regulars. Most of them were draftees, volunteers and all the rest. Nixon, of course, was a volunteer. And I never ceased to be amazed at how all these other types could do a job just as well as I could, even though I was a professional. I think perhaps the key to it is motivation and inspiration more than anything else, although the training that all of us got, even the training the reserves got and so forth, was pretty well handled. We didn't go on a day-to-day basis saying "Oh, that guy's a reserve and I'm a regular" kind of thing or "He can't do it as well as I can." "He can't do it as good as this man over here because he went to the Naval Academy." There was a lot of good humor bantered about all this. We were all just part of the organization.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, before the war do you recall that there was hostility against the military man? I'm thinking of the '30's in particular and before the rise of [Adolf] Hitler seriously in the world, say up until '38? And the only reason I raise that question again is from the standpoint of recreating the times in which the President himself and you lived.

FLEPS: No, there was not any hostility toward the military in those days compared with hostilities today.

ARENA: As compared with today?

FLEPS: No. In fact, when I entered the service it was during the depression and there were long waiting lines to get in the service. I had to go through a waiting line to enlist in the Navy and it was only because--well, this gets into the personal side of my life--I was put to the head of the list in Youngstown, Ohio, because the Navy recruiting petty officer there knew that I was desperately trying to get into the Naval Academy, and the time thing was such that I had to get in real quick or I would lose out on a whole year. And he saw to it that I did. And that's really how I learned that there was a waiting list. So to get back to your question, if there was any antipathy toward military people as such I really wasn't aware of it. In some of the coast towns, like Norfolk [Virginia], for instance, there used to be the joke that civilians had doormats in front of their houses or signs in front of their houses, "Dogs and sailors not allowed," but I never saw one.

ARENA: I've heard that expression, but I didn't realize it was that particular town. And you, yourself, who were there never saw any?

FLEPS: No.

ARENA: Well, I want to thank you very much for your courtesy in allowing me to come to you directly and ask all of these questions and your answering them all so frankly and fully, and I know my colleagues in history will share this gratitude. Thank you very much.

FLEPS: You are most welcome. I have enjoyed it.