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## Charles O. Gronert (January 25,1973)

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. CHARLES O. GRONERT

January 25, 1973  
Lutherville, Maryland

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Charles O. [Otto] Gronert. We are in his residence in Lutherville, Maryland. Today's date is January 25, 1973, Arena interviewing. Mr. Gronert, may I begin by way of asking you about yourself, some idea of your own background, where and when you were born, where you received your education?

GRONERT: I was born here in Baltimore [Maryland]; do you want the date?

ARENA: Please.

GRONERT: February 20, 1917. I attended, of course, elementary school in Baltimore, Polytechnic High School, and courses at Johns Hopkins University. That's the background there. Do you want me to get quickly to the Navy years; is that the idea?

ARENA: Well, what did you take at Hopkins, and what were your interests around the time you were going in the Navy, and what had you been taking in school?

GRONERT: This was, of course, a few years prior to the Navy, but it was a little diverse from the standpoint that part of it was in the business procedures, marketing, sales management, things of this nature, and then also some engineering subjects. I have a great deal of mechanical interest or aptitude, and it was a combination of the two. And of course, today I'm doing exactly that, combining my knowledge of sales and mechanics together in the jobs I'm working in.

ARENA: Would you state those positions you have?

GRONERT: Well I work for, one firm is Temple-Pierce. They have two offices, one in the city and one in the Lutherville area, just four and a half miles from where we're sitting. They are in Lutherville, also. The other is a material-handling concern, lift trucks, fork trucks, various warehousing equipment, and they are in Timonium, Maryland, due east of where we're sitting about four and a half miles. It's a type of work, of course, that I enjoy a great deal, because you go out and you solve a fellow's problems, whether it be storage of merchandise or handling from one department to another, conveyors. It's a very interesting job. Prior to this, up to about twelve years ago, I was in sales. The business was paint brushes, and I started off locally here and grew to a stage where I finally was vice president of the concern out in St. Paul, Minnesota. I traveled coast to coast and border to border. Any other questions you have?

ARENA: No, that's good, and very helpful from the standpoint of your status with, at that time it was the Glenn Martin Company; would that be the full correct title?

GRONERT: Yes. Prior to the war, I took a job in the Inspection Department at the Glenn L. Martin Company. At that time I was not working on a Navy project. We were building planes for the British desert use, which was known as the 187.

ARENA: Did you say desert use?

GRONERT: Yes, it was . . .

ARENA: Combat in Africa.

GRONERT: It looked like a pregnant guppy.

ARENA: A pregnant guppy, the little fish.

GRONERT: It had a tremendous belly; it was a fighter bomber, quite an unusual plane, like a glorified version of a Beechcraft. And then as we got into the war, they started building the PBM flying boat. I have a picture of one down in the basement, a painting. And I was taken off the British job and got into the special procedures on this flying boat.

ARENA: And you were a civilian through all of this.

GRONERT: I was a civilian at this time, yes. And I became, of course, through getting into it in the early

stages, a supervisor of--I don't know what the actual number of men was, but--about, I would say, roughly fourteen men who were inspectors. Of course, I had a draft deferment status, which was modified from time to time. The Martin Company tried to do everything to keep me there, but to no avail. The draft board classified me as 1-A.

During this time, I had been to Washington several times to attempt to secure a Navy commission and was unsuccessful due to regulations in the security net, and when I was finally classified 1-A and subject to draw, I enlisted in the Navy and was immediately, because of my inspection background at the Glenn L. Martin Company, sent back there, doing virtually the same job that I was doing before, in virtually the same building, with the same people and almost everything identical, and for a while . . .

ARENA: What was your rank?

GRONERT: . . . although an enlisted man in the Navy, was actually still in civilian clothes for a short period of time until we were really established as a Naval unit there. I started off at the typical Naval rate of Aviation Machinist's Mate, 3rd Class, and then when they established the Naval procedure and ranks and what have you, I became what is known as a Specialist 2nd Class. Our insignia--I haven't got one around here any more--was a diamond with the two stripes. After I would say, some period of time, eighteen months or two years, I don't recall any more, I received a promotion to Specialist 1st Class.

During this time, of course, being local--most of us had quarters off the base--I lived at home with my parents at 96 Kingston Road, just on the northern perimeter of the city and roughly twenty-five minutes to half an hour away from the Martin plant. We, of course, did not have the Beltway line at that time. Now you can do it in twenty minutes, sometimes better than that, depending on traffic. I'm trying to answer some of the questions you asked me earlier, so stop me if I'm getting on the wrong track.

Being local and knowing the roads and the streets, I was very frequently called on to drive the Navy station wagon which we had and to pick up officers at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station in Baltimore and convey them out to the Bureau of Aeronautics office at the Martin plant; we called it BAR for short. Another fairly routine run was to take the Navy officers downtown or perhaps some subcontracting plant within the city or surrounding area.

ARENA: And by the Navy officers of the plant, which you very kindly allowed me to see firsthand a little while ago. Would you describe that building?

GRONERT: Well, you mean dimensionwise?

ARENA: Oh, no, just generally.

GRONERT: It was a fairly large three-story building. The first floor of the building at that time was Personnel Offices for the Glenn L. Martin Company, and the entire second floor was the offices for the Bureau of Aeronautics Representative who, during the time they were starting was Captain White, and he was succeeded by Captain [Robert S.] Hatcher, and the last Commanding Officer was Commander [James O.] Bigelow. And it was during the time that Commander Bigelow was in charge of the station that Lieutenant [Richard Milhous] Nixon was on the base. And again, as I told you earlier, it seemed to me that it must have been late spring or very early summer of 1945. I do know that he was definitely there on V-E and V-J Days, and it seemed to me that his tour on that base was approximately a three-month period, which I'm sure could be verified through the Naval records.

ARENA: Of the various officers whom you did chauffeur from time to time, how did he compare, from the standpoint of his personality, his relations with you, with the other officers?

GRONERT: We're going back so far and some of these things are quite vague.

ARENA: I realize that.

GRONERT: But my general impression, Doctor, is that he was a comparatively quiet type, seemed always to be engrossed in the task that he was performing. I don't remember how frequent it was, but it seemed he was always going to New York or Washington on some trip regarding contract work. It seemed like he always had a folder or sheaf of papers there that commanded a great deal of his attention during the twenty-or-twenty-five-minute ride in one direction or the other.

ARENA: When, and if you recall, you and he did talk, what was his attitude toward you? Did he seem very strict, did he want to maintain his officer status and separation from enlisted men? Did he seem to be a regular guy, or whatever expressions you would want to use to describe his attitude toward you, if that comes to mind?

✓ GRONERT: I wouldn't say that he was particularly taut.

ARENA: Particularly . . .

✓ GRONERT: Taut, kind of a Navy expression. In fact, most of the officers we had there were exceptionally non-rank-minded, relatively nice dispositions and did not throw their weight around. And frankly, I would say that my recollections are that he was pleasant, definitely; and

though there were several officers that weren't, they were all quite civil and reasonably nice to be with. We did not have, of course, the same type of relationship than an enlisted man and an officer would have aboard ship, because we were a little bit more lax in our general attitude throughout the base. But our officers did not run, let's say, a taut ship; they just wanted the job done, and do you best, and I would say the entire attitude throughout the entire organization was one of general pleasant environment, with a minimum of top Navy discipline, which wasn't necessary to get the job done in the first place.

ARENA: Were there ever any occasions off the base, or even on the base, where you could meet informally? I'm wondering about, maybe, some sort of a meeting that was held, maybe for V-E Day or V-J Day; maybe some sports, where the officers might play the enlisted men. Was there ever any occasion, of any type, where you could meet with him informally, that you can recall?

GRONERT: No, I would say not, because Lieutenant Nixon, of course, had quarters in Stansbury Manor and he had his wife there, and I don't recall any time that we had social events or sporting events where the officers and enlisted men participated. I'm sure they had their social gatherings, and I recall a few that we had, but I don't think the twain met on such a level. It's not standard Navy procedure anyhow.

ARENA: I think I asked you off the record, but I want to be sure it's on the record, was there ever an occasion for you to meet Mrs. Richard Nixon?

GRONERT: No, I don't believe so, because he lived so close. He lived quite near to the plant, at Stansbury Manor, and I don't recall ever at any time picking him up at his quarters, though occasionally I did pick the commanding officer up at his quarters and I met the commanding officer's wife, but I can't say that I ever met Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Nixon.

ARENA: We did say, also, thanks to you showing me the area where he did live, Stansbury Manor, that that was occupied by civilians as well as Navy--and maybe even other military--personnel, but it was overwhelmingly a civilian area.

GRONERT: That's right.

ARENA: And it was within walking distance of the Martin plant area. Do you recall ever seeing him with other officers, and anything that comes to mind regarding his relations with other officers?

GRONERT: No, I can't say that I did, because I had other duties other than driving the station wagon. As I said earlier, I was on inspection, and when someone was needed I was not the only one. I worked a certain shift, and I'm sure somebody else came and picked up after I did. But no, I don't recall anything of that nature. We didn't have any kind of real close proximity, other than when the time came that somebody needed some transportation, I was one of those probably most frequently called upon.

ARENA: Do you recall how you discovered, and did he mention it ever himself, that he had just come from the South Pacific where he had been stationed in a combat zone?

GRONERT: No, I have no recollection of that at all.

ARENA: And you do recall that he never brought the subject up.

GRONERT: I wouldn't want to say that, either. Too many years have passed. I may have heard it from one of the other officers, but no, I can't answer that. It would be a very qualified answer, and I'd be guessing.

ARENA: Do you recall that he ever mentioned, and did you know at that time, about his home town area in California, Whittier to be precise?

GRONERT: I have no recollection of that whatsoever. In fact, most of the questions that most of the officers asked me were about Baltimore, being a native. They wanted to know where this was, and how to get to here and how to get to there. And at that time, of course, I had no interest in his background, or anyone else's background. In fact, the only one that I can remember definitely where he came from was our first commanding officer, Captain White, and he'd come off the old Saratoga.

ARENA: Was that because he tended to talk about the Saratoga and his experiences, or because it was a well-known ship?

GRONERT: He probably was due to be retired at the time, but the war precluded his retirement and he was stationed on shore. I don't know where he went from there.

ARENA: Was there anything like your having to pull any guard duty and he was the Officer of the Day over you? Was there any situation like that where you had to report to him?

GRONERT: No.

ARENA: How about signing out of the automobile for the drives and that situation? Was there any Navy red tape that had to take place involving him and you, where you had to have him sign papers, or that was not involved?

GRONERT: No.

ARENA: Is there anything that I have not brought up in this brief interview concerning your relations with President Nixon that you would like to mention at this time? Any subject that I have not touched upon regarding your firsthand recollections of him? For example, your recollection of him physically. We all know what he looks like today. How did he look to you in those days, and are these impressions clear?

GRONERT: I would say my impression of him as an officer, uniformwise and everything else, is that he was quite neat. And unfortunately, even though clean-shaven or fresh-shaven in the morning, he had quite a heavy beard; and my having light hair, I felt quite sorry for him, because he still had that shadow which was one of his unfortunate liabilities in some of the photographs, particularly in his first campaign. He had a beard like a stevedore and a face like a baby. I'm sure that every time he shaved he hurt. He was one of these fellows that, I imagine about 3 o'clock in the afternoon he had to apply a little powder to hide what some people call 5 o'clock shadow; with him he had a 2 or 3 o'clock shadow. It's unfortunate, but that's one of the things I do recall; and he still has it but maybe to a lighter degree, the heavy-set jaw. He was, basically, a very nice-looking man. My recollection of him is naturally vague, but he looks today. . . . We all get older, of course, a day at a time, but I would say he's basically held his age very well.

ARENA: Have you ever had the occasion, Mr. Gronert, to run into the President anywhere, since you're not too far from Washington, and chat with him in any respect at all?

GRONERT: No, I can't say that I have. I'd like to possibly, sometime, and I think it might be a great idea if we get the whole group together and go down there, but I haven't had that opportunity.

ARENA: Have you heard of any of the others whom you recall from that period who did, and whether or not he recalled them and recalled that period, any of the



gentlemen, or ladies, whom you know who were with you at that time and knew the President firsthand?

GRONERT: The only one, I believe, is Mrs. [Emma] Stover, the telephone operator. I believe she has on several occasions received Christmas cards from him. Other than that I can't say that I know of anyone having any association with him particularly in recent years. It may be that John Renneburg is going to be able to answer a lot of these questions for you, I'm sure, because John shared the office with Lieutenant Nixon, and he was Lieutenant Renneburg, and I think they had similar sides of the same job on contract negotiations and that sort of work.

ARENA: And I'm going to see him, as you know, in a few hours, and I want to thank you very much for taking all this time to allow me to see this area where the President and you operated, so to speak, during the end of World War II, and for answering all my questions so frankly and fully, and allowing me the hospitality of your own home in which to conduct this interview. Thank you very much.

GRONERT: Thank you.