

Interview with Admiral Bobby Ray Inman

Interviewer: Cathy Bachik

Transcriber: Cathy Bachik

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Begin Tape 1, Side 1

Cathy Bachik: This is October sixteenth [Thursday], and I am Cathy Bachik. I'm here in the office of Admiral Bobby Ray Inman in Austin, Texas. Admiral Inman has agreed to spend time with me today discussing his life and experiences that he has encountered through the years.

If you could start, Admiral Inman, by just giving me some background information on yourself.

Bobby Ray Inman: My father was Herman Inman, born in Wood County, Texas, in 1905. My mother was Mertie Henson, born in Upshur County, Texas, in 1906. They were married when they were nineteen and eighteen. I am the second child born in Rhonesboro, Texas, April 4, 1931—sister three years older, brother six and a half years younger, sister eleven years younger. My father was a farmer, small businessman, later with large corporations. I lived in several small towns in East Texas the first nine years of my life and then lived in the Panhandle at Dumas during most of World War II. [I] came back to East Texas, graduated from high school in Mineola. I had just turned fifteen. I had been rushed through some accelerated learning programs early.

I couldn't get into The University of Texas at that point because they had a minimum sixteen age requirement in those days. So I began at Tyler Junior College with the veterans coming back from World War II, which was one of the great experiences of my life. Then I transferred on to UT and graduated in June 3, 1950, [with a] bachelor's degree in history, with minors in government, economics, and psychology.

I had been a pre-law student. My grandfather on my mother's side wanted me to be a lawyer. He was a judge in East Texas, and he died while I was on that school trail. In those years, Baylor had a program where you could enter law school after two years of undergraduate work. So, when still racing to be through early, I went to do that, fortunately, in the summer. I decided that torts, contracts, and legal bibliography was the dullest thing I'd ever done in my life. (Smiling)

Instead of pursuing the law, I'd come back, done the undergraduate degree. My parents had become persuaded that I was going to be a career student at age nineteen. (Smiling) So, their response was that if I wanted to go to graduate school, I had to teach for a year at least to demonstrate that I had the capacity to teach. An old family friend was the superintendent of

schools in Longview, in East Texas, and he hired me as a teacher, accepting my psychology courses as education courses. (Smiling) I taught four classes of eighth grade English and one of eighth grade history in 1950–51. I grew up a lot. I learned a lot about dealing with people, school boards, and youngsters, good youngsters.

My family agreed at that point that I could come back to graduate school here at UT, but—and I did come in that summer—unfortunately, the Korean War had started. The Korean War draft board was breathing on my neck. So, I went scrambling to avoid being drafted and ended up going to the Navy’s officer’s candidate school in Newport, Rhode Island, November 18, 1951. I finished that on March 28, 1952, commissioned as an ensign. I went to an aircraft carrier. The bulk of the rest of those duties, I think, you can get pretty easily out of a bio, so maybe I’d better stop at that point and see what kind of questions you want to ask or where you want to send this.

Bachik: I’ve heard that Rhonesboro was like a small logging camp.

Inman: Rhonesboro is a place where I barely lived at all. It is simply where I was born. Once I was an adult and began having a biography people were interested in, I deliberately left that and simply went from Rhonesboro to UT to spare my family from any kind of curiosity and/or any other problems from the years I was in the intelligence community. Rhonesboro was sort of just a crossroads, mostly a farming center. Tyler, Gilmer, Mineola were, of course, different-sized towns; Gilmer and Mineola each about three thousand, Tyler about thirty thousand in those years. My father, at various times, owned filling stations, a drugstore, a drive-in, and then worked with Shell Chemical during World War II, then moved to California when working with National Battery Company. [He] was in sales and marketing all the rest of his life. He died in 1968.

But my East Texas heritage, I had on my mother’s side, two different brothers were in the insurance business, another was a dentist. One of them moved eventually from Marshall to Houston, who’s a CPA. On my father’s side, they were either farmers or small business operators. My father was the youngest in his family by eight years. My mother was the only daughter, the second child. So, in growing up, I knew my mother’s relatives much better than my father’s. In fact, I met a first cousin on my father’s side when I was a student here at UT, (smiling) for the first time in my life.

Bachik: At the time that you entered UT were most freshmen eighteen?

Inman: Much older than that. Let me go back to that. I’d been run through the experimental programs and then ended up in high school back into a normal pace when I was eleven. And when you are three years younger in high school, kids can be pretty cruel. (Smiling) Socially, you don’t belong there. But, my way around that partly was to concentrate on grades, but partly, also, in high school years, I worked on getting people elected for office. I found people that way to keep me from getting beaten up in restrooms. (Smiling)

When I began college, first at Tyler and then here [Austin], the veterans who'd come back from World War II, they were six years–eight years older than I was. And, so, I became their mascot. (Smiling) It was a very different attitude—very different atmosphere. They told me very quickly “grow up,” so I sort of jumped from being a teenager to at least pretending to be a young adult. I found it a very stimulating atmosphere. I was only five feet, four inches high, weighed ninety-six pounds when I got out of high school. I got all my growth to 6 feet, 150 pounds in college. I was too small to be in athletics [but] fascinated by them, so the way I got reasonably close to them was by tutoring people who were on the athletic teams—football players, baseball, golf. I got to know a lot of people in that environment as well.

Bachik: When you graduated with your degree in history, had you always intended to teach?

Inman: No, never. Never intended to teach. (Smiling) Never crossed my mind that I would teach, but I learned a lot of that year. But, I did not rush back to it.

[Repetitious question asked]

Bachik: When you went into the service, did you ever intend to stay?

Inman: Oh, not at all. Purely went to do my three years. I went to an aircraft carrier that was deployed off of Korea, stayed out there when they came back to the U.S., joined them when they were going back for their fourth deployment. So, I spent a great deal of the next twenty months out in the Far East, in the Korean conflict theatre, in Japan, also [taking town] when I had some leave time. When we came back to the U.S. from that cruise, the armistice was signed.

I had sorted out at that point that what I really wanted to do was go to graduate business school. I had applied at Stanford, and they'd accepted me. Then I went to try to get the Navy to let me out early. They laughed at me and told me they weren't letting anybody out early. Pure happenstance, the day I had been to the Bureau of Naval Personnel to make this pitch and had time to visit and tell stories of the Korean War time, they got a message that one of the young lieutenant reservists on duty in Paris had taken up residence with a young lady who turned out to be a very active member of the French Communist party. They promptly released him to inactive duty. (Smiling) Each service had certain jobs they would have filled—he was the custodian of all top secret classified material for one of the divisions of this joint agency. They ran the punch cards for any ensign of JG [junior grade] with administrative qualifications, either ashore or large ship, and when they started going through the cards [they] said, Inman, he was the guy who was here this morning. By that fluke, I had orders and within a week, I was on duty in Paris.

Then, [when] I had finished my three years of obligated service, and Stanford again accepted me. I was literally packing, and I got asked to go to London as the junior aid flag lieutenant—traveling aide, social aide—for the four-star admiral who had U.S. naval forces in [the] Atlantic,

Mediterranean, Middle East theatre. When you are twenty-three years old and you've already lived in Paris a year, it seemed like the thing to do. That's how I made it a career.

I did the tour in London, and then I went to a cruiser. That tour went very well. I was shifted from being a reserve officer to holding a regular commission to that point. They told me I needed to go to post-graduate school, and the various options, the one I was selected for was intelligence. That's how I ended up in that field.

After I finished post-graduate school, I was married that summer and at the Pentagon to be a watch officer, assorting messages and doing summaries for the people who would be briefing on current events. Out of a fluke, the briefer got fired two months after I got there. So I became a briefer. I spent two years, two very exciting years, as a current intelligence briefer for the chief of naval operations, the senior military member of the Navy. It was a wonderful experience, very exciting, like walking a high wire rope every day. You would go to work every other week, get up at 2:00 [a.m.], go to work at 3:00 [a.m.], and read through literally hundreds of messages and reports and decide what out of all of that should the head of the Navy know in ten minutes. You weren't permitted to use scripts. You could put reminders; if it was a very technical item you could have a note. With that, you had to go and talk and answer questions. You would stay around and be sent to brief other people and answer questions all day long. But, it was a very heady, very exciting environment because you saw everybody from presidents to secretaries of state and [secretaries] of defense.

I went from that to a destroyer as the operations officer. I had the very good luck to get promoted early in the next selection for lieutenant commander. But, I had gotten caught up in the intelligence area. I was asked at that point to become an intelligence specialist, and I did. Most of my remaining experiences were in the intelligence area.

Bachik: I had read an article where it stated that intelligence was your third choice. What was your first choice?

Inman: Personnel administration was my first choice, and communication engineering was the second. The reason I listed intelligence at all—there wasn't a curriculum for international affairs, but I'd gotten very interested in international affairs, particularly from living in Paris and London. That's why I listed that as the third choice.

Bachik: Where is your wife from?

Inman: She was born in upstate New York and grew up in Washington, D.C. When I was coming to post-graduate school, one of the admirals who had been on duty in London had retired, and he and his family were living in Washington. We'd stayed in Christmas card contact, and they wanted me to meet the daughter of their closest civilian friends. I was very skeptical

about that (smiling), and so was Nancy. We met in August, early September of 1957, engagement was announced in February 1958, and we were married in June.

Bachik: That is wonderful. And, happy ever since, I can tell.

Inman: Twenty-eight-plus years.

Bachik: I understand that when you were commissioned to be an admiral that it was done at a very young age.

Inman: I was very fortunate to be selected for rear admiral, the first stage of being a flag officer, in January 1974. I had just little over twenty-two and one half years of service, I was forty-two. I was not the youngest; I was the second-youngest peace-time flag officer. Two years later, the summer of 1976, when the leadership of the defense intelligence agency was all fired, I got yanked up and promoted to three stars. I was being paid really as a one star, and I went straight to three. When I took that job as vice director of [the] Defense Intelligence Agency on July 20, 1976, and put on that third star, I was the youngest vice admiral in peacetime history. Then, I got my fourth star, became admiral on February 12, 1981. I was not the youngest; I was the second-youngest four star. The other one that I'm more proud of, I was only the second non-naval academy four stars in the Navy's history. There has subsequently been three additional ones. I was just fortunate to be at the beginning of change where it was becoming easier.

Bachik: How old are most of the full admirals?

Inman: Most full admirals are about fifty-five when they make full admiral. I was forty-nine. But, there have been a couple of other who have done it at that, and occasionally at fifty-two or fifty-three, [but] fifty-five is about the normal age. Many of them stay on until they're age sixty-two. I would hope that I will have had a couple more careers by then.

Bachik: How did you decide to leave that and go to MCC? [Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation]

Inman: When I made the decision to become an intelligence specialist, I knew that I was moving into a very small pyramid. For the entire Navy, in those days, there were something like 313 flag officers—rear admirals, vice admirals, admirals. No more than 10% of those could be what was called “restricted line”—intelligence, cryptology, public affairs, engineering, aeronautical engineering, oceanography—or staff corps—supply, chaplain, civil engineering—all meant your promotion opportunity to the next rank was guaranteed to be as good as the rest of the Navy. If 60% of the aviator, submarine or surface ship skippers made captain, 60% of the restricted line would be selected for captain. But when you turned to flag officer, it was a very different matter.

For intelligence, there were only two, sometimes three, flag officer openings. By gentlemen's agreement, normally if you were lucky enough to be selected for flag, you stayed only four years if you just had two stars, or five years if you had three. But I was selected so early; my peers fathered and said, "You can do more for us if you stay longer." They urged me to stay seven or eight years. My decision to leave no later than '82, when I would have had eight years from the '74 date, was that it was clear that they weren't going to select anybody else for rear admiral as long as I was sitting there. Indeed, subsequent to my retirement, another one of my friends followed me out a year later. There have been two new selectees, and they both are people who worked for me for a long time over the years, including one of them who was my executive assistant when I was director of naval intelligence. That is what prompted me to want to leave at that time. I knew I had to make an opening for bright people [that] I helped bring into the intelligence field get a chance for flag.

When I retired, I didn't know what I was going to do. I looked at a lot of things. I retired July 1, 1982. On October 4, I was called and asked would I at least consider listening to something brand new that had never been done before: a company being put together, privately-owned, from competing companies, to focus on very long-range research. I listened to them the first time October eleventh and finally January twenty-first agreed to do it, so I came in January 21, 1983. I was the first employee.

Bachik: Has MCC been going at the speed that you originally had intended?

Inman: It got off to a slower pace than I wanted it to because of the difficulties of getting some brand new organization started, deciding where to put it, and getting the processes in place for hiring people from outside the company. By the summer of '84, it was very clear that it was going to be a success and was ready to take off. It is now going at a faster rate than I had hope that it would go and has already met some of the early goals earlier than had been set by the companies as the target to go by.

Bachik: Were you pleased to come back to Austin after all these years?

Inman: It was a complete surprise. Austin was one of fifty-seven places in twenty-seven states that bid. They won going away. I was pleased to come back, though I didn't know much about it. My family moved to California, as I had mentioned, and I became very fond of California. The idea of going to San Diego had a good deal of appeal to my family, and of course, the Navy ties. My wife was very reluctant to come. [She] made it very clear to one and all that Texas was not on her agenda, and she loves it. She was the one who very much wanted us to stay. So, as I move to become the chief executive officer of Westmark in January, we're going to do it right here in Austin.

Bachik: Can you tell me just a little about what Westmark will be?

Inman: Westmark again is a new concept. Pool of capital brought together by some merchant bankers, Mason Best Company, to go buy companies that already exist, focusing initially on the defense electronics area. It is an area that is going to go through some pressure because of the decline in the defense budget; things are going to have to be done differently. Only friendly purchases, no hostile takeovers, no raids. Clearly if they want to be bought, they're probably going to have troubles. Turn them around in their performance, focus on taking technology in to product at a much faster rate, and with absolute focus on quality. No bending on quality at all. Persuasion that is one of the things that's been missing in American industry. That's why so many Japanese products have been selling so well. The perception that they are of better quality. German, as well.

These companies—we're not going to merge them all into one giant company. The goal is to keep them as a number of small companies with the belief that they can move faster with less bureaucracy. After five years or so, perhaps take them public at that point.

Bachik: Are you [the] number one employee, only employee?

Inman: Yes, number one employee again. I'll take over as chief executive officer on January first. I leave here on December thirty-first.

Bachik: I know that with you as the CEO that it will be successful.

Inman: Oh, Cathy, you're very kind.

Bachik: Thank you very much for your time.

End of interview