

## INTERVIEW I

DATE: August 8, 1969  
INTERVIEWEE: ADMIRAL THOMAS H. MOORER  
INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE MCSWEENEY  
PLACE: Aboard Admiral's plane A-3D between Newport, R.I.  
and Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

Mc: This interview is with Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, Chief of Naval Operations. Today is Friday, August 8, 1969, about one o'clock in the afternoon. We are aboard the Admiral's A-3D, I think, and somewhere between Newport and Washington, D.C. I might add this is Dorothy Pierce McSweeney.

Admiral, I would like to begin this interview with a very brief outline of your command. You were appointed in June, 1967, by President Johnson as Chief of Naval Operations and assumed command that August and have served continuously in that capacity since. From 1965 to 1967 you were Commander in Chief of the Atlantic Fleet, NATO Allied Commander in the Atlantic, and the USS Enterprise Atlantic Commander. From 1964 to 1965 [you were] Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet. Another area and time period that does concern us a little bit is between 1962 and 1964, and you were Commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the Pacific. Do I have the basic command periods and posts essentially correct?

M: Yes.

Mc: Have you ever participated in any other sort of oral history project

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similar to this?

M: Yes, Mrs. McSweeney, as you know I am President of the Naval Institute Proceedings, by virtue of being Chief of Naval Operations, and we have under way now an oral history program with which we hope to cover practically all activities of senior naval officers that are alive today.

Mc: As I explained to you, if we come to any point where you feel you've adequately covered this, if you'll tell me or will refer to that, I am sure future scholars will have access to that too. I would like to begin by asking if you recall your first meeting with President Johnson, and if you will tell me when that was, and what it was about, and what your impressions were?

M: Well, of course, like practically everyone else in the United States, I had seen Mr. Johnson many times, in the Congress and also when he was Vice President, but the first personal meeting occurred when I had an appointment with Mr. Johnson in the White House in June of 1967 incident to my prospective appointment as Chief of Naval Operations. At that time I had an opportunity to talk to him for about forty-five minutes. We exchanged the usual pleasantries, and then he discussed his experiences in World War II in the Navy, and we discussed several mutual friends, such as Governor Connally of Texas and Admiral Dick Byrd, who had been his aide when he was Vice President. Also, that was immediately prior to the Israeli-U.A.R. confrontation, and, as a matter of fact, Prime Minister Wilson was in the White House at the time,

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and we discussed the Middle East situation to some extent. Of course, the final purpose was to discuss my prospective appointment, and we discussed this very frankly, of course.

Mr. Johnson assured me that he was always accessible, and that I could contact him at any time I chose. We talked about philosophy of command, and I told him that he could count on me to always express my opinion, but that if a decision was made in opposition to the one I set forth, then, of course, he could also count on me to support the decision once the President made it. That is the way I had always operated in the Navy, that's the way I expected my subordinates to react, and he could count on me to do the same.

Mc: You did not have any personal contact with Mr. Johnson in the Senate or during his vice presidential years at all?

M: None whatever, except in large crowds, for instance, but I had never talked to him face to face before that time.

Mc: Do you know how you had come to the attention of Mr. Johnson for your appointment?

M: Well, I think that Admiral McDonald was reaching the end of his four year period, and Mr. Johnson naturally would turn to the Secretary of Defense, who in turn would request advice from the Secretary of the Navy and other people in Washington, and so I am sure that I was recommended to him as Admiral McDonald's relief.

Mc: Admiral, I would like to ask you a little bit about the channels of communication that you had as Chief of Naval Operations and with the White House as the President's chief naval advisor. I

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wonder if you could describe to me how that worked, and also tell me about any of your participation in Cabinet meetings or National Security Council meetings?

M: Well, that of course worked several ways. Beginning at one end of the spectrum, I had frequent telephone calls with Marvin Watson, who was in the White House, and later became the Postmaster General, about various and sundry problems. The Navy is a big organization and impacts across the board on many subjects that come to the attention of the President. In addition to that, of course, through the JCS channel, we frequently became involved in major questions and would be called to the White House to discuss various aspects of such things as Vietnam operations, or the budget, and main issues of that kind. In addition to that, I had the opportunity to take Mr. Johnson to sea aboard the USS Enterprise, and at that time had an extended period to talk to him personally and privately.

Mc: Could you tell me a little about that meeting that you are talking about, the one aboard the USS Enterprise?

M: Oh yes, this was on Armed Forces Day, I think in 1967, and Mr. Johnson visited various bases, such as Fort Bragg, Camp Pendleton, some Air Force bases, and finally boarded a helicopter and went aboard the USS Enterprise in the vicinity of San Clemente Island, off the coast of California. He remained there overnight, and during that time, of course, we had dinner and breakfast together. He toured the ship, asked many questions about the ship,

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and the following morning spoke not only to the crew of the Enterprise, but also the crews of the other ships in company.

Mc: Are we going down?

M: It will be another forty minutes or so.

Mc: Could you tell me what your impressions are of Mr. Johnson and how you would characterize him?

M: Well, of course, I think Mr. Johnson was what one might call, what some people have called, a complex man. I didn't feel that he was so very complex. I felt that he had a burning interest in many, many subjects across the board and that he had the energy and the curiosity to delve into many, many things. I always felt that he, having been so successful for so long in Congress by achieving a consensus, felt that in every decision he made in the White House he also needed a consensus, sought a consensus, a majority opinion; and [I felt] that--although I am not positive of this and can't document it so to speak--frequently his basic horse sense told him that the best course of action was perhaps not that recommended by the majority of his advisors.

Mc: On the occasion of your meeting aboard the Enterprise, did you all discuss Vietnam?

M: Oh, yes. You always discussed Vietnam, no matter where you were.

Mc: What was the President's mood about it and areas that he indicated that he was interested in, as far as your conversation was concerned?

M: Well, I think it weighed heavily on him, and he was, of course,

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very much concerned as to how we could bring it to a close and at the same time achieve the original objectives that had been set forth. He was willing, I think, to take every course of action possible in order to attempt to get the North Vietnamese to reach some kind of agreement that would terminate hostilities.

Mc: Did he ask you if you would do anything differently from the position we were currently pursuing?

M: Well, yes, of course, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had taken a different position on several matters. I had, as you know, some experience at the outset since I was Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet during the Tonkin Gulf incident and at the very beginning of the air attacks on North Vietnam, which began, as you recall, in February of 1965. I always felt that we should have taken more positive military action against North Vietnam and should have used all means possible at the outset; namely, I felt very strongly we should have mined Haiphong harbor at a time when it was not used very often, and therefore ships that would have entered subsequently would have been coming in at their own risk, rather than having them already in and blocking them so that they couldn't get out. I felt that we should have attacked more targets in North Vietnam, because, in my view, we tried to make too clear a distinction between a military target and a non-military target; and I feel that any resource of any country, including food and manpower, which helps them to prosecute the war, is a proper target. Because if they had been required, for instance, to put major effort into growing

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food, there would not have been so many to infiltrate south, or so many to shoot at us when we were in the northern area with our ships and aircraft.

Mc: Admiral, I do have a lot of questions on Vietnam. I would like to pursue your occasions of being at the White House and the relationship you had with the President in the position as his chief naval advisor. Did this primarily come through General Wheeler, or did you have occasion to represent different opinions than the Joint Chiefs of Staff?

M: Well, the majority of the time, as a routine, the recommendations were presented by General Wheeler, because he was the one that attended what they called the Tuesday Lunch, wherein most of these day-to-day matters were discussed. However, in the cases of major actions, then the President would call the entire Joint Chiefs as a corporate body over to the White House.

Mc: Did you ever attend any of these Tuesday luncheons?

M: Oh, yes, because, as you know, when the other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that were senior to me were out of town, well, then I attended the Tuesday Lunch. Right.

Mc: How would you describe these in the idea of them being a vehicle for substantive policy decision-making?

M: Well, they were a vehicle for substantive policy decision-making, because, of course, they would be attended by the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense, and Mr. Helms from CIA; and the issue of the week, so to speak, or the issues of the week, were

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discussed, and in many cases decisions were made. In some cases a decision was delayed until further information could be gathered or until other related events unfolded, and the timing would be established later.

Mc: Was this a clear way to make that kind of decision?

M: Well, I think it was a way. It was not well documented, as one might desire on occasions, if you get what I mean. In other words, there was a very informal approach to the problem, but it was a way of getting a quick decision once everyone was assembled.

Mc: Did this ever lead to any confusion as to following up a decision that was reached in these meetings by this informal process as opposed to a more formalized meeting?

M: I don't think it led to any confusion. On occasion it was sometimes difficult to ferret out the background for the decision.

Mc: Did you ever attend any of the congressional breakfasts or briefings for members of Congress that were held at the White House?

M: No, but I have been at the White House when members of Congress were present during discussions, but not the formal congressional breakfasts.

Mc: What was your opinion of the National Security Council as an effective institution for advising President Johnson?

M: Well, we had just been discussing, in essence, the decision-making process, and the National Security Council did not function as forcefully and as often and as efficiently as it had, for instance, during the Eisenhower Administration, because it was pre-empted to



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a large degree by these informal meetings, such as the Tuesday Lunch.

Mc: I would like to go on and discuss some Vietnam questions with you. I don't know how far we will get on it. Let me begin with Vietnam and the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident where you were Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet. I think the first thing I would like to know is: how much provocation do you think there was for this attack on our ships?

M: I don't think there was any provocation by the Maddox, which was the ship that was involved. She was operating in international waters. She was going along a track which, as I recall during the time I was Commander of the Seventh Fleet, we had repeatedly traveled, and so I was certainly somewhat amazed that these PT boats would attack a ship on the high seas as they did.

Mc: Well, we had of course been effectively scuttling some of their naval ships in North Vietnam, hadn't we?

M: No--South Vietnam had been, just as the South Koreans today are, operating along their coastline, but nothing as far at sea as the Maddox was operating. As a matter of fact, we took very detailed precautions to insure that there was no mix-up between the two. I also cannot understand how the North Vietnamese could possibly mistake the Maddox, which was a fleet destroyer, for a boat from South Vietnam. It was many, many times larger. So for them to say that there was some confusion as to what the target was, in my view, ridiculous.

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Mc: Did you take part in any decisions that followed on what our position would be, or how we would protect them, or what we would respond to?

M: Oh yes, I was right in the middle of the whole thing.

Mc: Could you tell me a little about it?

M: Well, of course, the first thing to do was to continue the operation in order to assert our rights to operate on the high seas, because, as I have said, I didn't feel that we were being provocative. And then, after they persisted and subsequently made an attack--of course this was passed back to Washington--the decision was made to lay on a two-carrier air attack against the naval facilities of North Vietnam, namely: naval bases, PT boats such as those that attacked the Maddox, and fuel supply at Vinh. With respect to the planning for that attack and the targeting and things of that kind, of course, I was right in the middle of that, and passing up my recommendations to my boss, who was Admiral [U.S.G.] Sharp, the Commander in Chief of the Pacific.

Mc: Did you have any direct contact with people in Washington, either from the White House level or the Defense Department level?

M: I had considerable contact with people in Admiral McDonald's office. All contacts with the Department of Defense, or Mr. McNamara in this case, came directly from Admiral Sharp. But frequently I would find myself with two telephones talking at the same time.

Mc: No contact from the White House?

M: No, there was no contact, no direct contact, although, of course,

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we were given information as to what Mr. Johnson had in mind and what considerations he was making. Don't get nervous now if we don't finish this time. I will see you again.

Mc: I have got a lot more to ask you. Let me just quickly get in a question about the bombing of North Vietnam. I would like to ask you what your assessment is of the effectiveness and the necessity of it? I think you told me when we were talking about it that you would have pursued further bombing targets, but I would like to have you give me now what your assessment is, thinking back.

M: Well, I felt at the very beginning, as I do now, that we made the attacks over too long an extended period of time. What I am saying is, even without making any more attacks, had we made the same attacks at an early period, when we began the first attacks, I think that the effect would have been much more productive. And, as I say again, I never have understood the double-standard we seemed to have had, in the sense that it was perfectly all right for the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong to fire rockets into Saigon or Hue and kill all the South Vietnamese, but we had a complete bar on the similar type of action against the North Vietnamese. And again, I think that had we concentrated the effort, even used the same tonnage of bombs but laid it on in a much shorter period of time, that the North Vietnamese would have been much more prone to stop their aggressive action down south.

Mc: Did you participate in the decision on the selection of sites?

M: Yes, that was done jointly between the unified Commander and the

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Joint Chiefs of Staff, who in turn would make recommendations to the Secretary of Defense that we attack certain targets. For instance, for a long time we were prohibited from using napalm, and finally permission was given. If it had been given from the beginning, we could have inhibited troop movements and eliminated barracks. Or, in addition to that, it was a long time before we could attack in the vicinity of Phuc Yen airfield, and we finally got permission to do that. In other words, what I am saying is that I think we should have attacked all these targets immediately, once we made our mind up that we were going to attack at all.

Mc: Were members of the JCS pretty much in agreement on that?

M: I would say we were unanimous throughout on that.

Mc: And in effect these were not accepted by the President--these recommendations?

M: That's right. At least, they were not accepted by the Secretary of Defense, who in turn advised the President.

Mc: I think I had better shut this off here.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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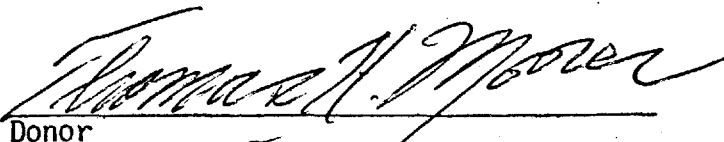
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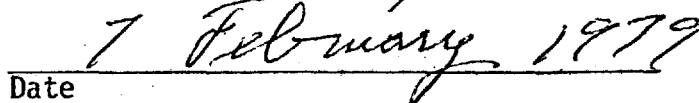
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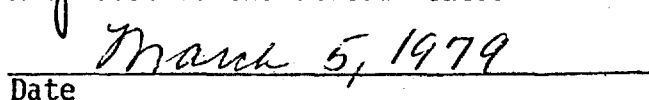
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