

Coastal Carolina University (CCU) History Project – Transcription of Interview with Mr. William H. “Billy” Alford (WA).

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Date of Interview: June 20, 2023

Videographer: Dennis Reed

Location: CCU Media Production Studio, Hampton Hall

[NOTE: The transcriber has added some bracketed, italicized text throughout to express either non-verbal expressions of the speaker or to add informative references to names or places mentioned.]

Introduction:

Hello. I am Charmaine Tomczyk, Librarian Emerita of Coastal Carolina University. I am pleased to direct the CCU History Project which interviews key individuals who made significant contributions to the development and progress of this university. Today is June 20, 2023, and I am honored to interview Mr. William H. “Billy” Alford.

Mr. Alford is a 1977 graduate of Coastal Carolina College with a degree in political science. He served in Vietnam in the United States Marine Corps. Later, he also served in many key leadership positions in the governance of and support for Coastal Carolina University.

He was a member of the Horry County Higher Education Commission from 1984 to 1989 which included a two-year term as its chairman. As such, he played an important role in the establishment of Coastal becoming an independent SC public institution in 1993.

He served as chairman of the CCU board of trustees and also of the Coastal Educational Foundation. For these and other leadership roles he was named an honorary founder of Coastal Carolina University in 1999.

Mr. Alford also has led a distinguished career in public service and a successful career in business in the Grand Strand area. He was vice president of A&I Fire and Water Restoration Company, a company he co-founded in 1974 while he was a student at Coastal Carolina.

He has served as chairman of the S.C. Highway Commission when the Conway Bypass ranked as the statewide priority for new road construction. He ensured its funding by building the bridge over the waterway when allocations ran short. Later this strategic move served as a catalyst to full funding. After the first leg of the Conway Bypass opened, the bridge was named for Alford in tribute to his perseverance on behalf of that road.

In 2001, he was awarded the Order of the Palmetto, South Carolina's highest civilian award, for his lifetime achievements and service to South Carolina.

To further recognize his contributions to CCU and Horry County, Alford was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Public Service from Coastal Carolina University in May 2017.

Interview:

CT: Good morning, Mr. Alford. Thank you for joining me today to talk about Coastal Carolina. I want to begin by your telling us where you grew up and what your early years were like.

WA: I have had a wonderful childhood, a wonderful life. I have been so blessed It all started - I had two unique parents. Bless their hearts, they are deceased now. My mother was from Germany and my father was from Marion County. And after WWI my father went to the University of South Carolina on the GI bill and he got a job in Nuremberg, Germany and he met my mother. They up here in 1951, lived in Columbia for a while My father had employment with the SC Tax Commission. He was transferred to Conway. It was like a Norman Rockwell setting in Conway. I loved it. I spent my childhood from one to age 12. It was a wonderful place... We lived in an area where the grammar school was just a few blocks away. The junior high school and the recreation department was a few blocks away and the high school. It was small enough that everybody knew each other. It was just a safe, great place to live.

CT: So, you lived in downtown Conway.

WA: I did live in downtown Conway.

CT: And what school did you go to?

WA: I went to the Conway Grammar School, and it is now the Horry County Museum.

CT: Okay, right on Main Street.

WA: Right on Main Street. It was a great school and great teachers too.

CR: Did it have the McCown Auditorium attached to it at that time?

WA: Yes, it did. It sure did.

CT: So, the school had activities there?

WA: Oh yeah. In the auditorium they had plays. They had, you know, at Christmas time they had different movies. It was a very nice place to go to school.

CT: As a young boy then in Conway, what kind of activities did you do?

WA: There were plenty. We played sandlot sports. We went to the movie theatre, High School sports. Conway's a big sports town and especially, it still is. There was always some type of activity going on.

CT: So did you play a particular sport?

WA: I played baseball, and I played football. Those were the two that I played.

CT: Wow. So that kept you busy. You had a lot of friends in Conway.

WA: I had a lot of friends in Conway. In the seventh grade my family moved to Myrtle Beach. We belonged to the Lutheran Church and that was the only church there. So, I went to Myrtle Beach Junior High School and then Myrtle Beach High school graduated in 1970.

CT: Do you remember how many graduates there were at that time? Was it a big graduation class?

WA: No, it was not. Maybe about 300 I would say.

CT: That's still a good size. You probably knew almost all of your classmates?

WA: I did. I did. I knew almost all of them.

CT: So, let's talk about Coastal a little bit. You've had many connections with Coastal over the years. So can you describe... You were a student here so let's start with that.

WA: I started in the fall 1970. I had a choice of going to Columbia without a car or come to Coastal with a car. I thought I was pretty bright and then I would transfer the next semester or the following year without a car. But college wasn't for me and I wasn't for college, so...

CT: What was it that made you realize that it wasn't a good fit?

WA: I think I was too young and maybe not mature enough to really focus on academics. So, I enlisted in the Marine Corps and went to Vietnam and came back.

CT: How many years were you in 'Nam?

WA: I was there less than a year. I got the GI Bill, came back and I started back at Coastal in 1973. It was still a two-year school where you'd have two years here and transfer to Columbia for another two years. In 1970 there were basically only three buildings out here. That was the Singleton building and a custodian home beside it. As well as Atheneum Hall and that was basically it.

CT: So, Kearns Hall wasn't there?

WA: So, Kearns Hall was not there.

CT: Wow, so three buildings So you commuted?

WA: Commuted. Yes, I lived at home at Myrtle Beach and traveled back and forth.

CT: And your major was...?

WA: In Political science. And I took some business courses as well.

CT: Why Political Science?

WA: I always liked politics.

CT: Okay. Good. Tell me what the campus was like. Because as a commuter campus my guess is that there was not a lot going on on weekends.

WA: During the football season there was a lot going on. The university had a bus and we were fortunate to utilize that bus on many trips to Columbia. And there were a lot of activities in Myrtle Beach, too. There was good bit to do.

CT: When you said a bus do you mean like a school bus? Or a van?

WA: A school bus A small school bus, not a big school bus.

CT: Okay. So, it carried a good number of people.

WA: It did. And at that time, we didn't have a gymnasium. Coastal played their basketball games at either Myrtle Beach or Conway. And their baseball on Conway baseball field.

CT: So, we used the high school facilities until we got our own. Yah, I remember the football field here was really in a different direction Than it is now. And we shared it with the high school.

WA: Yes, ma'am. Conway High School

CT: I recall that. Now you said you were a political science major, but you had an interest in business?

WA: I did. When I came back in 73 – 74, I started a business, in '75 I was married., '77 I had a child. And I graduated August ' 77, three years of summer sessions.

CT: Well, you were on the fast track. *[laughter]*

WA: I was very focused. I was real focused. *[smiles]*

CT: And to start a business while you were a student?

WA: Yes. Ma'am.

CT. How did you juggle that time?

WA: Well, it was difficult and sometimes I went out to the base at night and took courses. Because we had a branch out there as well.

CT: Oh, that's right. And then once you became a family man then you had additional time restraints?

WA: I did.

CT: And keep the business going?

WA: Kept the business going and went to school.

CT: So we were not a four-year institution even then? So you graduated from the University of South Carolina?

WA: Well, my degree is from the University of South Carolina. But I think it was in '74 that it changed to a four-year school for Coastal.

CT: So you had a ceremony here.

WA: Yes, everything was here.

CT: Okay, good. Were some of your classmates also your High School classmates?

WA: Yes, and some of my friends from Conway, my childhood friends were classmates as well.

CT: Could you name some of those for me? Or who you remember?

WA: Oh, yeah. Derwood Owens from Conway, Carlyle Watson from Conway, Randy Lee, Randy Alford, Bruce Anderson. just a whole host of people.

CT: Wow. And many of them stayed in this area and had their businesses as well?

WA: Yes, Ma'am. They did.

CT: When you were here as a student, I am sure you got to know a lot of the faculty. One that comes to mind that I know did a lot for the college and for students is Col. Bill Baxley. Can you tell me a little bit about what kind of relationship you had with him?

WA: I had a wonderful relationship with Col Baxley. He was a mentor of mine. I had the upmost respect and admiration. He was from Dillon, SC and went to West Point. And when he finished at West Point, he was stationed in the Army. He served the country very well in Vietnam and came back. He had a master's I think from Alabama. He taught a number of courses. He was all about the veterans. He took real good care of us.

CT: How did you first meet him? Did you take one of his classes?

WA: I did, Principles of Management. Peter Drucker.

CT: Oh yes, that was the textbook!

WA: Yes, ma'am.

CT: Of course, Col Baxley did a lot in terms of fund raising.

WA: He did!

CT: At this institution as well. Did his character seem to give you some insight into philanthropy as well?

WA: Yes, he was a true Southern gentleman. He was so well respected. He just had all the gifts to make things happen. Everybody felt comfortable around Col. Baxley. And that's why he was so successful in philanthropy.

CT: He did have a welcoming approach to everyone – everyone he met. Were there any particular words of wisdom that Col Baxley gave that have travelled with you all these years?

WA: He was the type of person who treated everybody as equals. He was a great example of someone who cared about everybody, the students, the veterans, the athletes. He was all about people. That's the kind of thing I try to do as well. Certainly not as successful as he was but tried to.

CT: Well, I think he would say he is very proud of your accomplishments.

WA: Well. Thank you.

CT: You played a larger role here at the institution when we were trying to become independent. And that process was a long process and an arduous one at times. Can you speak directly to some challenges that may have presented themselves when we began working towards independence?

WA: Well, the biggest thing is, if you look at, the Coastal Educational Foundation is one that really established Coastal in 1954. A lot of the land and monies and all that were donated to the Foundation. And it started out at Conway High School. And I can remember as a kid seeing students going there at Conway.

CT: And when you say Conway High School you don't mean the current building?

WA: No ma'am. I'm talking about the one that's on Laurel Street.

CT: Right. The old Burroughs School is what I call it. Is that?

WA: No Ma'am. The Burroughs School was a grammar school, but the one on . Laurel Street. Where the Middle School is now.

CT: Ah, okay. Where the middle school is now. Thank you, so I get my logistics straight. I'm sorry, go ahead.

WA: So, the founders of the university and the other challenge we had – challenge we had is we had the Horry County Higher Education Commission: and which millage was established to make that happen. In order to move forward to independence or thinking of independence, you had to have those two entities on board. And some members were for it and others were not.

CT: How many people really are we talking about with those two groups together a total number of how many members?

WA: I'm just guessing maybe thirty.

CT: Yeah, so when you talk about getting consensus from that number of people. So the likelihood is...

WA: It was difficult. So in order to do anything we had to get consensus. So we had to build a case. In order to build a case it took a lot of work and a lot of strategy. It took a long time.

CT: And what was your role, was in the Foundation?

WA: No, I was in the chairman of the Horry County Higher Education Commission at that time.

CT: And who was the chair in the Foundation then?

WA: Jimmy Johnson. And I had a close relationship with Jimmy. I looked at him for guidance. So, it worked out real well with Jimmy. And the big thing was we had to build a case. We had a

graduation and after the graduation I was invited to the Faculty House which was a little small house in the back. It was really a little shack.

CT: It was. By the pond.

WA: By the pond and there was a bunch of trash behind the pond. After graduation I was invited to go to there to the Faculty House. And I did. And then I started walking around the campus. A lot of things had changed, too. Dr. Singleton was here you know forever and then we had a new Chancellor which was Fred Hicks and then Chancellor Eaglin. We were in the university system which was critical to Dr. Holderman. He wanted to maintain the system. But after that graduation and walking away and seeing the condition of the buildings. It was horrendous. It was horrible. I felt personally that the university we were getting further and further away from the university.

CT: Further away in that they weren't supporting us financially and giving us the buildings?

WA: And in communication. So I asked a lot of questions, or the Commission did. Got back and we were in the bottom of the row. Every category: Buildings, funding, FTE funding. All of it, we were just in the bottom. And so, in order to get their attention, we had our local senator help us or assist us.

CT: And who was that?

WA: Senator Long. [*Senator Bud Long*] He informed him that there were some disgruntled people. And the next thing I know I was invited to go to Columbia and met with the President and the Chairman and other people.

CT: And you were invited by Senator Long?

WA: Dr. Holderman.

CT: Okay. President Holderman of the Columbia Campus – and the system I should say, the USC system.

WA: The system, right. He was big on the system. So we met and told him we would like to invite him to Coastal. We look at Coastal as his Camp David. And so he decided to come to Coastal We met in the Sherwood Conference room [*in Wheelwright Auditorium*]. Little did he know I had slides, or we had slides. We had all the information out as far as where we stood in the system and outside the system. . For example, if you wanted a bond bill you had to compete within the system and then outside the system.

CT: An extra layer?

WA: An extra layer. So he came down and we had the slides and showed him the Atheneum was about to fall down. He got a real upset about that. We showed him the international studies center at Camp David. It was a single wide mobile home with the taillight knocked out of it and exposed pipes and we showed him some other things. Needless to say he was not very happy.

CT: So, this was a report that you had prepared with slides for him?

WA: For him. So, he got the feeling that something was up and then we presented the same case to the Foundation what was going on and then a committee was formed headed by Paul Malone.

CT: So, when Holderman left this campus. I'm assuming Holderman was here with his entourages. He very rarely travelled alone.

WA: Oh, he had them all.

CT: Before he left did he give you any indication to you all about his response to the presentation?

WA: We met in the classroom upstairs. He basically said I feel like you are interested in independence. We basically said we don't want to be left behind.

CT: Was the report's focus asking for independence?

WA: No, it was focused on the needs of the university – of Coastal.

CT: So, it was Holderman who then said you are looking for independence.

WA: Right. He felt, he had a feeling that there was a movement to independence in that classroom.

CT: He felt an uprising - in a way.

WA: He did.

CT: Okay. So, I'm sorry, so go ahead. The next step was then.

WA: And I don't remember, I think we might have done the Foundation prior to the meeting in Sherwood [*room in Wheelwright*] I'm not sure... in the conference room in Wheelwright. But we did and we had to have those identities on board. So after the presentation to the foundation and to the commission, then we all had to work to get all these people on board so the movement could go forward.

CT: So, Paul Malone was Chair of the Foundation?

WA: He was a member of the Foundation. Jimmy Johnson was Chair. He was asked to chair a committee to look at the possibility of going independent.

CT: Ah, okay so there was an ad hoc committee for Independence within that larger group. And their role was to continue to gather information about why?

WA: They brought in a consultant. I can't recall the consultant's name.

CT: Was it Fretwell?

WA: It might have been Fretwell ...to do the research. So getting it from the beginning with Holderman and to getting the Foundation and the Commission on board was quite a task.

CT: But it sounds like you did the direct approach. You went to the man who should have been notified to start if we were part of the system that we needed assistance.

WA: Yes, I mean he promised us first of all he would fix the Atheneum and then he said he would make the Wall School of Business the number one a priority in the system.

CT: Did he come through with those promises?

WA: Well, we have the Wall Building and we got the Atheneum fixed. Now how he did that I don't know. We had them.

CT: So, your meeting with him was somewhat successful then?

WA: We got his attention. He was quite angry when he left.

CT: I'm trying to get a feel for the timeline of this. From the time that he came to campus, and he was shown the slides and your presentation to actual Independence Day in July of 1993, there must have been a good bit of time in between there and a lot of action taking place.

WA: There was a whole lot of action taken place in 1990. There was Operation Lost Trust. That was a sting. The State issue. You had the Highway Commission, and I was on the Highway Commission. There was a lot of issues there. You had the ABC Commission was going on and you had a lot of issues going with Dr. Holderman with this Foundation. There was a lot going on.

CT: I'm glad you put it in context because I tend to think of our independence as being a singular thing happening in the state but there was a lot going on in Columbia. . .

WA: There was a lot, there was a lot going on.

CT: And we needed Columbia's feedback on all of this, didn't we?

WA: Right. The support - But Dr. Holderman was losing power because of all this stuff going on with the Foundation. I really think that if he would have stayed in power it would have been difficult to pull it off.

CT: He really had a concept of a system as being very controlled by the flagship institution in Columbia.

WA: Absolutely.

CT: But I think he saw the value of Coastal in terms of its growth?

WA: He was all about the system. You had members of the Senate and the House in those areas that the schools were – the branches. He controlled the power. He had a lot of power. He was a very bright man.

CT: I recall that when independence was imminent, that Spartanburg, now called Upstate, Spartanburg campus and Aiken campus were also contemplating pulling away. That must have really been an eye-opener for Columbia as well. That prospect.

WA: I would certainly think so.

CT: Of course, it never happened.

WA: Well, see in 1973 I believe it was, Francis Marion was a part of the USC system.

CT: What do you think. since you mentioned that particular campus, what do you think really catapulted them into becoming, being able to become independent?

WA: I think they had just a powerful delegation [*Legislative Delegation*]. And had a lot of people that had a lot of influence.

CT: Was Senator Leatherman still in that district?

WA: I would think he would be. Yes. I would think so.

CT: Of course, he was very involved in the finances of the State for years and years.

WA: Oh yes, he was. Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. He had a lot of power.

CT: It was their time, wasn't it? But it was an example that Coastal could point to.

WA: Well Coastal was so unique from the standpoint in that Foundation owned the land, the commission owned the land and the buildings. For example, Singleton Building, Atheneum Hall and Kearns Hall and about 16 acres of land there in the heart of campus is owned by the Commission not by the university. So it's a little...

CT: It is a unique situation?

WA: It's a unique situation. I mean you couldn't build on the campus without the Foundation's approval. And the Commission had a contract with the university that could be broken with one semester's notice, but that was basically impossible to do anyway.

CT: You are making me realize how many moving parts there were to this. Usually, the story of independence seems like just one straight line, but there clearly was a lot of up and down, wasn't there?

WA: Yes. You had faculty who were worried about not being affiliated with the University of South Carolina, what was the retirement system would be like. There was just a host of issues that all had to be worked out to get everybody on board. People like Jimmy Johnson, Clark Parker and certainly Craig Wall, Jr. A lot of people had a lot to do with that aspect of it.

CT: It sounds like you all pretty much worked together - not saying you didn't have differences, but you collaborated.

WA: Yes, yes, Ma'am.

CT: That kind of brings us up to USC giving us independence and Coastal Carolina University having to create its own Board of Trustees. Can you talk a little bit about your experience with the Board of Trustees?

WA: I can talk about experiences when I was on the Board of Trustees.

CT: Okay tell me those years?

WA: um *[pause]* Gosh knows, I can't recall.

CT: I'm sorry, I stumped you didn't I? *[laughter]*

WA: *[smiles]* It did. I was fortunate because I served on the Coastal Educational Foundation, too, so I had knowledge of both the Higher Education Commission and the Foundation and that helped me being on the Board of Trustees.

CT: It well suited you for that position.

WA: Dr. DeCenzo did a wonderful job. Eddie Dyer. I can't enough great things about Eddie. He did a wonderful job. It was a pretty smooth transition. The focus was what we can do to make it better and the challenges we had with the physical plant as well.

CT: So, you were the Chairman of the Board when DeCenzo was President?

WA: Right.

CT: and Eddie Dyer was the Executive Vice President. So during that time what were the major issues that came before the Board?

WA: Some of the big issues was the fact of the physical plant, the condition it was in.

CT: Still an issue?

WA: Right, and how we were going to grow. And Will Garland came up with the idea of being engaged in the one cent sales tax. And he spoke with Eddie Dyer and next thing you know Mary Eaddy and Robert Rabon are heavily engaged in it. And it passed. So that really boosted the opportunity to grow.

CT: That was a hard task, wasn't it?

WA: It was. I tell you Robert Rabon and a lot of people. Even faculty members like Henry Lowenstein. They all worked hard to see it pass. But Will Garland, without that movement Coastal wouldn't be where it is today.

CT: And Will Garland was a business professor but he was also the chief financial officer.

WA: And a wonderful chief financial officer.

CT: At that time Coastal was still probably a small college. We might not have had more than about 5000 students then you were chairman??

WA: Probably more than that. But it was still small.

CT: Were there discussions in the Board about our growth at the time?

WA: Yes. Some felt like 8000 and others felt 11,000. The concern was in state and out of state tuition. So I guess now it's 11 - 11,500 something along in there.

CT: Yes, more like 12. Yes, the in state out of state issue I think was imposed on us by the state. Because as a state institution, we were expected to serve South Carolinians. I think they watch that ratio very closely. The fact of the matter is the out of state students really carry the load for tuition and help our budget quite a bit.

WA: They absolutely do. Right.

CT: Being a student yourself at Coastal, were there discussions during the Board that you felt particularly suited, experienced with to talk about as a former student?

WA: As far as...

CT: Any topic at all- any that came up - admissions the type of student, majors, the campus environment...

WA: No, not really, not when I was a student. I was so busy I had my plate full.

CT: I forget what a different time it was on campus.

WA: But it was fun. It wasn't a big campus. It was a fun place to be.

CT: I think many students today would echo that and say it still is. I want to talk more about Coastal before we go into your business career or your military career. Clearly, this series is to talk about the history of Coastal and to give more insight into how it came into being and how it's become what it is today. Are there any things about Coastal's history that you particularly feel need to be highlighted in terms of its accomplishment or its success?

WA: Oh yes, yes, a host of things. Back when I was growing up there was a big divide between Conway and Myrtle Beach. And Coastal was a place people could meet and work things out. I remember when Coastal – when the Singleton Building had an Open House. I was a kid and I went with my parents to Open House. I can also recall a civil defense exercise. I spent a night in the Singleton Building with Geiger counters and all that during the cold war.

CT: Oh wow, because it was a brick building, okay, I never realized it was classified as such.

WA: So it was engaged in community in a lot of ways. Projects such as the saving the Railroad. Coastal was heavily involved in that. The creation of the Area Council of Transportation that lobbied for Hwy 22, the Carolina Bays Parkway and there were so many other projects that Coastal was heavily engaged in the community and made things happen. I doubt seriously that Carolina Bays Parkway would be here today if it wasn't for the faculty and the staff that were engaged in these projects.

CT: How were they engaged?

WA: Well, you got to understand, the core of the Carolina Bays Parkway is through the Carolina Bays.

CT: Ah, the environmentally controlled area.

WA: Right, so having those people involved in those environmental issues and bringing everybody on board. Everybody was part of the process. I don't think that would have happened if it hadn't been here at Coastal, in fact I know it wouldn't have happened.

CT: Somebody did some great planning in covering all the bases that would arise in Highway Construction. Were you on the SC Highway commission at the time?

WA: Yes, I was on it.

CT: So, you knew the process that one had to go through to make that happen.

WA: I was very fortunate. And a lot of people were very kind to me on the Highway Commission. And a lot of people like Myrtle Beach, too and they had homes in Myrtle Beach. That helped a lot as well.

CT: I'm getting a sense that all of this happened just because of the relationships between and among the people in these groups. Not so much even the process or the requirements of the task but the conversations and the work among people.

WA: Yes, everybody worked together. We were very fortunate. Mr. Wall was such a big player in the state. And so was Craig Wall, Jr. You had people like Jim Creel was on the State Development Board. Bill Sigmon who was Parks, Recreation and Tourism. Board, PRT. And you had many others. You had some strong leaders in the delegation [*the local Legislative Delegation*]. And everybody worked together. Mark Garner, Bob Grissom [*Major of Myrtle Beach*], Ike Long [*Mayor of Conway*] –I mean, everybody came together. It’s kind of like “don’t mess with me.” You always had those views along the Waterway.

CT: The Independent Republic of Horry.

WA: Absolutely, Independent Republic.

CT: it also seems to me that part of this was moved along because of who was at the helm at that time. Edward M Singleton had such a connection with Conway and with this area, didn’t he?

WA: Dr Singleton did so much. He was another mentor. I felt the world of him. He was so well respected and liked. The delegation liked him. We had Senator Stevens, he was number three in the Senate from Loris. We had Charles Hodge., chairman of the Ways and Means. There was a lot of juice there. Dr. Singleton could use that in getting things for Coastal. So, the timing was perfect. But you had all these other people who were very strong in business and had the connections across the state.

CT: Well that’s what teamwork is like, right, not one person has everything, but together.

WA: It’s the “We” approach

CT: Yes, it’s The “We” approach. I like that.

WA: Yes, Ma’am.

CT: Thinking of Singleton. I’ve had other people who I interviewed saying that when Coastal was small they were able to actually walk in to see Dr. Singleton, - it was Mr. Singleton at the time - and chat with him in Singleton Building. Did you ever have the opportunity or experience to meet with him in his office.

WA: Oh yes I sure did. [*smiles*] I had a couple of lectures from him when I first came out of here. And Mrs. Allen, she was a sweetheart too.

CT: Mildred Allen, his executive assistant.

WA: It was wonderful – everybody. It wasn’t that big. It was open house. You only had really Singleton Building and Atheneum Hall.

CT: You could stand in one place and turn around and see it all.

WA: That's right.

CT: Well, thank you for sharing those times. I think Coastal has changed so much, I think we forget or we don't know what small beginnings we came from and what we are now. Let's move to your other accomplishments outside of Coastal. We kind of touched on them already with your highway commission. But tell me a little bit about maybe your military service, or your business service or your public service, however you want to approach those.

WA: Well, the military had a big impact on me in leaving home and being away.

CT: Where did you have boot camp?

WA: Parris Island.

CT: Parris Island. That was a tough environment.

WA: Yes Ma'am. I was then. It was different. It really changed my life the Marine Corps I am very fortunate to have been part of that branch of the military.

CT: In the Vietnam War were you drafted?

WA: No, ma'am I enlisted.

CT: Was the draft going on at that time?

WA: yes, ma'am.

CT: You knew you wanted to be a marine, rather than another branch?

WA: Well my father was in the Marine Corps. And like I said I just wasn't ready for college. It wasn't I just needed to take a sabbatical sort of speak.

CT: A Sabbatical to Parris Island [*chuckles*] So you didn't need your parents' consent. You were old enough at the time?

WA: I hitchhiked from Conway. Signed the papers. Went to the bus station. Got my physical and then went to Parris Island

CT: And after your training you went directly to Vietnam?

WA: I went to Guantanamo Bay Cuba for five months and twenty days and then I went to Vietnam after that.

CT: Hearing that length of time I know you counted each and every day you were there.

WA: Each and every day. There's not a lot to do in Guantanamo Bay.

CT: So when you were sent to Vietnam what was your tour like? What was your responsibility?

WA: Well it was the latter part of the war it was 1972. And Vietnamization was going on and during that time I was stationed in Okinawa. The Easter Offensive came about and it wasn't working and then that's when they sent our battalion in.

CT: That's when the Marines are sent in.

WA: Yes ma'am.

CT: And I recall you said you were there for only five months.

WA: A little more than that it was maybe seven or eight.

CT: And I'm sorry I didn't mean to say only. Five months can seem like an eternity. Is there anything about that time that you would like to talk about.

WA: The only thing I could say is I have a lot of respect and admiration for the people that went there in 1966-67, especially 68, 69 and 70. There were a lot of heroes. I was just honored to be there. I am certainly not a hero by any means.

CT: Well we thank you for your service nonetheless.

WA: Well thank you, but there were a lot of people who went through a heck of a lot more than I did.

CT: Now you came back to the states. Were you stationed somewhere?

WA: I came back to Pendleton what they call staging. And I got out and I enrolled in Coastal in 73.

CT: You were not hurt in Vietnam?

WA: No ma'am. I was very fortunate not to be hurt.

CT: Not physically hurt.

WA: No ma'am.

CT: Thank heaven for that. And then you came to Coastal. My guess is that there were other veterans here?

WA: Oh yes, ma'am. There were quite a few veterans here.

CT: Did they form a group?

WA: We had a Veterans Club. Col Baxley, he was the advisor of the Veteran's group.

CT: I knew there was a time before we got ROTC on campus.

WA: It was way before that.

CT: I wasn't aware of that. The time seemed to be right to form such a group.

WA: yes. Ma'am.

CT: Let's focus on your public service. We touched on many things already: your help with Coastal Carolina, your work with the highway commission. But there are probably many other local or state things you got involved in that you would like to speak about?

WA: I served on a number of commissions, with the educational commission task force under Governor Riley. I was on different task forces for Tourism, things of that nature. I served on the Santee Cooper board. The Board here at Coastal. Chamber of Commerce, I served there. The Rotary Club. Chair of the Board of Trustees at Grand Strand [*Hospital*]. We were fortunate to get the cardiac surgery center there.

CT: Tell me a little bit more about that because now Grand Strand Hospital is known national as a heart trauma unit. I forgot what level, but they really have an excellent facility there.

WA: They do. The way it started out was the fact we needed to get the certificate of need. In order to get the cardiac surgery unit. Well, it's pretty difficult. They are lots of hospitals. They didn't want you to have it. We met with the Medical University. [*MUSC – Charleston*] We said Look we send all our trauma patients there. What can we do? So we worked out a joint programs where they did the surgery here but it all came from the Medical University...the surgeons. Then it got to the point where they want to go and have it.

CT: Was that likely the plan from the beginning? We would start by using their surgeons and the volume would be such that they would just say you are on your own now?

WA: No. We were hoping that that would happen, but we had to start somewhere. And Neil Trask was heavily involved in that and Bob Grissom.

CT: And what was his role?

WA: He was cardiology...

CT: Oh, Dr. Trask. He is still practicing, isn't he?

WA: Yes, he is a wonderful person.

CT: His daughter came to Coastal Carolina University. She was one of my student assistants as a matter of fact.

WA: Oh. Is that right? Good.

CT: When you talk about building a community which Coastal was really strongly involved with, having health care facilities is paramount in having a growth in any area. So that was really quite an accomplishment.

WA: There were a lot of people engaged in that. That was a big deal. The Cardiac surgery unit. There were so many different projects.

CT: I remember seeing an article about the boy scouts giving you an award. Do you remember that?

WA: Yes, I do.

CT: Were you a boy scout as well?

WA: Yes, ma'am but not for long.

CT: You never made it to Eagle Scout?

WA: No, ma'am. I didn't make it to Eagle, but I went to the Big Boy Scouts. [*referring to the Marine Corps*]

CT: So had you been involved with them over the years?

WA: Yes, ma'am. Not a lot. But I have been involved with them.

CT: Tell me a little bit about your business. I am still so surprised to hear that while you were a student you also had a business.

WA: Well, I had two partners at the time.

CT: Two partners?

WA: Right. We all formed it at the same time.

CT: Mr. Isaac was one.

WA: Right. And his son, Danny Isaac, Jr. It was a small thing. I mean we did carpet cleaning, pressure washing, and that type stuff and then we emerged from there and got bigger.

CT: So, it started out with your just doing, buying the equipment and starting some services.

WA: Well, initially, it was a carpet cleaning company called Danny's Carpet Cleaning and we merged that and started the A&I and purchased that equipment and grew it from there.

CT: Knowing that you took some business classes, I wondered if you had done a business plan or a marketing plan any of that or did it just spontaneously happen because you had the carpet cleaning business to start with.

WA: It actually helped a lot but we did a fire loss for a family in Murrells Inlet and the insurance adjuster said we don't have anybody in this area. So we went down that niche and it worked out for us.

CT: You were just in the right place at the right time in terms of need. And A&I is still in business today?

WA: Yes, I am retired from it. My partner Danny Isaac he has it and doing well with it.

CT: And that's quite a accomplishment because there is a lot of competition now in that area for restoration...

WA: Yes, every time you turn around. There is. There is a lot of competition.

CT: You have the reputation of longevity with yours. That's fantastic.

WA: Yes, ma'am. Forty some years.

CT: Do they call you for consultation?

WA: I have been retired now for five years. I spend a lot of time in Beaufort. I have a farm over in Marion. County, I try to stay busy with those things.

CT: What kinds of things on the farm do you do?

WA: We lease the farm out as far as crops. We have a gentleman that does that. We just go over there and fish and hunt and have a good time.

CT: So you have some ponds there, water and some forest as well. What a nice respite. Is that a family farm?

WA: It was a family farm. It was my grandmother's farm.

CT: How wonderful that you have maintained it. Let's talk and go back to Coastal now and talk a little bit more about present day. You've seen the history of Coastal over so many years. How do feel about it now knowing what it's been through and knowing what kind of future it has

WA: I think Coastal has a phenomenal future. The purpose in the formation of Coastal initially was to educate the sons and daughters of the Independent Republic of Horry and it has certainly grown beyond that. I don't think we can ever forget where we came from and how we got

started. And how important the University is to the community. I would certainly like to see more community outreach. I am more interested in quality and not quantity.

CT: When you say community outreach, what kinds of examples are you thinking of?

WA: We have a lot of challenges. If you look at it - our high schools... The whole school system has challenges. With the immigration issues, we have kids come in and go to our schools, they speak the same language but they have different dialects. So there are challenges in there. That's the biggest thing I'm concerned about, is the fact is the children. It's the safety and welfare of the area. They have a lot of challenges.

CT: So in what way do you think Coastal could assist in that issue?

WA: I think the students here...

CT: The education majors?

WA: The education majors would be wonderful and we have a lot of retirees that are looking for something to do. So we can have some kind of engagement with retirees and use their resources to help certain areas. Even though we are growing at a rapid pace, there is a lot of talent that's coming in here and we need to harness that talent to enhance the quality of life in this community.

CT: Well you know Coastal for a long time has had a mentoring program in the college, Dalton Floyd mentoring and I know they do a good bit of work in the public school system.

WA: And I'm not criticizing anything that Coastal's doing.

CT: No, I understand.

WA: I would just like to see more.

CT: More of it. Right. And I think you're right in that: different approaches, more programs and different programs are needed as the situation changes. The bilingual issue or the multilingual issue is very important for reading, writing and all of that. So it sounds like Coastal has a lot of opportunities to stay engaged with the communities and work with its communities.

WA: It does it has a tremendous opportunity, and we are so fortunate to have Horry Georgetown Tech, too. The combination of those two. It's a perfect match. But Coastal can be whatever it wants to be. It's just a matter of focusing. I think Dr. Benson will do that.

CT: I think each of the leaders we have had at Coastal has focused on different aspects and has moved us forward.

WA: They have. Yes, ma'am.

CT: Well, Billy it's been a real honor to speak with you today, your long history here at Coastal and we are so glad you chose to stay in Horry County. And continue to contribute to all the needs that it has. Your talents have been very helpful to us.

WA: It's been my pleasure too.

CT: Any final words you would like to say about Coastal?

WA: I'm excited about the athletic program. It's a wonderful place. I owe more to Coastal than it owes me and I am grateful to be a part of it.

CT: Thank you very much.