

Interview with Chester Hennis, February 7, 1995

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Transcript:

Interviewee: Hennis, Chester Interviewer: Date of Interview: 2/7/1995 Series: Southeast North Carolina (SENC) Length

Interviewer: Chester now lives in St. Louis, Missouri. Chester why don't we start with what is your connection with Southport and Oak Island area.

Hennis: In 1941 I came from boot camp in New Orleans directly to Oak Island. I remained there for about six months and I found out that the best detail around here would be Bald Head because I like to hunt and I like to fish. So I immediately asked to be transferred to Bald Head and because Captain Burnett was a real understanding, super nice guy and a terrific person, he agreed to it.

It was going to be temporary and I ended up staying there for three years. I went there as an apprentice seaman and I ended up as a boswain's mate- a first class boswain's mate. In the meantime after I first arrived, another original detail, there were only two of us stationed there. The guy was a terrific boswain's mate that was there on my arrival so he taught me an awful lot about the ocean, about boats and about the sea in general and we became really close friends.

We ate good. We enjoyed one another. We took turns going on liberty. We had a very good time. After about six months after the war started, actually my original assignment was over there around in the fall of '41. When the war started they decided they had to increase the personnel over there because we had to stand watch 24 hours a day. We used the new lighthouse which is now gone. It

was a skeleton lighthouse.

We used that for a lookout tower and the watches were every four hours. We got to see a lot of ships being sunk because they were sinking these ships right off the 8 mile slew through the Frying Pan Shoal. So this became...we really liked it and there were a few more men over there. We had a good time.

Then they decided they better have a horse patrol because it was a pretty good size beach to cover by sight. With the horse patrol we had to have a lot more men so they opened up the old Coast Guard station which was about in the middle of the island. We enjoyed it quite a lot because now we had additional recreation besides the protection.

Interviewer: Was that the lighthouse station?

Hennis: Yes, it was the original Coast Guard station. So they stayed there and we built some stalls and so forth. We got a lot of horses. These horses were either donated or came from the cavalry. They were old cavalry horses. We had a lot of fun with these horses. We enjoyed it. Part of my job was not only with the lighthouse but with the old Bald Head. We had a radio tower in old Bald Head that sent out a signal C -.-., that's where all the ships could get a beam on it and come on in. So we took care of that.

I had to take liberty parties ashore every day and pick up parts, food, supplies, whatever and bring it back. So the time went fast. We enjoyed it. We had a lot of time to swim. We used to swim the horses every day because they'd get saddle sores if you didn't. It just became a fun place.

We'd have visitors over there. A few of the girls from Southport would come over and have little parties. Everything worked really nice. We could fish, we could hunt. I got in the habit of hunting every night during the winter for coon. I'd get about five every night. I had a little dog, I boarded a Dutch freighter. The guy gave me a little puppy, a small dog and I trained him to tree squirrels and tree coon.

He'd go up in these little palmetto berry trees and they were really easy to shoot and I would sell them. I was doing better with that than I was with the service pay which wasn't very good. People during the war, especially the colored up here in Wilmington, were happy to get the coon meat cause meat was scarce. So I'd get as much for the meat as I'd get for the hide. So it worked out very nice and I enjoyed it very much.

Interviewer: Where did you stay? Did you stay in tents or did they have buildings?

Hennis: No, we had buildings. I believe Noni has some pictures of the buildings. There were three buildings at the far end and they were originally for the lighthouse personnel and then we took them over.

Interviewer: Okay, those three buildings are still over there.

Hennis: I believe they are.

Interviewer: How big a detail was over there? How many people?

Hennis: Including horse patrol?

Interviewer: Yes.

Hennis: I'd say about 30. At the station where Charlie's cabins are, there were about a dozen of us there and then there were about 20 or so on horse patrol.

Interviewer: The horse patrol is particularly interesting to people around here because that's so unusual for the Coast Guard to have people who rode horses. Could you tell us a little bit about how they selected them, was it separate unit and how was it all set up?

Hennis: Well when they decided that they needed a horse patrol to cover the beaches, they sent a memo out asking for volunteers of anybody that knew anything about horses. So all these kids from Texas and Oklahoma thought they were cowboys so they volunteered immediately. They were tickled to death. They were scared of the ocean, scared of boats and here they're in the service and it was like a Godsend to them. Man, they wanted to get on those horses and get away from the boats.

So they volunteered and it worked out real well. They knew horses and they liked to ride. I don't say it was a 100% from Oklahoma and Texas, but a large portion, there were a lot of farm boys that could ride. We happened to have a boy who happened to be a real close friend of mine. He was a golfer up in Charlotte. He was in the horse patrol because he thought it would keep him off the water cause he got seasick.

So he thought this was a good detail but then he finally hated horses. We had a good time though and everything worked out real well.

Interviewer: Sounds like the kind of guy the Coast Guard needs.

Hennis: That's right, you need all different types. The horse patrol worked out really good and we believed that it did a good job because nobody invaded that I know of on the beaches after they established the horse patrol cause it was continuous almost all up and down the coast.

Interviewer: Was it all day long?

Hennis: 24 hours a day. Every four hours.

Interviewer: But what were they really looking for?

Hennis: Well see those submarines were operating right off the coast and they thought they'd put somebody ashore maybe in a life raft or however. They'd get ashore and they could be intercepted that way. So it worked out real good. We didn't have any problems.

Interviewer: Weren't they also hunting for shipwreck survivors and bodies?

Hennis: Almost anything in the world that would come ashore. They even looked out after the turtles when they came ashore to lay their eggs to make sure there were no problems. It was a good operation and I think it was considered a success. And they didn't have that much money tied up in it because the horses were donated. Like I said they were old cavalry horses. A vet would come only on call so we didn't have expenses like that.

Interviewer: Did they also run on Oak Island?

Hennis: Not right there at Oak Island, no they didn't.

Interviewer: It was mostly more a boat...okay.

Hennis: They're all up and down the coast, but not where it was populated.

Interviewer: But if you could get there in a vehicle, they didn't use the horses.

Hennis: That's right.

Interviewer: The turtle part of it is interesting because I'll bet you the people on the turtle watch now certainly are not aware that the Coast Guard guys did that 50 years ago.

Hennis: Well I'll tell you, the turtles are more plentiful. Apparently, then you can be up in that tower and kind of watching with your binoculars and you could see the next morning, you know how a turtle...you can see that track going down. Well you could just follow that track right up to the next and there they'd be. Now that was a restricted island.

Civilians weren't allowed over there. But Mr. Sherl who owned the cafeterias, he owned that island and as a result he could give his friends permission with the Coast Guard's permission to come over and occasionally I'd bring people over there to do a little hunting or fishing whatever. They had to be well known people that they could trust. But they still wanted to be sure that nobody got those eggs.

So we'd keep a good eye on them, but the people were of the caliber that you didn't really have to worry about it. But you never knew so you just kind of watched as close as you could. Sometimes those fishermen might come ashore. The Coast Guard was real friendly with all fisherman because most of them were real local people that they all knew and trusted.

If they'd be in trouble with their boat, a lot of times they'd put up a white flag and we'd go out and tow them in. As a result any time we needed a few shrimp or anything, we'd go out on one of the boats and they'd give you a bucket of shrimp. So it was really good.

Interviewer: What else did you hunt beside the raccoons?

Hennis: Well we could trap mink. There was a lot of mink over there. It was loaded with coon. We didn't kill any squirrels because I don't think they would have been too good to eat. They were little gray squirrels. The fishing was tremendous. We had a lot of good fishing off Frying Pan Shoals there.

If we wanted shrimp or clams or oysters, they were plentiful at the time. You could just find them anywhere you wanted.

Interviewer: Have you been back to Bald Head recently?

Hennis: No, I haven't been back there for about two years. I went over just to see how it had changed and it had changed immensely. The little incident that occurred, one day we had a party over there and it was a nice group of people. Captain Barnett's daughter was there and Miriam Frank and a whole crowd of us had a party over there. We were all partying and having a good time. We decided we'd swim over to Oak Island.

So we all got in the water and started to swim and they started to drop out. They thought this was foolish. We were starting from up at the end near the shoals and by the time we got to the end of the island, there were only two of us left, Captain Barnett's daughter, Wilma, and myself. So she said she thought this was foolish, it would take all afternoon. I said I was going to go.

So I kept swimming and I ended up in Southport. In the meantime, Wilma calls her dad and says Chester's out there swimming and we don't see him anymore and he's been out a long time and he said he was going to swim to Southport. He thought oh my God so he calls Caswell. The Navy had a base there at Caswell and they could watch that inlet there and they said nobody had come through there.

So they sent a boat out. Walter Lewis went out. He was the best boatman that they had at Oak Island. He was terrific. So he came out and started looking. He said he couldn't find me. So by that time I had gotten ashore there by the government dock. I went to the USO and they said I was in trouble, they said they were looking for me all over the place and I was in bad trouble. They said I'd better call the station.

So I called Captain Barnett and I told him I was over there in Southport. He asked what I was doing in Southport. I said I had gone for a little swim and got caught in the current and I ended up in Southport (laughter). He said okay and he laughed about it. He asked who I was with and I told him. He said I was with a good crowd so that was okay. There was never anything said about it. Anyhow it was a nice experience.

Interviewer: What was your total military experience? When did you enlist? How long were you in?

Hennis: Well I enlisted in the summer of '41. I was going to be drafted. Prior to going in the service, I had spent about three months out in California with an uncle of mine in Long Beach and I saw the good detail the Coast Guard had out there and I thought if I have to go into the service this will be it. So I went into the Coast Guard thinking I'd be stationed as a lifeguard in Long Beach, California and ended up in Southport. I was really disappointed at the beginning.

I had been in boot camp in New Orleans. I'd always been in a big city all my life. When I came here I thought oh my God, this is bad. I found it was the greatest place in the world. We'd get up in the morning you know if we happened to be on liberty. We'd go to the drugstore right here and we'd all meet there because there was a post office next door to the drugstore and we'd get our mail and the whole town would be there.

We'd decide that morning what we were going to do, go horseback riding or go sailing or swimming or fishing, whatever. So it worked out real nice. Man I started loving this town and man I wanted to stay the rest of my life. I really did like it. But it was good.

Interviewer: The audience is applauding (laughter).

Hennis: Well I met so many nice people like Geneva Smith. She was real good to the servicemen because she's got three boys and her whole family has always been on the water. She was well acquainted with the servicemen. Her dad, I believe it was her dad, Charlie Swann who was captain of the lighthouse. She's still a real good friend of ours. We just had dinner with her today.

I don't know. I just really liked this town. Then I decided it was time to go on. The war was getting a little more serious and I was enjoying it and I thought this isn't right. So I volunteered to go to the west coast and help out over in the Pacific.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Hennis: That was '44. So I got out there and I got aboard ship and we participated over there for about a year. I was involved in a rather serious accident, the captain of the ship and myself both got hit pretty hard. So I spent the next year, my last year in the hospital. I was in nine different hospitals. I was in four overseas and five in the states. I was in a body cast from the tips of my toes to my armpits, both legs spread out in this position laying flat on my back. Plus I had this arm in a cast.

The only thing that was out was this one arm. That's all I had exposed. So I stayed like that. They were tremendous. Once I got over in the Philippines and a few of those hospitals it was kind of rough, but they were trying to get me back to the States as quickly as possible because they didn't want to have to an operation overseas like that. They didn't have whatever they needed.

So we were headed back to the States. We had engine trouble, we were on a plane. I can remember this one boy who was laying on the deck of the plane there. He had to throw up. His jaws were all shot up and they were wired together. He got air sick and he's trying to throw up through a straw if you can imagine that.

Then I had a lieutenant right above me who was strapped in restraints and he kind of broke them loose and there was another officer up in the forward part of the plane and they're both shell-shocked. There was "Fire one, fire two", they're hollering and he got his hands loose. I think

this guy is panicking and I'm right below him. We're pretty close together and I see his hand coming down and I can't move. I'm hollering for the nurse.

She said she'd take care of him so she gave him a shot, but then about every hour she'd have to give him a shot. Every time he'd start to get lose and get panicky, she'd have to give him another shot. So we changed planes, I think it was in Guam, and when we changed planes there a nurse relieved her. Now that was a little nurse, she was about 5 foot tall. She was relieved by a nurse that was about 6'9", she appeared to be. She had to duck in the plane. So this little nurse was telling her about these couple of guys, how bad they were and they might get violent.

She said, "I'll tell you what. I'll take care of it, don't worry about it" and she came with a syringe about that size. She hit them and said they won't give us any more trouble. Never heard a word out of them the rest of the trip. Nevertheless, we got to Hawaii and it was so nice because prior to that you'd be in the battle land and maybe there were trying to get down, we went from the ____ Bay up to Manila in an LCM. There were a whole bunch of us.

They couldn't get it out and they couldn't get the LCM close enough so the guy was rocking the thing trying to get us a little closer. Well the poor guys that were shot up real bad, you know, they were screaming and hollering cause it was jarring them. When we got to Hawaii, we got in a regular stateside ambulance. We had a concrete highway. We got to this hospital, they had fresh eggs, fresh fruit, fresh everything.

There was the best looking bunch of nurses on this ward. This doctor must have picked them for looks because they were outstanding. I was only supposed to stay there for about three days to recuperate a little bit and then finish the trip to the States. I talked to this doctor and he said if I wanted to stay there, he could do a lot for me. I forget his name, but he was from New York and he was really a terrific doctor.

All the nurses had been like at Bethesda, Maryland and various places and they had never known a better doctor. I said I'll stay and I stayed there until I was pretty well cured. So it worked out really well.

Interviewer: Well it looks like they did very well by you. You look very fit nowadays.

Hennis: Yeah, I'm feeling real good. I've done real well. Everything is healed up pretty good. I'm still about 50% disabled, but I had been 100% for a long time.

Interviewer: You mentioned before we started taping about a Brazilian ship off Bald Head that was ...

Hennis: Yeah, that was during the war while I was there. This was a coffee freighter loaded with coffee coming from Brazil. What happened, we had a real bad storm and during the war they were scared to go outside too far and they were trying to slip through that 8 mile slip in the shoal and they were on the ground.

They were taking a beating and they were going to sink. So they called for help and Walter Lewis was in charge of the detail and he took the crew out there. That boat I think may still be at Oak Island, I'm not sure. It was a self-balanced, self-riding boat. He took it out and he got 32 men off of that ship, one at a time and broke one leg. Didn't lose a man. They were merchant Marines, they were used to the water, used to boats. They knew what to do and the men on the boat knew what to do.

Walter was so fantastic that he just came right up to that ship. They'd jump off and come down, circle around, get another one and brought them all in. The ship was sinking fast and before we could get away, it went under. He was tremendous. He was probably the best boatman I believe that they had around this area.

Interviewer: Give us some other names of people that you served with at Bald Head.

Hennis: Well one of the boys on the patrol was Bob Hood. I remember him real well because he was a golf pro from up in Charlotte and he was practicing golf all the time so we all kind of remembered him. Bob Miller was one of the boys from Philadelphia. He was there at the Coast Guard station with me. Leland Willis was the man who was the bowsman in charge when I first went over there and tremendous, he was from a boatman from way back and really good.

There was Rhinehart and Rhinehart was from Philadelphia, terrific guy. We had two kids from Texas there. They were brothers. Hart was their name, Jim Hart and I think the other boy was Bob Hart. We had a kid from New Orleans, his name was Jesse Gilleo. We had Bob Kesey was over there for a while and ___ Parker, he was from Oklahoma. We just had a real nice group. They were pretty well spread out from all around the country really. Mostly kids like say from horse patrol were from Dallas, Texas and Oklahoma, down through there.

So the captain transferred him. He was really lenient and a good guy. He'd do nothing to hurt

anyone, but he thought it would be best if they were transferred. They went out to the west coast and got aboard ship and they were torpedoed, almost as soon as they got out there. He really felt bad about it. They were all three lost, but there were a lot of nice guys there at Oak Island. I can't remember all their names.

Interviewer: Well I can't remember things that happened last week as well as you're remembering. A lot of people who lived in Southport at the time probably will remember a lot of the names.

Hennis: Oh, I'm sure they will. Some of them come back to Southport.

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier about the golf pro, letting you ride his ship for him?

Hennis: Yeah, it was a real nice sideline we had there besides the hunting which I'd make a few bucks on, Bob Hood didn't like to ride at night especially and he would give us \$5 to ride his ship. We became real good friends and I'd go up to Charlotte with him to the country club and his wife was a hostess up there. We'd spend two or three days up there and we'd have liberty and have a real good time up there.

I used to dive for the Y from the day it was built, from the day I went into the service. When I got up to the country club, I wasn't worth a darn playing golf so I started diving there at the pool. Man, I had a lot of girls. They liked watching somebody do the dives (laughter).

Interviewer: Yeah, \$5 in those days was a lot.

Hennis: Well the base pay when I went into the service was \$21. They took out \$6 for insurance so you had about \$15 left for a month.

Interviewer: Okay, somebody's giving me notes to ask about Stinky Avant.

Hennis: I don't know him (laughter).

Interviewer: Oh, phooey! Well does anyone else have questions?

Second Interviewer: What about the John B. Gill tragedy?

Interviewer: Were you out there when the John B. Gill . . .

Hennis: I was on Bald Head at the time.

Interviewer: What did it look like from Bald Head?

Hennis: You could see it very well. But at the time we weren't too alarmed or too concerned because this had happened about half a dozen times, that ships were sunk off the coast. It was a shame what happened, but there was nothing that could be done. But it was a good rescue. You know they were just limited to what they could do in that situation.

Interviewer: Of course Southport's great interest to that was that the survivors were brought in here. Well we appreciate your talking to us.

Hennis: I enjoyed it.

Second Interviewer: Another (inaudible)?

Interviewer: Yeah, give us something about what you've done since.

Hennis: After I got out of the service after spending that year in the hospital, I was 100% disabled so I had...I was in construction because my dad was in construction and I was just not physically able to participate in that occupation. So I had to find something a little easier. I went to work for the government in the general accounting office. It turned out to be a good job. I had 15 real good girls working for me.

It was really an easy job and I liked it except that I wasn't used to being in an office with a coat and a tie and so forth. So you know it was five days a week and I wasn't real happy there. There were a lot of fellows who were working out there at the time. There must have been 3-4000 people who worked in the general accounting office.

So some of the boys I met there said that they were all in the service and said they would like to try out for the fire department. There was a big ad that came out that they were going to hire men for the fire department. I said boy I'd like that because of all the time off. You get a lot of time to hunt and fish. I stayed with the government for two years and I had recuperated quite well.

When I heard about this I said I would never be able to make this because they're real rigid and there were 3000 people that applied for the job. One thousand were colored and they almost got eliminated immediately because of police records so it cut it down closer to 2000 actually taking the test. But I had worked out solid at the Y for I guess every night for six months prior to the test.

I took the test and I was just hoping that I could prove to some of my friends that I was still physically able to do a few things. So I worked a little bit harder than most people and I ran the track over there. So I took this test and they don't tell you what happens immediately. Prior to taking the agility test, you take a mental test, but I had been taking IQ tests when I was working for the government just for fun more or less and I was pretty well used to how an IQ test would go.

So I took that. They don't call you for the agility test unless you pass their written test so I knew I passed. Then when I finished with this agility test, I knew I had passed so I took the medical test. I knew I was healthy, but I knew that my problems would show up and my back had been broken in three places. I lost 3" out of this arm including the elbow. My hips were smashed and my ankle was all tore up so I was in bad shape.

But I figured I got this far, that's good, but I know I'll never pass the medical because they'll see the problems. So I knew things that I had that were good, my heart, my lungs, my eyes, my ears so I went to those doctors first. They were all specialists and this guy would check my ears, go to the next doctor down the hall, so I'm doing real good.

So I thought there's only one guy left and that's the orthopedic doctor. So I'm going to get caught. So you had to strip off and you'd walk in and he had a desk and he'd talk to you for a couple of minutes about different things. Then he'd tell you to turn up your hands and squat and a few things like that.

So I came in, he said sit down and I started talking to him. He said he thought he knew me. I thought I hope you know the good side, not the bad side (laughter). So he asked if I ever boxed. I said yeah, that I used to box. He said you got your nose broke one night out at the arena, didn't you. He said he set it. We got talking and he said I looked like I was still in real good shape.

I used to be able to do handstands from a chair like this so he said you still do a lot of hand balancing. I said not really, but I could still do a few little things so I did this handstand. Sat back down and he said he could see one thing, that I was still in real good shape. He said there's nothing wrong with you I can see that. He said he was looking over my agility record and said that I was in fantastic shape.

So I came home and told Jane, at the time we were married, I told her what had taken place. She said how could they not find out about your back. I said they didn't even find out about my arm. So I told her the story so every night when I came home I'd ask if she heard anything about the tests.

Well it went about two months and finally I came home and she gave me this card, I was number one on the list.

So I went in the fire department. In a few years I took another test for captain and I became a captain and stayed there for 30 years. I enjoyed it. The good part about that job, not only did you have a lot of time off to hunt and fish cause you only work a total of 10 days a month, but you work 24 hour days when you work. So I started a construction company on the side and that became my main livelihood.

The fire department in St. Louis paid with a good pension and all, but I started this business and it turned out so good that now my three boys, I had six children and 14 grandchildren. So I was very healthy and my wife was healthy too. But I'll tell you they came out of college and all three of them went into the construction work. They own their own companies. They're doing tremendously well.

Interviewer: Do they ever ask you to turn your hand over?

Hennis: No, because I was a good fireman and I've never smoked in my life. I don't drink. I don't even drink coffee or tea or soda. I either drink water or fruit juice. But I've always liked to keep in shape.

Interviewer: How old are you now?

Hennis: Right now, I'm 78 and I feel good. Everything is going well.

Interviewer: We should all look so good. I've been given a note here, unfortunately the old USO building just burned recently and just want to ask you what you remember about the USO.

Hennis: I thought it was terrific. When I first came, there were two things you could do. You could go to Mac's who had the best shrimp dinners in town. For 50 cents you got all the shrimp you could eat fresh right off his boat plus French fries, slaw and I think a glass of beer went with it. So that was good. And then you could go to the USO and there were bunch of little girls all around town. They'd gather up there and they enjoyed it. They had a lot of fun and the servicemen had a lot of fun. They kept out of trouble.

So I'd either be up there and after I was here a week or so, I met a girl and if I wasn't horseback riding or sailing or swimming with her, I was up at the USO. I just had a real good time. Then about a month before I left there, I decided to take a liberty for one of the first times up to Wilmington. I

went up to Wrightsville Beach and met my wife. We got married after I got out of the service.

Interviewer: And what was her name?

Hennis: Jane, Sunshine Jane they call her.

Interviewer: What was her maiden name?

Hennis: Jane Crew, that family has been around here for years and years.

Interviewer: Oh yeah, the Southport tie in with your wife.

Hennis: There's really no tie in with Southport. She was from Wilmington. After I met her, we had a real quick relationship between the beach and the Catholic USO and the other USO that was up there and became very well acquainted.

Interviewer: They're saying your wife's people were from Southport.

Hennis: Originally, the Gallaways, they were from here.

Interviewer: We thank you and appreciate it.

Hennis: I enjoyed it.

Interviewer: Is there another question?

Second Interviewer: Yes, we were going to ask him about the Catholic Church while he was here.

Hennis: When I first came here, there was no Catholic church. The priest would come down from Wilmington, Whiteville, and I would take him over to Bald Head to say mass over there. I was an altar boy when I was small so I would help him with the mass while he was there. You know I thank Father Hardry for my wife. He said how come I was so enthused with the girls in Southport. He said he knew a real cute girl that I'd like up there in Wilmington.

So he told me and I thought ok, I'd go take a look. I took one look and that was it (laughter). The service really, I owe a lot to the service.

Interviewer: And how long have you been married?

Hennis: 48 years. Like I said, we have six children, 14 grandchildren. The three boys are in their

own business. My one daughter is a psychologist, she's got her own business. The other girl is a social worker and the other girl is just married, raising her family.

Interviewer: Well thank you sir and we'll just close with that then.

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