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Interview with Jack O'Brien

RCA Heritage Program

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[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

Jack O'Brien: My name is John O'Brien. Everybody knew me as Jack O'Brien. I worked primarily at Moorestown although I started out in the college relations program and had a few assignments in Camden and the Hightstown before I came to Moorestown.

Interviewer: What was your location within the division? What was your first?

Jack O'Brien: My first location was on the college relations program. I worked at Heightstown for about eight weeks. I did studies on communication links between the Viking orbiter and the lander and between the orbiter and the earth so that they could communicate and send back whatever information they collected. It was kind of a – fresh out of school I was overwhelmed with what I was being asked to do but it was stuff I had studied in school so it really did apply. I was able to make a little bit of contribution there.

Interviewer: What was the first major project that you were able to work on then?

Jack O'Brien: That was the Viking program. It was, like I said, an eight-week assignment. It was basically looking at parameters of the communication system, bandwidth versus power versus modulation index to see what was going to be the optimum setting that they were doing. It was kind of a systems study. It wasn't really hardware or anything like that.

Interviewer: So, being a fresh new college graduate, did you have any mentors or anything that –

Jack O'Brien: In that assignment I worked with a fellow, his name was Max Fresca and I'm not sure how to – He was an elderly gentleman at the time so I'm sure he's long gone. But he was very, very able to help me along. If I had any questions he was very helpful so that was one of the things I found in general with everybody where I worked. If you had a question, there was always somebody that would kind of take you under their wing and help you along. That didn't matter whether you were entry level or further along in your career. Everybody kind of had a mentor at some point.

Interviewer: [0:02:00] How did your career progress as you worked at RCA?

Jack O'Brien:

After the college relations program and the four assignments, my last assignment was in Moorestown and I was doing some studies of projecting what the radar return would look like from an array of objects. Having no idea what that was for and after I found out – I can't tell you, but anyway I did that for six weeks and then at the end of the relations program I asked to join Moorestown and they accepted me as an associate member of the engineering staff, which was an entry level engineering position. I worked in the advanced systems and technology group and I was working with several people with years of experience, PhDs and everything. I felt I should really be the floor sweeper because I was kind of like the new guy, right out of school. But, again, the kind of work we were doing it was theoretical studies of various kinds of communications systems and actually trying to lash them together in the laboratory to demonstrate how they might operate using test equipment and other devices. I did that for about eight years. That program came to an end and I was still, at that point, I had got promoted to a member of the engineering staff. That was like 1978 I think it was and I was moved into the equipment design group. I was very nervous about that assignment because I had pretty much forgotten everything I'd ever learned in school. I had never really done any design work. I was afraid I was going to go down there and be out on the street in six months. A couple of the people I worked with said, "Don't worry, you'll be running the place in a year." So, I went down there and I was assigned to a program called EDM4, which is the engineering development model of the AEGIS SPY-1B signal processor. I worked on that through the rest of my career in one aspect or another.

[0:04:01]

I joined them in '78 and by '82 I was a unit manager. I was responsible for the design of the digital portion of the signal processor related to the detection and burn-through processing they called it. I did that for several years through about '84. We took it through integration and test at the CSED site, which is the old BMEWS site. They converted it to a Navy test site. I don't know if you've ever seen it. It's along 295. It's got the ship superstructure on it. Spent three years out there integrating that radar. When that was done I got assigned to the test team that brought it into production and delivered it to the CG-59, the USS Princeton. Then after that I got assigned supporting the production test from an engineering side. In about 1984 I was promoted to an activity manager and I had responsibility for all of the signal processing design work, both analog and digital. I had three or four unit managers reporting to me. So, it was quite a responsibility I felt and I felt a little out of place because here I was in my mid to late 30s and I had people 50, 60 years – they probably forgot more about engineering than I ever

knew. But, again, working with the people you develop a rapport and it worked out quite well. Along came GE and they delayed, was the famous term at that point, where they were getting rid of positions. They wanted only so many steps of management between the top of the company and the people doing the actual work. They got rid of that position but they formed a position called an engineering project manager is what I became. Essentially I was responsible for all engineering work associated with the AEGIS program.

[0:06:07]

I was working very closely with the program offices with the customer. I would be making presentations so that was kind of a different step. I had been in management where you're more involved with working with the people on a day to day basis. Now you're kind of stepping out and becoming more of an interface with the customer and I did that through 1998. So, from about 1986 to '98 I was an engineering project manager. During that time we did a lot of work with taking the AEGIS program and doing what we called foreign military sales, selling it to Korea, Japan, Norway, and Spain. There had to be adaptations made to their radar to allow that to happen. So, I was responsible for leading all of the engineering effort associated with that. 1998 I got a call from a fellow who is now a Vice President at Lockheed Martin asking me if I was interested in coming over and working in the production program office. The SPY-1DV signal processor, which was the next generation was coming into production and they hadn't transitioned anything for production since about 1982. So, they needed to, kind of, rekindle that skill set within the program office. So, they brought me over as a program manager and I formed the group that did that. I had the connections with production, with engineering, so it was kind of a natural fit with my background. I formed that group, brought in people with production experience, people with engineering experience, primarily mechanical engineers because they were the ones that ultimately were on the floor getting this stuff built. Also, with people with a procurement background because there was a lot of new suppliers that had to be brought on board with this version of the signal processor.

[0:07:57]

I did that for a number of years. That went smoothly. Then we got into, they kind of assigned me to work on a lot of the new programs that had a production element. DDG21, DDX, the Deep Water program, which was the recapitalization of the US Coast Guard. I spent the last five or six years of my career working very closely as a part of a team working on the production aspects of the proposals that went out. We won some, we lost some, but all along with fun. Again, it was working with people both within the company and

sometimes consults that came in. I still have a close relationship with a lot of those people. I still stay in contact with them.

Interviewer:

Do you want to talk about your co-workers a little bit?

Jack O'Brien:

Yeah, some of the people I worked with when I first started out I talked about that assignment where we were doing the studies of the radar returns and stuff. I worked with a fellow named Hunter Goodrich. I believe at that time he was, of all the active engineers with RCA, he held the most patents of anybody that was currently – I don't know what the number was, but I've heard that. He was a very dry man but he had a very dry sense of humor. We were in a meeting one time and they were arguing over some point and it was obvious that he was in the right and he turned to me after the meeting and he said, "In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king." Because this group that was arguing was kind of off base and he knew it but there was a leader that they all followed so it was kind of interesting. The unit manager I reported to was a fellow named Art Tallaminie and he was one of the few engineers I ever worked with that was not degreed. He learned engineering in the trenches. He had worked for Dumont Labs before he came to RCA. I worked for him for about eight years.

[0:10:01]

When I came in as a trainee and when I got hired on I was with him. Some of the other people I've worked with, Joe Volpe. Some of the chief engineers at the time as I came up into management I worked very closely with them in reporting status Bernie Matulus. Most of my experience and the people I knew were in the Moorestown facility. I didn't know too many in RCA, but since then I have met some people, a fellow named Marty Grassmiller I think it is. He worked in Camden. He's retired. He lives near me and we hooked up through one of the lunch clubs or something like that and got to know each other.

Interviewer:

While you were working with RCA what was the work environment like?

Jack O'Brien:

RCA, I would say, was a very, very good work environment. It was kind of a family oriented thing. They had all kinds of monthly newsletters or magazines that came out. They had pictures of people with their anniversaries. They were very much more focused on that and they also sent me to graduate school. I went to the University of Pennsylvania, got a Master's Degree in Systems Engineering. Took five and a half years because I was only taking one course a semester at night but they paid for all of that. So, that was very generous of them I think. They also had a program that I looked into very briefly. They were looking for patent engineers and they

were willing to send you off to law school to become a patent attorney to work for the company. My brother is a lawyer and I talked to him very quickly about what law school is involved and he said, "A lot of reading and a lot of paper writing." I quickly said I'm not going to go for that because that wasn't my forte at all. But, again, the opportunities for advancement, the opportunities for interesting work, very, very, very good with RCA.

[0:12:06]

When GE took RCA over, at least the defense part of it, there was a lot of trepidation because we didn't know what was going to happen. Were we going to have a job? Were we going to be out on the street. It turned out we got through that pretty smoothly. However, the next one, when MartinMarietta bought the business from GE we didn't even sweat it. We figured we'd been through the tough one this one's going to be a piece of cake. I like to say I went through four companies and never changed desks. So, I sat at the same desk through all of these transitions.

Interviewer:

We've heard a lot of people talk about the RCA family and you just mentioned it. With that in mind, did you have any relationships outside of work that – like co-workers that you would go out with or a lot of people talked about the parties, like the holiday parties?

Jack O'Brien:

The holiday parties were great. We used to have an annual one. In fact, one of the people I worked with left and became a nurse and she's up stationed in Alaska now and I'm friends with her on Facebook and we still stay in touch with some of the stuff that's going on. I belong to a group we meet for lunch once a month, the signal processing retirees around different places in South Jersey. The third Thursday of the month we meet for lunch and I have gone to a couple of the RCA lunch groups but not too many of them because my schedule on Mondays is not very flexible.

Interviewer:

Seeing the influence in south Jersey, would you say that RCA had a measurable impact on the community?

Jack O'Brien:

I would think so because it was really a family oriented...

[0:14:01]

You asked a question earlier about family. If you look at how many people that worked there where they were maybe the second or the third generation of their family to work there. Their parents may have worked in the factory, their son went to college and got a job as maybe a financial manager or an engineer or something. There was a lot of that. One of the things that happened when GE came in they didn't like that. They thought it was a little bit too inbred. I think that was very helpful because you grew up with that culture. You understood it and you supported it and when GE came in they

started to get away from that. They started to see a lot of turnover with the new hires and they were very concerned about that. They wanted to know what was the driver behind that and I think part of that was cultural at the time where people didn't see the loyalty coming from the company therefore there wasn't a lot of loyalty going back to the company. So, if a better opportunity came along for them they jumped. I don't think you saw too much of that under RCA.

Interviewer:

You said you went through all of the transitions through the various companies after RCA was eventually bought. How did you and your co-workers cope with all of that?

Jack O'Brien:

Well, we didn't have a lot of things we could do to prevent it. So, it was kind of like one of my bosses said, "Just keep your head down and keep doing your job and be productive. Don't sit in the corner and pout about it." That's kind of what most of the people did. They just kept doing their job. They were nervous about what was happening but they got through it. Very few people really lost a job during any of those transitions except for the people that decided they wanted to leave on their own. When GE came in there were a lot of people that took a retirement rather than go through, I remember that because the people that were close to retirement they just decided to go.

Interviewer: [0:16:00]

What was it like to retire from a company like RCA?

Jack O'Brien:

It was bittersweet I will say. I had planned to retire with 40 years. I was 62 years old at the time and I was going to go in June because that would have been my 40th anniversary. I started on June 15th, 1970. I heard there was going to be an opportunity for a voluntary layoff so I went in February. It meant \$20 less a month in my monthly retirement benefit but I got out early enough that it worked out very well personally for me because my daughter was going back to work and she had a four-month-old son. So, I retired on Friday and that following Tuesday I started babysitting for him four days a week. That was my new job. I did that for four years, I had him. I'm sorry, for two years, and then he went to daycare.

Interviewer:

Would you summarize your job with RCA as just a job or more than that?

Jack O'Brien:

It was a job but it was more than that because I think I enjoyed every day I went to work. There were days, like everybody had, you didn't want to and there were times during the integration and test phases we were working seven days a week, 24 hours a day, because testing went on all the time. I remember one day in

particular I was working second shift so I came out at midnight. It was the winter time, there was about a foot and a half of snow and it was still coming down and I lived about an hour. I live in Doylestown, Pennsylvania so that's a good hour drive. I looked at that and went back inside and worked another shift and went home the next morning. I could envision myself being stuck on the road all night. There were days like that but in general I enjoyed the work I did.

[0:18:02]

I enjoyed the people I worked with and that goes a long way to making life much, much more acceptable in terms of some of those difficult times you have to get through. There were good times and there were difficult times but there were a lot more good times than difficult times.

Interviewer:

What would you say is the best part about working for RCA?

Jack O'Brien:

The people I worked with. I learned a lot from them and I hope as I became more experienced I was able to help other people in their transition. When I retired that was the one thing I missed the most was the people that I worked with.

Interviewer:

How about the worst part?

Jack O'Brien:

Monday mornings. That's the best part about retirement is Sunday night.

Interviewer:

Do you have any other personal stories you'd like to add in or anything like that?

Jack O'Brien:

I can't think of anything off the top of my head. Something popped into my head while we were talking and it went away. In general I think I worked with a lot of different people and some of them have stayed active as consultants after they retired. I didn't want to do that. Personally, what I wound up doing was, like I said, I was babysitting and becoming a grandfather and a babysitter. Most recently I became involved in politics which is something I would have never thought to have done. I was approached about running for borough council where I live and surprising to me a lot of the skills that you learn as an engineer and as a program manager really translate directly into that because you're running a small town. You're looking at budgets, you're concerned about what has to be done.

[0:19:58]

So, when I first was approached I'm thinking, "I don't really know anything about this." But as I've been doing it now for almost two years, year and a half, I find that a lot of skills that you have

translate directly into that, but I wouldn't have thought that ahead of time.

Interviewer 2:

As a production manager, did you get involved in any of the sea trials?

Jack O'Brien:

I did get to ride, I think it was, the USS Gettysburg on what they called trial alpha. They tried to get, at one point, people who were involved with the production or the development of the equipment, they wanted to see the shipyards. So, we did have the opportunity to see the shipyard and to see the equipment was being installed and I had an opportunity to go out in December in Maine out in the North Atlantic on an overnight sea trial. They had me sleeping on an LL Bean cot up in the radar room. The legs were between two pipes, so, if the ship rolled it wouldn't slide to far. It was a very interesting experience. They fed us on the ship just like they would the crew. They had the mess thing open, you walking down an aisle way and happened to be the time when they were doing high speed maneuvers where they would go from hard port to hard starboard and I had a bowl of soup. So, you were walking like this trying to keep the soup, never mind in the bowl, on the tray. It was an interesting experience because it was part of what we normally wouldn't have seen. We were involved with the assembly and the tests and the performance of it but not the actual use of it out at sea. I did get a chance to attend one of the christenings for a ship up in Bath also.

[0:22:00]

It was my 35th anniversary and, I'm trying to remember who it was. Orlando Carvallo called my boss and said send him up there with his wife. So, they sent me up for the weekend to be at part of the christening of the ship. That was another thing that you wouldn't normally see.

Interviewer:

What was it like working with your customer?

Jack O'Brien:

That was kind of interesting. We had a pretty good relationship. I first started during the development phase where as an engineering manager you would be presenting to the internal customer, the production office, and then when I went over to the production office I knew some of these people but not at the same level you get to know them as a program manager. That worked pretty well. The one guy we worked with was Kevin Kenny. He was our direct contact and I, at that time, was a Phillies fan, I had been a Mets fan. He was a big Red Sox fan so anytime we were together we would always be talking baseball as well as the business at hand. When I retired he gave me a Red Sox hat. So, we had a good relationship but the first couple of times it was a little nervous because you don't know

what's going to happen. The time I was most nervous was when Admiral Meyer was in the audience because he would come up and he could be very brusque and I was cautioned that if he starts going on he's not talking to you if you're the guy on the stage. He's really talking to his staff around him. I only presented in front of him once or twice and I got through it pretty well. I had been cautioned and warned about that so it was a matter of getting used to it more than anything else.

Interviewer: [0:24:05]

Were there a lot of people like that that you had to deal with and figure out how to present to?

Jack O'Brien:

Yes, when I was an engineering project manager I had a, I won't name them, but there was a chief engineer at the time who I would go in to present what I thought was a pretty good story. We were in good shape, things were running well, and he would be all over me. He'd ask a question and if he didn't like the answer he'd be all over you. Another time I'd go in with what I thought was a disaster on my hands and think I'm going to get thrown out of the room or something and it would go very smoothly. So, I could never figure him out and it drove me crazy. My manager at that time was a fellow named John Rackovic and I talked to him about how do I handle that. He said, "Well, you got to do what you can do." I was driving home one night and I started to feel numbness in my jaw and down my arm. I wound up in the emergency room thinking I was having a heart attack and it turned out it was all stress related to him, this individual. I would get so stressed out over it. It turned out I got through it. Everything was fine. Another interesting story, again, John Rackovic. I was a unit manager working for him. We were in the middle of tests so we were working 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I had a daughter who was in, I can't remember if it was kindergarten or first grade at the time, she took it upon herself to write a letter to him. Remember the paper you got when you were in kindergarten? The lines were about this big and so she – Dear Mr. Rackovic, it took her three lines on the envelope to get Rackovic in and she wrote this letter about how he has to give me more time off because she doesn't see me enough and everything. So, I went into work and I gave it to him and I said, "John, I think I got a little problem here we better talk about."

[0:26:06]

He said, "What is it?" I said, "Well, I want you to read this letter." Well, he took a fit of laughing and when he retired he gave me the letter back. He had kept it all those years. It was like 10 or 15 years later and I gave it to my daughter and she had it framed and gave it to me as a Father's Day gift one time. You asked earlier about what the RCA family was like that was the RCA time. That was the kind of

relationship you could have. You could go in and have that discussion and not feel threatened at all by it or something like that.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]