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Interview with Art Simons

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[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[0:00:00] Art Simons: My name is Art Simons and I started in RCA Camden in 1966 immediately after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania. Uh, I worked in Camden for a few summers while I was going to graduate school and also at RCA Morristown and then I came back full time in 1971 to RCA Morristown. I worked there for a few years, came down to Camden on loan in 1975 and never left; retired in 2008.

[0:00:37] Male Speaker: And when you started, what was your first job assignment?

[0:00:41] Art Simons: Uh, I worked, ah...I guess my first significant job assignment, ah, was AEGIS uh, it started... was called the MFAR in the early days probably pre...pre-proposal, uh, but I had some very interesting summertime assignments working on AEGIS and then, uh, after I came back and worked fulltime, I did some analytical work in support of AEGIS and a few other radar programs, I think one was called BATS and uh, then I went down into Camden and worked on secure communications.

[0:01:17] Male Speaker: Um-huh. Uh, when you started work, did you have any mentors or senior engineers or anything?

[0:01:25] Art Simons: Actually, uh, that was one of the hallmarks of my entire 42-year career at RCA, is that there was also somebody who was willing to help, anxious to help, and more than capable of helping. Uh, so in the early days, uh, in Morristown, my mentors were Tom Bulger and Maurice Timken, and John Dodson, and of course Jimmy Sullivan and Frank Capaso was my boss during those summer jobs and he...he was fantastic as well. And then, I had...I was fortunate I had mentors throughout my entire career.

[0:02:04] Male Speaker: Um-huh. Um, talk about some major projects that you did work on?

[0:02:10] Art Simons: Uh, well I guess some of the more significant ones were the, uh, KY-57 and KY-58 secure communications gear. Uh, that was my... really my first assignment when I went...went to Camden. And then from there, I moved, uh, to Maroon Archer, which was a very large job in the intelligence community. In fact, that was a significant point of my career because, uh, we create a business area, uh, out of the Maroon Archer program and many of us from Morristown who were

on loan to Camden ended up, uh, transferring to Camden fulltime because of that business and frankly, uh, it kept me in the business in...ah...in the engineering business for the rest of my career. I found it fascinating. Another major job that I worked on that I...ah...really enjoyed was the DINDI program which we did for the government of Israel and it was not only a fascinating job, uh, technically, but it was also an interesting job sociologically because condition of the contract was that we had to have, uh, Israeli engineers as part of our team and to see the interaction between the RCA engineers and the Israeli engineers was very, very interesting. We even had a Hebrew class and I always found it amusing that the, uh, 60-year-old sec...Irish secretaries were taking Hebrew lessons after work. Uh, and another, uh, program that I worked on that I, ah, really enjoyed, that was a great program with great engineers was NERVETRUNK, which I worked on, ah, in the 1990s in Camden.

[0:03:53] Male Speaker: Um-huh.

[0:03:53] Art Simons: And of course there were many others. A lot of proposals.

[0:03:55] Male Speaker: And you worked your way pretty much up the engineering ladder. How did that go?

[0:04:01] Art Simons: Well, ah, it was a hallmark of the engineering community back then that if you did well in engineering, they tended to promote you within the engineering community, but they were always on the lookout for management which was a two-sided coin because the best engineers don't always necessarily make the best managers and so for a long time I really resisted going into management because I really felt that I was, ah, technical and there were better technical people than me. But eventually I matured and I realized that I could manage well and I agreed to do it and then in 1979 I went into management, uh, first as a leader and then as a...ah, a department manager. Eventually I ended...ended up as the director of systems engineering. Ah, and throughout my entire career I was encouraged and supported by, ah, a host of people at RCA, which I thought was, ah, really one of the things I look back on as one of the most significant aspects of my career at RCA, is that there was always somebody there to help.

[0:05:09] Male Speaker: Um-huh. Talk about your co-workers through your career?

[0:05:13] Art Simons: Well, I always thought it was kind of unusual and I...I really can't speak for other companies cause RCA is...and its descendants were the only companies that I ever worked for. But I...I always had the

feeling that RCA was very, very unique, uh, it was really more of a family than a job. I...I really enjoyed the people I worked with. I had a great deal of respect for their engineering ability and their intellect and, ah, they were always there to help you out and, uh, I think it's one of the major reasons why I enjoyed myself so much. It's...for me personally it's not only important to have challenging work, which there always was, and, interesting work, ah, and ah, a great work environment, but the people that we worked with were exceptional. And that was important to me and, ah, I appreciated that.

[0:06:08] Male Speaker: It's interesting; the term RCA family has come up in almost every one of our interviews.

[0:06:13] Art Simons: I'm not, I'm not surprised. In fact, ah, I still get together with RCA people of various ages in three different lunch groups and a fourth group that's mostly RCA people. Uh, we...we were close when we worked together and were close in retirement.

[0:06:28] Male Speaker: Um-huh. What about, ah, outside of work?

[0:06:33] Art Simons: Uh, outside of work, ah, of course family was the most important to me. I...have a wife and two wonderful children and now I have three grandchildren. Ah, I was always participating in various sports. I played a lot of softball, a lot of basketball, and, ah, played a little bit of bridge when I first started at RCA at lunch, ah, didn't really play a lot for years, but now that I'm retired, ah, I...I play serious bridge often. Go to tournaments and I really enjoy it.

[0:07:03] Male Speaker: Do you recall any of the RCA parties?

[0:07:06] Art Simons: **[Laughter]** Some of them are hard to blot out. Ah, yes I do. I recall...recall them very well. We had great Christmas parties, ah, and we also had a lot of fun completion parties when jobs were over and we were really thrilled to deliver a system. We had some, ah, really wonderful completion parties with the customer that were a...were a lot of fun. But I think I enjoyed most of all was the...were the Christmas parties, ah, because you know I...I could bring my wife and she got to meet, ah, other people that I worked with and their spouses so, that...that was fun.

[0:07:43] Male Speaker: Um-huh. What was the best thing about working for RCA?

[0:07:49] Art Simons: I think the best thing about it was that it kept me intellectually engaged. About a week before I retired, a young fellow stopped me in the hallway and said to me, well you're retiring and I said yes and

he said, well what about the work, what about the work? So I said to him...I said, well I have to tell you that the work was always very challenging. It was always very, very interesting. It was often patriotic and that was enough to sustain me for 42 years. Uh, I toyed with the idea of becoming a lawyer. Uh, before I went to, ah, graduate school in engineering and even in the early days when I worked at RCA when we, ah, unfortunately had a series of layoffs, I thought a lot about becoming a lawyer, but the work also kept me there and I have no regrets whatsoever.

[0:08:36] Male Speaker: What was the worst thing about working for RCA?

[0:08:38] Art Simons: The layoffs. Yea, absolutely, the layoffs. I, ah, I started working at RCA in 1966 and I was going back and forth to...to graduate school and the...they were having a series of layoffs during that period of time in the late '60s. And I came back in August of '71 and they had the last layoff in, ah, December, right before Christmas of 1971 and it was...it was horrible. It really was and I think psychologically that's one of the reasons why I, ah, resisted becoming a manager, just the thought of having to lay somebody off was just, ah, really unthinkable to me.

[0:09:22] Male Speaker: People have speculated that RCA changed South Jersey. Have you anything to say on that?

[0:09:29] Art Simons: Well, I think RCA was a...a significant part of South Jersey. Uh, my father-in-law, ah, well my in-laws got married in 1944 and they immediately moved from New York to South Jersey. My father-in-law worked for RCA for many, many years in material standards and you couldn't go anywhere in South Jersey and not run into somebody who either worked at RCA, whose spouse worked at RCA, whose uncle worked at RCA, everybody worked at RCA. There were a lot of people who worked in Camden and, ah, I think it...it is part and parcel of the fabric of South Jersey. If you're talking about South Jersey, you know, you have to consider the impact of RCA.

[0:10:15] Male Speaker: You mentioned that the work was challenging. Did you feel that the work was valued by your supervisors?

[0:10:23] Art Simons: I always felt like...that they appreciated what I did. I...I really...I don't think I ever in 42 years, ever had a supervisor who didn't appreciate what I did and what...and what my co-workers did. And just to extend that a little bit, very often we would have visitors from the government, very high level people, ah, both in the military and in the government come and thank us for what we did and tell us that

we were saving lives and, ah, you know, you can be a cool customer, but when someone tells you that it's really meaningful.

[0:10:54] Male Speaker: Yea. Um, how do you think RCA was looked at in the customer community and in the rest of industry?

[0:11:06] Art Simons: I think with a great deal of respect. Uh, I don't think we were ever the cheapest, ah, in our proposals. We had a lot of competitors...I think who were capable of underbidding us. I'm not sure exactly the reasons for it. Maybe the high price talent like myself, I'm not sure, but we had...we won a lot of programs because the government knew that we delivered really fine systems that worked and if you mentioned the fact in government hallways that you worked for RCA, it definitely had an impact. So, I...I was always proud to work for RCA.

[0:11:44] Male Speaker: So how would you sum up your career? Just a job, a good journey, how would you sum it up?

[0:11:51] Art Simons: Definitely not just a job. It was, ah, it was an important part of helping me raise my family successfully. We...we've had a wonderful life because of RCA. I enjoyed every minute I spent there. Ah, as I said, it was intellectually challenging and that was important to me and I meet a lot of people that I really, really care for. So, ah, I couldn't have been happier with my decision and we're thankful that RCA hired me in '66 and when I...for a summer job, and when I told them I was going to graduate school they said, we don't care, go to graduate school, you can come back every summer and, ah, that's when the magic started.

[0:12:34] Male Speaker: Oh, um, so I'm seeing a lot of pride come out. Uh, pride in the work, ah, talk about also the effect of the work on our country?

[0:12:50] Art Simons: Well, as I mentioned earlier, uh, for, ah, 30 plus years, I worked in the intelligence community and obviously you can't go into a lot of detail about that, but, ah, I tended to be, ah, politically more liberal than most of my co-workers and people who were...who thought like I did, didn't necessarily work for places like RCA. But I was not only, you know, liberal in my political thinking, but I was...I think a practical person and I...I certainly didn't believe in unilateral disarmament and I really believed that what we did in the intelligence community was... what a smart country interested in doing good both here and around the world should be doing and so, ah, I think that what we did had a major impact in the country. I felt

proud to be part of it and I still think that it's an important component of keeping us safe.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]