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Interview with Jim Weber

RCA Heritage Program

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[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[0:00:07] Jim Weber: It's Jim Weber, otherwise known as 'Cowboy,' started in 1966 in Downtown Camden, 1 building.

[0:00:19] Interviewer: Okay. What was your first project?

[0:00:23] Jim Weber: My first project was actually a multiplier for a hard shuttle, a hard shelter; and I had to do the multiplier for this frequency chain that would hit the satellite for a radio, it was basically radios.

[0:00:45] Interviewer: Okay. Did you have any mentors or anything when you started?

[0:00:53] Jim Weber: No, unfortunately I didn't. I wish I had, but I didn't.

[0:00:57] Interviewer: Okay. So, talk about some of the major projects that you worked on.

[0:01:06] Jim Weber: Well, I worked on the radar shelters initially. I don't remember the name of them. But after that I worked on the P-3C aircraft, and I also worked on the sub chasers. I worked on a trident missile submarine; remember that program, IR Squared. You were pretty big in that. I also worked on the Destroyers, the radios, the telephone system on there, and I got to ride on the P-3C aircraft and run tests. We did a lot of testing on it actually flying; and I got to ride on a submarine, but they...because I was involved with the HF radio, the thing didn't submerge, they had to submerge, they had to stay up, so I never got to submerge, so I did get to ride on it. All that was exciting. I never got to the Destroyer either, but eventually what happened was that the Navy shut down all of its depots for the P-3C radio and they were in a jam. They needed them for the plane and they couldn't fix them, and they came to me personally and asked me because I had done a lot of business with them throughout the years going on to the places and fixing it, and they asked me if I would start a depot, and I did. I created a depot with Marty Watson, who was my PMO guy, and he helped me convince the management that the project would make money, and it made millions. That was my last project before I retired.

[0:03:05] Interviewer: Where did you get the parts?

[0:03:07] Jim Weber: We made a lot of them, believe it or not. We made the coils. I did have a job in between all this when I was at work as a maintenance-spares guy, finding obsolete parts, that was my specialty, and I knew how to find obsolete parts all throughout the country or have them

built. So, what was obsolete, I fixed. I got a tube guy remake the tube, I had two-tube people because we had a tube on that radio, and I was adept in finding things; I found everything, so...

[0:03:49] Interviewer: You worked on the Apollo program, did you not?

[0:03:52] Jim Weber: Yes, I did.

[0:03:53] Interviewer: What did you do on that?

[0:03:54] Jim Weber: We actually were responsible for the ranging. In other words, the way it worked was that there was two modules that were shot off at the end, there was called a lunar module and a command module. The command module dropped the lunar module to the ground. The command module continued to stay in orbit around the moon, and as it was rotating around, the guy in the bottom did what he did, took samples and then he came up. Our job now was to lock them up. We had ranging built into the radio with a digital display and that's all they could see. They looked at the digital display and they would go right and left, and up and down, and it would take them right in; and it worked. That is what we have been praying, "Please lock up, don't let it be my fault if it doesn't." Well, they locked up successfully. And then they shot off, the guys in the lunar module climbed in the command module, and then they had explosive bolts and they dropped the lunar module, just let it stay in orbit, and they came back to earth; and it worked. We were...

[0:05:14] Interviewer: Had you heard the rumors that the rendezvous radar that was supposed to do that, was very suspect because it may not be able to do it?

[0:05:25] Jim Weber: We were the back up, right. That was supposed to be the primary, the radar. That was the primary lock-up, but how did you know that?

[0:05:35] Interviewer: Spoke to Sam Pietrofitta.

[0:05:36] Jim Weber: Okay. I didn't know anybody else knew that. It may have worked, but they liked our...the astronauts liked...and they were doing this mock-up, they kind of like that digital thing. It seemed a little... and that was tricky because we had to have ranging built in over voice. So that was quite an art doing that. In fact that's how I got my nickname too. You remember that, right? We had to vibrate each radio, we had put them in the shaker table and turned them on and wash them while we vibrate it, brrrr, like this, to see if they work. Well, while they were doing that the squelch broke, and they said, "Weber, fix it," so I jumped up on top of the module with a knute stick, and I was adjusting it; and people walked in as I was adjusting

this thing while vibrating, and they say, “Hey, you look just like a cowboy up there”, that was the beginning of my nickname. It lasted me until I retired.

[0:06:49] Interviewer:

And beyond.

[0:06:50] Jim Weber:

And beyond.

[0:06:52] Interviewer:

Did you have any involvement in the Apollo 13 incident, the response to that?

[0:06:59] Jim Weber:

When was that?

[0:07:01] Interviewer:

That is where the spaceship basically blew up and they had to get them back to earth.

[0:07:05] Jim Weber:

No, I didn't have any on that one. No.

[0:07:09] Interviewer:

Okay. So, you also worked on the Trident program?

[0:07:15] Jim Weber:

Yeah, I was the radio for the sub.

[0:07:21] Interviewer:

What did you do on that?

[0:07:22] Jim Weber:

Well, we just basically built it. I designed some of the circuitry, and we built it specifically for the submarine. It can only be used when they were on the surface, and it did work pretty good. I think it worked out fine. It was one of the only ways I could do long haul communication.

[0:07:53] Interviewer:

How do you think RCA in general valued you as part of these projects?

[0:08:01] Jim Weber:

I get back to the family again, it really seemed like they did; they were very much family, very much concerned about people. They had to do lay-offs once in a while, and I got involved in that aspect too, I don't know...you probably didn't know that one, did you? I was on the grievance committee for the union. There is only two professional engineering labor unions in the country, and that's Seattle and us Boeing out there, Seattle and RCA, they were the only two, and we did have an engineering union and I was very strong in it.

[0:08:47] Interviewer:

You mentioned the RCA family. Elaborate on that, what does that mean to you?

[0:08:53] Jim Weber:

It was really like a family, people cared for each other, people looked out for each other. Anytime you had a problem, if you had a problem, everybody would come to the rescue, even if it was for work, or for golf, or for skiing, and I still golf with the same guys that

I worked with, and I still ski with the same guys I would ski with, and it is still family. They still see me, and we still hang out.

[0:09:30] Interviewer: So, how did it feel to retire from RCA?

[0:09:34] Jim Weber: It was strange because I had it easy towards the end of my career because I had that depot up and running. It was a bear to get it started, but then after that it rolled along quite smoothly and I didn't have a whole lot to do. I was lucky if I worked four hours a day in those times, but I got the job done and I kind of enjoyed it. I hated to leave everybody, because it felt like I was leaving. But I was 66 when I retired and my wife wanted to retire, she was a little younger. We decided we should be travelling and seeing things before it's all over, before we couldn't, that's why I retired.

[0:10:21] Interviewer: What was the best thing about working for RCA?

[0:10:23] Jim Weber: I liked the people. That was my opinion, the people.

[0:10:30] Interviewer: What about your supervisors?

[0:10:32] Jim Weber: They were all fine. Some of them didn't like me, some did. It's just that's the way it is with all supervisors.

[0:10:42] Interviewer: What was the worst thing about working for RCA?

[0:10:46] Jim Weber: There was a lot of overtime sometimes. You really had to give things up, spending a lot of extra time. The worst part was when I was in management. I was in engineering most of my career, but I went into management for about 5 or 6 years; those were the worst years of my life because I had people, I had to deal with a lot of different people, I had to put in a lot of unpaid overtime. You remember that. You work 55 hours a week, you pay for 40, and that was...It was first level management; it's always a bear. So, when GE took over, they did me a favor. They said, "We are getting rid of that level of management throughout the corporation" and that was my level. They asked me where I want to go, I said, "Back in Engineering, please." That is when I went back and I was happy.

[0:11:53] Interviewer: They talked about RCA changing South Jersey. Did you see any of that? Do you feel that that's a valid description?

[0:12:01] Jim Weber: Oh absolutely. Sure. I mean the whole...Everybody worked for RCA South Jersey. There is stuff built, there's lots of businesses downtown at that time, if you remember long ago, movies, two movie theatres, Horn & Hardart. The town was booming and all around, all the restaurants, that affected everybody. It spread out.

[0:12:28] Interviewer: Let's talk a little more about your co-workers.

[0:12:34] Jim Weber: I still hang out with them. I like my co-workers. I didn't have any trouble with any. When I was in the grievance committee, I handled their grievances. I saved a lot of people from being laid off. I was infallible after I got out of management. Before I went into management I was a grievance guy and I only won about half of my cases. After I came out of management, I won them all, and they were saying, "You know, you heard all that stuff in meetings, and that's considered private" and I said, no it isn't; not for me. Earl Sass, "Oh, there's one, that's the guy" Earl Sass. He was one of my...He was the guy that actually promoted my career. He was the guy that made me go into management, he was the guy that like salvaged me at a very early stage. When people thought I was a little crazy, and a little reckless, and Earl Sass came to my aid and saved me, put me on the path, and then later...that was early, and then later on I was working for him again, and then he made me manager. So, he was... He died recently.

[0:13:58] Interviewer: It sounds something like a mentor.

[0:14:01] Jim Weber: He was a mentor, yeah definitely.

[0:14:03] Interviewer: Okay. For how long in your career?

[0:14:08] Jim Weber: Ten years maybe, maybe more, maybe 20. Charlie Montini was another one. I don't know if you remember him. Yeah, he was another one, he said it like it was.

[0:14:23] Interviewer: How did you keep up with the technology?

[0:14:27] Jim Weber: I took some courses in software, and did a basic machine code software that's when I became a specialist then. I took after hours classes all the time, I was always in some class that we held, you remember? And I wrote some software to tune couplers, and it worked out pretty good. We didn't sell it, but it worked. So, I did some things modern; kept up to date. Well, integrated circuits I used for my new designs, for the URC-88 had some integrated circuits in it that were different.

[0:15:14] Interviewer: What's your assessment of...What do you think the rest of the world looked at RCA, their assessment in the community and in the technology?

[0:15:25] Jim Weber: They were on top for a while. The community loved them of course because there was work and everything else, a lot of spin offs, but their products were great; the TVs, all their stuff. There has been competition. I still think we had a little problem that GE take over, I don't think that ever should happened but...

[0:15:49] Interviewer: That keeps coming up, why don't you elaborate on that?

[0:15:52] Jim Weber: Well, I don't get it, I don't understand why they did it. I still don't. They didn't have to do it. That's my opinion.

[0:16:07] Interviewer: So, what changed when they did it?

[0:16:10] Jim Weber: Everything. There were all kinds of things, there were a lot of changes made. Actually in some cases their health and pension was for the better. So, some things got a little bit better, but I don't know, we could have done it ourselves I think.

[0:16:34] Interviewer: Did the RCA family continue on even after the acquisition?

[0:16:39] Jim Weber: Yes, I think so, yeah.

[0:16:44] Interviewer: Okay.

[0:16:45] Jim Weber: Because we became L3, we did get spun off again. So, I actually retired from L3 communications, and that was another operation.

[0:17:00] Interviewer: How would you sum up your time at RCA, your career at RCA?

[0:17:09] Jim Weber: I wouldn't give it up at all. I would do the same thing. Yeah, I might make a few changes but not much. Yeah, I enjoyed working there.

[0:17:25] Interviewer: Okay.

[0:17:26] Jim Weber: I worked for other companies so I...

[0:17:29] Interviewer: Well, compare that.

[0:17:32] Jim Weber: They weren't as family-oriented, they...Some of the places people weren't even friendly. In some places they ratted you out. I got ratted out for things. I had a job-shop when I was working as a draftsman, and I asked if I could take a day off, and they said fine, and the guy asked me, "Where are you going?" I said I am taking a day...I said I have an interview for this government job. So he goes and tells him and when I came back they fired me. If you can go and interview for another job, you are out of here. I hadn't decided to take that job yet, whereas RCA wasn't like that. I mean, maybe there were some but not much.

[0:18:24] Interviewer: Okay. Anything else you want to add to this?

[0:18:31] Jim Weber: No, I think that pretty much sums it up. Do you have anything, Tony? No. She liked going to the parties, the RCA parties. She liked those, they were fun. You remember those you guys had them; and what was his name, the PMO?

[0:18:55] Interviewer: Hugh Montgomery?

[0:18:56] Jim Weber: Yeah, Hugo Montgomery. Remember Hugo Montgomery, the way he would throw parties? Outrageous! Remember that? Oh, god! The bar will close in a half hour, so everyone rushes and gets a drink. I think I will keep the bar open for another half hour, and everybody rushes up and gets another drink. Before they even knew it everybody is drunk. It is true. I am just saying, that's just the way things were. They can cut that.

[0:19:28] Interviewer: But you worked hard.

[0:19:29] Jim Weber: Oh, yeah.

[0:19:30] Interviewer: And you partied hard.

[0:19:31] Jim Weber: Yeah, we did, yes, exactly.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]