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Interview with Bob Paglee

RCA Heritage Program

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Bob: I'm M. Robert Paglee. I don't use my first name I like to be called just simply Bob. I was born in Europe in 1924, a good year. Both my parents were citizens and my mother brought me as a baby back to the U.S. I was her second child. First one was born Evinston, Illinois. I came along and was born in Europe and she brought me back when I was just a baby, two years old or so. Anyway, I joined RCA after I graduated from Purdue in October of 1944. I was one of those students that was on accelerated program so I got my degree in about 2 ½ years. Of course, I'm practically blind in this eye from a childhood injury. I wasn't drafted and my RCA came along and interviewed me and offered a trip to the East Coast to take a look at the place. so I decided to join up. I was 20 years old at that time. Actually, my father had to sign for me my application to RCA because I was not of age, of legal age.

[0:02:00] Anyway, I started in December of 1944 and down in Camden. It was with the Service Company who said they would send me around the world so I thought, "This is great. I could do my thing." Indeed I did. It didn't take long to put me into a program RCA was building a thing called a JT, which is a sonic listening device used on submarines to get data into, directional data, into the submarine target data computer which then sends a fish to its destination. The idea is that they listen to this cavitation noise caused by screws and this thing had- this was an RCA design with a synchronous detector so that they could have a meter that showed when it's right on target. It was center scale but as you move you may work to handle to work the servo that rotated this thing. There was a big hydrophone above the submarine. To center the needle on this sound was a far more accurate system than its predecessor which was merely to get the maximum sound. To find the peak of a signal that's wrong is difficult. If you can by having two hydrophones

and doing the sum and differencing to find the null , they got a very accurate bearing on the compass.

RCA sent me to submarine school in New London, Connecticut for I think it was a two week crash course. We had some trips on a yacht called the duck. It was actually Joe Penner's yacht and Joe Penner is the guy that came up with that thing. If it looks like a duck and walks like a duck then it must be a duck. That was Joe Penner. We had some experience there off the coast of Connecticut in trying to learn how some of these things- anyway, it didn't take long before the RCA put me in officer's uniform and sent me to order to the submarine base on Midway Island, Gooney Bird heaven. There we took care of the submarines as they came in for refit or whatever problems they were having. It was very small. It's not a big place, Midway Island. Actually, there's two islands in the lagoon and the main submarine base was the one on what would be the western island. The East island was just a knoll.

Anyway, after the war ended, I was there when the war ended and the war in Japan ended and we had a little celebration on BOQ and had quite a time with a tour around the island in a commandeered weapons carrier. After that, I came back to New Jersey. Let's see, I guess one of the next things RCA put me into was a trip to Point Barrow, Alaska. RCA had a contract to develop an underwater sonic transducer system what was like a mini radar system to measure the thickness of the ice in the arctic environment. This was in support of actually the navy and was Navy Petroleum Reserve at 4. They were doing exploratory work there with drilling wells, big wells, deep wells in order to try to find out what liquid black gold there was in Alaska for the navy. It's a very complicated thing but from Point Barrow, they would organize what's called a cat train. It was a big diesel caterpillar diesel that pulled a whole series of well cats then two or three. Each one had a couple sleds, the great big sleds. Sled as big as this room. Unless they may had oil, barrels and oil machinery and all kind of stuff that they had to take the forward location where they were drilling for oil. We had to measure the thickness of the ice.

But the trouble is the ice was so flawed that it was impossible to get an accurate measurement. In a way the job turned out to be a lot of information about ice and not a system that would work. I think since they may have now of the new systems that do work in that fashion but in those days it was tough. I would go out on the ice with- I had a vehicle that had been rigged up with a power generator and stuff and we could do some testing. There were a couple of Navy guys that were assigned to work for me and we took a lot of data and we're out and did a lot of interesting things in one weekend we took a trip to Wylie Post had come down with his Wylie post and-

[0:09:45] Gwen: What was his name?

[0:09:47] Bob: Famous humorist Anyway, they came. They crushed and there's a thing there where a monument on the shore of the- I guess that would be the-I think that's the Bearing Sea at that point. After that, I thought it would be interesting to get into other things. After we've started working for the as a sales representative for the RCA TV, and radio, transmitters, antennas, studio equipment came with all the stuff that went in to the TV station and I did sell one station in Memphis. The things were very difficult because the freeze was on. FCC was trying to decide how close together they could put these TV stations and not have co-channel interference, or adjacent channel interference. After some difficulties early on, they put a freeze on building more TV stations. That shut the whole activity and RCA was really hurt at that point with this broadcast division.

At that point, I got sent on a contract with the State Department for instructing the European the countries in NATO on modern weapons and radar computers, aircraft artillery which most that was the only thing that was active for countermeasures. In the process, I started out in Belgium but it got so miserable up there with all rain in cold weather on lousy and so I

asked for a transfer and got shipped to Rome. That was really great because that's where I met Gwen. We were married there by a-

[0:12:54] Gwen: Paulist priest, James Cunningham, Santa Suzanna

[0:13:02] Bob: American church for Americans living in Rome and it was quite a number of people there that went into that church. Father Cunningham fixed it so we could get married in Vatican City because to get married in Rome, which is part of Italy, is a very complicated affair, but to get married in Vatican City, was a breeze. Well, comparatively so. In fact, one of my buddies there got married at the city hall in Rome and Gwen and I were there for witnesses. That was a nightmare. In all the places we had to go to get them. Anyway, we got married in St. Peters.

[0:13:54] Interviewer: You don't speak with an Italian accent. What were you doing over in Italy?

[0:14:00] Gwen: I went over with a college friend and then her mother came over and we had an apartment in Rome. Her voice teacher was an American who, an Italian American, who would spend one year in New York and one year in Rome. This was the year to go to Rome. My family, I being an only child, they said, "Okay, that's all right if you go." That's how it happened and about two months later I met Bob Pagle at La Fiammetta, which was a movie theatre that showed American movies. It was a great place for romance. My parents didn't meet him. I went home to get my truso. You young people don't know what that is, but the wedding dress and all the new clothes that's called a truso. We did it in three days at Marshal feild and company in Chicago. My parents and I sailed back on the Liberte, and that's when they first met Pag. They didn't know him until the week before the wedding and we've been married for 62 years.

[0:15:18] Bob: One of the reasons I didn't come to the U.S. to meet the parents, it was a kind of weird thing. In those days, the U.S. was trying to entice people to go oversees and stay there and help the European economy whatever. They had a thing if you stayed for, I think it was 541 days, then come back, from that point on your income tax was forgiven. No income tax. That was a very-

[0:16:07] Gwen: The incentive to stay there.

[0:16:10] Bob: For about five years. If I had come back even for one day, it would kill a thing and I'd have to start the 541 days over again.

[0:16:24] Gwen: Our daughter was born there three years later, and we came back to the states when she was a year old. I would also add that my husband speaks Italian like a true Roman. They thought he was a native. They thought, absolutely, his Italian is so excellent.

[0:16:46] Bob: Not really.

[0:16:46] Gwen: Yes it is. It was.

[0:16:49] Bob: They thought I was a hillbilly.

[0:16:50] Gwen: No, they didn't. And our Ann, who is a graphic designer, and now lives in Portland, Oregon, she went back. She had a semester, she was at Temple, and she had a semester in Rome. She met, my husband is a hand radio operator, and he would speak every Sunday to this Italian dentist, Franco Angelone, every Sunday. We said to Franco, "Ann is coming. We hope you can meet her." They adopted her. She's their American daughter. She and her husband even went sailing on their honeymoon there. So Ann speaks Italian like a Roman.

[0:17:36] Bob: RCA. Anyway, we came back-

[0:17:40] Interviewer: Now, with the RCA story. Go ahead.

[0:17:44] Bob: Well, RCA is what really married us in a way. I married RCA, and then I married her on account of RCA. Anyway, we came back and I went to work in Moorestown for what was called Missile and Surface Radar. And what's involved with mainly the precision tracking radars that we were building here in Moorestown. It was the ANFPS 16. There was a whole family of these things. The ANFPS 16, the ANFPQ6, TPQ18, et cetera. There was a whole series of these. These radars were fantastic. It was instrumentation radars that were as accurate as.... We advertised them to a tenth of a mil precision. Accuracy is something else. Accuracy depends on your alignment and on how you have it oriented. Precision was tenth of a mil which was exception on those days.

[0:19:07] Interviewer: What year was this that you came back to Moorestown?

[0:19:10] Gwen: '58

[0:19:12] Bob: No, '56, 1956. I did a lot of the pioneering work with these radars. I wrote some of those things that I was showing you nomographs, and I wrote a couple of the articles for the RCA engineer. Maybe someday I'll find where I hid the thing. I think I saved it somewhere. If I find it I'll give it to you. Anyway, we put these radars all over the world because we were trying to support the nice man-in-space program. One of the radars that I was particularly interested in was the one on Kawaii. I actually sited the I picked site with the help of an instrument that came from Pearl Harbor with the

operator, the fellow that knew how to- it was an altitude thing because Kawai was- we wanted to find the right spot to put that radar so that we would pick up the capsules that came around the world. We would have preferred, there was a spot that I would have preferred but they won't let me pick that because the state, Kawai had its own smaller radar up there that was-

[0:21:19] Interviewer: It was like the contest between the federal government and the state government?

[0:21:26] Bob: The state government won and we didn't put exactly where I would have preferred. We picked a good spot for it anyway. That was basically what I have been doing all the way up until recently in more recent until the time I retired I was the manager of the AEGIS signal processor design and development. The AEGIS system is a very complex affair that is the current of the modern U.S. Navy to be able to launch all kinds of rockets and anti aircraft type stuff and the missiles and now it's been developed into anti ballistic missile system which is going to be very interesting. They are trying to put couple on over in Europe, but I'm not involved with that anymore. I'm retired and so I just try to keep up with what's happening. We had an arranged tour of the Combat Engineering, CSED System Engineering Development site here in Moorestown for the IEEE bunch. This was about two or three months ago.

[0:23:26] Interviewer: Yeah, it was just this year. Let's talk about RCA now. You didn't mention any of your coworkers. What were they like?

[0:23:41] Bob: Great guys. The RCA family in fact we still are. I go once a month to a luncheon that we have for the signal processor group. Sometimes I go for the- there's another one that's the microwave group and the mechanical engineers are part of that. We still have a very tight retirement group and it's- RCA was one of the most unusual, I thought friendly, and trying to bring engineers into a social environment as well as a technical environment, RCA had lots of opportunities for study. I had took a course at the Villanova, it's a mathematics course. I also took a lot of afterhours courses right in our plant here in Moorestown that were given by engineering specialist to bring the rest of engineering community up to snuff in that particular discipline. So it's very interesting. RCA is a fantastic, friendly kind of thing.

[0:25:36] Interviewer: You use the term that sounds almost like a slogan, the RCA family. What's that mean to you?

[0:25:44] Bob: Family is like this: We are married together. I'm trying to describe it was such a tightly, knit, both technically and socially. I don't mean that we had social events, the special stuff except the retirement suppers and every time I guess every five years you get another tie clip or sets of top pen and pencil.

It was never any big thing out of this. It was just being friendly. RCA had an environment that was, I thought, unique in that world. I've seen quite a few others in my various, because I've, RCA sent me a lot of different places and I see the world in a way. I have always thought RCA was absolutely unique in the way it treated its employees and particularly the professional people.

[0:27:25] Interviewer: Okay. It sounds to me like you felt like RCA valued you as a contributor and you were just an employee?

[0:27:34] Bob: Always amazingly friendly. It's hard to describe. I guess I was 43 years up to the time I retired. That's a long time to work for one company. People don't do that today, hardly. But I think they still do it here in Moorestown. I see some of the guys who retire and come to these luncheons. They're still very much a family here.

[0:28:19] Interviewer: What about the influence of RCA on South Jersey? Do you have any opinions on that?

[0:28:28] Bob: Well, I think it's between the Camden Plant, the Moorestown Plant, and the Heightstown, Princeton. Well, there was a RCA lab at Princeton. In fact, that was another one- the RCA lab in Princeton donated to your competitor at TCNJ, The College of New Jersey. I had an IEEE tour earlier this year. It's an interesting place. They have a lot of RCA-

[0:29:20] Gwen: Memorabilia

0:29:22] Bob: Memorabilia on a wall panel all around the big room. Have you ever been up there to the-?

[0:29:33] interviewer: Yes, we did. We went up and visited that.

[0:29:37] Bob: One of the interesting things about the RCA groupings of point factors and enterprises in South Jersey at least in the engineering community, I'm not so sure about the factors with the hourly workers have quite that privileges. The engineering things we had opportunities. If the business in Moorestown fell off and the business in Camden was thriving, we would farm out engineers from this location to that location. As a manager, I had the unfortunate need to lay off people on occasion. I think it was only two occasions in all my experience that we had a problem where we had to lay off a few people and that's a very heartbreaking activity.

We managed to avoid a lot of that because of the interconnection of RCA Camden, RCA Moorestown, even the broadcast division. When that went out of business it was originally in Camden, I guess, then it went out to the Gibbsboro what they call the paint factory that they had turned into a modernized and turned into a factory which was a busy building stuff for the broadcast TV stations. That business went down hill when Japanese, we couldn't compete with the Japanese on price. I wasn't really involved in that

except for one thing. When that enterprise had to fold up, I was able to bring in some engineers from there and I placed them in jobs here at Moorestown where we needed more people. This happened quite- well, not terribly frequently, but frequently enough that it really made a difference. We didn't have such a turnover of people. We tried to hang on to the talented people and professionals.

[0:33:01] Interviewer: So you were quite well travelled. What do you think of the assessment of the RCA standing in industry? How did other technical people view RCA?

[0:33:18] Bob: Oh, I think it was a- I remember a guy at Wallops Island one of the Wallops Island radars there on the beach and another one further inland. Anyway, one of the government engineers I was familiar with used to kid me about this. He said RCA is the, I forget now. An ad for whatever it was- doing hair or something. He thought RCA is you guys keep thinking that you are the tops, and we were. He would kid me about that. I can't remember now the name of that.

[0:34:35] Gwen: You never told me that story. I can't help.

[0:34:40] Interviewer: As Bob's wife, what was your impression of the RCA family?

[0:34:46] Gwen: They were like family. He was home for lunch every day. Boy, you can't get any better than that. In fact, at one point he brought all the engineers. Fortunately, I had fore knowledge about that.

[0:35:05] Bob: Only we have a patio out here who went-

[0:35:06] Gwen: That was at the other house. That was on Edgemore Drive.

[0:35:10] Bob: We have it here too.

[0:35:14] Gwen: We were very fortunate.

[0:35:16] Bob: We've lived in Moorestown since we came back from Europe in 1956.

[0:35:24] Interviewer: How about your supervisors, what was your impression of that?

[0:35:28] Bob: Always very helpful trying to help me improve. I never had any conflict. We all got along very well. I thought generally they went out of their way. Well I did too to try to make things as pleasant and as efficient as we could.

[0:36:09] Interviewer: Let's step back and sum up your career at RCA, just a job?

[0:36:19] Bob: Not a job. It was a life.

[0:36:24] Gwen: Its his calling.

[0:36:27] Bob: It was a life, and a wonderful one.

[0:36:34] Interviewer: Have we left out any stories?

[0:36:40] Gwen: About in Rome when the Purdue GleeClub came.

[0:36:46] Bob: Yeah. Miss money Penny?

[0:36:50] Gwen: Yes.

[0:36:52] Bob: Do you remember, what was her name?

[0:36:55] Gwen: The actress in the James Bond movie, Miss Money Penny. She's Canadian and she had moved in that very night right next door to us.

[0:37:07] Bob: We had two apartments on that floor. Our door was here, her door was there. This was at the end of a corridor. As the Purdue Glee Club was- well, I was involved with that back in the days when I was a tenor. They have a overseas thing for-

[0:37:42] Gwen: A tour, singing.

[0:37:45] Bob: Well, at the UN food and agriculture affair there in Rome. I invited them to come and they said they would if they could and they did.

[0:38:01] Gwen: After the concert.

[0:38:02] Bob: After the concert.

[0:38:03] Gwen: Lois Maxwell.

[0:38:04] Bob: Lois Maxwell, yes. Anyway, they drove up to the front of this fancy apartment building where we were and actually they were condominiums but we were renting one. Then all these guys in white tux- very fancy dress.

[0:38:27] Gwen: Plaid cumber buns.

[0:38:27] Bob: They all filed out of this bus and they tried as many could get into the elevator but the elevator were not that big so they went up four flights of stairs. They came running up the stairs, and they went running into our apartment. Dozens of these guys were entering the door. Lois Maxwell opened her door and said, "Shhh," she must have thought these ... into a mad house.

[0:39:13] Gwen: Then they started singing.

[0:39:15] Bob: Yeah. I had rented a piano. I was assigned to the embassy in Brussels and in Rome. We had access to all kinds of great things at very reasonable prices.

[0:39:38] Gwen: At the PX. Well whatever...

[0:39:40] Bob: I got a couple of cases of beer, put them in the bathtub along with a couple bunches of ice. This was all ready for these guys. They were having a good big time singing.

[0:40:04] Gwen: Tell them about the balcony.

[0:40:07] Bob: Yes. A bunch of them went to crowd. We had a cantilevered balcony. It wasn't a big balcony. Just say from here to the wall. I was worried. There was all a bunch of guys on the balcony. I was worried about whether the darn thing would break off or.

[0:40:37] Gwen: It didn't.

[0:40:38] Bob: I shoo them off so that only a few of them could stay.

[0:40:41] Gwen: It was memorable. Lois Maxwell, her first night in this apartment, right next door to us. You can imagine our feelings.

[0:40:54] Bob: All is racket, the music was piano pounding. I guess a bunch had been 50 voices singing and Gwen singing and it was quite an affair.

[0:41:09] Interviewer: Okay. What was the best thing about working for RCA?

[0:41:21] Bob: Being appreciated. I think that was the best.

[0:41:26] Interviewer: What was the worst thing about working for RCA?

[0:41:33] Bob: Disappointment. For instance, when we ... that ice measuring device that had me go to Alaska. This was a Navy contract. They designed it in Camden, and the Camden ice company, I don't know if you are familiar with it. They would make this great big ice 500 pound ice. They would take these things into the lab in Camden and they would use this to test the device. Of course with this beautiful ice that came out of a ice factory, the thing worked perfectly. I thought, well, we better be sure I go all the way up to Alaska I want to see if we can test it in the real world here. So we went over. One of these just the other side of the river- it's a fancy hotel on lake and the lake was frozen over and I said we would go and test this things on that lake so we did. Indeed, the problem was when we went out on the lake, it didn't work. There were too many flaws in the ice. It was impossible in the real world to make it work.

We also went into a boat house which was covered over. The ice was solid under there and we tested it there and it worked nicely but just the same as it worked in the lab. In a way, this was my biggest disappointment that we had developed this thing. I really was not in on the original design of it. I just was dragged into to do the testing. I thought this was not a viable product. I thought we should just cancel the contract and say, "Well, we tried." Well RCA didn't want to do that because I had a contract. They had money. The contract said you got to go test in Alaska. I told them, "Well, I'll go but I think we shouldn't because it's expensive." When I got there it was black. There was no sun. Around noon time there would be a little bit of yellow on the horizon like at night here but it was black. It was the 24 hour.

[0:45:33] Gwen: It was depressing.

[0:45:35] Bob: No, it was interesting.

[0:45:40] Gwen: You like sun.

[0:45:41] Bob: I had fun with that. Actually, at one point we put our equipment including what do they call it. It was almost like a weasel tracked vehicle. I think it was a weasel maybe it was called. It had a cab on it which was warm. Of course it had the power generator. We put that on an airplane at Point Barrow and we flew it to Umiat. Umiat is like the end of the world. There was a Umiat had one time was a bustling place where they had drilled a deep well nearby. Now, there was nothing there but it was on a Caldwell river. This was another test that I had to do to find out how this measuring machine would work on a Caldwell river because that was a problem that they had to cope with when they would run these big cap trains up the river early now and then they find because the underwater, the rocks on water would cause the currents to eat away some of the ice. The ice might be three feet thick generally. In spots it might be just a few inches thick.

Every now and then one of these great bulldozer caterpillar train things would break through and would have to rest and there was a big problem there on the Caldwell river in the middle of nowhere had to try to rescue the thing and get this thing out of there, the big heavy machine. I went down there to try it on the ice and I found the same thing, and it didn't work there either. I got out of the cab of this weasel then I went up the hill, and I go into this oil well building. It was so cold. I guess they had to build a building around the derrick. There was this gigantic- the thing was as big as this house with a big derrick in the middle and a huge machine in the bottom and generators, all these stuff, all idle because the job was over. It was such a difficult place to get in and out of even though this was pretty expensive machinery, they had to abandon it there and out probably it still there.