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Interview with David Armstrong

RCA Heritage Program

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File Name: 0806151412_David_Armstrong

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[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[0:00:07] Male Speaker 1: My name is David H. Armstrong. I started on 5-5-53. That was when I was hired. What else was it? Anything else?

[0:00:19] Male Speaker 2: What job assignments do you have?

[0:00:21] Male Speaker 1: Okay. Well, one of the first ones. I worked at 53 building and I was working on a TPS-10D radar. It was my first job. I worked on a standing wave ratio thing in electron... what was the other thing? The magnetron oscillator, which went with the radar. I was only there about a year and then I went into Camden. In Camden, I think my first job was ARC 34. I work there in ARC 34 radio for a jet airplane. That was the next job I worked on.

[0:01:10] Male Speaker 2: Where was 53 building?

[0:01: 14] Male Speaker 1: East Camden. It was a nice place back then in East Camden, very nice. We had a little restaurant across the street from the building and it was pretty nice, no air-conditioning though. Anyway, the next place I worked with car phones. I spent a good, maybe three, close to three, four years on that job. Then I ended up in customer tuning. We were producing car phones for radios for police, cabs, things like that, and two-way radios for them.

[0:01:50] Male Speaker 2: Okay. You said car phones, are you talking about the police two-way radio?

[0:01:55] Male Speaker 1: Yeah, that's exactly right. That was a car phone job. They had—

[0:02:01] Male Speaker 2: What did you do on those projects?

[0:02:03] Male Speaker 1: Well, I worked on individual receivers and tested them, troubleshoot, fix them if there was something wrong... when it comes off the line it was always something wrong. Right? So, I had to get them fixed and all. Anyway we did that and as time went own, I got into final test. I did the final test. There was three receivers, a 50 megahertz, a 150 and a 450. And I would set the oscillator for the... tune it for the customer frequency in the end. So that was the end job, the whole thing.

[0:02:45] Male Speaker 2: What occupation did they hire you for?

[0:02:48] Male Speaker 1: Actually...in 53 building was a class B tester. That was an entry tester. Then when I got to Camden on the ARC 34 I was hired as a

Class A Tester. In the car phones, I was still a Class A Tester and we finished that up. In '59, I left car phones and I was hired for 501 computer. That's when I made X-Tester in 1959. Then after that... let's see, what were the next jobs? I had a couple jobs in between that weren't too long lived. The COMLOG NET and AUTODIN. That was 17-4 or 5. It's a building. There was another... I'm trying to think. After that, let's see. That was in the early '60s, '50s, '60s.

[0:04:05]

Oh yeah, then I got hired on the Spectra 70 job. That was one of the best jobs I ever worked. I love that job. That was a real good job. I worked on four computers, 70-15, the 70-25, 70-45 and the 70-55. That was the biggest and that's when I worked on, the 55.

[0:04:28] Male Speaker 2:

What was so good about that job?

[00:04:31] Male Speaker 1:

Troubleshooting. I love to troubleshoot. That was the best thing about the job, the whole job. Troubleshooting. That backplanes with wires and print circuits. That was a huge machine, the big rack, huge rack. I loved that job. It was a good job and we became quite good at it. Yeah.

[0:04:53] Male Speaker 2:

Talk to me about your co-workers for a little bit. What was it like?

[0:04:58] Male Speaker 1:

Well, when I first started, a lot of World War II vets and I really liked working with them guys. They're a really great group of people. I was a new kid on the block, of course. I was just out of high school when I first started and all. There were a lot of nice people. I like the people. People were important. There's even the supervisors, and the ones I had were real good. They were very nice people. Yeah.

[0:05:28] Male Speaker 2:

When you first started, did you have a mentor or something like that to help you out, to get you going?

[0:05:34] Male Speaker 1:

Well, they always. When you're the new guy on the job, they always give you some break you in with a... they give you another good tester or something to break you in on it. There were always different ones. You had to have someone show you the ropes and then you continue with the job and then you use on the job training. After that you teach yourself. That's just what we did. Yeah. Anything else?

[0:06:04] Male Speaker 2:

No, that's good.

[0:06:06] Male Speaker 1:

Well, after Spectra 70, like I said that's the job that looked really great and I looked like it was going places. They were going to send us, me and a few other guys to Florida with Tom McIntyre, he was the manager. Then it fell through. They went out of business, computer business. When I come back, I was laid off a little while.

When I came back, I went on to the IVCS job, Interior Voice Communication System. I worked on that, which just Clem Facchini . Do you remember Glen Facchini? No?

Anyway, he worked there. He was my supervisor. He was a great guy. He was a World War II vet. He flew B17s over Berlin, 25 missions. Then after the war he flew the Berlin Airlift. I liked him a lot. After that job... what did I go in there? That was in the early '80s. Then after the '80s... I'm trying to think. Oh, I went to 17 building. That's when I got hired in COMSEC and that's when I worked with Joe Christopher and Sam Mortorano That was an NSA job. They're all communications, encryption devices and things like that.

I worked through there for about four years or so. Then we had another job came in, a space shuttle job. Remember the backpack radios and the orbiter radio? Well, I worked on both of them and I worked with John Sheldahl.

[0:08:02]

I did final test on both of those items. The final test on the orbiter. In fact, that's the first time I got back to transceivers since car phones. Car phones and on this, the space shuttle job. John Sheldahl is an old friend. We made friends there and we're friends till this day, John Sheldahl. He was a lead engineer on the job.

Anyway, I knew all them guys. After that, let's see, where did I go from there? I'm trying to remember. I seem to remember 40 years ago better than just more recently. Yeah, where did I go from there? I was from there to there. Oh, Irish Square. I was on there for quite a while, yeah, in 3 building. We had rack area where I'd perform test on racks, pre-ATP, ATP and final ATP. There are three tests to make sure everything is right. Then they integrated all their racks into the rack room where the engineers did the final test. That was IR-Square. That was a good job. That took me up to almost the time I retired. I went into the new building after that. IR-Square, that was the end of that job. It wasn't really the end.

The one thing I want to mention about the radios, the space shuttle radios. I was talking John Sheldahl about them. He said, "We never had a failure in 30 years." That's how good they were done. Never had a failure in 30 years. I was glad to hear that. Yeah.

[0:10:00]

My work was done well, then on them jobs.

[0:10:03] Male Speaker 2:

You have some pride in your work. What about the work environment?

[0:10:09] Male Speaker 1: Oh, they're fine. Yeah, that was fine. I mean it was a family sort of thing. We had loyalty. I had loyalty to the company and they had loyalty to me. We were loyal to each other and everything.

[0:10:21] Male Speaker 2: We hear a lot about the RCA family. What does it mean to you?

[0:10:26] Male Speaker 1: Well, you sometimes think it means that your family is there because you have other family members working there. But it's not just that. It's a family because people care about you. They care about you and you care about your work. I mean I took pride in my work. I really did. I found out the best thing to do is keep busy as much as you can. I always did. I'd like keep busy and do my work and that's what it meant to me.

[0:11:02] Male Speaker 2: You had family working in RCA also?

[0:11:05] Male Speaker 1: My brother, George. That's the only one. Yeah. George Armstrong. Yeah.

[0:11:13] Male Speaker 2: What about outside of work?

[0:11:18] Male Speaker 2: We had our work day. Did you ever associate with any of your co-workers outside of work?

[0:11:26] Male Speaker 1: Mostly with the RCA tennis ladder. I belonged to the tennis ladder with my brother, George. Don Parker was in it. Carl Smith and another fellow, I think you know him. There were some other people. I can't think of their names offhand now. There were quite a few people in the ladder. We associated that way. I mean outside of work. Not so much with anybody else, no. We just went to work and came home again. That's it.

[0:12:08] Male Speaker 2: People have talked about the Christmas parties too. Did you ever go to any of those?

[0:12:15] Male Speaker 1: No, I heard about them, especially when I first started RCA. They've had some wild parties there. No, I never went to the Christmas party. I just went home, that's it. I was a good boy. I got married at 21. I decided to behave myself.

[0:12:41] Male Speaker 2: You mentioned John Sheldahl as a friend outside of work?

[0:12:45] Male Speaker 1: Yes. Absolutely.

[0:12:46] Male Speaker 2: Anyone else?

[0:12:48] Male Speaker 1: Well, Don Parker, actually. We played tennis even when we weren't on the ladder. I used to play doubles with him with some guy Borgezi? He was an engineer. Ah Steve, what was his name? Bill

Borgezi? I'm not sure. I know his last name. It was Borgezi and there was a couple of other guys we played with. My brother, George, played with him in doubles outside of work. Yeah. That's the only ones there I can think of right now. Yeah.

[0:13:28] Male Speaker 2: The environment of the workplace was more a caring environment. Is that the way you would summarize it?

[0:13:34] Male Speaker 1: Yeah. I would say so. Yeah. Most of the time, yeah. I always run into a couple that aren't so hot but that's the way it goes. We don't have any problems. We had guys in 53 building. They came back from the war and they had some problems, some of them. We had a guy, one guy in 53 building he used to box on weekends.

[0:14:01] His name is Eddie Giosa. He was a boxer from Philadelphia and he would box on a weekends and come in on Monday and he's kind of beat up. It was an interesting place to be. There are so many interesting people. In fact, I don't know if you have figures on this, but during the '60s I think there was close to 20,000 people in the plant. There was a lot of people. I don't know.

[0:14:27] Male Speaker 2: That brings me to another point. Several people have mentioned about RCA changing South Jersey. Do you have any thoughts on that?

[0:14:39] Male Speaker 1: Changing South Jersey. Yeah. It provided employment for a lot of people. Campbell Soup was across the street and they provided a lot of work for people and everybody could buy homes on that and raise families. Yeah, it was a great thing to have. I mean I don't know where I would have worked if I hadn't worked at RCA. I mean everybody work there. I seems like everybody... neighbors... I moved... my first home I moved into, there was a manager working there, Bill Lyons . His name is Bill Lyons. He worked with Tom McIntyre. He lived next door to me. That was my first house in West Mount. My second house was in Audubon and I lived there for 35 years and paid that house off and lived there for a while and then we moved to Virginia.

Yeah. It was a big impact on South Jersey, both companies. I can remember coming down Market Street during one of the day shifts in the '50s, there's be tomato trucks in front of me, you know piled full with tomatoes and they'd be falling off. The kids would be running the street and grabbing the tomatoes. Then we go to work and the windows would be open and you could smell the soup. Pretty unique.

[0:16:04] Male Speaker 2: In your assessment, what was the best thing about working at RCA?

[0:16:09] Male Speaker 1: My assessment? A job I liked, enjoyed. And troubleshooting was the main thing. I loved to troubleshoot.

[0:16:16] Male Speaker 2: What was the worst thing about working at RCA?

[0:16:21] Male Speaker 1: Well, when I first started it was a noisy, noisy place. I'll tell you that. There was noisy, crowded. It was close quarters. I didn't care for that too much. Other than that, that's the worst... those were the worst things, I guess. The crowds and... I'm not really used to that, being around a lot of people like that, but I got used to it. The people were the main thing about it. I met a lot of great people there.

[0:16:56] Male Speaker 2: How do you think the rest of the world viewed RCA?

[0:17:01] Male Speaker 1: Well, they still talk about it today, RCA, RCA. I talk to people. They still think it's in existence. They made their mark on the world, I'd tell you. They made it. Yeah.

[0:17:19] Male Speaker 2: How would you sum up your career at RCA?

[0:17:23] Male Speaker 1: Well, it was great. Great career. I enjoyed it. Like I said, I raised my family with it and bought a house and paid it off and lived a good middle class life on it. That was about it. Like I said, I went to work wanting to go to work, which a lot of people don't do today. It was good. It was a good place to work.

[0:17:56] Male Speaker 2: Anything else you'd like to say about your career, RCA, or anything that we haven't touched on yet?

[0:18:05] Male Speaker 1: No, I think I touched on a lot of it. Interesting projects. Like I said, the IR-Square, the space shuttle, the radios, I worked on there with John Sheldahl. What was the other one? Car phones. That was tubes. Everything was tubes. I sold a whole transition from tubes to transistors, to integrated circuits, to micro miniature. The COMSEC job was a beautiful job. I enjoyed that. I work with a lot of engineers, lots of those jobs, I work with engineers even though I was just a technician. It was always interesting.

I think the COMSEC group there was one of the nicest groups I ever worked with.

[0:18:58] Male Speaker 2: How did the engineers treat you?

[0:19:00] Male Speaker 1: Good. Yeah, they're all good. Very nice. They were very nice people, gentlemen. They're very good. Yeah.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]