John A. Adams ’71 Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis.
Cold War Oral History Project
Interview with Admiral Edward Feightner by Cadet J.D. Eanett, October 17, 2005

About the interviewer:

Cadet JD Eanett ('07) is a history major from Lakeland, Florida who plans on commissioning as a Marine Corps Flight Officer upon graduation from VMI.

Eanett: The following interview is being conducted for the John A. Adams ’71 Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis as part of the requirements for History 387—History of Air Power. The interviewer is Cadet J. D. Eanett. The interviewee is Admiral E. L. Feightner who will also be assisted by Capt. Frank Ault, a colleague. Today’s date is October 17, 2005. We are meeting over the phone.

I’m just going to tell you, basically, what I’m doing. I have a History of Air Power class here at VMI and for our semester project we need to interview someone who has first-hand knowledge of air power throughout history. I’m a friend of Rita Selvage and of her husband, Don, and he said you would be the perfect people to call.

Ault: I don’t know, but Admiral Feightner knows everything there is to know about aviation, so ask your questions.

Eanett: Admiral, I’d like to start with you and ask a couple of questions. Is that O.K.?

Feightner: Go ahead.

Eanett: What was it that originally got you into aviation?

Feightner: The Army was after me. They put me in the draft.

Eanett: The Army?

Feightner: I was in college and about to be drafted. That's the reason I joined the Navy. I'd already learned to fly before that.

Eanett: Oh, really? You learned to fly as a civilian?

Feightner: Right. We had a program back in those days called Civilian Pilot Training Program.

Eanett: What, exactly, did that entail?

Feightner: It gave us enough hours to get ourselves a license – a private license – and it was a program that was actually financed, I think, by the military in order to get some pilots trained so they'd have a pool of pilots to draw from.

Eanett: Sounds like a pretty smart idea.

Feightner: It was. One of their better ideas.

Eanett: So you decided to join the Navy?

Feightner: Yes. I had already signed up for the Army Air Corps and they had a little wait before we could go in. One day an airplane landed at the airport and a guy walked into the hanger and he came out and he was wearing Navy whites and about that time a yellow convertible comes screeching around the hanger and a blonde jumps out and gives him a big smooch and off they went. My flight instructor couldn't stand this so he says, "Why don't you and Red take that airplane and go up to Grosshill, Michigan and find out what this Navy stuff's all about?"

To make a long story short, we went up there and found out what the Navy stuff was all about and they said, “Hey, we’ll take you this afternoon.” So we signed up. That’s how I got in the Navy.

Eanett: Wow! That is a story right there. I understand, at least from the resume that I was sent, that you served in World War II. Correct?

Feightner: That’s correct. I started in 1942. I was headed for *The Yorktown* and they got soaked before I got there, so I went down to Maui and was one of the first people assigned to Butch O’Hare, who they named O’Hara Airport up in Chicago. He had just become the Navy’s first ace and had shot down five airplanes that were trying to sink the *Lexington*, so I was sent down there with some of the survivors off the *Yorktown*. We became VF-3 and they were short of a training squadron and then VF-10 came through and they needed a couple of pilots, so Butch O’Hare donated me to VF-10 and we went off to the war on the *Enterprise*.

Eanett: Now I also understand that you, yourself, qualified as a fighter ace. Is that correct?

Feightner: That is correct.

Eanett: Were all five of those in a single engagement, like Butch O’Hare, or were they separate?

Feightner: No, mine were stretched out. I’m credited with nine airplanes and four probables in there. These were stretched out over – on that tour on the *Enterprise* I got four of them and the rest of them I got were in Hellcats on the *Bunker Hill*.

Eanett: Did being a fighter ace get you anything special or any prestigious things or anything nice aboard ship?

Feightner: Oh yes. I think it opened a lot of doors. I ended up being in the Blue Angels and I ended up being a test pilot at Pax River.

Ault: I think it's worth noting that about five percent of fighter pilots shoot down about 30 percent of the enemy, so that puts Feightner in a special class. It puts him in that five percent of aviators that have special skills which we've never been able to identify.

Eanett: That's incredible. I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about the test pilot program if that's o.k.

Feightner: Sure.

Eanett: How does one end up in the test pilot program?

Feightner: Some people apply for it, but often times they put out a request for people to volunteer to go into the test program. And then you have to be recommended by your skipper and a few other people. They have a selection board and they select out of the group that's come up there, whether they need you or not.

Eanett: That's pretty interesting. Did you test, mainly, aircraft – like actual flight time or was it weapons systems, navigational equipment, etc.?

Feightner: Test Pilot School is strictly to test the airplanes.

Ault: Not the subsystems.

Eanett: O.K. I understand now. I understand you flew, pretty much, every fighter aircraft the Navy's ever put up in that test pilot program.

Feightner: I think that's right – up through the F-14. I drew up the requirements for the F-18, but I never got to fly the airplane – flew the trainer a lot – the simulator, but I never flew the actual airplane. But everything from the Wildcat on, I flew all of them.

Eanett: Of all of those airplanes, did you have a favorite?

Feightner: Yeah, I think for just going out and having fun I think, the Bearcat was probably the best airplane. It has the electra-forward, but I sure wouldn't have wanted to go to war in it. I think we had the right airplane for World War II and that was the Hellcat. That's why it ended up being the high-scoring Navy fighter. It shot down more airplanes than the next three airplanes combined.

Ault: The Bearcat engine was the F8F.

Feightner: They were looking at the Bearcat and the Hellcat at the same time and they decided we really needed a general purpose airplane like the Hellcat, because it could do so many more things than the Bearcat could do. Bearcats were kind of a point defense fighter and didn't have much range and couldn't carry much, but it sure had a lot of performance. The Hellcat and the Corsair were the two airplanes that really we had in World War II. They were pretty good airplanes for that time.

Eanett: That's really interesting. I know the reputation, at least, for the Test Pilot Program through all the research and stuff I've done, but did you ever crash?

Feightner: No, fortunately. Not what you would call a real crash. I've had a few things break on airplanes.

Eanett: Never had to bail out or anything?

Feightner: No, never did. Did a lot of dead-stick landings. Broke the cutlass, the cutlass 1, the F-7U1 in two. I broke the back on it making carrier landings with it, but that really wasn't a crash. It was just a hard landing.

Eanett: I guess that makes you one of the rare lucky ones, huh sir?

Feightner: Well, yeah. There were quite a few people who survived. Jimmy had 22 crashes during his career. None of them really kept him out that long – Doolittle. Do you remember Jimmy Doolittle?

Eanett: Oh, yes sir.

Feightner: He wrote a book and he said he crashed 22 times and he lived.

Eanett: That man's incredible.

Feightner: Yes he was.

Eanett: Twenty-two times and he keeps on living. So, when did you actually wind down in the test program?

Feightner: Well, I went from there to a VX-3 which was, in reality, another test program, but we tested the systems rather than the airplanes themselves. We found out which system would work and what tactics you would use to get the most out of the airplane.

Ault: VX program concentrates on the availability of the airplane for fleet operations – not can the airplane fly well, etc., but does the airplane meet the requirements for whatever the Navy wants to do with it.

Eanett: O.K. I understand now. So, in working with VX-3 and being in the Test Pilot Program and palling around with people like Alan Shepherd, did you do any work with NASA?

Feightner: No, we didn't do any work at all with that. I did get out a couple of times and fly a couple of the NASA airplanes. They had a program down there and we were testing out an automated landing system for the 747. That's the only work I did with NASA. I met a lot of NASA people though.

Eanett: I bet you did working in the Test Pilot program.

Feightner: We traded information a lot, back and forth.

Eanett: Learn anything interesting?

Feightner: Oh, a lot. NASA does a great job. There were a lot of interesting things. A lot of things that made better airplanes because of it.

Eanett: Excellent.

Ault: NASA is more in the theory of flight business. They check the authenticity and the performance of air foils and all sorts of shapes and power and all these components of flight. The Navy Test Pilot School is more in testing what happens when they put all the stuff together.

Feightner: The Navy Test Pilot Program is there primarily to make sure the government gets what they paid for. The contractor has to demonstrate that the airplane will do things and then we go out and see whether it will. Fleet pilots use fleet tactics to see whether an airplane can do what we ask it to do. We won't actually sign off on the contract until we actually run the board of inspections survey trials. That's what Navy test pilots do, to make sure the airplane meets the board of inspections survey trial.

Eanett: That's pretty cool. After you did the VX-3 program, you went on to the Blue Angels. Is that correct?

Feightner: No, I went to the Blue Angels right after the Patuxent tour and before I went to VX-3. After the Korean War. They sent the Blue Angels to war in the Korean War and the flight leader was killed during that war. After the war they wanted to start them up again and they called me and asked me if I wanted to be the leader. I said I could be there in about five minutes. I said, "What airplanes are we going to fly?"

And they said, "The F-7U1."

I said, "I just resigned."

They didn't understand that, but we finally got them to understand that you could not – that airplane wasn't far enough along that you could even fly in formation. So they decided to put the team in the new Panther that has just come out and we'd use the F-7U1's ones to solo. I got there and found out there weren't any F-7U pilots but we searched around and found Butch Morris – the original leader of the Blues – and they decided to break him loose for a year, so they let him come back and he'd lead the formation and I'd do the solo work. The only problem was, he was senior to me and I lost my job. Incidentally, we got word just last week. He just died.

Eanett: I'm sorry to hear that sir.

Feightner: You've heard of a book called *First Blue*. You might be interested in reading it.

Eanett: Was flying with the Blue Angels really, really challenging?

Feightner: It sure is. That's a lot of work, but it's a rewarding thing. Of all the Blue Angels, we were really one of the first exhibition teams. Of course they developed a lot. You know, back in the old bi-plane days they had a couple of outfits that flew around, but the Blue Angels were our first formal exhibition team. It's a lot of hard work but the payoff is pretty good. You get a lot of enjoyment out of it and it sure benefits the Navy. That probably brings more people into the service than any other thing we do – into the air program. That's true of both the Air Force and the Navy. Most of the aviators that come in, come in because they see the Blue Angels or heard about them or heard of the Thunderbirds. The Canadians have the Snowbirds. All of them are great. The British have a team that are pretty good – the Red Arrows. They all do a great job.

Eanett: I've heard the Marine Corps is going to come out with an exhibition team. Have you heard anything about that?

Feightner: They've tried several times to have that, but I'm not sure it will ever happen. There are a few politics involved with doing that and they may run into a problem trying to get another team.

Ault: There would also be a problem with money – policy or money – it will get shot down one way or the other.

Eanett: That's very true.

Feightner: Marine pilots are Navy pilots, you know.

Eanett: Oh, yes sir.

Feightner: They won't admit it, but it's a fact.

Eanett: No, they often won't admit that. I agree. So, being a Blue Angel is pretty prestigious work?

Feightner: Oh yes, great. Get to meet a lot of good people. Have a lot of fun at air shows. We get the royal treatment.

Eanett: Did flying with the Blue Angels, in formations and all that – did it ever become relatively routine or was it always challenging – always difficult?

Feightner: It's always challenging and it's always difficult. When you fly that close and do those kinds of maneuvers together, you'd better be up to your game. I don't know how well people know this, but each one of our teams have lost a lot of people doing these things. It's not the safest thing in the world, but we make it as safe as we possibly can. I think the Blue Angels are up, now, to something over 20 people who have been killed flying in the Blue Angels. And so have the other services – they all have.

Eanett: I did not know that.

Ault: Well, the extra problem is you're always flying around crowds and you don't want an airplane to fly into the crowd and kill a lot of people.

Eanett: That's even more true.

Feightner: When you fly those kinds of maneuvers, as close to the ground as we do, if you do something wrong, that's the end. You don't make many mistakes down there at those altitudes. In fact the whole Air Force team went in together at one point. I don't know whether you remember that or not, but they were flying the F-5s, I think it was at that time – T-38s I think they were. Everybody has to watch the leader and the leader had a malfunction and couldn't pull the airplane up. They'd done a loop and were coming down on the back side and he couldn't pull out and by the time the rest realized what happened, they all hit the ground – wiped out the whole team.

Eanett: I had never heard that before.

Feightner: Yeah. It looks great in the air, but it's hairy.

Eanett: I don't doubt it. I'd like to go back a little bit, if you don't mind, to World War II and discuss your service at Guadalcanal.

Feightner: Right.

Eanett: How many aircraft did you down over Guadalcanal?

Feightner: Officially, none.

Eanett: Officially?

Feightner: Something happened – I don't know. I shot down nine airplanes there but I never got credit for any of them. We moved off the *Enterprise* and went over to Guadalcanal and all we had on were our flight suits and the day we arrived they only had four airplanes in commission. We brought in 16 airplanes and then they pulled us out later on and we left all the airplanes there, but while we were there, we just all flew together and during that period I shot down nine airplanes that I'm positive of. We got debriefed and everything. Supposedly they sent this information in; we didn't have any way of keeping records and they sent this back to the carrier. For three of us, the information never got back to the carrier, and we didn't find out about it until about six months later when we were ending up our careers and were getting off. Normally we didn't keep our own log books. They were kept by the ship. When we got off there was no record in there of any of the three of us having been on Guadalcanal. There was no way of proving what we'd done so it was just written off – just nine we didn't get. To answer your question, I shot down three fighters the day we arrived because we were covering our bombers and so forth. After day two, I got two on the next strike that we went up. Our flight leader got shot down and in

protecting him I shot down two more Zeros that were strafing and then I got three bombers later on after that and got one or two others somewhere in there. But none of that ever got recorded except by the Marines and whatever happened to them we never did find out. I shot down some more planes in Hellcats later on.

Eanett: That's pretty good to go. You also flew in Korea. Is that correct?

Feightner: No, I didn't fly in Korea. I was a test pilot in Pax River during Korea. First testing the Bearcat and the Corsair and AF and a couple of other airplanes at the time.

Eanett: So, during your stint as a test pilot, how did the Cold War really affect the test pilot program? Did they keep a lot of it under secrecy?

Feightner: No, I don't think so. We did a lot of testing during that period but I don't think there was anything secret about what we were doing. We were just trying to get new airplanes that were up to the job. We didn't have a lot of big airplanes at that time. The biggest airplane I ever tested was a thing called the R6O which was a big Lockheed aircraft. It was a four-engine transport and it was so big it had two levels of seating in it and two big spiral staircases in it, one fore and one aft, to get from one to the other. We bought two of these airplanes and we put them in commission and they used them to carry the Navy band around. They didn't go beyond that because the airplane had some problems and it was pretty short legged. In fact, most of the time, because of the headwinds, they couldn't even fly from the East Coast to the West Coast. We'd have to stop in Kansas City or somewhere and refuel it. But anyway, it was a pretty good airplane. I had a great experience in it. I had done a lot of JATO work – flew with JATO, jet assisted take-off, you know, when they put these rocket bottles on each side of the airplane to help you get off?

Eanett: Yes sir.

Feightner: This airplane had eight of those on there and the day we were going to test it, we had quite a bit of wind and we used a short runway at Pax River to get off. The co-pilot sitting beside me was doing the paperwork at the time and so we started the take off, we're going to fire the bottles, just before we got airborne. That airplane was so big, you know, you took off the nose wheel and then you went down the runway on the main gear and pull back on the stick and at that point, fire the JATOs and they didn't go. So we ended up getting airborne "on the back side of the power curve," which means you can't accelerate. The only thing that saved us was a big drill haul coming up right with a semi-circular roof on it – a hemisphere-type roof – but when we approached that we were below the top of it, but the ground effect took us over the top and got us up enough lift and we got up over the trees. We weren't getting any altitude until we got over the river and then we got on the river and got a little lift. All soaring airplanes find out there's a lift over water when the sun's out. That's the way we got back up on the stick and got to flying again. That's some of the stuff you can get into – some of the surprises that come along.

Eanett: Pretty close call, though, isn't it sir?

Feightner: You got that right.

Eanett: So you just didn't test fighter aircraft? You also tested heavies like that?

Feightner: We tested all kinds of things. Helicopters. PBM5 which was a big flying boat – the Mariner – and we had the FA-16 program. I did a lot of work for that one, the Mariner, making rough water landings and doing prop tests on it because when you reverse the props you suck water through them and get a lot of erosion on the propellers that way. Those are the kinds of projects you get involved with.

Eanett: You must have had to go through a lot of training to learn to fly heavies and fighters and sea planes and helicopters?

Feightner: Oh, yeah. They all fly the same.

Ault: It's called on-the-job training.

Feightner: I even checked out Charles Lindbergh a couple of times. Once in an F7F, he came down and I owned all the F7Fs at that time. I had the F7F project. My boss, Marion Carl, called me in to the office one day, introduced me to Lindberg and said, "Hey, the colonel wants to fly your airplane. How about checking him out?"

I took him out and gave him a 15 minute checkout, which we normally did, and I said, "I'll get a fire bottle if you're ready to go."

And he said, "Do you have a handbook?"

Well, right there I knew what he thought of my checkout. Obviously he wasn't satisfied with it so we got him a handbook and he stayed in the airplane for the rest of the day. Till about 3:00 he got out and went in the hangar and talked to the crew chief in there and then he left and took the book with him. So he didn't fly that day. I asked the crew chief what he talked about. He said, "I don't know. He wanted to know all about the control system."

The next day he came back. He got out and went out to the airplane and I went out to see him and he said, "I'll be ready to go in about an hour, probably."

So he got back in the airplane and he sat there and Burn said, "Well, just raise your arm when you're ready to go and we'll send a fire bottle out."

And about an hour later he did just that. He went off and was gone two and a half hours and came back and I went out to see him and said, "How'd it go colonel?"

He said, “Son, you’ve got a fine airplane here.”

That was the sum total of anything he said to me. He went in to see Marion Carl and then he left and then I went in to see the boss and said, “What did he talk about?”

He said, “I don’t know. He didn’t tell me.”

So we never did find out what he did. I got hold of the crew chief and finally the crew chief told me, “Well, all I know is he made me loosen the trim tab on the forward elevator.” So we got our heads together and figured he’d been doing flutter tests out there I guess or something, but he didn’t hurt the airplane so we put it back where it belonged and went on with it.

Later on, during the Korean War, I had a project. We were going to start carrying bombs on the Corsair. So we had a project there and we completed it. He showed up one day and he wanted to hear what we had done on this thing so I gave him a checkout again, put four or five hundred pound bombs on and he went out and made a couple of take-offs with them. Later on he went around to all the bases in the Pacific and showed people how to make short field take-offs with bombs on board.

Eanett: That’s just really, really cool.

Feightner: The only other time I met him was when I was on a carrier, just before the landings on Leyte. We went down to pick up the Secretary of the Navy, down to a little island called Biak, New Guinea. They had a base there. We got there and the P-38s were in there and I got to see Lindbergh again, because he down there showing the P-38 pilots how to extend their range by taking off, flying on one engine out to the battle, cranking up both engines until the fight was over. On the way home they’d fly on the other engine and this way they were able to increase their range. We didn’t have in-flight refueling in those days. So this kept him pretty well occupied. He did a lot of things that nobody ever knew. Incidentally, on that flying from Biak there, they flew completely across the Philippines. They didn’t tell anybody in

those days, but he shot down two Zeros while he was out there. Being a civilian pilot, you know, the rules of war wouldn't apply to him and they can torture him or anything they wanted if they got him. Anyway, they credited him with two airplanes.

Eanett: I had never heard that before.

Feightner: A lot of people never heard that part of the story. They didn't advertise that very much. He was a good pilot. Obviously he knew what he was doing.

Eanett: Oh yeah. I'd like to switch tracks, again, really fast. The last plane you tested was the F-14?

Feightner: Yeah. I didn't really test it. I just flew it to see what it was like because, at that time, I was head of the Navy Fighter Design.

Eanett: The head of Navy Fighter Design? How did you get that job?

Feightner: Oh, just because of my experience I guess. All I know is one day I got orders. Well, I started out as the program manager for the Phantom – the F-4F1. We ended up giving that airplane to everybody else in the world after that. It was such a good airplane. It broke all the world climb-to-altitude records. We built a lot of those airplanes in later years. In fact, some of those airplanes are still flying, I think. Some of the countries are still flying them. The Germans flew him, the Israelis flew them, Japanese flew them, the South American countries flew them. It was kind of an ugly-looking airplane but it really had a lot of power. We set a lot of records with it, anyhow.

Eanett: Yes sir.

Feightner: While I had that program, John Glenn had the F8U project. He was the chief project officer of that one. But I went from the Phantom, then, and took over the job at Navy Fighter Design for a couple of years. Caught up to the F-14 before I left.

Eanett: What is it, exactly, that the head of Navy Fighter Design gets to do? Are you really in charge of every Navy Fighter Design program?

Feightner: That's correct. Every Navy fighter program that comes up. We supported all the fighters that we had out there according to the technology and so forth. Yes, all the airplanes that we built. If we had a new buyer come buy one, well that's when we drew up the plans for the F-18. We needed an all-purpose airplane to sell overseas, but they blocked the F-16. It was one of the competitors in there, but the Air Force and the Navy together decided the F-16 was a better airplane than the F-17. For the Navy, the F-16 wasn't a good carrier airplane. They came on and decided they wanted to sell a twin-engine airplane overseas and so the Navy looked at it and said it had to be in somebody's inventory before they could do that. So we looked at it and decided that we could use the twin-engine version of the F-17, so we redesigned the airplane and called it the F-18. That's really how the F-18 was born. It was supposed to be a fairly light-weight fighter that could be sold overseas. It has progressed a lot since then.

Actually the airplane we really wanted is the one they're just now getting out in the field – the F-18E and F now. They had a few engine problems and things and Congress, or somebody, in their wisdom, put a ceiling on what the airplane could cost and they ended up with some inferior engines in it. It took all this time to get the airplane up to what it should be. That's the kind of work you do in fighter design. Do you know anything about the Hawkeye – the Navy's…

Eanett: The E2C – the AWAC?

Feightner: AWAC, yes. Strange as it may seem, that airplane was designed by the Navy fighter team. We did that because we needed an airplane to direct fighters and so we actually fielded the first one of

those airplanes. Came out of the engineering and the Naval Air Systems Command under the fighter program.

Feightner: AWACs turned out to be a pretty good idea, so now we're doing it for everything.

Eanett: Yes, sir, those things save a lot of pilot's lives.

Feightner: They do more than save lives. I tell you, they're the key to a lot of this business.

Eanett: After you were the head of Navy Fighter Design, what did you move on to after that?

Feightner: I guess I moved out to the Carrier Division as the operations officer and later on, then, I guess I went from there to a fleet oiler and from that on to an LPH. I came back to Washington. I escaped for awhile, but they eventually get you back here. All that good training they gave you as a test pilot for the program.

Eanett: So, have you done anything with the more modern Naval fighter power, like the F-22s and the JSFs or any of that new stuff they're looking into?

Feightner: Yeah, I did fighter studies and so forth and some of the things for the JSF. They used to call that thing a VTOL. That came out of some of that work we did. I had retired by then and it was part of fighter studies, etc., but I didn't have anything to do with that.

Eanett: Yes, sir, I understand. Well, sir, that's about all the questions I have for you today.

Feightner: Alright.

Ault: You know where we are. Just call and we'll set it up if you want to fill this thing out or if you want to send your paper here, by computer – we'll be glad to do that for you.

Eanett: I might do that too, sir.

Feightner: Well, Captain Ault, if you haven't talked to him about his program – he and I worked together all these years. We even have the same air wings and same job in NAVAIR. We just traded them back and forth.

Ault: He did the fighting, I carried the spear.

Eanett: I would love to talk to Captain Ault, but I've got one tape and I'm out of time.

Feightner: Well, you'll have to talk to him someday about – he's head of Top Gun.

Eanett: Yes sir, I'm aware.

Feightner: He's the guy who invented it.

Eanett: You, sir, are my hero.

Ault: I was just out there about three weeks ago. I gave the graduation address to the Top Gun class. Here's the hooker. I asked for a show of hands of anybody over age 37. There were five. Because all this went on while all these guys were growing up – like you were growing up. What most of the admiral did was while you were growing up.

Feightner: It was all over by the time you were grown.

Ault: Well, you call us again if you need to fill this thing out.

Eanett: I might do that sir.

Feightner: O.K. Thank you.

Eanett: Thank you very much sirs. Have a good day. Woohoo!!!