

Panama Canal Museum Oral History Interview Clip Transcript
William and Carol Hellums
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Bill: I'd come down on the U.S.S. Sturgis, which had been a converted Liberty Ship left over from World War II. Converted by Martin Marietta, and they'd taken the propulsion system out and in place put a ten-megawatt electrical nuclear reactor, pressurized water. Turned it into a floating nuclear reactor, and this was the world's first. It was more done as R & D in the Army program, U.S. Army Engineer Reactor Group. This was a tri-service organization made of Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel. The Army operated it. It was trying to prove a concept. It would have been very relevant for, like, the Japanese disaster today, to be able to tow a big generating-capacity plant, dock it next to the disaster area, and feed in the electrical lines, and you have power. One of the problems they had in Japan, they lost power for days and days and days. So anyway, the Canal had been experiencing drought and the Pan Canal needs water to work because of hydraulics. Electrical power for the Panama Canal had been provided extensively by the dam down in Gatún.

Carol: All the power was hydroelectric.

Bill: So, they wanted to save the water, not use the hydro power. So that's probably the reason we go, I'm gonna bring this reactor down here; it doesn't take water. We brought her down, towed her down, I think it was April [19]68. Crew came down, about forty-five of us, I believe, in the crew and nuclear operators. I was a health physicist. I was also trained as a nuclear operator, but I got the job of environmental monitoring, which meant that I would take water samples around the boat, sediment samples from underneath the boat. Then I would go out in the jungles and gather biomass, fish, things like that. Then I'd go out on the lake and catch fish and so forth. Ash them down and do radiological analyses of these samples, and then send out a report every month and every quarter and so forth like that.

Carol: Bottom line, he got to spend his days hunting and fishing in the Canal Zone and around the lake.
[Laughter]

Bill: It was the ideal job in the Army. In fact, the Big Picture, this was a program put on by the U.S. Army back in the [19]60s, [19]70s, actually came down and filmed me. One of the more interesting jobs in the program. They took a single photograph of me sitting on the end of the pier with a fishing pole. Easiest job in the Army.