

236 Heroes on Deck

Voiceover: This program is sponsored by Captain Dave Truitt.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Clarke: Thank you very much, and thank you for being here. I appreciate it. Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with a discussion about the wartime history of Navy Pier, the original documentary *Heroes On Deck: World War II on Lake Michigan*, and the new memorial being planned at Navy Pier in honor of these WWII heroes. Here to talk about these topics are Captain Dave Truitt, Herb Sohn, and Jonathan Toby Mack. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago, and it's sponsored by Captain Dave Truitt. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. Navy Pier is one of the most famous landmarks in Chicago, attracting over nine million visitors each year. The pier and its proximity to Lake Michigan once served an important purpose to the navy during the Second World War. From 1942 to 1945 the pier housed, trained, and employed 10,000 men and women. A booming community within itself, Navy Pier contained a 2,500-seat theater, barbershops, cobbler shops, a kitchen, and its own hospital. Off the Chicago shoreline, the navy qualified over 15000 pilots for aircraft carrier landings using two training aircraft carriers, USS Sable and USS Wolverine, which were converted from coal fired, side wheeled passenger ships. Not every pilot landed successfully during training on the pitching decks of these ships. 128 aircraft were lost and over 200 accidents and eight pilots lost their lives. Using rare footage of US Navy operations, interviews, and computer-generated imagery, the documentary *Heroes On Deck* tells the story of the recovery of these rare war birds and the ingenious training program that changed the course of the war in the Pacific. Captain Dave Truitt was compelled to tell the story of these men and was the underwriter of *Heroes On Deck*. He currently serves and supports the Museum of the American Sailor, the Museum of Science and Industry, the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, where he received the Founder's Award in 2010, Chicago Marine Heritage Society, and the Christmas Tree Ship. He served as the chairman of the USS Midway memorial committee for the Navy League, as founding chairman of the Chicago Marine Heritage Society, and in many capacities with the United States Coastguard Auxiliary, including as a flotilla commander. He is also a coastguard-licensed shipmaster. Captain Truitt attended the University of Chicago law school and practiced law in Hyde Park. He served for nearly fourteen years as president of Friends of the Chicago Public Library. Herb Sohn is a WWII veteran who enlisted in the US Navy in 1945 at the age of seventeen. He trained as a radio technician and was stationed at Navy Pier during WWII. He served in the navy for two years and two years in the US Marine Corps where he achieved the rank of sergeant. It was during his wartime experience that he decided to become a physician. Sohn attended the University of Virginia to earn his undergraduate degree and then later returned to Chicago to attend the Chicago Medical School. He served as former vice chairman for the board of trustees for Rosalind Franklin University and as former president of the American Association of Clinical Urologists. He currently works as a urologist at Weiss Memorial Hospital. Toby Mack is cochair of the Chicago Navy Memorial Foundation and president and CEO of the Associated Equipment Distributors. He attended Penn State University and entered into active duty in the US Navy in 1966. He was deployed with the Seventh Fleet in Vietnam

from 1967 to 1968. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Captain Dave Truitt, Herb Sohn, and Jonathan Toby Mack.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you for being here today. Before starting the discussion we're gonna watch a short clip from *Heroes On Deck* to get the mood set.

Voiceover: The US had to get going. We'd just been attacked.

-The navy needed carrier pilots.

-The idea of putting training aircraft carriers on Lake Michigan was brilliant.

-There were probably between 130 and 150 crashes.

-If you're down low and you give up a wing, school's out. Crashed and burned.

-There were fires. Deckhands would walk into an engine.

-15,000 carrier pilots trained on Lake Michigan.

-These were the guys that shot the Japanese air force out of the sky. They were the ones that changed the course of the war.

Clarke: Dave, this film has been in the back of your mind in one way or shape another over many years. This has been a labor of love for I would say decades. And so I want to know what inspired you to tell the story in the fashion that *Heroes On Deck* is, because it won a couple Emmy Awards. It's been very well done. It's been very successful, but it wasn't always, you know, overnight success.

Truitt: No.

Clarke: So what inspired you to create this film?

Truitt: Well, yeah, as I'm sitting here and listening to Chuck Downey and Grant Young, both of whom perished during the film, I get a tear comes in my eyes because they were my original source. And as you know, I made a film myself, all volunteer film with the Underwater Archeological Society and the Shedd Aquarium using these two guys as our actors and our narrators. It was quite different, and we showed it in the auditorium at the Shedd Aquarium, and I had these two guys, live, there so they would tell the story. You wouldn't see the story, like you can in this film, which is-- I'm really proud of. But they would tell the story, and all the hands would go up. Everybody loved talking to these two wonderful guys about their life. They enlisted; they weren't drafted. That turned out to be--if you look at the whole military, guys enlisted in the navy. They don't get drafted in the navy. They were there because they wanted to be there.

Clarke: So these guys both trained on the carriers.

Truitt: Right.

Clarke: So they were able to take that message forth.

Truitt: They both qualified. And in the movie as we said about Grant Young, he was-- we're gonna tell something about him in the water, not on the water, because he went in the water and he had to be pulled out. It was a great story.

Clarke: So it wasn't just the veterans that inspired you to tell this story. Tell me a little bit about the archeological part of this.

Truitt: Well, I had--I was trained by the military to be a diver, and I dove in a lot of places in the South Pacific. And I came back to Lake Michigan, and I had formed, somewhere along the line, an organization, which later was broken into two parts. One part became the Chicago Maritime Museum, and the other part became the Underwater Archeological Society. And that was a wonderful group, and they're all volunteers. And the Smithsonian said they're the best in the country. I relish that. But in any event I dove with those guys. And I had been diving in warm water. And here I was on Charlotte Ann.

Charlotte Ann is a ninety-two foot schooner that I own and captain, and that's where I originally got my name Captain Dave. And so the guys were all going in and diving and putting on their suits and their mask and all like that, and I had never done that. I would dive in warm water, you know, come out, could stay under for three minutes. But this guy

invited me to go in with a mask and everything. I did it, I found it was easy to do, and changed my life. And I formed the Underwater Archeological Society, and we dove all over Lake Michigan, southern part, and we found airplanes.

Clarke: Scattered around the bottom of the surface.

Truitt: Right.

Clarke: Any of those planes that you dove on have come up to the surface, or?

Truitt: Well, we figure that there are some--there are different figures, but the figures I had that they lost seventy, and we brought up forty. So there are thirty left. The most interesting story was Grant Young, because Grant Young, as you will see in the film, these guys land on an incredibly short deck, and it's only twenty feet above the water so he was, you know, trying to keep his wings out of the water. And it's a very scary thing, and he made it. And he went to take off, he was so proud of himself, and the engine stopped. Well the engine didn't--that's what he thought, and he says that in the movie, but that isn't what happened. He lost his propeller. And so he goes and the plane goes down, and they pull him out. The picket boats come, and they pull him out, and he says--they says, "What happened?" And he said, "I lost my propeller." And they said, "That never happened. We're marking you up, and so and so." So he asked me to take him out, find his plane, which we did, send a diver down. We had a scope on our boat, and we could look down there. That's his plane. Now look on the ground, and there's his propeller. He was a happy--he says, "Oh, wow, can you imagine that." And he so wrote and got reinstated, that it wasn't a negligent thing.

Clarke: So the navy changed the record.

Truitt: The navy changed the record.

Clarke: That was great. All as a result of finding that. When was the first time you had to actually create a film?

Truitt: Well, I didn't--you mean ever?

Clarke: Just for this topic in general?

Truitt: Oh, well in this--I also did--I've done a lot of films. I like films. I've done them all over the world. And, but on this topic it was doing this film with the--the name of the film was, "They Called Me Jack," because Grant was always called Jack. Nobody in the navy are not gonna call you Grant.

Clarke: So it's the story of Jack, who is Grant Yong, who you found his plane--

Truitt: "They Call Me Jack". And I used the two guys, and as I watch this film and realized these people are hearing this story, and it's a great story, but the aren't seeing it. Wouldn't it be great if we had a film where we actually could go back in time and film this stuff and have the sound and actually see so we would all know what they're remembering? And that was my first, "Wow, wouldn't that be fun?"

Clarke: I have a question for all of you here on the panel. Dave, let's start with you. How aware do you think the general public is that there are still WWII aircraft at the bottom of Lake Michigan, and that, you know, this cold water fresh water lake played such a role in the pacific war?

Truitt: I don't think--I would say ninety-nine percent don't know. Have no idea. This was secret. It was intended that they shouldn't know. And after it was not secret, they took them away. They took the decks off, and they said--and we even say in the film, because we call this being scrapped, but they weren't scrapped. They were junked, because they were wood ships. With the propulsion system was locomotive engines in there. I mean this was--burning coal, which was a problem when people came in to dive, with the black coal smoke coming out. And anyway, anyway.

Clarke: This seems to be a legacy for the city of Chicago, so Herb, what is your awareness of people being aware of this topic?

Sohn: I agree with Dave entirely. It's very interesting that I was at Navy Pier for one year, lived there, had no idea that they were even training pilots on Lake Michigan. When they kept a secret--I wish we could stop the leaks now as well as they kept secrets at that time. But it was just amazing that we just didn't know. Of course we were in school at the time and were more interested in what we were doing than particularly listening to other things about going on. I did not know they were training pilots. I did not know that there were planes underneath Lake Michigan. First time I knew about it is when I got involved in *Heroes On Deck*, and it opened up my eyes, and then I got interested. Then I learned a lot.

Truitt: I'm glad.

Clarke: Well, tell me, one of your jobs is to actually communicate this message. What kind of audience reaction do you get when people talk about this?

Sohn: Well, often surprise. As gentleman said, very, very few people know this story. I think more do now thanks to this film. But and probably more in Chicago are aware of it than outside the city. But I frequently mention it or describe it to people, and they just seem shocked. They can't even conceive of such a thing being done until you describe it to people, and then it makes sense.

Truitt: I think one of the reasons, and I wonder if you feel this too, one of the reasons nobody knows is first of all it was secret, and second, the pilots were trained as pilots all over the country. They just came here for--and you remember how long the time was to do the--

Sohn: Fourteen successful takeoffs and landings, and they got their ticket punched.

Truitt: Right.

Clarke: That's pretty much it. It was quick.

Truitt: And they could do that in a matter of half an hour.

Sohn: Yeah, they could do that in a day.

Clarke: They'd qualify and get out to the front.

Truitt: They did 300 a day. 300 pilots a day in the two vessels.

Clarke: Before we go on with further discussion, I'd like to play another clip from *Heroes On Deck*.

Truitt: Good.

Kurtis: Chicagoans were certainly aware of the conflict raging in Europe, but few had any real sense of the sacrifices being made by our future allies. But forward thinking commander Richard F. Whitehead of the Ninth Naval District Chicago was already preparing for America's involvement in the war. He'd embraced an ingenious proposal from a civilian, merchant mariner John J. Manley. Working along the Atlantic seaboard in 1941, Manley noticed that aircraft carriers training pilots required destroyer escorts for protection from predatory German submarines. Wouldn't training carrier pilots in the safety of Lake Michigan be less dangerous?

Voiceover: Whitehead agreed and immediately began lobbying the navy to embrace the Lake Michigan experiment.

- The idea was initially perceived as radical. So the navy commissioned a study to explore the concept. That's the navy's bureaucratic way of slowing things down.

Kurtis: Pearl Harbor would speed things up.

Roosevelt: Yesterday, December 7, 1941, The United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

Kurtis: With German and now Japanese submarines patrolling US coastal waters, training carrier pilots in the safety of Lake Michigan suddenly made a lot of sense.

Commander Whitehead was given the go-ahead to put his plan into action.

- The US had to get going. We'd just been attacked.

Clarke: Well, Herb, tell me how you ended up in the navy and a little bit about what was going on with you at that time.

Sohn: It's a very interesting story. The first time I ever left the east coast. And I went to the University of Virginia for about a year. And every week I'd lose another roommate to the service. Kept going on and on, and I got a little lonely down there. And I spoke to one of my friends, and he said, "How do you handle this?" He said, "Why don't you go with them?" So it sounded good to me. That time, I looked at all the services, and the navy was offering a training program under the Eddy Test. Captain Eddy had given an exam, and those that passed it would be able to go to training, electronic training, in the navy. And I thought it would be a good idea not only to serve the country but also to learn something, a trade, while I was in. So I took the exam. Fortunately I was able to pass it and was sent up to Great Lakes to take my boot training. At Great Lakes, they had a school called the Primary, where you learned to fix just radio instruments and learn a little bit about electronics. And then they sent me to Secondary. I had a choice of either going to San Diego or down to Navy Pier. I loved Chicago. I'd spent some time there, and I said, "No, I'm going to Navy Pier and spend some time in Chicago." So I came down there, and some of the interesting stories that I can tell you is the first thing when I went in there, they had a picture of a hand that had been burned, and under it, it said, "He touched radar." So the first day they showed me a radar machine, I can look at the audience about to hundred feet down. That's about as far as I got to the radar machine. I got closer and closer every day. But I did learn not to touch the machine. Second was that I'd always been told that it was cruel and unusual punishment to put two prisoners in the same cell. I was in one room at Navy Pier with 3,000 sailors, and that tells a story by itself. And it wasn't cruel and unusual punishment. It was a good--I got plenty of sleep. Third thing that happened is, it's a good idea before you go anywhere to talk to someone who'd been there before to get a lay of the land. And one of my buddies that I'd met told me, "When you go there, be very careful and take the middle bunk." I said, "Why is that?" He said, "Well, its' a big room. If you go in the top bunk, the birds will do their things on you, and if you go on the bottom bunk, the rats will start nipping on you. You better go on the middle bunk." I'll never forget the day I got at Navy Pier. It was a cold day--it was in December--and I ran in and got my middle bunk. And that really helped. But the training was sensational. We took a special oath at the time above the regular oath that you took when you served your country--you know, obey the constitution and be loyal, and told them we wouldn't tell--it was a secret oath that we wouldn't say anything we were doing. And all the notes that we took were numbered, and at the end of the day they'd collect it, and if you didn't have the numbers in order or didn't have all the numbers you spent the rest of the day looking for that page. Fortunately it didn't happen. I was careful. I did not want to spend the rest of my life looking for pages. But I learned a lot during my time in the navy, and I think about the present time after my service there, that wouldn't it be wonderful if everybody had an opportunity to go into the service and learn a trade or learn something to do? Maybe we could resolve some of the problems we have in this country today. Gave me a tremendous opportunity. After the war obviously I went under the scholarship program and was able to get into college again, and they paid my way, and I thought this was very good. But I really enjoyed my time there. The other thing that I enjoyed was Chicago. I had heard so many things about Chicago. You know, Al Capone. People talked about all the violence and everything. I never found that. People in Chicago are the most generous, nicest people I've ever met. We came into the city; they could not do enough for us. We used to come into the city and go down to the USO, which is now Roosevelt University. It used to be a bowling alley, and we'd sleep on the bowling alley. They took away all the, obviously the bowling lanes. And we'd come in there, they'd feed us, give us tickets to all the shows.

And there are a few other USOs that did the same thing for us. And there were always notes there inviting us to somebody's home, you know, for the weekend or something like that. And I thought that was very nice. And after I got out I said, "I'm coming back to Chicago," and that's the reason I came to school here. 'Cause I did find it probably the best city I've ever been in.

Clarke: So tell me a little about what you were thinking at the time when you have rats potentially nipping at your heels and birds doing whatever on the top of your bunk. I mean, what's the general mood amongst the sailors that you were with?

Sohn: They were very jealous of me getting a middle bunk.

(Laughter)

Sohn: And I think at that time had I known any better I probably could have sold it.

Clarke: How was morale?

Sohn: But you do worry about it--actually this didn't happen--the upper bunks did get the birds. The lower bunks, I don't think I had that problem.

Clarke: But how was morale?

Sohn: Morale was sensational. Everybody was there because they enlisted. You have to remember at that time the draft was on and you got drafted into the army, but you had to enlist to go into either the marine corps, air corps, or the navy. So I enlisted, and all of these people that came there wanted to be there. And it was very interesting because this exam was a little tough. And we were thrown in with a lot of professors, a lot of college graduates, people like that. So it made it very nice. Instead of shooting dice all night long we'd play bridge. That was kind of interesting.

Clarke: So you're in a big room, 3000 guys all together, and yet the compartmentalization of what you were doing is very much compartmentalized. So the guys who were working on one thing don't really know what the other guys are doing.

Sohn: That's right.

Clarke: And so on and so forth.

Sohn: Yeah, you'd go to different classes and different parts of it. At that time radar was a secret, and that's why we had to sign a special oath. I never saw the inside of the box. The only thing I was able to do was to take care of the outside, the electronics that ran the radar. The radar was a, they explained to us, was just a little tube called a magnetron. And we never saw it. It was all hidden and--but we knew what it was gonna do. Another part, aspect, of this was that they were using for radar jamming, and after the war was over I realized what Chicago did in the war effort. We actually won the war. We trained all of these service people on the aircraft carriers to destroy the Japanese aircraft. And we talk about being the second city. I think we're the first city. I mean, I think we're responsible for serving America. I feel very strongly about that.

Clarke: So do you have anybody who you served with during your year at Navy Pier that you have a story about or a sea story if you will?

Sohn: I don't remember too much about it. When I got out I wanted to go to premed again, and that was my first thought. It's interesting; when you're in the service, and I think the same thing happens to a lot of people that I talk to, very few of us talked about our service career during that time. In fact this is the first time that I had a chance to talk about service. You just didn't mention it. It was--you know, it's part of life. Seemed to me that's what you're supposed to do.

Clarke: Well, Toby, there was other things going on at Navy Pier, and--other than radar training, and would you share some of those things with us?

Mack: Well, there were many other things going on. There were a number of other schools that were headquartered at Navy Pier. There's actually a school for navy cooks and bakers that was headquartered there. But there were so many different kinds of training curricula offered because navy--the classes there were for aircraft maintenance

technicians, so they had aircraft gunnery, aircraft electronics, aircraft engine maintenance, air frame maintenance. So the entire panoplies of how you maintain and/or fix a damaged airplane in the theater, all of those skills were taught at Navy Pier. 60,000 sailors were trained through those classroom programs at Navy Pier. And so it performed a tremendous role in addition to the carrier-training program. But there were so many other things going on around Navy Pier, in and around Navy Pier. There's actually a ship that had been the USS Eastland that actually sunk in the Chicago River in I believe it was 1915, and a lot of people died. I think 850 people died in that accident. The navy salvaged it, converted it to a naval training vessel, and used it throughout the 20s and 30s. When the war broke out they brought it to Navy Pier, and it had four deck guns on this ship. It was called the USS Wilmette. That ship was the platform for training merchant marine sailors to operate deck guns, which were now being installed on merchant ships to protect themselves against German submarines when they were transiting across the Atlantic. So those gun crews actually trained, the merchant marine gun crews trained aboard the USS Wilmette. So that's something that was going on. And then there was a great deal of other things. There was a war bond drive that was held on Navy Pier in late 1944 that raised almost two billion dollars for the war effort in-- out of the Chicago region. That whole exhibit and display area that helped raise that money, they turned Navy Pier into literally a show and then they had several amphibious ships that were built in the area here. We had shipyards all over the Chicagoland area building ships for the war that were built on the Great Lakes and then taken down through the Illinois Waterway to the Illinois River and then the Mississippi down to New Orleans. They had several of those ships open or visitation, and then they had the drill hall, which was at the head of Navy Pier. It isn't there anymore, but I think it survived up until about nineteen sixty-something. But it was a drill hall for the sailors. Training--it was an athletic and drill center. They turned that into an exhibit hall, and they had all kinds of displays. So that helped the war effort with a tremendous financial contribution to the war effort. I mean, so much of the war was financed by private individuals just making donations of their savings and their money to these war bond drives. And so that was a very, very important thing. On the north end of the-- the head of Navy Pier, they actually had a hangar where they did a lot of maintenance and maintenance training on aircraft, and they had during the war bond exhibition, they actually had a Japanese Zero. And I don't know how they got it there, but they did. Then they had it wrecked. They had it sticking nose down into the ground as a display. They had a Japanese midget submarine. All kinds of things, and it--the place was just crawling with people during this five or six-week period of time when they had that war bond drive.

Clarke: It really shouldn't surprise us too much that Navy Pier and Chicago was so active during the war. It was a national effort. But I think that it's hard for us to imagine anything at Navy Pier other than what is there now. But it was a very different place when you were there. Can you describe a day in the life of being at Navy Pier while in the navy during WWII?

Sohn: Oh, yes. That I can remember. They got you up early. They tried to play--the bugle was played on a radio. They got you up, you went in for breakfast, and as Toby said, they trained the cooks--I didn't know they trained the cooks down there. They did a good job. I mean, the food was very good. All I know is I went in at 135 and wound up 170 when I got out, so it couldn't have been that bad. I spent the rest of my life just trying to get down to close to 135. But we get up, we'd have breakfast, and then we'd go to our first class, and that was a lecture, and in one of the halls there. And they take you right from the beginning--electronics and electricity and then into radar. And then we'd work the rest of the day on the equipment. And every now and then you'd hear somebody scream or yell where they touched the wrong wire. One of the things I learned in the

navy was to keep my hands out of things I didn't know were plugged in, and always remove the plug before you work on anything. It's like ducking--when I was in the Marine Corps the first thing I learned was how to duck, and that's good training. And we spent the rest of the time there. But it was very interesting. At the end of the day most of the time we'd, you know, rest up in our bunks and study, but we had to do the dirty work. We had to as they swab the decks, we had to keep the floors clean. I got garbage detail. You know, when they talk about people taking dirty jobs, it didn't bother us. Somebody had to get the garbage, so at the end of the day we'd get a little truck, and we'd go around collecting garbage and then dump it at the end of the day, or else clean the bunks and clean the latrines and things like that. So in all you learned a lot. And remember we were very young at the time. We were only seventeen and very impressionable. And I'll never forget my days in the service because it really helped me later on to learn, as I said, to respect my elders. I learned discipline. I learned it's important in life to keep learning and to keep, you know, studying, and it helped me in everything I did. I--as I told you I started as an attorney, I mean as a doctor. I always wanted to go to law school, so I went to law school, and I got a law degree. And I owe it all to my background in the navy.

Clarke: Dave, you're at the bottom of Lake Michigan, and you're seeing this ghost of a vestige, a history sitting down at the bottom. It's this crashed WWII aircraft. And I'm sure that you later realized just how important this training was during the war.

Truitt: Absolutely.

Clarke: And I'd like you to talk about that, but I'd also like the panel to talk about, just how important was all this training to the war effort?

Truitt: Well, I think we all speak what he said between ourselves. When we realized--and I didn't--I wasn't there during the war. I found this all out afterwards in making this film. But in making this film I had such an appreciation for the American young men and for the citizens of Chicago, because we all were together happily, and there are so many guys that said they loved--service guys, loved being in Chicago. And everything. But the thing that amazed me; we had this one thing in the film where the planes are flying over oboe, which was the--what chapel?

Mack: It's the Baha'i temple.

Truitt: Baha'i temple, and there's a catholic school there. And there's this girl, Nancy Van Hulle. And we have a picture of her in the third grade and she is with the nuns, and she's saying a prayer. And later when she's sixty years old she's interviewed, and she's crying, and she says there was this one accident--there are only eight people who died in this whole thing, but there was this guy who went over the side in a plane and they pulled him out, and he lived. And she said, "I thought it was my prayer, and it saved him, and I loved him." And this whole feeling, it was so great. And we provided--if you watch other movies like Midway, the war was won not by big guns, it was won by planes. And I think that's what he meant when he said we felt we won the war.

Clarke: So Herb, looking back on your experience in the war and then also over the course of a lifetime, this training, the things that we did here in Chicago mean a great deal. What are your reflections on that?

Sohn: No question about it. It gave me a background. I came from New York. The only people that I knew were the people in my apartment house and the schools that I went to. And I never really had a chance to meet people from all over the world. And when I came to Chicago up at Great Lakes I met people from all over our country. And I got more appreciation of what is going on in this nation, how great these people are. We had every strata of life in America at Great Lakes at that time. And we learned the buddy system. One of the things, you know, you hear today, "You have my back." We learned that the best way in the service is to watch out for your buddy, because they're gonna

watch out for you. And this was very important and very important in life afterwards. The other thing that I learned from my service was how important education was. You know, it's very nice to be a consultant, but it's also better maybe to learn something, a trade or something that you could know what to do. And we're starting and beginning to think now of trade schools being very important. And I speak to a lot of--I'm involved with the chamber of commerce, and I speak to a lot of the people in industry. They find it very difficult to get people that know the trades. And I think we have to get back to training that and make a person that uses their hands is just as important as someone who uses their brain. And I learned that in the service. The other thing I learned is that people are nice, and I said the people in Chicago were nice. The people in the service were nice. My superiors always looked out for us. They were hard on us, but they always looked out for you, for your benefit. I learned that, and that was--that made me feel very good. Mack: I remember them saying, or us saying that they yell at us, but they won't let anybody else yell at us.

Sohn: That's right, very good.

Clarke: Well, Toby, the stuff we did on Lake Michigan really did help take the Japanese out. But it was a big effort getting the force up and ready. There weren't so many aircraft carriers when this whole thing started out.

Mack: Yeah, that was a key part of the equation that made this strategy so important was it wasn't just that it was great to be able to train pilots off of carriers where there was no submarine threat. The fact of the matter was when WWII broke out at Pearl Harbor, we had seven aircraft carriers, and that was far fewer than the Japanese had, and very, very soon into the war, we were down to about three, and one of them was in the Atlantic. And so you had all of these carriers being built in the shipyards around the country. How in the world are you gonna get pilots to man the air wings that are gonna fly off of these carriers? So they just couldn't afford to take a combat capable carrier because we were fighting for our lives in the South Pacific and in the Mediterranean North Atlantic. They could not afford to take a combat capable carrier out of service and use it for training. Forget the fact that it would have been subjected to submarine threats and it required escorts. And by the way escorts are great, but a good enemy submarine commander can shoot through escorts all day long, and so escorts don't guarantee that what's being escorted is gonna be protected or survive. So this was a--an ingenious solution, and I think it was one of the things that gave us that naval air dominance that allowed us to literally knock the Japanese naval air force out of the sky, which we had done by about, you know, two-thirds of the way through 1944 Japanese air force was done. The Japanese naval air force was finished. We'd shot them all down basically.

Clarke: But training on Lake Michigan wasn't exactly an easy thing either. There's all sorts of other issues in dealing with the weather in Chicago. They trained year-round. There could be ice on the edges, but the ships were out in the middle.

Truitt: Well, there was ice floes out on the lake. You can see them now in a cold winter. And so the ships were maneuvering through ice flows. And the other thing that was critical particularly about these two ships was that they were fast. And a carrier has to be fast because it has to generate wind over the deck that gives the aircraft lift both to land and to take off. And so these two ships could steam at about twenty knots, which is actually slow for an aircraft carrier, but just minimum capable to get enough air coming back over the deck so the combination of air coming over the deck and the air under your wings because of your forward motion, the sum of those two give you enough lift to take off and to land. And so fast carriers are off fast ships, and these had to be fast to be able to be used as training carriers.

Clarke: I think it's very interesting to think about what's going on in the middle of the lake, what's going on when you're training for radar technician at Navy Pier. Dave, I want to come back to you and talk a little bit about the actual making of the film. What was this like? This was, again we've talked about, this was your second attempt to do this. And certainly the second time around was a lot more successful than the first as far as getting a lot more eyeballs on it. Who are your producers?

Truitt: Harvey Moshman, John Davies, and Brain Kallies.

Clarke: So what did they teach you about making films this time around versus the first time you tried?

Truitt: Oh, I can't tell you how much. I'll tell you the first thing, because I had done other films with Harvey Moshman, and--but I had never been involved in the detail like in this. And so they would do something they thought was good, and they'd rush me over to the theater, and they'd show it. And here is the old boats, and you know, and they're going along, and the steam comes out. And this time I heard, "Hooonk." I had never heard that horn because these were all silent films. And they kept putting--and the next thing I found out, when a plane would come in and it would crash, and they would say, "That's an SBD," which I'm wearing because that's what we have out at Midway. "That's an SBD, but that's not an SBD sound." and then we'd go back, and we would. Because we knew that there were gonna be guys like you listening to this, and they were gonna say, "They got it wrong." We weren't gonna have anything that they got it wrong. So the amount of technique we used to make everything, the sound, what people talked about, make it accurate. The film and getting the film--we were fortunate enough--the thing that was hardest to get was a film of plane crashing. Because when you have a plane crashing on a training vessel like this, you don't have a photographer standing around. But there was one guy who was allowed to bring his camera, a 16mm silent camera, and he--that's the crash that you see. And that is the thing we wanted people to actually experience with their eyes how this was not easy. It was short deck. As you said, there wasn't enough wind to hold you up, and if it wasn't a windy day they wouldn't go into the wind. And there were all sorts of problems. And to feel that. And the one scene where the guy's walking up to the swirling thing, and we say, "And there were people who walked into the propeller," and then it cuts. You know. And it was--I relived all of these moments as we added sound and got closer in. It was fantastic.

Clarke: Well, this effort that you've done with this documentary is certainly not your first effort in making sure that people are aware of WWII Lake Michigan, things like that. The plane hanging at Midway airport, you did an awful lot of work to get that plane up off the bottom, getting it funded, and get that thing on display. And people walk under it, you know, hundreds of people every day. So this process seems to be something that you fell in love with a long time ago.

Truitt: Well, as you heard these gentlemen talk about how nice these people are and how good the military was. And I got to know so many of these, and again as you said, they enlisted. They weren't drafted. They did this--they would lie about their age to get in and get into pilot training. It was absolutely--and to film these guys about--it just made you feel very good to be American.

Sohn: And another interesting aspect about, and Dave mentioned, the Dauntless, which was actually the dive bomber that sunk most of the Japanese carriers in the Midway battle, and is the plane sitting out at Midway, the navy was using just about every plane in its inventory to train these pilots. And so they had the SNJ Texan trainer. They were using Dauntlesses, they were using Avengers, they were using Hellcats, they were using Wildcats. Every plane in the inventory. And what they were using then--they were getting basically war-weary birds back from the theater that they could--that were still

serviceable but the pilots could fly planes that kind of had been retired from combat, so they were flying every kind of aircraft in the navy inventory on and off these two--

Truitt: Well of course we--I identify with that. What we were trying to do was try a plane, qualify in a plane that they were going to-- but the problem was if there wasn't enough wind, then as you mentioned the tried, true trainer--if the trainer didn't have any bombs, didn't have a machine gun, didn't have bullet proof armor, so it could take off easily. And so that was a--

Clarke: I heard there were even drones that were used during WWII that they were testing that were at the bottom of the lake.

Truitt: No.

Clarke: Yeah, so.

Sohn: Super secret. You're not supposed to know that.

Clarke: Yeah, they're down there. You can go find them, right?

Truitt: We have that at the end of the film. You're not supposed to notice.

Clarke: Not supposed to know that.

Mack: One aspect of all this that I forgot to talk about is in reading about WWII after I got out, apparently the Japanese had--they were always shown with cameras on them, and they were taking pictures all over the US. They knew all our production: how many planes we could build, how many ships we could build, and things like that. And they figured out from the amount that we could build that they beat us. I mean, they thought that they had it all. The one thing they forgot is that we could build more aircraft, we could build more plants to build aircraft, and the ingenuity of the US, our people here, was just great. And that goes along with this too, is the fact that we figured out how to do it, and we did it. The president got up, and he said, "I want 50,000 planes." He got 60,000. "I want 40,000 ships." He got 50,000. And these liberty ships, they put out one a day. And as you know these planes, they're putting out every twenty seconds, or maybe twenty minutes. What we did is--and our country can do--and that's why when people worry about what's gonna happen with the US, I don't worry about it. I know our people, I know the ingenuity of them, and they can do what they want to do whenever.

Sohn: I did a paper once on the top guys, the emperor and the top military guy, having the discussion that you talk about, whether they could win the war or not. And the emperor would say, "We can win the war because we have the samurai spirit." And that was horrible because they would just keep coming at you, and it was terrible. And the other guys aid, "But they've got the cowboy spirit." (Laughs) And the cowboy spirit of course is where you don't have a gun, so you pick up a stone. You know, and you don't have enough factories, you build other factories.

Truitt: And Chicago I think was the most productive part of the United States in terms of war production. And the reason that O'Hare Airport is out there now--it wasn't named O'Hare then, but that was a Douglas Aircraft manufacturing plant during WWII. They actually built that plant at the same time that the order was placed for the airplanes. They made it out--it was like a couple million square feet of manufacturing under one roof. And they made the building out of wood because they couldn't afford steel because it was needed for ships or planes. And so they built the factory, and then they manufactured, I think, over 500 of these enormous four-engine military transport planes that they were making both for the navy and for the army air corps. It was the C-54 Skymaster sky trainer.

Sohn: Famous plane.

Truitt: Yeah, and they made those out at O'Hare, at what is now O'Hare field, at this Douglas plant. So, and there was ship building at the--well, remember the famous Pullman Standard Car Company? Well, it converted to become a shipyard on Lake Calumet. They were actually building 200-foot long submarine chasers at the Pullman

Standard car company in--on Lake Calumet. There was a little shipyard right here, right up the street where Belmont crosses the north branch of the Chicago River. There was a shipyard right there that was making minesweepers during WWII, wooden-hulled minesweepers. And then down southwest of Chicago in Seneca, a Chicago Bridge and Iron Steel Yard was converted into a shipyard, and they built 157 tank-landing ships, which is a big 2,500-ton, 350-foot ship that was used to bring material up to the beach. And so that was just outside of Chicago. So all of this activity, all of this manufacturing capacity, any plant that could make anything that could be used in the war effort was converted to war production in WWII, and Chicago I think was--probably had the greatest war production of any other place in the country.

Clarke: Well then it's probably appropriate that Chicago have a memorial to the--
(Laughs)

Clarke: --topic of today's conversation given everything that Chicago has done and given that we don't often think about this or even given the Nike missile silos that were along the lake to take out the Russian bombers. I don't know if they would have gotten one what would have happened, but we didn't have to deal with that. But you, Toby, are involved in a project to bring a recreated USS Wolverine, put it over there on Navy Pier, and maybe have one of the ships--one of the planes that's at the bottom of Lake Michigan on public display so you don't have to actually have an airplane ticket to go see it. It would be right downtown Chicago. Tell me a little bit about that, Toby.

Mack: Well, I'm just one of the people involved. Actually the other two guest gentlemen at the table are also participating in that effort, as are many, many other prominent Chicagoans. And our plan is to build a scale replica of the USS Wolverine and plant it in--right at the sea wall on the north side of the head of navy Pier and have it be an exhibition center and facility where visitors can come and learn all these stories, see the films, look around and see what else is on display, learn about the war effort, and learn about the ship, and learn all about these stories that we're talking about. Because with nine million visitors a year and so many people not understanding the depth and the importance of what went on there, we feel an obligation to tell that story, and we think that this memorial is the best way to tell a very, very important story to the greatest number of people that we can reach because of its location at Navy Pier.

Truitt: Which is where it happened.

Clarke: How much does your own service play into your desire to do this?

Mack: Well, I'm a navy veteran of the Vietnam era, so I was a destroyer sailor and spent about six years in the navy. And when I left the navy in the early 70s it never left me, and these guys know that. It's the same story. And so when I came to Chicago in the late 70s, and I thought, "Well, what's Navy Pier? Let me go down there and check it out."

And so we went down, looked around, saw a couple of plaques about some things that had been done relative to the navy, why it was named Navy Pier, but then I started getting more and more interested in the bigger picture and the whole story and digging. And I went to the Naval Historical Center in Washington and went through all their photos of stuff that happened in Chicago during WWII, and this incredible story just kind of unfolded. I wasn't the only one that knew it because Dave knew about it, too, but I just had this kind of compelling need to tell that story because of my passion for the navy, my beliefs about how wonderful that experience was and how important it was in my life and other people's lives, to get it out there and to get as many people exposed to it as we possibly can. We can't let these stories die. We are what we are today as a country because of what happened at Navy Pier and around the country in 1942 to 1945, or we wouldn't be sitting here. And so too few people know that. They must be taught, they must learn it, and that's what this memorial that we're putting at Navy Pier is gonna do.

Clarke: So where are you in this process?

Mack: Well, we're pulling together our team. We're pulling together our resource base, and we're just starting. We spent a good bit of time planning where it could go, where it would go. We moved it around to a couple of different places, but we found the right place at the north end of the pier, and that took us a while to work out.

Clarke: And you have the blessing of the Pier, too?

Mack: Of course. Yeah, we certainly do. It took a while to work all that out, and now we finally have it down to the point where we can actually plan a facility. And we've got a world-class designer and architect, the Smith Group, which has done many, many monuments and museums around the country, that has created some conceptual designs for the memorial, and so we're working with those and just as I said beginning the process of getting this--getting our plan and our objective out to a broader audience, and we're--you know, we're on the verge of becoming very, very publicly out there with it.

Clarke: I think it will be a good addition to the downtown landscape. We're, at the Museum and Library, kind of like the base museum for the city of Chicago, but we're kind of alone, so we could use some company downtown.

(Laughter)

Mack: Yeah, we want to put a lot of cross-traffic between--

Clarke: 'Cause there's a lot of monuments, but there aren't places that are also places to go. So if you have--

Mack: We could actually run a shuttle back and forth between here and there.

Clarke: That would be nice, yes. That would be excellent. Maybe we could get navy--get Soldier Field in on it-- and create kind of a staff ride for military-related history here in Chicago. Well, gentlemen, it's been a wonderful conversation. I want to thank you very much for being here.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you to Dave Truitt, Herb Sohn, and Toby Mack for an outstanding discussion. Thank you to Captain Dave Truitt for sponsoring this program. To learn more about *Heroes On Deck*, visit HeroesOnDeck.com. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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(Theme music)

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(Theme music)

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