

Oral History of John Eberhardt, NOL Machinist/Systems Inspector

Editor Note: These two oral histories were submitted by Jack Eberhardt, son of Jack Everhardt.

Like Dad I was a government tech but in computers and comm. I retired once but recently am working again for JHU/APL's Transportation Division.
Dad passed in Sept 93 but the priest at his viewing was a former Navy Surface Weapons Officer. Dad had a funny sleep habit aboard his Navy Tanker in WWII. He would swear at Hitler in German for having to leave his family in war. His shipmates weren't always certain which side he was on.

Jack Eberhardt, Laurel, Maryland

Oral History Stories Number 1

My father John Eberhardt was a machinist/systems inspector from late 1949 until spring of 1977. Dad was a Navy vet hired after starting at the Arlington Torpedo Factory in the late forties. He restarted as the fourth year apprentice in NOL's Public Works. But he appreciated the opening. Eventually he carpooled with a supervisor Dr. Ralph Garran in the Wind Tunnel Area. DAD was to apply for a job for a departing machinist. The job was to maintain and operate the pumps for the flow testing on nose cones. Dad had grown up in Cincinnati speaking German. He talked about the Lab's German scientists who emigrated with Dr. Werner Von Bram. Some moved to other labs. Others had followed the good Doctor to Alabama. On occasions Dad spoke briefly to some of the scientists in German. One Scientist, Dr. Eva Winkler and Dad had daily conversations about families. She would comment at the end of the day "I go home and work dis problem with my husband". Her husband worked in another NOL lab.

A curious thing happened during the Sputnik episode. The news blurted the "Russians are ahead and we didn't know about it". Dad sat with a smile on his face. He said "not everyone was caught off guard". And "our German scientists have German friends over there". I suspected the talks with Dr. Winkler might be about other matters than family. Dad also mentioned the morning piano. In the cafeteria a German scientist sat and played the piano after each breakfast. He seemed to be thinking. Dad asked in German one day why he was playing. He was composing his work for the day and it helped him concentrate. Then there were the candelabra. Walking past offices in the admin building Dad noticed two men. Each had facing desks sitting in the dark with brown bag lunches open. He paused at the open door because the candelabra was lit on a desk. One of the men spoke with a smile and said "it makes me feel important at lunch". We were able to visit for paycheck days, movie nights and visited the spring open house events. I remember hearing the orchestra with young and old playing good German music. During an open house I saw Dr. Winker at demonstration of a wind tunnel test. With her German accent she rattled off the effects being watched by visitors. She finished with "any questions?" Looking dumbfounded the tour quickly moved on. Dad approached the good doctor and conversed in German. She turned to an approaching staffer and spoke in German. The staffer blurted "what?" She said, in English, sorry I meant...and went on with orders. Dad said she does that often after I speak to her.

One of my sisters was hired at the Lab and met her husband there. Her future husband had completed his machinist's apprenticeship and worked with Dad. Work at the lab was a special place. It was impressive to come to work inspected by a gate guard and reminded to keep secrets. As a government worker Dad enjoyed benefits and lifelong work knowing the Government and Military were benefiting. Dad was looked on as different and talked about as that Government JOB. When questioned by the nosy about work or salary he could always say "it's classified". The space related work began to migrate. Dad was promoted to building inspection work. His daily habit of turning his billed cap around for close inspection of viewing ports drew looks. Much like German submarine captains using periscopes. Others thought he looked silly. One day a young supervisor was assigned to take inspection notes. The supervisor knocked off his forward cap at the first view. During the rest of the day they both were seen with backward caps. Someone commented, he's got the new guy looking dumb too. When Dad retired he gave short notice and tossed his backward cap in the trash. Someone retrieved it. The thought was to coat it in metal. With little time left the cap was sealed in a clear plastic box as a retirement gift. He went to an office meeting and found they were short of retirement certificates. He was asked to report to the Captain's office later in the week and bring his wife. There he was formally presented his certificate.

Oral History Stories Number 2

During an NOL Family Day I arrived at a tall building in the back area. It was used as a multiple level water test tank. At various levels divers could be seen demonstrating scuba actions. The swimmers were qualified staffers or volunteers acting at times as local first responders.

A locksmith in the early days was replacing a door lock next to a secured meeting. The meeting was protected on the other side by armed Marines. The locksmith opened a meeting door unknowingly and surprised the Marines. On his tool belt was a special large oval green badge marked simply "Q". When he displayed the badge to the Marines, he was cautioned to close the door quietly and call his supervisor before continuing work in the area.

An interesting building was in the back area. It was a large green Quonset hut with two aluminum patches on the top. The color was German Army green. It had been transported from Germany after WWII. Inside was a diesel generator being studied for efficiency. The patches were shell holes from our Army's artillery.

One retired machinist was called back to start an old but needed pump. He was told he would receive a fee. He returned with large hammer and used a tall ladder to reach the top. He banged the casing at a spot and the pump started. On the ground he said I want \$500. The supervisor was told \$5 for the new hammer and \$495 for knowing where to use it.

NOL weekend movies were privileged fun. A theater like auditorium was run by a volunteer. He also had a candy counter sale as we came in. The movies were older and few attended. But you had to be a staffer family to get in for each member's quarter. I loved the privileged part.

Dad had noticed heated water being dumped as a coolant from the wind tunnel testing. He thought GREEN before the current trend and wrote up a suggestion plan about recycling the water and exchanging the heat for reuse. He eventually received an award of several hundred dollars. The engineer working the refit received a larger award. But the cost saving was estimated in millions over the years.

During the first years NOL had a few project managers accepting private sector positions for great salary increases. General Electric offers were the main leads. The offers became known as Generous Electric jobs.

On the other hand senior and junior engineers were assigned to design an expanded heat piping system. Each would take half of the work. Without much consultation the system was nearly completed. Problem was the ends met with a foot offset from each other. After discussion and blaming it was discovered one had used a different measuring system.

DAD knew an engineer living on a Frederick farm. He rode to work in good weather on a BMW motorcycle every day. He had been a pilot in WWII. His new Piper Cub was used on weekends to photo local property for realtors. Dad spoke to him about my crush on flying. We arranged on a weekend to visit. And I got my first ride from a grassy farm field.

Dad had an early repair trip to China Lake. He enjoyed the visit as requested staffer. Later in life he thought about a job offer in Florida. It was at a place called Banana River. It sounded like work in a swamp area. So he turned it down. He found later it was a boat service location for Cape Kennedy's rescue fleet. I could have grown up in the CAPE area.

Years later Dad heard of a new engineering staffer assigned to a group of senior staff. He applied for job convenience to his nearby home. His dual degree was Science and Accounting, but lacked the direct engineering background. He still struggled to meet early goals. Criticized by the team leader the staffer was to be simply dismissed. A hirer manager arranged to transfer the new staffer to DC Headquarters for a better fit. The staffer worked hard for two years and rose to head a budget review committee. Guess whose team had to appear for review at that time.