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**Interview of**

**DONALD F. CARPENTER**

**CHAIRMAN, MILITARY LIAISON COMMITTEE, 1948;  
CHAIRMAN, MUNITIONS BOARD, 1948-49**

**MENDENHALL, PENNSYLVANIA**

**JUNE 12 & 13, 1981**

**INTERVIEWER: STEVEN L. REARDEN**

**SECURITY CLASSIFICATION: UNCLASSIFIED**

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REARDEN: When you became CMLC in the spring of 1948, what were things like in general and what instructions did Forrestal give you?

CARPENTER: I've been reading your chapter on the Berlin crisis--a little wordy in places. But it conveys the point that the international situation was very tense. The Soviets were interfering with traffic to Berlin and Lucius Clay was urging strong action to make them stop. I recall Forrestal telling me that, in these circumstances, the A-bomb assumed a tremendous importance. It was our strongest weapon and he considered it a mistake that it was not under military custody.

Forrestal gave me 2 tasks. One was my official assignment of duties in the directive he issued. But as is often the case I had an "unofficial" assignment as well and this was the most important. There was a deep cleavage between the military and the AEC. Our people thought the members of the AEC were a bunch of "crooks" and they thought our people were fools or worse. My instructions from Forrestal were to get these people to work together.

The custody dispute was of great importance during my tenure on the MLC. It came to a head during July 1948 and culminated in a White House meeting attended by Forrestal, the Service Secretaries, the AEC commissioners and myself, with the President. Forrestal submitted a letter, that I had written, outlining the military's position. My idea was to settle the custody dispute by setting up a parallel chain of command in the military so that there would never be a single

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person short of the SecDef. The SecDef would ultimately be in charge of issuing directives to actually transfer custody of bombs, but only of course on order from the President. Truman turned down the transfer, the reason being, I think, that I did not make it sufficiently clear to him that he--and he alone--would have ultimate authority over the use of the bomb. Lillienthal argued his case extremely well. This was the first time I'd ever had close contact with Truman. It may well have been that my lack of experience in dealing with him was what resulted in our failure to obtain custody.

REARDEN: The published Forrestal Diaries say that Truman told Forrestal that the entire custody matter would be reviewed after the election. How do you recall the discussion?

CARPENTER: As I mentioned, I was present at the meeting between the military heads, the AEC and the President. I do not recall any mention by Truman that the custody question would be reopened after the election. In fact, Forrestal was very disappointed by the outcome and told me he thought he should resign. I told him that I thought that he was badly needed and that the thing to do now was to go ahead with plans, issue directives, and make clear the things the military should and could do, even if we weren't going to be allowed custody. That was the origin of those directives sent out to the Services in late July 1948.

Another problem that I thought bulked very large was the need for re-organization of the AE program within the military. When I became CMLC

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everything was split up by Service--Army, Navy, Air Force. This bred rivalry and hindered the exchange of information. My thought was to reorganize along functional lines--e.g., atomic energy power generation, security procedures, weapons design, personnel, etc. One person would be designated to monitor each program and make recommendations to the MLC. The Services realized this was new. I recall that when I proposed it, we had an all-day argument at our meeting. When we adjourned, I posed one single question--can't we work together? The next day, when we resumed our discussions, the atmosphere was totally different and we became one of the closest working organizations in Washington.

REARDEN: What were relations like between the AEC and the military?

CARPENTER: As you probably know, Lilienthal had a difficult time obtaining confirmation from the Senate for his appointment. Afterwards, the reports coming in from the AEC labs became quite thin--not much in the way of substantive information. I got the feeling, after the Lilienthal hearings, that the scientists had gone "underground" in order to protect themselves from possible similar attacks. So a group of us, including William Hosford, ex-president of Western Electric, Charlie Thomas of Monsanto, Oppenheimer, etc., chartered an airplane and flew around the country to the AEC installations to see what was going on. Through these direct contacts we finally got the information on what was happening. Another difficulty was the way the AEC was organized--it was so diverse, so spread out, that it was hard to get

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coordination. Industry had a hard time working with the AEC.

I was never conscious that the AEC tried to hold information back from us. We simply asked for information--no explanation--and got it.

REARDEN: Did you have much to do with the AEC Division of Military Application?

CARPENTER: Not really. Probably should have had more contacts. The DMA was under James McCormick, and I dealt with him extensively. On the NEPS project (the atomic-powered airplane), for example. I was very dubious of that thing. The atomic-powered submarine, on the other hand, seemed a more promising project. I think it would have gone faster without Rickover, even though he has come down with the reputation as being the "father" of the atomic sub. Rickover was competent, but he made everyone mad--you can't accomplish much that way.

REARDEN: Tell me a little about the internal workings of the MLC. What about Webster, your successor?

CARPENTER: He and I pretty much divided up the work. I worked on the policy and organization side. Webster concerned himself with the scientific problems. He was very competent.

REARDEN: The H-bomb decision came long after you left the MLC, but was there any discussion of it when you were there?

CARPENTER: The H-bomb was so secret, so sensitive, we never mentioned

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it directly or specifically. A side-light: We found our security to be lax, at least there was the potential that information would seep out. The walls of our offices were paper-thin and the people next door might hear our discussions, so I ordered the walls bricked up.

I am still activated by security on the H-bomb matter. When I went to Washington, I was told to talk to Conant. He was delighted to see me and discussed atomic matters extensively. Oppenheimer later brought fission up himself and explained it. He was a man with extraordinary clarity of expression. I recall visiting him at his offices in Princeton and there, on his blackboard, he drew for me the formulas for fission as well as fusion bombs.

One reason the H-bomb was held up was a chronic shortage of fissionable material. This shortage affected everything and had a powerful influence on our thinking. The breeder reactor idea came along later and we thought this would help.

REARDEN: Do you recall anything about the setting of military requirements for weapons?

CARPENTER: Not really. It was a JCS responsibility, but JCS knew practically nothing about atomic energy at war's end. Nichols (the head of AFSWP) and I usually briefed them. Also, you must remember that during the period I was CMLC there were no bombs, as such, in the stock-pile.

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REARDEN: There was a lot of trouble in the late 1940s with espionage in the atomic energy program. How much of this came to your attention?

CARPENTER: Klaus Fuchs probably did the most damage. His arrest came after I was out of government, but I recall that in 1948 Naval Intelligence alerted me that something was "wrong" at Harwell, where the British atomic energy program was centered. I took this report to Forrestal and urged him to discontinue exchanging information with the British until this was cleared up. I also talked to people in the British Embassy about the situation and they hit the ceiling when I suggested we might cut off information. The problem carried over into Webster's tenure.

Then there was the McLean and Burgess episode. I never liked the looks of the CPC. I was Forrestal's rep on the Combined Policy Committee, but I was never really able to learn what the CPC was supposed to be doing. It was a pretty fuzzy organization with ill-defined duties--a remnant of the war. McLean was one of the British reps and it was through the CPC that he got a lot of the information he probably passed on to the Soviets.

REARDEN: What are the recollections you have of people you worked with, people like LeBaron, Bush, Strauss, etc.

CARPENTER: Van Bush was a very key figure in everything having to do with military R&D; had been involved in it since the outbreak of World War II. He was the one, really, who started the Manhattan Project. Lewis Strauss--he and Forrestal were very close personal friends. No

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recollections, really, of LaBaron, except that he was O.K., although I remember his wife, who was one of the few women decorated in World War II for entertaining GIs.

REARDEN: What are your recollections of Forrestal?

CARPENTER: Forrestal had an interesting way of operating. Do you know about the "scotch and soda call," the "cocktail call," and the "lunch call?" Well, these were calls from Forrestal's secretary to join him at appropriate times of the day. The "lunch call" would be largely for in-house people to join him for lunch to advise or talk about a particular subject with Congressmen. The scotch and soda call was mainly for members of Congress and other dignitaries. And the cocktail call was for members of the press.

About Forrestal's health, I was very favorably impressed with him when we first met. His mind was keen, incisive, and quick. In fact, most of our meetings--most of all his meetings--lasted no more than 5 minutes. In that time, he could analyze a problem and give an answer. When I first went down to Washington, I spent the night before our first meeting at the Hotel Washington and wrote out a lengthy list of questions. The next morning, I posed these questions to Forrestal and he ticked off the answers--without hesitating--one right after the other, completely to my satisfaction.

It was not until about a year later than I began noticing that his mind was beginning to fail. Where it used to take him 5 minutes to think

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through a problem, it now took him 20 and oftentimes, his mind would wander so that he never could reach a decision.

REARDEN: What were your relations like with Louis Johnson? Many people found him brutish, difficult to work with.

CARPENTER: I was very gun-shy of Louis Johnson at first. Forrestal begged me to stay on after he left, because he felt Johnson would need a lot of experienced help and wanted me. I was not at all enthusiastic, and so I decided I would lay down conditions that Johnson could not possibly accept and he would be forced to replace me. But he accepted every condition I proposed. I recall leaving my meeting with him convinced that Johnson would renege; but he never did. Others may have had troubles with Johnson, but not I. I found him calm, logical, and reasoned in all my dealings with him. He gave me outstanding support.

REARDEN: After the MLC, you went to Chairman of the Munitions Board in September 1948. What was the situation there?

CARPENTER: The Munitions Board had been under Thomas Hargrave, a part-time appointee. He was President of Eastman Kodak and used to spend one week in Washington, the next week in Rochester, N.Y. He had originally agreed to stay on for 1 year and when his time was up he was eager to leave. Well, this came in the middle of the 1948 presidential election campaign. The general feeling at that time was that Truman would lose. No Democrat would take the job, because he didn't think it would last. No Republican would take it for fear of being "tainted". Forrestal came

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to me. He was pretty desperate, and I agreed to serve, but not for very long--until the political situation became clarified.

Forrestal asked me if I felt I needed more power at CMB. I told him no. I thought the whole thing would work better if I worked by persuasion, rather than by fiat. I recall only one instance in which a serious situation arose that I had to exercise my authority. We had a staff meeting one day and the staff was getting suspicious--what right did I have anyway exercising authority? I excused myself from the meeting, but as I left I put a copy of my directive from Forrestal on my desk so that everyone could read it--not intentionally, just so the paper was there. When I came back in, there was no more trouble, no more disagreement.

REARDEN: The Munitions Board and the Research and Development Board both had problems with their personnel. Military officers didn't like to serve there because they were not "visible"--might lose out on promotions. Was there anything you did to ease this situation?

CARPENTER: Forrestal complained to me that there were too many resignations by high ranking officers because of the unification. In these circumstances, keeping up morale was a constant problem and I felt the way to solve it was to try to bring the Services into the decisionmaking process as much as possible. At one point I recall someone telling me he felt an assignment to the MB was like an assignment to the cemetery.

We had the same problems in the MLC as in the MB. In the MLC, I went to

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the Service Chiefs and asked them to assign someone of high rank--to give the job status--just to work with us on a part-time basis. In the MB, appointments were more permanent, so the techniques had to be different. One solution I hit on was to hold luncheons every other week with members of the staff. They could invite whomever they wanted. As I recall, we had outstanding speakers, such as Bernard Baruch on one occasion, Charlton Ward of Fairchild Aviation on another. These luncheons became so popular that eventually, the chiefs of staff asked if they could attend. I told them they had to be invited; it was all up to the staff to issue the invitations.

Rearden: What were your dealings like with the NSRB?

CARPENTER: We pretty much ignored it.

REARDEN: How would you rate the MB's stockpiling program?

CARPENTER: We probably didn't stockpile as much as we should have. We didn't have adequate appropriations. We used all our appropriations--but there were still gaps. Expensive items like tin were not stockpiled in sufficient quantities. An important object of the stockpiling program was to avoid the need to divert ships in wartime to escort freighters. A good start was probably made under difficult circumstances.

Returning to the personnel problem, I felt that one very big part of my job was to recruit people--people from industry--to work in government. By and large, the government people thought industrialists never came to Washington unless they had a personal stake in something. People in

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industry, on the other hand, thought that people in government were empire builders. There was a big gulf in thinking and I felt it injured both sides. I wanted to bring industrialists to Washington to work 2 years (no more) so that there could be a give-and-take atmosphere, correct these misconceptions. But I don't feel I was very successful.

One episode I recall involved the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). People in the Pentagon saw the NAM as a bunch of selfish industrialists. I wanted to get the NAM involved in selecting people from industry to come help in Washington. Forrestal agreed and, initially, NAM agreed. But just before we were to have a meeting to work out the details, NAM cancelled. I have never understood why.

My reasons for wanting to limit people to 2-year tours were: (1) after 2 years, you begin to get the "Great I Am" feeling or Potomac fever; and (2) you begin to lose touch with the rest of the country. I always felt it important to stay in touch, and so I had the Wall Street Journal and the Kiplinger Letter delivered to my office regularly.

REARDEN: To what extent were you involved in selecting your successor on the MB?

CARPENTER: I tried to recruit Ward Canaday of Willys Overland. He was my assistant, but his company wanted him to return to business. Carl Ilgenfritz, a vice president of U.S. Steel was later considered. Ilgenfritz had pension rights with U.S. Steel and the Senate refused to pass him unless he revealed how much salary he was getting. At first he

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declined to provide this information, but he was assured it would be confidential and eventually agreed to give it if it remained confidential. So he told the Senate the size of his salary and almost immediately the information leaked to the press. Ilgenfritz was hurt and angry and refused to serve. Finally, Hubert Howard took the job; I'm afraid he had Potomac fever, but of course I don't know.

REARDEN: Is there anything else we have missed or that you would like to mention?

CARPENTER: Yes, we have not touched yet on the roles and missions controversy and the supercarrier controversy. I recall Forrestal telling me once that big carriers were a thing of the past and that they probably would not play a significant role in future wars.



COMPTROLLER

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

June 19, 1981

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Subject: Interview with Donald F. Carpenter

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On June 12-13, 1981, I interviewed Mr. Donald F. Carpenter, former chairman of the Military Liaison Committee (1948) and the Munitions Board (1948-49), at his home on Hillendale Road, Mendenhall, Pennsylvania. The interview was held at Mr. Carpenter's request, after he had read several of my draft chapters on the history of OSD, 1947-50. In addition, Mr. Carpenter also gave me his copy of his "Confidential Recollections," or personal memoirs, which I subsequently took to Washington, copied and returned to him.

The following is not a verbatim transcript of our conversations. It is, rather, a summary in dialogue form of the discussion that took place over the afternoon of June 12 and the morning of June 13. Mr. Carpenter has seen, reviewed, and edited these notes.

Steven L. Rearden



OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

COMPTROLLER  
(Administration)

26 JAN 1982

*Mr. Alfred Goldberg*

Mr. Donald F. Carpenter  
Hillendale Road  
Mendenhall, PA 19357

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Date: **AUG 29 2013**

Dear Mr. Carpenter:

You will recall that you were interviewed on June 12 and 13, 1981, by Steven L. Rearden, a representative of the OSD Historical Office, as part of our oral history program. We are presently establishing an interview exchange system among the various historical offices within the Department of Defense (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, JCS, and OSD), all of which have oral history collections. Our purpose is to use each other's interviews when they are appropriate to our research for histories and special studies. At present we do not anticipate making these interviews available to anyone other than official historians attached to the above listed offices.

Utilization of interviews will be subject, of course, to security classifications where they exist. In regard to access, we want to respect the wishes of the persons interviewed. Interviews might be closed, open with permission of the subject, open with permission required to cite or quote, or open without restriction. Interviews in the last category, of course, will be most useful for research purposes.

I am writing to ask you to indicate your preference in regard to our interview with you. If you would like to establish restrictions or conditions, please let me know about them in writing. If you wish to impose no restrictions, also please so indicate in writing.

Thank you very much for your cooperation on this matter. I shall look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

*Alfred Goldberg*

Alfred Goldberg  
OSD Historian

*you may list the information I sent or quote you as open without restriction as outlined above  
Donald F. Carpenter*