By MARGARET MILLER CURTIS

I've never met John Alter, but when I phoned him, his voice reminded me of a stern handshaker. "That's the kind of man who gets right down to business," I thought. He sounds like a born leader.

After asking for and receiving Alter's resume, I knew my first reaction was correct.

I had intended to write an article about Jim Hart, who turned me down. "You should write about John Alter," he told me. "He's done more than I know, both in the military and as a civilian." John doesn't recall exactly when he first met Jim, but his wife, the former Elizabeth Ann (Betty Ann) Hart, was an EAU school mate and friend of Jim's wife. Betty's meeting was inevitable.

I asked about his childhood and discovered that it must have had something to do with air places. If his voice was like his eyes, I would say his voice "hit up," when he heard the word, airplane. He said his first plane ride was at the age of two, in World War II, when he served in the Navy. As a civilian, he worked for the Zanesville Publishing Company as a photographer, the Piper Aircraft Corporation as Director of Communications, the Boeing Company as Director of Public Relations. In 1960, he married Betty Ann. The couple was active in many community affairs and still remembers that time as an exciting. That day began in the rural Midwest in pretty much the same way I was raised in a rural town in the South, he doesn't like to be called a Yankee, just a farmer.

For my husband, Dan, also grew up in a small, rural town in Indiana, and spent time working on farms, I sympathized. I told him that in Mariana, we used to have a fast driving, known only as Red Hat. He was never seen with his red hat. When Red Hat was driving me home one rainy day, he asked, "Maxi Miller, is it true that you are going to marry a Yankee?"

"When I said, 'Dan, I am from Indiana, if that's what you mean,' he answered, 'Well then, I'm telling you now, they mixed marriages will never work out.' But as John and I both know, Old Red Hat was wrong.

When asked what brought him to Florida, he explained that when Betty Ann's parents were older, they were running back and forth to Florida so often, they decided they might just as well move there. In 1997, they became official Floridians and with Betty Ann, he now manages the Alter-Bev Ins Farms, which provide land for cattle, timber, and row crops. John also became actively involved with the Republican Party and was elected by Governor Kirk Scott to serve as president of the North- west Florida Water District. When he told friends that he now looks after 600 acres of poor trees, they nicknamed him "King of the Trees."

I asked what he liked best about the South, and he said that he found it much like the place where he was raised. As a life in my home office with my wife, Betty Ann.

Marking the corner of a soon-to-be stand of Long Leaf pine trees.