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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Van Odell
Conducted by Jason Stewart
Date: 9 September 2008
Transcribed by Cecily Darwin**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 Jason Stewart: This is Jason Stewart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech
2 University conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Van Odell. Today is September
3 9th 2008. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Odell is joining me in Katy, Texas. Is that
4 correct, sir?

5 Van Odell: Yes.

6 JS: Okay. All right. Why don't we begin, if you don't mind, by telling me a little
7 bit of biographical information, when and where you were born, what your parents'
8 names were, what their occupations were, that type of thing.

9 VO: Okay. I was born in June 10th 1949 in Stillwater, Oklahoma. My parents
10 were George Van Odell, Jr., and Betty Jean Fuget Odell. My father was born in
11 Earlsboro, Oklahoma. My mother was born in Maud, Oklahoma. My father is a professor,
12 was a professor at Oklahoma State University and my mother was an office manager at
13 Oklahoma State University.

14 JS: All right. Could you tell me a little bit about your childhood, about growing
15 up in Stillwater?

16 VO: Sure. It was a small university town. I grew up there and also in College
17 Station, Texas, both of them small towns. I had a real great childhood, lots of Boy
18 Scouting. I spent a lot of time camping and fishing. I spent a tremendous amount of time
19 in the woods in and around Stillwater. I went to public schools and went all the way
20 through high school there and graduated from Stillwater High School. I spent—became
21 an Eagle Scout. Worked from the time I was eleven years old on. I always had a part-time
22 job from the time I was eleven. I took two paper routes and kept those all the way

1 through several other various jobs while I was there. I don't know what else to say about
2 it because it was a rather Ozie and Harriet type family.

3 JS: Yes, sir.

4 VO: I had a brother and a sister. Like I said, my father was a professor and we just
5 lived in and around the university. I spent lots of time up in the museums and up in the
6 university labs all the time I was growing up.

7 JS: Right. What did your father teach?

8 VO: He was actually a researcher in biochemistry. He did teach organic chemistry
9 and biochemistry and he used to teach the wash out course for vet med students called
10 Biochemistry 4113.

11 JS: All right, okay. Could you tell me a little bit about high school for you? Did
12 you enjoy high school and what were your favorite subjects?

13 VO: Oh, no. I absolutely hated high school. It was a miserable experience. As a
14 matter of fact, I look back on my life, Vietnam was a lot more fun than high school. It
15 was a pretty horrible place to be it was a real clique-ish group. There were very few
16 people on the in-crowd and they pretty much controlled the school. It was like most of
17 those tribal experiences.

18 JS: Sure.

19 VO: I did not enjoy high school at all. As a matter of fact, I only took—I was
20 preparing myself for university, which I really didn't want to do at the time, and I took
21 one shop course in welding and it was the only course I enjoyed the whole time I was in
22 high school. I was ready to be out of school and wanted to be on my own just as soon as
23 possible.

24 JS: Okay. When did you graduate from high school?

25 VO: 1967.

26 JS: 1967, okay. As you were going through high school and you graduated in '67,
27 were you paying attention at all to or did you know anything about what was going on in
28 Vietnam?

29 VO: Oh, yeah. I was a news junkie all my life. I had watched it on the news and I
30 wanted to go over and be in it.

31 JS: Okay. All right. Did you join the Navy right out of high school then?

1 VO: No, I actually joined before I was out of high school. I joined way back in
2 1966 on the reserve program, so I drilled for almost a year before I graduated. Let's see,
3 yeah. My senior year I was in the Naval Reserve and I graduated in '67 and I was already
4 an E-3 petty officer and from there I went to boot camp and then onto A school and
5 became an E-4 or a third-class gunner's mate.

6 JS: Okay. What made you choose the Navy?

7 VO: Well, my father had been in the Navy and several other military had been in
8 the Navy in our family all the way back to the Civil War. I had—he had been in World
9 War II as a fire control technician in the Pacific Fleet and also in the Atlantic. I just
10 wanted to be in the Navy. I think that most people, if you will look at most of the major
11 admirals in the Navy, they came from Kansas and Oklahoma and central Texas. Very few
12 of them are sea-faring- type people but I think being land locked you just kind of want to
13 go on the ocean.

14 JS: Right, yes, sir. Well, did your father tell you anything about his experiences
15 when you were growing up?

16 VO: Oh, yes, yeah we talked about his experiences in World War II and he told us
17 about what happened and we discussed—also my grandfather was a historian in his own
18 right and we talked about American history and world history. But, yes, he did, he talked
19 to me about his experiences in the Navy quite sensibly.

20 JS: All right, so then that had a great effect on you then, I would imagine.

21 VO: Oh, yeah. That certainly did.

22 JS: Okay, well, let's see. So you went through the Reserves, I mean, you began in
23 the Reserves. Could you tell me a little bit about how that worked?

24 VO: Sure. At that time you could join the Navy in a couple of different ways. One
25 was Regular Navy, which was four years active and two years reserve, or like I did it
26 which was two years active duty and four years reserves a total of six years for both.
27 Being from Stillwater, Oklahoma, I knew not any other way to do it because there just
28 was this Naval Reserve station and a bunch of us, actually there were six of us who still
29 get together every once and a while who just didn't have anything to do one Saturday
30 night and we decided we would go join the Navy. So we went down and got our papers
31 and I wasn't old enough so I had to go get my parents to sign for me. It just basically was

1 a product of I was ready to get out of Stillwater, Oklahoma, and I didn't know how and
2 this looked like a way to do it.

3 JS: Right. What did your father think whenever you told him about joining the
4 Navy?

5 VO: He thought it was a good idea. He had done the same thing. He had joined
6 when he was seventeen, also.

7 JS: Okay. All right. So once you graduated from high school was it then straight
8 to basic?

9 VO: I left the two days after I graduated from high school and went to basic
10 training in San Diego.

11 JS: Okay.

12 VO: They were running people through very quickly so we went through an
13 accelerated boot camp which was only a couple of weeks long because we had been
14 training for almost a year at the reserve unit learning basic military, you know, how to
15 salute, how to wear your uniform, all the really extremely basic stuff there in Stillwater.
16 We went to a couple of weeks in San Diego to boot camp and then we got on an airplane
17 and they flew us to Seattle, Washington, and we spent two weeks on a destroyer escort,
18 the USS *Whitehurst* DE-634, for another couple of weeks of training. Then I returned
19 back to the reserve center from there.

20 JS: Okay. Can you tell me about the accelerated boot camp in San Diego and just
21 a typical day? How would it be different than your regular basic training as far as a
22 typical day?

23 VO: They were exactly the same as a typical day but we were brought in and just
24 put in with everybody else. We just didn't stay as long. But we would get up in the
25 morning about five o'clock and they'd come yelling and screaming and knocking the
26 beds over and getting us out of bed. Then you'd have to very quickly dress, get your rack
27 made up, get outside on the parade ground for a few minutes of calisthenics where they
28 would come around and scream at you and beat on you a little bit. Then we would march
29 off to breakfast. After a while—after a very quick breakfast you would march to classes
30 all day and the classes would entail anything from knot tying to rope splicing. We went
31 out and spent two days on fire control where things would be set on fire and we would

1 have to put the fire out. They had a mock ship out in the middle of the desert that
2 different rooms would catch on fire and you'd have to put the fires out. We went through
3 a gas mask thing where we put on a gas mask and you went into a room and they shot
4 tear gas all over. In the last second you ripped off your mask and took a deep breath and
5 then ran out so you can get a taste of it. The problem was that they got to the last ten guys
6 in our company, and I was one of them, and they didn't have anymore gas masks so we
7 had to go in there and spend the full ten minutes without a gas mask on in the tear gas
8 room.

9 JS: Goodness.

10 VO: Then run out. Then we would usually have lunch sometime. During that time
11 they would march to lunch and you would have a very quick lunch. You would get out
12 and you would go to more classrooms and that could be anything from television
13 classrooms to actually hands on type things, discussing how a ship works, the inter-
14 workings of how you act on a ship and what your job is going to be. At that point we
15 were all brand new so you were either going to be on the deck gang or be in engineering
16 as a snipe, which would be work down in the engine rooms. Then at the end of the day
17 after dinner there would be another class or two or another type of work session. Then
18 you would strip off your clothes and you would wash them in these big concrete tubs and
19 hang them up. The Navy had these things called clothes ties, which were just a series of
20 great big strings, and you would tie your, supposedly used these onboard ship but you
21 never did after boot camp, but you would tie your clothes out so everything you wore that
22 day would be washed and hung out on the lines to dry to be picked up before five o'clock
23 the next morning, folded, and put back in your locker. You are given the same size locker
24 as you got onboard ship which is about eighteen inches by eighteen inches by twenty-four
25 inches deep. Everything that you owned goes in that locker.

26 JS: Okay.

27 VO: One thing about it, of course, this naval base is no longer in operation, but
28 there was this huge fence that ran right down between two buildings. These buildings
29 were old Spanish style two-story barracks, San Diego style. On the other side was the
30 Marine Corps and they were running their Marines through and getting them to Vietnam
31 as quickly as they could.

1 JS: Right.

2 VO: We would get out at five o'clock in the morning and we would look across
3 the fence and there would be these Marines in sweatshirts and green pants carrying
4 telephone poles. Then we came in at night they would be carrying telephone poles. When
5 you got up the next morning they would be out carrying telephone poles and I was sure
6 glad I wasn't in the Marine Corps because that's about all they ever did. That is a typical
7 day that we would have but we went through all sorts of shipboard, you know, customs,
8 how you acted, what you did onboard ship, how to operate onboard ship, and that type of
9 thing and that's the basic training to be a sailor on a ship.

10 JS: Okay. All right. Did you have any weapons training in basic?

11 VO: No, not at all. We—no, we were not even allowed to carry guns. Most of the
12 companies had rifles, 1903 Springfields from World War I and up to World War II. We
13 used those to march the first day and about the second day one of the guys doing about
14 face rifle barrel hit the guy behind him and gashed his face wide open so they just took all
15 the guns away from us and we didn't have any guns the rest of the time we were there.
16 Which was great because then you didn't have to carry the damn thing.

17 JS: Right. Yes, sir. All right. What was your thoughts on the training? Did you
18 think it was fairly adequate or not?

19 VO: Well, to be perfectly honest, I didn't have any thoughts at the time. It was
20 quite adequate for what we were doing, yes. It was—like I said, it was all accelerated. I
21 did that and I also went to accelerated A school in gunnery later on. At that time they
22 were running us through as quickly as they possibly could so it was adequate enough to
23 get somebody to where they didn't kill themselves on the first day on the job.

24 JS: Right, okay.

25 VO: But it was not the in-depth detail stuff that they do nowadays.

26 JS: Right, okay.

27 VO: I'm still involved with the Navy quite a bit so I know what they are doing.

28 JS: Right. What about the instructors? What was your thoughts on them?

29 VO: Well, he was a chief, we had one, he was a chief engineman and he came in
30 about five o'clock in the morning and left about five o'clock in the afternoon. He was
31 there just kind of doing his job. He was marking time, so to speak.

1 JS: Okay. Was there any mention of Vietnam at all during basic?

2 VO: Well, no, the one thing that happened is that we were brought into a room,
3 and this was during the seven-day Israeli war with all of the Arab countries when they
4 were attacked. We were told that we might be pulled out. There were two things that
5 happened at this time. We were told that we might be pulled out and put on ships and
6 taken over to the Mediterranean to support Israel at the time. By time all that blew over
7 Israel had already defeated the Egyptians and Jordanians and Iraqis and everybody else,
8 the Syrians.

9 JS: Right.

10 VO: I got to visit the Egyptian museum of that war just a couple of years ago. I
11 didn't realize it but Egypt says they have won the war according to the museum.

12 JS: Oh, really? That's interesting.

13 VO: (Unintelligible) during that seven-day war. But Vietnam was discussed but
14 the main thing that Vietnam was discussed at that time is that they were training gunner's
15 mates to go on the battleships they were bringing out. They bringing out in *New Jersey* and
16 possibly they were thinking about bringing out the *Missouri* also at that time and they
17 needed hundreds and hundreds of gunner's mates to go man these big guns. At that time
18 the Navy's full and absolute mission in Vietnam, besides fighter planes over North
19 Vietnam, was coastal patrol and offshore naval gun bombardment. That is where the
20 Navy was focused at that time.

21 JS: Okay. So that's where you thought you would probably end up then.

22 VO: Well, I was too stupid at the time when I joined up to not realize that the
23 Navy didn't go on land, which was completely different then what happened later on.
24 But, no, I thought that or some destroyer escort or something. I just wanted to be out in
25 the fleet someplace on some type of patrol. But, yes, I was too young at the time to even
26 realize what was going on actually in-country.

27 JS: Okay. All right. Well before we move on to A school, to gunner's mate
28 school, could you tell me were there any other particularly memorable moments from
29 basic that stick out in your mind?

30 VO: Oh, it was just—I just was smart enough having gone through a lot of stuff in
31 Boy Scouts and having been on my own camping and doing things like that to be able to

1 handle myself and be quiet in group situations. We had several guys that didn't quite
2 understand that they needed to keep their mouth shut and run below the radar and they
3 were hit and abused by the drill instructors quite often. I was able to avoid all that just by
4 flying under the radar.

5 JS: Right.

6 VO: It was—as far as that, onboard ship when we went to the second part of the
7 training, which was up in Seattle, Washington, it was just really something to—they gave
8 us one afternoon off, one Sunday afternoon off and we got to put on our dress whites and
9 go out into the town itself as sailors, which was rather an interesting deal at the time
10 because coming from a small town in Oklahoma this is my first foray into the other parts
11 of the United States at that time so it was just really an eye-opening experience to see. I
12 went down and I will relay a story about Jackson Pike Street later on when we talk about
13 Vietnam.

14 JS: Okay.

15 VO: We went down to Jackson Pike Street where all the bars and all the wild life,
16 wild nights went on. Of course, we couldn't do anything because we were only eighteen
17 years old at the time so we pretty much just looked in the windows and headed back to
18 the ship.

19 JS: Right. Okay. Was there any negative reaction to you guys at this time?

20 VO: No, not at all. As a matter of fact, we were quite welcomed in the city at this
21 time. This was 1967. That hadn't really started. But there was no negative reaction at all.
22 There was—or no positive reaction either way. We were just—they had quite a few
23 sailors in Seattle and Bremerton at that time so it wasn't anything big with them either
24 way.

25 JS: Okay. This was when you were in gunner's mate school?

26 VO: No, no. This is when I was just finishing up the second part of the boot camp.
27 It was a two-week cruise up in Seattle, Washington.

28 JS: Okay, I got you. So once you finished up basic did you go straight to gunner's
29 mate school or was there any time in-between?

30 VO: No, I went back to the reserve unit for about, let's see, about four or five
31 months and completed the rest of the training and became an E-3 at that time. I went to

1 gunner's mate A school in September of—the last of September of '67. I went to North
2 Chicago Naval Base. I flew up there and started sixteen weeks of gunner's mate A
3 school. That was a chosen rate—I put in the two or three rates I wanted to be and that was
4 the one that came back. They kind of had this dream sheet where you asked for what you
5 want and sometimes you get it and sometimes you don't. But that was one of them. At
6 that time it was gunnery, which is the large guns, the five- inch thirty-eights and the
7 three-inch seventy-ones and then also the sixteen-inch that were on the *New Jersey* at the
8 time. We were training to be gunner's mates up there. It was pretty much all classroom
9 work but they had a huge area that had all of the guns that could be moved. There is two
10 rates there that go to school. One is gunner's mate guns, which is all guns, and the other
11 side is gunner's mate missiles, which is all the three at that time. The Navy had three
12 different missiles that they fired off ships.

13 JS: Okay. Which were you trained to—

14 VO: I was trained as gunner's mate guns.

15 JS: Guns, okay.

16 VO: I was trained on all the big weapons.

17 JS: Okay. All right. Could you take me through a typical day of this training?

18 VO: Sure. The gunnery school was a huge, giant all-glass building with green
19 glass. Our barracks was right across the street from it. It was, like I said, in North
20 Chicago. Abbot Labs, the pharmacies, had one of their production facilities up there and
21 they used to spew out some of the nastiest chemicals and it stunk all the time. You shared
22 a room with four other people. You had two desks so two of you shared a desk, four beds,
23 two bunk beds, and a small locker. You were not allowed to wear jeans at any time. You
24 could only wear your naval uniform. Anytime on and off the base you could never wear
25 civilian clothes at any time. You would get up and go eat breakfast about seven in the
26 morning. Classes started at 0800 and they were usually all lecture classes and they would
27 lecture from 0800 until somewhere around noon. There would be a short break for lunch.
28 You would come back and there would be lectures all afternoon long until about five
29 o'clock. On Fridays you would take a test and if you passed the test you got the weekend
30 off. If you flunked the test you went to Dumb Fuck, which you went back up there and
31 you studied all weekend long and every night the next week for three hours. Then if you

1 passed the next test then you got off of Dumb Fuck, basically is what it was called. You
2 were able to do that but you could very easily be spending fifteen hours a day in the
3 classroom if you weren't doing your work. If you flunked three times you were flunked
4 out of school and you went directly to the fleet and you didn't get your training. We
5 usually got most weekends off and you could go up to Kenosha or some place in
6 Wisconsin. You could go down to Chicago and walk around. The trouble was by that
7 time it was getting cold and the Navy pea coat isn't the best thing in the world to keep the
8 cold off of you. Then there was a little military town across the way where the people just
9 tried to get all the money they could out of you every time you walked over there. They
10 had a lot of shysters over there and people who would take advantage of you and you had
11 to watch that. We went—we had, oh, let's see. Yeah, that's pretty much what a day
12 would be like.

13 JS: Okay. All right. So there was no hands-on training then?

14 VO: Not really. Well, I take that back. There was some hands-on training. We had
15 five-inch thirty-eights and three-inch fifty-fours down below which were all in working
16 order. There was no ammunition, of course, because they were inside of a building. But
17 we went over all the hydraulic systems. You were taught the different hydraulic systems
18 and how they worked, servo units how they worked, how to clean and operate, how to
19 keep the things cleaned and lubricated, safety precautions, and that type of thing. In the
20 most part, no, there was not any hands-on. But we went through all the weapons that the
21 Navy used on ships. Basically these weapons at this time were still things that came out
22 of World War II. There hadn't been much upgrading except for the missiles on the other
23 side of the building which the missile men were working on. But as far as what I was
24 doing it was still World War II type weapons.

25 JS: Okay. What were your thoughts on this training? Pretty good or—?

26 VO: It was very good training. It was long and very detailed and after having
27 gotten out of high school I really didn't want to go back to school but it was an
28 opportunity that I took advantage of. It got me rated to third-class gunner's mate. Now,
29 one of the good things about this was I that I talked about my Boy Scout training earlier.
30 In fact, I was an Eagle Scout. I could tie all the knots and I could do all the deck stuff so I

1 never had to do any mess cooking. When everybody else was down in the mess decks
2 cleaning dishes I never had to do that.

3 JS: Right.

4 VO: Then because I went to gunner's mate A school and became third-class
5 before I even went on active duty, I got out of all sorts of nasty type duties and was able
6 to just go do technical type stuff, which was a big benefit.

7 JS: Okay. All right. Could you tell me a little about your instructors here at the
8 gunner's mate school?

9 VO: For the most part they were chief gunner's mates, a couple of first-class
10 gunner's mates. They had done well in the fleet and were top type sailors but they were
11 not instructors. Having taught quite a bit lately in my life I recognize a good instructor
12 and poor instructor. They were basically just up there to throw out some information
13 however they could and just yell at you. There wasn't—this was back—the Navy has
14 changed quite a bit. The Navy used to be extremely lilly white, just absolutely no people
15 of color whatsoever, a rarity and they were also extremely stratified. There's almost a
16 royal hierarchy in the officers' ranks coming on down and then in the upper enlisted
17 ranks. The Army, having the same type of rank system, was a little bit more, didn't quite
18 have those lines drawn. But these guys were kind of king of the roost and if they wanted
19 to abuse you in any way they could. They will scream and yell and make you do all sorts
20 of stuff. But it was a good school. The commanding officer of the school was a limited-
21 duty officer which meant he rose through the enlistment ranks and was lieutenant
22 commander at this time. He was real good. He was really wanting to put on a good school
23 and have—he was interested in teaching. He was interested in seeing that things went on
24 well. It varied from good instructors to poor instructors.

25 JS: Okay. All right. Were there any particularly memorable moments about this
26 training that stick out in your mind?

27 VO: Yeah, there's a couple of them. I'll tell you the one. There was—one of them
28 was the first time it snowed real hard and heavy. They called from the barracks. They
29 said, "Everybody that lives in the South report to the duty station." We all went out there
30 and reported to the duty station and they gave us shovels and we had to shovel all the
31 sidewalks by hand. A couple of days later we got another huge snow fall and they called

1 out all the boys from the North and they gave them snow plows to plow the snow. That's
2 one of things. They'd pull crap like that all the time.

3 JS: Right.

4 VO: Another memorable one that I thought—of course being a young kid from
5 Stillwater this guy was there, he'd been in the Navy for a while and he said, "Hey, let's
6 go to Kenosha. There's a real neat night club up there and they will let you in even
7 though you are underage. We will go up there and have some beers and have a good time
8 and they've got lots of girls." So we hopped on the train and went to Kenosha. Of course,
9 it's freezing weather and there's snow all over the ground and we are freezing death and
10 we walk into this night club and they have a place to hang your jackets. We hang our
11 coats up and we go and sit down and have a couple of beers and the club is wild and
12 there's a dance band going on and there's girls. Then the club shuts down and we had to
13 go get a hotel room. The two of us got a small hotel room and had one bed we were going
14 to share because we had pooled our money together to go up there for this one big night.
15 We go out and someone had stole coats. So here we are with no coats, it's snowing like
16 crazy, it's just cold and the wind is blowing. We go back down to the hotel room and they
17 had rented out our room. We didn't have a room. We had to hitchhike back to the base
18 that night and we were out here on this cold road about seventy miles away from the base
19 hitchhiking with no coats. It just so happened some Marine pulls up and says, "Are you
20 going to North Chicago?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Get in." They gave us a ride all the
21 way back. That was—the two biggest memorable experiences I had both dealing with
22 snow up there.

23 JS: Right. Yes, sir. All right. When you finished gunner's mate school, did you
24 go—where did you go from there?

25 VO: Well, I went back to the reserve unit to get ready to go on active duty. I still
26 hadn't even been on active duty yet. I went back to the reserve unit for a couple—I can't
27 even remember. It was a couple of months, and trained there at the reserve unit. I had
28 some much time on my hands I got myself a job and worked while I waiting for active
29 duty orders which came in September of the next year. I finished gunner's mate A school
30 in March of '68 and my orders finally came through in September of '68.

31 JS: Okay.

1 VO: Yeah, September of '68.

2 JS: All right. In that time when you went back to the reserves, what type of
3 training were they giving you there?

4 VO: Well, at that time I was still was in—they really didn't have much they could
5 give me because I wasn't—they had two different two units at that time, those that had
6 been on active duty and those that hadn't been on active duty. Those of us that hadn't
7 been on active duty, we were going to the basic military stuff. Well, I had been up in
8 North Chicago at a naval base the last, I think it was eight months, and had gone through
9 all the military training that was necessary so it was more of the same type stuff. What I
10 did is I worked on—you have four things to advance in a rank, one of them are practical
11 factors. You have to be able to do certain types of operations in your job, clean a gun,
12 take a gun apart, you how, whatever you rate is. If you rate is corpsman you have to be
13 able to do different types of medical treatments. That was practical factors. Then you
14 have military factors, you know. Do you know how to salute the flag? Do you know how
15 to come onboard ship? Do you know how to do—it's much more difficult than that but
16 there is fifty to one hundred items that you have to be able to do for your next rank. Then
17 you take a test which you have to pass, number one. You have to make at least a seventy
18 on it. Then if they need three hundred of those petty officers, of third-class petty officers,
19 and they need three hundred of them and five hundred of you passed they take the top
20 three hundred and you don't pass. So you have to study on that then you get your
21 officer's okay that you can be advanced in rank. So there is four things you have to do.
22 So what I did during that time is I just studied for the next rank. I had already made third-
23 class by that time, which was pretty much unheard of. Somebody that hadn't been on
24 active duty was already a third-class petty officer. So I just started studying for my
25 second-class test and worked on that.

26 JS: Okay. All right. When orders finally came through, did that send you to swift
27 boat school?

28 VO: No, I had applied. When I was up in gunner's mate A school, my roommate
29 had been sent to swift boat school and he was really all excited about it. He had pictures
30 of it and said it was a really great thing. When I came back they said, "What do you want
31 to do?" You filled out what was called a dream sheet, put down what you wanted to go

1 do. I said, "I want to go to swift boats." They said, "You can't go to swift boats. You are
2 too young. You are only eighteen. We can't send you to swift boat school." I said, "Okay,
3 I want to be on a destroyer someplace." They said, "Okay." So as it turned out, my orders
4 were to a transit barracks on 32nd Street in San Diego which meant that I was going to go
5 there and sit and await orders because they didn't have anything, they didn't know where
6 they wanted to put me yet. When I got my orders I didn't know where I was going or
7 what was going to happen. I packed up my stuff and said good bye to everybody and
8 also—I had just got married that summer, too. So I said goodbye to my wife. We went
9 and flew out to San Diego and told her that I didn't know what was going to happen and
10 went the transit barracks. When I got to the transit barracks they didn't have anything for
11 me but since I was already a petty officer they made me master at arms of the transit
12 barracks. So instead of being one of the members of the group sitting there waiting for
13 orders I was in charge of everything, which meant I had to get up every day and inspect
14 everybody, make sure the barracks here clean, and keep order in our barracks. There was
15 about thirty people in the barracks at that time. I sat there and I filled out another dream
16 sheet and this time I filled out the dream sheet and I said I wanted to be on swift boats
17 because by this time I had turned nineteen. They said, "Oh, you can't be on swift boats
18 because you are married. What do you want to do?" I said, "Well, I want to be on a
19 destroyer out of Hawaii." They said, "Okay, we'll see what we can do about that." I
20 waited around another two weeks and all of a sudden I got my orders that said, "Swift
21 boats. Go to Coronado. Transfer to Coronado Island the last of September and report for
22 swift boat training." Even though they told me I couldn't do it two times they finally just
23 gave it to me anyway.

24 JS: Okay.

25 VO: So I called my wife and told her that I was going to move over to Coronado
26 and she—I said, "Why don't you see if you can come out? I am going to be there about
27 eight weeks. Why don't you see if you can fly out and stay with me?" She had to drop out
28 of school, which upset her father. He was the dean of student personnel at Oklahoma
29 State University at the time and so he was quite upset she was dropping out of school to
30 come be with me but she did. She flew out and we got a little one-room basically a one-
31 bedroom apartment out there on the island and started swift boat school.

1 JS: Okay. Now, let's see. Okay. I guess, tell me a little bit about the training, the
2 swift boat school training.

3 VO: Sure. We trained from—as a matter of fact, this last weekend these last two
4 days of this last week when I was gone I was up in Ohio meeting with a couple of guys I
5 was in swift boats—we had get-togethers all the time and then in October I am going up
6 for a big one in Washington, D.C., but we still get together quite a bit. But what swift
7 boat school was at that time—man, I can't get the right, I think it's eight full weeks
8 which involved a tremendous amount of training. We had a series of boats there that were
9 on a—that were tied to causeway. This is now where are the SEALs (sea, air, land) were
10 trained. The SEALs had just started. There was still Navy UTD (underwater demolition
11 teams) but this was the amphibious Navy. We would start training at seven o'clock in the
12 morning and train all day long until usually five or six at night. Usually one or two days
13 on the weekend we would also train. Then we were off and we could head for the beach
14 and, like I said, my wife was there and we had our apartment and there was a couple of
15 things we could do there. But it would go—that started from the very beginning. We
16 went through boat operations, basically how the boat operated. It had two 12E-71 diesel
17 engines and you had to know how to operate the engines. It had an Onan generator that
18 provided all the electricity, all the guns systems, the radar, the radio, all the deck
19 operating systems. But each one of us was responsible for our job, plus you had to know
20 a little bit about everybody else's job. The boat crew consisted of one officer, usually a
21 lieutenant JG (junior grade) and five enlisted men. Boatswain's mate for deck operations,
22 radio radarman who operated the radio and the radar, and engineman who took care of all
23 the engines, a quartermaster who did the navigating and usually drove the boat, and a
24 gunner's mate who operated all the small arms. We would go through—of course, since I
25 had been trained on all the big guns I never even had been trained on small arms but I
26 went through all the small arms school. I had to know how to take apart and fix .50-
27 caliber machineguns, M-60 machineguns, Russian AK-47s, M-79 grenade launchers. Our
28 boat had something that the Army never could believe that we had be we had an 81-mm
29 mortar which they sit in the ground and drop shells into and fire. We had brought one up
30 and connected it to a gun mount and put a recoil system on it and a trigger where you
31 could drop a motor round down inside of it and point it at somebody and shoot it. It was

1 quite an effective weapon. On top of that was a single .50-caliber machinegun. I was at
2 the very top above the pilot house, fourteen foot above sea level, and I had twin .50-
3 caliber machineguns, which was an old B-52, World War II B-52 mount they pulled out
4 of airplanes.

5 JS: Right.

6 VO: And stuck on the top of the swift boat. The story behind the swift boat—I'm
7 getting off subject here. I'll get back on.

8 JS: No, that's perfectly fine.

9 VO: The story of the swift boats is that in 1965 they needed a patrol boat in
10 Vietnam right away so they came down and Sewart Seacraft was building these crew
11 boats for the off shore oil rigs. They are just an ugly little old grey boat that a bunch of
12 crew members could pile on and they could take it out from Louisiana and take it out
13 drop people off out on the offshore platforms. The Navy took these since they were
14 already making them and already had the plans and cut some large holes in them and
15 made gun tubs, put gun on them, gun mounts, outfitted them with radios, radars, and
16 large storage areas for ammunition. Put in a refrigerator and a freezer and a Navy cook
17 stove on the inside of it, one that everything snaps down so if the boat rolls the oven
18 doesn't fall off and the pots and pans don't fly out of it.

19 JS: Right.

20 VO: They outfitted that and started sending them to Vietnam in 1965.

21 JS: Okay.

22 VO: For shore, ocean patrol, offshore ocean patrol, not in the rivers and so that is
23 where this came from. But back to a day in school, there was no typical day in school.
24 We did boat operations and then for one week we did water survival. You would go over
25 and you would swim and you would swim and you would swim and they would show
26 you how to fight off attackers. You did in-the-water martial arts, so to speak. We did a
27 bunch of that type stuff which never came into play. We didn't get that close to them. We
28 went through—you know, there's a hundred snakes in Vietnam and ninety-nine of them
29 are deadly poisonous and the other one can swallow you. So, you know, went through all
30 these scare tactics basically.

31 JS: Right.

1 VO: I saw one snake the whole year I was there. They went through water
2 survival in the ocean, what to do, and this type of stuff but very intense training. Our final
3 exam was that you dove into this big pool with your full uniform on, boots, pants, shirt,
4 hat, everything and you swam around in a circle. After about fifteen minutes they said,
5 “Your right arm is broken. Hold it up in the air.” So you had to hold your arm up in the
6 air. Then you had to hold both arms up in the air and keep swimming. You had to hold
7 one leg up in the air and keep swimming. Then you had to hold both feet out of the water
8 and keep swimming. Then after about forty-five minutes of this three of them jumped
9 into this group of twenty of us and tried to drown you and you had to fight them off and
10 get out. If you were able to get away from them and just get away and break one hold
11 then you passed the test and you can get out. At the water survival school we had
12 probably four or five guys flunk and basically you didn’t get flunked out, you went back
13 and had to do another week. They’d just roll you back. Another week would gunnery and
14 we would go over every gun and how to take them apart, how to fix them, how to work
15 with them and then the final exam on that was that you were blindfolded and you were
16 put in a barrel with the gun and all the parts were dumped in on top of you and you had
17 to—it was a fifty-five- gallon drum, then you had to find all the pieces and put the gun
18 together before you can get out of the barrel. They did that with us a couple of times.
19 Then we went through many, many classes on radio and radar, seamanship, you know,
20 map reading, Morse code. We had to learn Morse code and then we also had Vietnamese
21 classes at the same time. These things would rotate. You’d go for three or four hours to
22 Vietnamese class and then you would go for two or three hours on how to operate radio.
23 In the afternoon you would take the boats out and everybody would get on there and you
24 would have to take the boat out from the pier without tearing the pier or boat up. Take it
25 out in San Diego Harbor and do some type of little operation out there and come back in
26 and tie the boats back up and clean them up. We did some operation on the boat every
27 day. Up until the last week where we went out and did—at this time the Navy was just
28 doing board-and-search operations so we had a couple of Vietnamese junks that were
29 there. They were all painted up with a big eye on the front. They would have two or three
30 guys in there dressed as Vietnamese and we would have to pull along side of them and
31 board and search them. One of the things that happened is one of the master chiefs there

1 that was always trying to do something to throw you off and you would lose points and
2 have to go back and go through another week. One of the things he would do is he would
3 throw a hand grenade, a fake hand grenade or something that he had in his hand and if it
4 landed inside your gun tub you were dead and you lost points for that. He was standing—
5 I was watching real closely because what we would do is come up and it's my job to
6 cover them with the twin .50-caliber machineguns. I keep the machineguns on the guy.
7 When we got too close to the boat and we were tying up next to it I had to bring the guns
8 up and out of the way because they couldn't depress down enough to even shoot on the
9 boat if we needed to, and pull my M-16 out and hold my M-16 ready to shoot in case
10 something happened. Well, the chief was on the bow of the boat and we were out, we
11 actually were out of the harbor. We were out in the ocean and big swells going on. He lit
12 a cigarette and he had a real live cigarette lighter and he threw it at me thinking it would
13 land in the gun tub and I just batted it away with my hand out into the ocean. He
14 screamed and cursed at me for about twenty minutes right after that happened but he
15 shouldn't have thrown it.

16 JS: Right.

17 VO: We went out on those patrols and then we went out on a long operation
18 where we went all the way down to Mexico and they had a towing sleeve that they towed
19 behind a tugboat an ocean going tug. We fired mortar rounds at it, had to fire a .50-
20 caliber but unfortunately about the time we got out there a Mexican fishing boat was
21 pulling up through our firing area and we had to sit and wait. The waves were just huge.
22 They were giant swells coming through and they were probably real slow, long-period
23 swells so the boat would just rock like a bell. After about two hours of this people were
24 just throwing up everywhere. Our boat was rocking so far it would rock over far enough
25 that I could throw up and without even having to get out of my gun tub and not even hit
26 the boat.

27 JS: Wow.

28 VO: So about the third time I threw up the boat came and righted itself up and
29 they said, "Okay, you're up and ready to fire." I couldn't even see I was just so hazy and
30 I said, "All right." One of the things you are supposed to do on these towing sleeves is
31 not hit it. You are supposed to shoot all around it because if you hit it you will damage

1 and they can't tow it back. As they pulled up there I just shredded the thing because I
2 couldn't even see where I was shooting around the thing. I think the next boat fired after
3 that and there wasn't enough left of it that anybody else could fire. We went—but that
4 was the type of operations that was full gun. We went up to the—the other way we
5 trained on weapons is we went up to Camp Pendleton, the Marine base, and fired 81-mm
6 mortars up there just to get used to it. They had one sat on the back of a truck so they
7 would drive the truck real fast over bumpy roads and you would have to load and fire
8 while they were doing that. Let's see. What else can I tell you about? Oh, one of the most
9 interesting things that happened while we were there, one Sunday we had to do boat
10 operations and the Sunday was December 7th and we were on this pier, Navy pier there in
11 Coronado, and we were all standing at attention getting ready to go to our boats and
12 about this time thirty Japanese Zeros flew in. What it was, North Island Naval Air Station
13 was just to the north of us and they had hired a bunch of the Navy pilots to fly Japanese
14 Zeros for this new movie they were filming at the time called *Tora! Tora! Tora!*

15 JS: Right.

16 VO: So here comes these Japanese Zeros over the top of us so I went back home
17 that night to talk to my wife and I said, "Man, you wouldn't believe it." She said,
18 "Japanese Zeros were flying over the top of us today!" I said, "Yeah, I know." It felt like
19 Pearl Harbor right there in San Diego. It was *déjà vu* all over again. For the next couple
20 of weeks they flew over us every day while they were training but it just so happened that
21 the movie theatre had hired a bunch of off duty naval pilots to fly them.

22 JS: All right. Okay. Let me ask you about—you mentioned a little while ago that
23 you were, one of the classes they were teaching here was Vietnamese. Were you able to
24 pick up much of the language?

25 VO: No, I didn't even pick up when we got over there. We tried quite a bit but
26 basically we could tell them to stop, get out of here, just very basic. I had probably a
27 vocabulary of thirty or forty words at the time that I could use but nothing real—no
28 conversation. We basically were just trying to get down, you know, put your gun down,
29 stand up, put your hands over your head, get out of here, come to me, those type of
30 commands to be able to command the boats whenever they were coming up. Supposedly
31 we were suppose to have a Vietnamese interpreter onboard but that never happened.

1 JS: Okay. Would they also teach you anything about Vietnamese culture?

2 VO: Oh, yes, yes. Not only that—well, as far as we had a couple of things,
3 Vietnamese culture. We also had Army culture, so to speak. We had liaisons from the
4 Army and the Air Force that came in and talked about how the Army operated in
5 Vietnam, order of battle, what a company was, what a battalion was, where they were
6 operating, what they were trying to do. The Air Force did the same thing.

7 JS: Right.

8 VO: But a lot of Vietnamese culture on how to act towards the Vietnamese and
9 how not to act, you know, what not to do and that type of thing but there was quite a bit
10 of that.

11 JS: Did you find this training, this Vietnamese cultural training, did you find it
12 useful for later?

13 VO: Yeah, in a lot of ways it was. It helped out, the Vietnamese language, but it
14 was a little bit more of, you know, understanding another country and how to deal
15 whenever you got there and not get yourself in trouble.

16 JS: Right. Okay. What about your overall swift boat training? Did it prepare you
17 for Vietnam?

18 VO: Well, it prepared us as best you could. The mission from the time that I was
19 in school, which was from September to January 1st, the mission in Vietnam changed
20 completely. It went from offshore patrols to river patrols in the south. There were five
21 divisions. So, yes, as far as boat operations, as far as how we operated the boats, how we
22 operated guns, how we did all of that, it prepared us. As far as how to operate in the
23 rivers, no, it didn't. But we were not the first but we were probably the second tier of
24 people that started running rivers. Burnique started running rivers in An Thoi in about
25 November and Larry Thurlow, who was boat officer, he was one of the one who also
26 started running rivers about that same time. He lives up in Bow, Kansas. So they started
27 this and when we went over we picked it up very shortly after they started it. I guess you
28 could say it was all learned. Now they have a group of people called special warfare
29 combat crewman now in the Navy. It's actually a rate that you can get and we were the
30 very first ones of those. We got those awarded just a year ago, as a matter of fact, as
31 being the very first combat crewman the Navy ever had. We learned everything on the

1 job training, but these guys go through a year's worth of training on how to operate in
2 rivers and close combat situations. We got none of that.

3 JS: Right.

4 VO: We were just thrown into it. As a matter of fact, they've got one of our boats
5 there in Coronado up as memorial. I was out there to see it a couple of years ago. But this
6 special warfare combat crewman is kind of like the paratrooper's badge. It's a metal
7 badge that goes on the uniform or submariner's badge. The Navy was nice enough to
8 come back and say, "Well, you guys were the first ones of these so we are going to
9 grandfather you in," and they sent us the award and a nice little certificate a couple of
10 years after that. But in answer to your question, we knew how to operate the boat. We
11 knew—the nice thing about it is we worked with our same crew that we went over with.
12 They didn't mix us. Now, a couple of crews had to be mixed but we were lucky enough
13 to go over with the same guys that we trained with.

14 JS: Okay. All right. What about your instructors here? Were they combat veterans
15 from Vietnam?

16 VO: They were all swift boat veterans from Vietnam. They might not have been
17 combat veterans but they all had operated on swift boats offshore Vietnam at that time.
18 The commanding officer was a full lieutenant of the group. He had been on swift boats,
19 one of the very first ones over there. All the chiefs and the petty officers were also swift
20 boat veterans. They were the ones that were telling us, you know, we here they are
21 starting to go into rivers now. The training changed dramatically over the next year for
22 the guys coming through the schools after us.

23 JS: Okay. All right. Did they ever talk much about their experiences?

24 VO: Oh, yeah. They would give us—but their experiences were—

25 JS: Different.

26 VO: Were board and search junks. There is lots of board and search every junk
27 out there which means that you are hassling every poor guy that's trying to catch fish out
28 in the water. The Viet Cong aren't going to be stupid enough to be out there. You board
29 and search all these guys in boats and everything else trying to find weapons and
30 everything else.

31 JS: Right.

1 VO: At this time two of the people—as a matter of fact, one lives here in
2 Houston—before they started going to the rivers were up in the northern part of the area
3 and they were trying to bring down these big trawlers. China would give them a trawler
4 and they would load that sucker up with all the weapons they could and they would run it
5 down the coast and run it in the ground and dump all the weapons off to the VC (Viet
6 Cong) or the NVA (North Vietnamese Army), whoever was there. The guy here, as a
7 matter of fact, he lives just a couple of miles from me, he was on the boat that actually
8 sunk one of the trawlers with an 81-mm mortar. They were in quite a bit of—their boat
9 just riddled with bullet's. Then another guy that lives up—I can't think of the name—
10 northeast of Houston, he actually was on boats that sunk two trawlers, which was the
11 biggest and only combat I think swift boats had had by that time.

12 JS: Okay.

13 VO: Which was pretty big because they were going up against ships that were ten
14 times their size.

15 JS: Sure. All right. Did they—let's see. Did you come to know these guys that
16 participated in this later on?

17 VO: Yeah, those guys I really didn't talk to until we had our big swift reunion a
18 couple of years ago and I got to know them and found out they just lived real close to me.
19 But, no, I did not know them at the time.

20 JS: Okay. All right. When did you realize or when did you come to know that the
21 training they had given you was not what you were going to be doing?

22 VO: Well, they pretty much told us that there.

23 JS: Okay.

24 VO: They told us that, you know, you are going to be—they said some of you—
25 well, here is what it was. There was five divisions in Vietnam. The first one at An Thoi,
26 Division 11, is just as far south as you can go is the Ca Mau peninsula. That's where all
27 the combat was going on. That's where all the river patrols were going on. The next one
28 was up at Cat Lo and there was some river patrols going on up in there. The ones to the
29 north, Cam Ranh, Na Trang, and Cua Viet, they didn't have any river patrols at that time.
30 Now, Cua Viet started some but there really wasn't any rivers at Na Trang or Cam Ranh
31 to go into, large bay. Those basically remained fairly safe areas. At the time that we were

1 getting ready to go over the bloody place was An Thoi. As a matter of fact, when we got
2 in-country we flew into Cam Ranh Bay and I went over to the enlisted men's club and
3 started having a couple of drinks with some guys that had just got back from there. From
4 the way they talked every afternoon they were getting out the fire hoses and washed the
5 blood and guts off the causeway so I wasn't too excited about it at that time.

6 JS: Right.

7 VO: Because out of our—we sent six boat crews over at the time that I went over
8 and we were the first six boat crews to go over in almost half a year. They hadn't had any
9 replacements at all. We were the senior crew, which meant our officer was senior to all of
10 them, so we were the ones going to An Thoi and the other ones were going to the safer
11 areas.

12 JS: Right.

13 VO: It was the most, I think the scariest I ever was, was finding out I was going
14 to An Thoi and having to listen to stories about it for five days before I actually got there.

15 JS: Sure.

16 VO: As with most things, it wasn't nearly as bad as what you thought it was going
17 to be. It was bad but it wasn't just absolutely horrible.

18 JS: Okay. All right. Well, before we move into your Vietnam experience and your
19 orders to go to Vietnam, when you finished up swift boat school, did you receive your
20 orders to go to Vietnam then or was there some—?

21 VO: Oh, yeah. We were going to Vietnam. Yes, we basically had our orders to go
22 to Vietnam but directly where we were going to, yes, we got them at the very end.

23 JS: Okay. All right. Did you have any time at all in between, any off time before
24 shipping out?

25 VO: Yeah, yeah. What they told us was that—well, I will tell you what happened.
26 We also had to go to SERE (survival, evasion, resistance, escape) school which was five
27 days up in Whidbey Island, Washington, in the middle of winter where you go out and
28 they teach you how to survive in the woods. How to cook a rabbit and then they chase
29 you around through the woods and they put you in a prisoner war camp and beat on you
30 and scream at you and go through horrendous—they actually put you in a pit, put you in a
31 box and screw the box down on you until the next morning when they turn around and

1 tell you to stand at attention. They raise an American flag and people start crying. It was
2 that—I mean, you actually thought you were in prisoner of war camp. It was a
3 horrendous deal and all the boat crew had to go to it except for me and my boatswain's
4 mate. What happened on that was that we both had wives there and they told us that we
5 were living Monday morning to go to SERE school. We had to be there at 0500 in the
6 morning with our greens on and they were taking us up to Whidbey Island so we went
7 and talked to our the petty officer and said, "Hey, we want to take our wives up to Los
8 Angeles and drop them off at this guy's house who his mother lived up there he was a
9 friend of mine because my wife was eighteen years old and I really didn't want her to be
10 there for a week by herself out in California. He said, "Oh, go ahead and take off. There
11 is only an hour more of class." We hopped in the car and we drive to Los Angeles. We
12 spent the weekend there and go to Disneyland and have a good weekend and turn around
13 and travel back and put on our green uniforms and show up at 0500 hours ready to catch
14 the plane and there's nobody else there. We walk over and they said, "Oh, yeah. They
15 changed their orders. They got a plane in early and they left out Saturday morning." I
16 said, "Oh, God. We are going to prison." The guy says, "What do we need to do?" I said,
17 "Let's go home and get our dress blues on and come back and turn ourselves in." We
18 hopped in his car and went back and got our dress blues on and went back and went up
19 and turned ourselves in for a captain's mast. We said, "We missed ship's movement,"
20 which is usually thirty days in the brig. They said, "All right, you guys are going to be
21 punished. What you have got to do is you have got to stand guard duty for the next
22 week." "Oh, okay." We go up there and they said, "Report up to the main guard station."
23 We go up to the main guard station and they said, "Oh, you've got to get in some white
24 spats to go on your uniform. You've got to get a white belt and a gun." Okay, so we went
25 over and got that and came back and they said, "Okay, you've got to stand guard duty
26 from 0800 to 1200 on Wednesday." I said, "Oh, okay." So we took off for the rest of the
27 week and came back for that one four-hour stint and that was our whole punishment.

28 JS: Oh, wow.

29 VO: Anyway, but then they told us, "Well, you have to go to SERE school." So
30 our—I'm getting back to what happened in between. "You can't go off with your crew."
31 So we went over—that's what the officer told us. So we went over to the yeoman, which

1 was an enlisted man and we said, “Hey, look. We really want to get out of here. We don’t
2 want to stay around her and go to SERE school.” I said, “Our crew is already gone and,
3 you know, we are not going to be with them. We are going to have to get with another
4 crew if we have to stay here a couple of weeks and go to SERE school.” He said, “Oh,
5 hell.” So he writes out: “Been to SERE school” and stamped and said, “Go ahead and get
6 out of here.” At that point they told us—they came and they sent us up. They gave us
7 money to fly to Seattle, Washington, on commercial flights and told us to be there in five
8 days. Well, I had already shipped my wife home, let her off at the airport the day before
9 crying and shipped all the stuff home. Of course, she had the flu, which was another
10 unfortunate incident because I got it from her later. So I said, “Well, shit. I’m going to go
11 back to Oklahoma.” I took the ticket money and went over to the airport and said, “I want
12 to get a flight from here to Oklahoma City and from Oklahoma City to Seattle,
13 Washington,” and it covered it. The money the Navy gave me covered all of that. I hoped
14 on this flight and when I got on the flight at this time people were being a little bit nicer
15 to military people so the guy sitting next to me just kept buying me drinks the whole
16 flight. This is back when they would do that on the planes. When I got to Oklahoma City
17 I was just screaming drunk. I couldn’t even hardly stand up. So I went out there and I had
18 my duffle bag to go to Vietnam and I was in my uniform. This is in Oklahoma City and
19 Stillwater is about sixty miles away and I just walked outside and said, “I want to go to
20 Stillwater. How much is it going to cost?” He said, “Oh, fifty bucks.” I said, “Let’s go.” I
21 took a cab from the Oklahoma City Airport to Stillwater. I showed up at my father-in-
22 law’s house, which is out in the middle of the country, at 3:30 in the morning and
23 knocking on the door. Of course, he didn’t like me anyway but he comes to the door and
24 he said, “Oh, I thought it was some drunk, and it is.” I said, “Well, hello, Dan.” Anyway,
25 I got to spend a couple of days and see my mom, my dad, my brother and sister and see
26 everybody there at home. I got about a five-day basket leave basically and then took off
27 and jumped on the plane and flew to Seattle to McCord Air Force Base to catch our
28 military flight over to Vietnam.

29 JS: Okay. All right. What did your—how did your family react? What did they
30 think about you getting your orders to Vietnam?

1 VO: Well, they were rather upset about it but they were very proud. My dad being
2 a World War II veteran and everything they had been through it. They basically didn't
3 say much of anything about it, more worried than anything else.

4 JS: Did you dad talk to you, did he give you any advice or anything?

5 VO: Oh, no. Not at all.

6 JS: Okay. All right. Then you—so you left the U.S. to go to Vietnam from, you
7 said, Washington?

8 VO: Yeah, McCord Air Force Base.

9 JS: McCord Air Force Base. Okay. Let's see. You said you flew by commercial
10 airline, right?

11 VO: Commercial air there and back both. They didn't have enough military
12 planes to do it.

13 JS: Okay. Did you have any stopovers on the way?

14 VO: On the way we stopped in Kyoto, Japan, and they refueled and it was just
15 miserably cold. I had caught the flu from my wife and I was starting to get really sick. It
16 was a rough flight, to say the least.

17 JS: Right. Okay. Now, had you caught up with the—were the guys in your crew,
18 were they on the same flight?

19 VO: No, they weren't because they had gone on one before. But we met up in,
20 well, Cam Ranh Bay. We met up in Cam Ranh Bay at the EM (enlisted men's) club.
21 From there we took a flight from there to Saigon. In Saigon we stayed at a hotel and they
22 told us that we were flying out the next day at five o'clock. We had to be out and down at
23 the lobby at five o'clock in the morning. Just as soon as we got—we were getting ready
24 to go to bed and they came back and said, "Oh, no. Those have been canceled. You are
25 not leaving at five o'clock in the morning. So just go ahead and sleep in." Well, the next
26 morning some guy came by on a motorcycle and threw a satchel charge into the group of
27 people that were standing waiting for the bus that we were supposed to be there and
28 killed four of them. That's one of many incidences that have happened to us where
29 something just happened and the people that were where we were supposed to be died
30 and we didn't.

31 JS: Wow.

1 VO: Hello?

2 JS: Yes, sorry. Well, how long were you in Cam Ranh Bay?

3 VO: I was in Cam Ranh Bay three or four days. I'm not sure.

4 JS: What were you doing during this time?

5 VO: Well, we were just waiting to catch a plane out of there but I was laying in
6 bed throwing up. Gosh, I was just deathly ill. There was no medical service at all so I
7 couldn't get to a medic to get any help whatsoever so I was—I just laid in bed. When I
8 did get up it was usually in the evening and then the only place to go was the EM club
9 and I would end up having two or three drinks, which was really stupid. Basically I had
10 crackers and rum for three days while I was trying to get through the flu.

11 JS: Right. Was there any type of in-processing?

12 VO: In-processing? There probably was but I wasn't aware of it.

13 JS: Right.

14 VO: We just handed our orders and they told us to go wait but, no, there wasn't
15 any in-processing.

16 JS: Okay.

17 VO: Not there. There was later on down at An Thoi.

18 JS: After three or four days you then flew down to Saigon, right?

19 VO: Flew down to Saigon and spent a day there and then flew on out to An Thoi
20 on a military flight.

21 JS: Had you recovered by this time from the flu?

22 VO: Yeah, I was getting over it by this time. I was fine.

23 JS: Okay. Did you have—I know you were sick at this time—but did you have
24 any—what do you remember about your initial thoughts about Vietnam? Your first
25 impressions about Vietnam at that time?

26 VO: It was hot and humid. Of course, I was never off a military base during that
27 time.

28 JS: Uh-huh.

29 VO: The naval base at Cam Ranh Bay is surrounded by the Army base which is
30 surrounded—surrounded by the Air Force base which is surrounded by the Army base, so
31 about as safe as you could be. It was pretty—it was actually a very gorgeous place. As a

1 matter of fact, I talked about later that, you know, if you went back there it would be a
2 great place to put a hotel, white sand beaches and just gorgeous mountains and really a
3 gorgeous little place. But it was hot. It was humid. I was sick, away from home, wanted
4 to go home, knew that I was going to die because, like I said, all the stories we heard in
5 the EM club basically it was at the end of day they just hose you off the deck. It was
6 pretty—that was a pretty rough time right there, those couple of days.

7 JS: Sure. Okay. Well, could you describe An Thoi for me?

8 VO: Yeah, An Thoi is an island off the west coast of Vietnam, which if you take
9 that Parrot's beak that comes down into the ocean there is several islands that surround it.
10 An Thoi is a fairly good sized island between Thailand and Vietnam. As a matter of fact,
11 the border that cuts north of there is Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Interesting part,
12 Joseph Conrad, who was a writer in the late 1800s, if you are familiar with his work,
13 wrote about this whole area and the islands but he was on a sailing ship at the time. When
14 I read his book while I was over there, which was really interesting, but he—An Thoi was
15 a large island. We had the south tip of it. We had a small base there. The VC had about
16 three to four hundred men on the island creating havoc. We basically held the south tip.
17 There was a Coast Guard base, a Vietnamese RAG (river assault group) base, which are
18 the Vietnamese junk navy, and then we were stationed off—we were not on land. We had
19 an APL, A-P-L, which is a World War II barracks ship. It's not a ship. It doesn't have a
20 name. It's just called the APL and had some number but no name because it didn't have
21 any engines. It was just a three-story barracks with mess facilities and then tied along to
22 that was the USS *Krishna*, which was a tender. The *Krishna* was a tender to the swift
23 boats then tied on one side of the other, either on the APL or the *Krishna* side—*Krishna*
24 side, if you were getting repairs you were tied up over there but if you were just in port
25 you were tied up on the APL side and we had our nest of swift boats. There would be
26 anywhere from three to ten swift boats tied up there at a time who weren't on patrol. The
27 APL, like I said, it was just if you can imagine staying on an old ship, World War II class
28 that was always in need of paint and repair and never had freshwater. We had saltwater
29 showers. Just a pretty rough place to live.

30 JS: Okay. All right. You were assigned to the—the parent unit was it CTF-115
31 (Coastal Surveillance Force-115)?

1 VO: CTF-115 was the big overall unit that was commanded by at that time Adm.
2 Roy Hoffman, actually it was Cpt. Roy Hoffman at the time. That was all the boats. Then
3 we were—under that it was COSRON-1 (Coastal Squadron-1), which was the
4 headquarters at Cam Ranh Bay, which was all the swift divisions. Then under that there
5 were five swift divisions and we were Coastal Division 11 out of An Thoi which took
6 everything from the Cambodian border on the west side all the way around and all the
7 way up near Cat Lo, which was the entrance to the Mekong River.

8 JS: Okay. All right. What was the overall roll of CTF, of 115?

9 VO: It was the—I hate to say it. My understanding of everything of CTF-115 was
10 protection of all the rivers, bays, and offshore Vietnam and to interdict all the—to
11 interdict the VC and stop the enemy at any place that we could.

12 JS: Right. Okay. The role of your particular swift boat division within that?

13 VO: Our division had responsibility for the area I told you about all the way from
14 the Cambodian border, which is the Ha Thien River up near Rach Gia, just north of Rach
15 Gia a little ways, all the way around up not to the Mekong River but to the last river
16 which is the Song Bo De on the east side, which is the river that flows in and out. This
17 area that, if you've got a map there it's kind of a parrot's beak looking thing that goes
18 down to the ocean. It's intertidal rivers which means that if the tide goes in and the tide
19 goes out the rivers change depth. It's probably a meso- to micro-tidal system. I didn't
20 know this at the time. I do now. I am a geologist. But the river would—the river could go
21 out and leave you stranded if you were up in it if the tides went out far enough.
22 Extremely muddy, nothing above three meters, just as flat as the Texas coastal planes,
23 mud flats.

24 JS: Okay.

25 VO: Lots and lots of vegetation. However, this is the area where they sprayed on
26 top of us many times, massive amounts of Agent Orange. There is a military book that I
27 found in the Oklahoma State Library a couple of years ago that showed all the ranges that
28 they dropped Agent Orange down in this part of it and it's all over the areas that we
29 operated, just absolutely covered the area. We would go into areas there wouldn't be any
30 vegetation at all, just everything was dead, trying to run that out. It was—I'm going to
31 jump around here a little bit. The island I am talking about, An Toi Island, if you see it on

1 a map there if you'll notice the very top north section is kind of a carved out half moon
2 and that was one of our patrol areas. We would go up there and anchor and run radar all
3 night long to make sure they weren't brining any trawlers down from Cambodia, to make
4 sure anybody wasn't trying to slip across the top. That was one of the most beautiful
5 areas I've ever seen in my life. There is small mountain range at the north end of that
6 island. We would anchor out in this absolutely gorgeous bay, cook a couple of steaks and
7 two or three of us would stay on duty, watch the radar, you know, look through the
8 binoculars and just have the most peaceful, wonderful patrol you could ever have, which
9 was a real rarity. I think we got to do that three times so it wasn't often but it was just a
10 real gorgeous place.

11 JS: Okay. All right. One of the things I wanted to ask you about, An Thoi as far as
12 the base there, you mentioned VC being on the island. Did the base ever come under
13 attack?

14 VO: Not while I was there.

15 JS: Okay.

16 VO: It did come under attack at other times but not while I was there.

17 JS: Okay. Also talking about Agent Orange, did you or anyone else in your crew
18 or you know about have any effects from it?

19 VO: No, I don't believe we did.

20 JS: Okay.

21 VO: You know, I—no, I don't think. I know all—I still keep in contact with all
22 but one crew member. We don't know where he is.

23 JS: Okay. All right. Could you take me through a typical day, if there was such a
24 thing?

25 VO: Yeah. We had—well, I'm going to take you through because it changes.
26 Now, we were lucky enough—and I still see these people and it's real funny because you
27 see them now and they don't look, they just look grayer but a lot of them look exactly
28 like they did back then. First of all, what we did is we went up and met the commanding
29 officer and got a bunch of information on where the VC was operating. Of course, all this
30 stuff went over my head. I was just trying to run the guns but they threw a lot of
31 information at us the first day. We went up and talked to the operations officer and the—

1 had some type of CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) intelligence guy there that was
2 telling us what was going on. Then we went to a place called Ha Thien, which is, it's a
3 river that runs between Cambodia and Vietnam right on that upper border. If you'll—for
4 a training patrol. The best way I can describe this is it was kind of like the VC and us
5 decided that if we would both operate in the area but we wouldn't shoot at each other we
6 would use it as training area and they trained there people there and we trained our
7 people. We were never shot at on the river at all when I was there. But we did about two
8 weeks of where we would go up there and make two or three patrols in, usually during
9 the day or late in the evening, early in the morning, not at night. There was a little village
10 there, the village was Ha Thien. They had some of the absolute best shrimp that you have
11 ever tasted in your life. It was sold in a place called the Ha Thien Photo Shop. They
12 didn't sell photographs or cameras or anything but the Ha Thien Photo Shop served beer
13 and shrimp. As a matter of fact, the guy that served us there as soon as we pulled out and
14 the VC took it over, they hung him right there at the causeway over there where we were.
15 But we would go in there and it was the first time I had ever been served Vietnamese beer
16 and they would bring the ice in which was packed in sawdust. So you would have
17 sawdust all over your ice, pour your beer over it and saw dust would float and maybe two
18 or three flies that came out of the bottle. The beer was Ba Moui Ba or 33 Beer.

19 JS: Right.

20 VO: We would have a beer or two when we weren't on patrol. Then we would
21 head on upriver. What we would do is everybody would be at battle stations, which in the
22 very forward part was our quartermaster, or sorry, radarman with an M-60 machinegun
23 sitting down on the peak tank. He was basically below the water line at the very bow of
24 the boat with this machinegun. Then there was a quartermaster in either the left or the
25 right hatchway to the pilot house with an M-16 rifle. Then I would up with my twin
26 fifties and then behind me on the fan tail would be usually the engineman and the
27 boatswain's mate and they would operate the .50-caliber machinegun and a Honeywell
28 grenade launcher. At that—and then what we would do is we would go into the river,
29 everybody in flak gear and helmets. The trouble was they didn't have enough flak gear
30 and helmets so some of us didn't have one. I had a helmet but I didn't have a flak jacket.
31 We also didn't have any green uniforms so we were having to wear our navy dungarees

1 which stuck out like a sore thumb. They just didn't have any—we couldn't get equipment
2 at all. As a matter of fact, we had to steal machinegun parts off of helicopters when they
3 would land. We did that quite often. But we would—then we would go up the river—we
4 would patrol in two or 3 boats together, sometimes as many as five. We would make a
5 run up the river checking everything out and turn around and come back and that's what
6 we did on training patrols. The guy who was our training officer at the time—I still talk
7 to him—of course, I didn't talk to him back then because he was an officer and I was an
8 enlisted, you know, we didn't run around together.

9 JS: Right.

10 VO: We did that for a couple of weeks. Then we got thrown into the rivers down
11 south where all the action was going on. They had several down there, the Bo De River,
12 the Cau Lon River, and the Song On Doc. The Song On Doc was the really wild one. The
13 first time we were ever shot at we were making a run into the Song On Doc and all of a
14 sudden, boom! The whole side of the boat just blew in and we took a rocket right on
15 starboard side. We started firing and getting out and the engineman started trying to patch
16 the hole and we had water coming in. Luckily, it was just above the waterline so we
17 didn't have to sink but they started putting patches on it. Another boat came around and
18 took a look at the hole and saw how big it was and said we had to get out of there. As we
19 went in you didn't see anything. If you could imagine a muddy river and then rice fields
20 and, you know, it was quite pretty and it was just about sunset and all of a sudden on the
21 way out there were probably ten Viet Cong flags that had been on flag poles that they had
22 raised to let us know that they were there. You would get in a fire in there and then we
23 got out towards the mouth of the river and all of a sudden started getting machinegun fire
24 and didn't realize what it was because it was so far away. But I was sitting up here in the
25 top and I started hearing all these bees buzz around my head. It was just this (making
26 buzzing sound) and I was thinking, "What is that?" because I couldn't see any bees. All
27 of a sudden I realized that someone was trying to kill me and I mean not trying to kill us
28 but trying to kill me. He was shooting directly at me. But the bullets were just going all
29 around me but they were evidently so far out that they just started tumbling through the
30 air. There was the (making buzzing sound) and I mean right next to me and then they
31 started slapping into the gun tub that I was in and that is whenever I ducked down and

1 quit taking pictures. But that was the first time I ever remember being shot at, actually.
2 The one thing that I can think of, which is real funny because, you know, people are out
3 there they are trying to kill you. When I say that they are trying to kill anybody that they
4 can but this guy was trying to kill me. He was trying to shoot me. It was just this really
5 strange feeling that, “Shit, he can’t be doing that.”

6 JS: Right, sure.

7 VO: That was the first time we were hit really bad. Then a typical day we would
8 go—this changed dramatically. We would go on patrol and we would usually have two or
9 three twenty-four- hours patrols. We would go out and we might hit the rivers for twenty-
10 four hours and I mean we would go into them and out of them, anchor in them at night,
11 try to ambush, try to draw fire. Then the second we drew fire we would have a firefight
12 and we would call in helicopters or anybody else that we could. Sometimes we can call—
13 we were so far out of range of everybody sometimes we couldn’t get any air support at
14 all. It was almost like the Lone Ranger type thing. We were out there and sometimes we
15 got help and sometimes we didn’t.

16 JS: Right.

17 VO: Then we would pull out and we would go back and clean the boats, bring up
18 and put in new ammunition, refuel, and get ready for our next mission and we usually
19 have a good night’s sleep and get a hot meal and then we would head out for another
20 twenty-four- hour patrol. When they opened up the rivers down south we started going
21 way down south there and they put another—they put an LST (landing ship, tank) down
22 there, *Westchester County*.

23 JS: Okay.

24 VO: And we would live on the *Westchester County*. We would go in the rivers
25 and we would transfer down there and basically we left our home base on the APL, all of
26 our clothes and everything else and went down there and spent forty-five days. We were
27 going in rivers every day, just one right after another. The *Westchester County* treated, of
28 course, they were Navy. They didn’t treat us very well. During that time they got
29 transferred out and a Coast Guard cutter took their place. It was the first Coast Guard
30 cutter that had been brought to Vietnam. It was a rather large one. They were really nice
31 because they were just excited to be there. We would pull up—when we would pull up to

1 the Navy ship they would drop a refueler down and we'd refuel and they would drop
2 ammunition and we grab ammunition. We pull alongside the Coast Guard they jumped
3 onboard and they said, "You guys go up and watch a movie and eat. We're going to take
4 care of your boat for us." They cleaned the boat, rearmed us, refueled us, fixed
5 everything we had. I mean just treated us like royalty. It was absolutely wonderful. But if
6 we were alongside a Navy ship they just treated us like crap so it was—they didn't care.
7 One of the funniest things that happened was we had a guy, you know, I was telling you
8 about people that dropped out of swift school. We had this poor guy. He was a
9 boatswain's mate at swift boat school and he was just totally clumsy and he stuttered. I
10 mean, he shouldn't have been in the Navy. But he went over to buy something at the
11 naval exchange from one of the young ladies there that was trying to selling stuff and
12 kept saying, "Well, what do you want? What do you want?" He finally just got so
13 frustrated and said, "Well, fuck you!" and so they kicked him out of swift school and sent
14 him to the fleet.

15 JS: Right.

16 VO: Well, we pull up alongside the *Westchester County* to get ammunition for the
17 first time and they put .50-caliber ammunition, which I reloaded in great big, large grey
18 canisters that weighed about eighty-five pounds. When you pull up alongside the LST
19 you are down on a fifty-foot boat and the deck above you is probably thirty-five foot
20 above you. I looked up there and he goes, "H-hey, gunner!" I said, "Oh, my God." It's
21 this boatswain's mate, you know, who I hadn't seen since he got kicked out of school. I
22 said, "Hey, how are you doing?" He said, "Y-you n-need some ammunition?" I said,
23 "Yeah." He takes the ammunition and he ties it on and he lowers this thing over and the
24 knot comes undone and this thing crashes to the deck and puts a huge dent in our deck.

25 JS: Oh, God.

26 VO: He just—there were three of us there and he could have killed either one of
27 us doing that.

28 JS: Goodness.

29 VO: That was more than exciting to see him again, to say the least.

30 JS: Sure.

1 VO: But then back to operations, then we brought in Operation Sea Float. I don't
2 know if you know anything about Sea Float.

3 JS: Huh-uh. No, sir.

4 VO: Operation Sea Float was a series of barges that they put up the—I can't reach
5 the name—Cua Lon River. It was right next to Nam Can City which was a city of
6 150,000 that was completely wiped out during Tet. I mean not everybody was killed but
7 basically they wiped the city off the face of the earth. There was this huge, giant area that
8 there was nothing but rubble that we would go by. Of course, we were patrolling. There
9 was only three of four boats that actually patrolled this area that were fighting the VC
10 down there at the time.

11 JS: Right.

12 VO: Well, they decided in this Operation Sea Lords to bring down this big barge
13 and set it in the middle of the river, make complete operations out of it, bring in all sorts
14 of boats. We had RAG boats and just—Army boats were down there. They had
15 everything in the world operating all of a sudden the last couple of months we were there.
16 It just became a big, huge base that operated out of the river and operated there twenty-
17 four hours a day trying to track down all the VC that we could.

18 JS: Right.

19 VO: Let's see. Another thing on the operation, you are supposed to only stay there
20 in this bad area about four months and then get rotated out when a new crew would come
21 in. Oh, the crew that came in that was finally—we were finally supposed to be rotated out
22 and this crew came in to take our place. We took them on a couple of training missions
23 and, bam! The first time out three of them were killed so they transferred everybody else
24 out and brought in another crew. This happened for almost five months. Every time they
25 would bring a crew in to replace us two or three of them wounded horribly or killed. So
26 we ended up staying in where we were for almost a full eight months. We had the longest
27 time in the rivers than anybody there, our 93 boat crew. We were on PCF-93 (Patrol
28 Craft, Fast-93).

29 JS: Okay. Wow. Okay. Well, could you—you have mentioned going into the
30 rivers basically every day. How often during these times would you have contact with the
31 enemy?

1 VO: Our boat had contact with the enemy at least once a week.

2 JS: At least once a week.

3 VO: If not more.

4 JS: Okay.

5 VO: Probably never go—we might go in and spend three full days and never
6 sleep. I went seventy-two hours once without any sleep running up and down the rivers.
7 We only had about twenty-four hours' worth of fuel on board so, you know, you would
8 dock and you would just run it into the ground and sit there and try to set up an ambush
9 for several hours, usually at night. But we would have some type of contact at least once
10 a week, either a small quick firefight or a mine blow up. This guy that I just visited in
11 Ohio was in the—I was telling you about—my boat officer Jack Chenowith and I went
12 up to visit Dick Pease, who is up in Ohio. Well, Dick Pease's boat, the 3 boat that blew
13 up when John Kerry claimed that he got his Purple Heart, although he was on the other
14 side of the river. We were going up and these four boats went into the river and our boat
15 has been CASREP'ed (casualty report) so we couldn't get our engines going so they
16 moved us to another boat so we got started late. We had to go into the river and meet
17 them by ourselves, which is just, you are not supposed to do. So we went running up this
18 river by ourselves just knowing we were going to be annihilated. We got it and we made
19 up with the other group and stayed at the village there for a little while and then turned
20 around to come back out. We were supposed to be lead boat. Well Dick Pease's boat, the
21 3 boat, took the lead. As he is going out of the river we come up to a fishing weir which
22 is stretched across the river and there is a space on each side. Well, we were supposed to
23 be lead but somehow Dick Pease's boat gets ahead of us. So it is his boat, then our boat,
24 then on the other side is John Kerry's boat, the 43 boat, and then behind us is the 56 boat
25 which is commanded by Larry Thurlow. Well, I am looking up there and all of a sudden
26 this boat just rises straight up in the water and this thing is, I don't know, it's a 150-ton
27 boat. It's huge. But this mine goes off. This boat goes, I mean, just six or ten foot in the
28 air and slams back down and people go flying off of it. A real good friend of mine was in
29 the gun tub and he just disappeared. I thought he was dead. So I start firing over on one
30 side and Thurlow's boat comes around us and starts picking up the guys out of the water
31 and he goes onboard to try to save the guys on the 3 boat that was blown up. Everybody

1 is just knocked senseless, basically. Kerry's boat starts up and he leaves the kill zone, just
2 starts firing like a wild man shooting at everything. I shut down my guns. The other boats
3 shut down their guns because we aren't getting any return fire. It's basically just one guy
4 sitting in a hole and he put some wires together and blew up the 3 boat. Anyway, we
5 spent an hour in there getting the 3 boat all ready to go out, hook up to it. Our boat, again,
6 has to go out by itself to go out and the LST has sent a couple of damage control experts
7 and a pump in so we can pump the boat out and get it out because it's just sinking in the
8 water. Our boat goes out by itself and picks up all this stuff and receives no fire, gets the
9 pump, gets these two guys onboard. They are wanting to know, "We've got to have flak
10 jackets! We've have got to have flak jackets!" "Well, we don't have any anyway. Don't
11 worry about it. They are just hot so you don't need to wear one." We go back in and
12 pump out the 3 boat and carry it on out. The interesting thing to that story, other than the
13 fact that I was with two of those guys this weekend, this last week.

14 JS: All right.

15 VO: That would be some of the big contact. Other times—the biggest firefight I
16 was ever in was when the 43 boat was destroyed and most of the people onboard were
17 killed. We were again supposed to be—we were the lead—we were going into the Song
18 Bo De River and we had a big operation going. They put this Coast Guard commander in
19 charge, which I never understood why they did this because the guy had no tactical
20 experience at all. He later became commandant of the Coast Guard, which amazed me
21 because he was a total moron. His call sign was Dipsy Doodle, which will tell you quite a
22 bit about him.

23 JS: Right.

24 VO: We were, I want to say thirteen—there were two groups of boats. I think five
25 and six. I think there was eleven boats going in. We were in the first group and we were
26 not only in the first group but we were the lead boat. So we start into this thing and we
27 know there is a lot of VC in here. We'd heard about them and also some NVA. So were
28 going on end. We knew we were going to catch it. We knew our boat was just going to
29 get blow to smithereens. I just felt like my number was up. We go in and the Coast Guard
30 commander who is in the boats behind says, "Pull over! Pull over!" We pull over and we
31 were making this leap frog jump where we would go in a certain distance and they would

1 leap frog, set up a base and then we would leap frog and we would just keep moving in
2 the river this way until we found them. We pulled over at this river bend and they take
3 off. Just as they round, the last boat rounds the corner the boat position that we should
4 have been in takes two rockets in the side and goes in and kills everybody in the pilot
5 house and the boat just goes flying up onto the—I didn't see any of this. It was around
6 the bend. I heard it from eye witnesses later. It goes flying up and lands right in front of
7 the machinegun nest, the VC. The guys that were on there had to fight there way back off
8 the back of the boat and were fighting within five, ten, fifteen foot of where these VC
9 were.

10 JS: Oh, wow.

11 VO: They got—the boats came in there and killed all of those guys, pulled our
12 guys off the boats, and pulled all the dead and wounded off and got out of there. All hell
13 is breaking loose. We don't have any helicopters in the air. There is firing going on and
14 so we start off to go save them and then were ordered back, you know, "Stay back! Stay
15 back!" Not by the Coast Guard officer but by Latch, who is over all operations back at
16 the main boat. Anyway, we had to end up destroying the 43 boat, brought in a helicopter
17 and finally came in and we destroyed it ourselves so the VC couldn't get anything off of
18 it. They did, however, get the machineguns off of it which later killed a good friend of
19 mine. But they stole two or three guns off, captured two or three guns off of the boat and
20 got to the bushes with it. Anyway, we were there all night long just being mortared by the
21 VC, just mortar rounds were just coming, falling between our boats but we stayed there
22 all night long and couldn't do anything. The next day we went up and I've got some
23 pictures of the boat, what was left of it, and the battlefield, of the area. But that was the
24 worst thing. That firefight went on all night long from dusk to dawn the next day.

25 JS: All right. Would the—?

26 VO: I am sorry. I'm losing here. Just a minute.

27 JS: Okay.

28 VO: Hello.

29 JS: Yeah, I'm here.

30 VO: Can you hear me?

31 JS: Yes, sir. I can hear you fine.

1 VO: Okay. I can't hear you at all.

2 JS: Okay.

3 VO: There you go. You are back.

4 JS: Let me see if I can adjust this patch real quick to where it is a little bit louder
5 on my end. But you can hear me fine now?

6 VO: Yeah.

7 JS: Okay. All right. Would the contact always come from the shoreline or were
8 the VC ever in boats themselves?

9 VO: No. Well, no they weren't. They were once but it was a mistake. They—we
10 rounded a bend one time and usually you could hear us coming from miles, but we
11 rounded a bend one time and there was a boat full of them with a big VC flag over the top
12 of them. When they saw us come around the corner I got ready to unload on them and,
13 man, the hands went up and all the guns went in the water and we just took them
14 prisoner.

15 JS: Right, okay.

16 VO: No, they would dig spider holes. See, they were really smart. I've got to give
17 them that. They would dig these spider holes and they would launch a rocket or set off a
18 mine in the water or just, you know, level a machinegun right through the middle of us
19 and then they would go down in the spider holes.

20 JS: Right.

21 VO: What we would do is we started—we got some Honeywell grenade
22 launchers, which is just nothing more than a machinegun that fires grenades and we
23 would just cover the whole area with hand grenades and try to get them that way. But
24 they would change their tactics almost immediately when anything happened. They were
25 quite smart and quite good. Once we would take a bunch of them out they would figure
26 out don't ever do that again. They would change their tactics pretty much after every
27 firefight.

28 JS: Right. Okay. Was it always the VC or the NVA or do you know?

29 VO: When we got hit really hard it was the NVA. The VC were pretty, you know,
30 they'd have one or two big weapons and that would be it. I firmly believe if they had had
31 the same weapons we had they would have blown us out of the water. We couldn't have

1 stood up to them. We would have had to change our tactics dramatically. We would have
2 to have close air support at all times. But they were pretty good and we could take them.
3 Actually, no battle that we were ever in did we ever back out. I mean we—the 43 boat,
4 you know, we lost the boat and everything else but we didn't leave. They left the
5 battlefield. We never were run out of any place we ever were. But we—the Song Ong
6 Doc River that I mentioned earlier, there were supposedly an NVA battalion there or not
7 a battalion, whatever, company. I'm not familiar with army terms but a group of a couple
8 hundred, whatever that is. They were pretty tough and when we ran into them we always
9 got casualties. I think we always got more of them than we did them. Now, we had a
10 humongous body count for the operation that we were on but that was horribly inflated.
11 On this one on the—when the 43 boat was blown up we found a couple of helmets that
12 had holes through them and blood all on the inside of them and two or three indications
13 that we probably—I would have said quite easily we killed three or four people in that
14 engagement. By the time it got back it was thirty or forty because they said, "Here's a
15 blood trail. Oh, there's another one," and then it got inflated and it got inflated. Hell, it
16 might have been 100 by the time it was all over. I saw write up of several of these
17 operations I was on in *Stars and Stripes* and they always had this super high body count.
18 It never was that. If you did it properly it probably would have been a tenth of what was
19 reported.

20 JS: Right. Okay. All right. What types of weapons were the enemy generally
21 using?

22 VO: They had claymore mines. A lot of stuff stolen from us or captured from us.
23 I'll tell you a story about how we fixed it. A lot of times Ruff, the Vietnamese Ruff Puffs
24 or national guard would lose their weapons but they would find a pile of money and come
25 home. That happened and when we found out that happened there were several of us that
26 got a lot of ammunition and we pulled all the bullets out of the cases, dumped out all of
27 the powder and filled them with C-4 explosives and put them back together and reloaded
28 all the weapons and gave them to the Ruff Puffs. They went out and lost those weapons
29 and got a pile of money, then I guess when two or three of them blew up and killed some
30 people—we heard all this through the CIA but we spent one night filling these things
31 with C-4.

1 JS: Right.

2 VO: Evidently the Ruff Puffs went back to take some more weapons and they
3 were all killed so that stopped that. Weapons they had? We captured a—this is no
4 kidding—we captured a World War I German Mauser.

5 JS: Wow.

6 VO: Lots of AK-47s, a World War II grease gun, B-40 rockets. I'm trying to
7 think. Yeah, we captured a lot of B-40 rockets which are Russian. A lot of claymore
8 mines that were captured from the U.S. were turned around and used on us, C-4. Then
9 they had M-16s. I mean, anything we had they had. Just traded weapons basically up and
10 downs the rivers depending on who was capturing who.

11 JS: Right.

12 VO: They had—they started having—they did two things. They were getting
13 these Russian weapons which were 82-mm mortars so that they could shoot their
14 ammunition and they could shoot ours but we could never shoot their ammunition
15 because we had 81-mm mortars. They also had a .51-caliber machinegun so they could
16 shoot their rounds and our rounds but we couldn't shoot their rounds, not that we would
17 want to but that was their strategy was that they could shoot any round on the battlefield
18 and we couldn't if anybody ran out of ammunition. They had—I can't think of any
19 handguns they carried. Maybe they did but we never captured any.

20 JS: Right. Okay. What weapon was the biggest threat to the swift boats?

21 VO: Probably the B-40 rocket. They finally figured out how to do it. They were
22 firing into the cabin area which we didn't have anybody in the cabin area. I guess they
23 thought that was where the powder and basically it blew out refrigerators or beds or
24 something but it didn't harm anybody. But then they started skipping them across the
25 water. They would fire it so it hit between them and the water and would bounce up and
26 hit the back rails of the fantail and it would usually kill the two guys on the fantail. We
27 lost a lot of people from that. What I was always worried about were machineguns but
28 they didn't have a lot of those. That would have been just devastating to us. One of the
29 tricks they used, these rivers had big turns and curves in them. Just, you know, you'd go
30 around, you would be going around a curve and you would look back and you would see
31 another swift boat coming—I mean, you see that across this thin piece of land you would

1 see the other swift boat on the other side. What they would do is they would set up an
2 ambush in the middle of that. When those two swift boats were on either side one of them
3 would just stand up and just shoot like crazy at one of them, duck down in a spider hole
4 and then if you weren't watching you would just spray the other boat with automatic
5 weapons. We had to be very careful about that.

6 JS: Right, right. Were the swift boats built pretty well to where they could
7 withstand the damage?

8 VO: Oh, no. They were quarter-inch aluminum. One guy—I laughed at one guy.
9 He said, “Well, I was on a”—we was talking about World War II. “I was on a boat that
10 was just made out of plywood.” I said, “That quarter-inch aluminum won't stop anything.
11 It will just go right through it.”

12 JS: Right.

13 VO: I can't tell you how many times I got down out of my gun tub, and I was on
14 four different boats down there, the 93, the 10, the 56, and the 25. I would get out and
15 you would just walk down the gun tub where I was in and there would just be bullet holes
16 just one or two or them just on either side of me. I caught one bullet in the back and the
17 only reason I knew that was that behind me was a big huge hundred-pound slab of lead so
18 that when I kicked my hips one way or the other the guns would move. It was a big
19 weight. That thing caught more bullets. You would just look back there and you would
20 see holes in it. Of course, it was probably a three- to four-inch-thick piece of lead and, of
21 course, they wouldn't go through but, man, it would just feel like somebody just hit me in
22 the back with a hammer.

23 JS: Right.

24 VO: I had that happen—two times I know that happened to me. It may have
25 happened more than that, but two times I remember quite well. But, no, they didn't stop
26 anything. As a matter of fact, sometimes the rockets would go through and explode on
27 the other side as they were going out.

28 JS: Right. Okay. They also—the VC also use a lot of—you mentioned mines in
29 the river earlier. Was that a common occurrence?

30 VO: When they could get them. See, this was the thing, this was a hard area to get
31 stuff into and we were just locking thing down as quickly—General Giap even talked to

1 Bill Franke one time. He said, “You really caused us a lot of problems down there in the
2 rivers.” He said, “We thought we were losing the war down there until you guys pulled
3 out.” But if they could get it in there they would put a mine in the river every chance they
4 get.

5 JS: Right.

6 VO: But it wasn't as common—the most common attacks we got were rocket
7 attacks.

8 JS: Okay.

9 VO: Rocket and small arms fire.

10 JS: All right. Based on what you just said, was your operations down there fairly
11 successful then?

12 VO: They were very successful. Like I said—we never lost a battle we were in.
13 We always punished them more then they punished us and we had control of the rivers.
14 Like I said, this was General Giap, he said he felt like we pretty well lost the rivers until
15 we turned over all of our boats to the Vietnamese and that was when he was able to come
16 back down there and take over.

17 JS: Okay. Speaking of the South Vietnamese, could you tell me a little bit about
18 your take on them? I know you mentioned the Ruff Puffs but what about the South
19 Vietnamese regular forces? Did you have much—?

20 VO: I didn't work with South Vietnamese regular forces, army. Now navy we did
21 because this was—we worked with Cambodian mercenaries and they were really good.
22 These were Special Forces-trained Cambodian mercenaries and Marines and they were
23 always ready to go fight. That's the people we worked with. They were very tough and
24 they went after everything they could. Now the navy, the Vietnamese navy we worked
25 with, this is what I never understood. I went in there and Nixon talked about all this
26 Vietnamization, we are going to be out of Vietnam in six months. I was thinking, “Well,
27 shit, you know, they're going to have people in here.” We got down there and they said,
28 “Well, you are going to be training Vietnamese.” Well, the first trainee we got was Bao
29 and Bao was a gunner's mate so I had to train Bao. Bao, basically every time that we got
30 fired upon you had to pry him up off the deck. They wouldn't stand and fight too rough.
31 Now, there were some of them that were quite heroic, but for the most part they were not

1 real intent on doing this. Of course, we were told, “Well, they have to go through this
2 every day. This is their country.” I said, “Well, then by God, they ought to really be
3 interested in it more than we are because we are going home.” As a matter of fact, when I
4 got transferred out of An Thoi and got transferred up to Qui Nhon and then later on Cam
5 Ranh, I became the leading petty officer of the boat and trained Vietnamese and brand
6 new officers up there. For the most part I would have to say that it was less than
7 successful.

8 JS: Okay. All right. Could you tell me a little bit more about these Cambodian
9 mercenaries? How did they operate?

10 VO: Well, they operated—they were brought in—they had a Special Forces
11 lieutenant and usually a sergeant, some senior enlisted man sergeant. They were a group
12 of about, I want to say thirty to fifty. I don’t remember the exact number. I don’t think it
13 was fifty. I think it was thirty to forty. What we would do is load them up on our boats—I
14 have got some really good pictures of them coming onboard through just mud trying to
15 climb on the boats. But little bitty guys, full packs, gear, weapons and they would take
16 them out and we would drop them off and then if they were sweeping a river bank we
17 would go along with them to provide gunfire support. If they were going really deep we
18 just keep contact with a map and we could drop mortar rounds in for them if they weren’t
19 too far away.

20 JS: Right.

21 VO: They would operate anywhere from that day to maybe two or three days out
22 searching areas.

23 JS: Okay.

24 VO: Then they would come back in and get back on the boats.

25 JS: Okay. All right. Let’s see. Now, you mentioned in your veteran’s
26 questionnaire that one of the other things that you did was that sometime you would
27 transport MEDCAP (medical civic action platoon) people into remote areas. Could you
28 tell me about that?

29 VO: Yeah. Well, this was up—we did a little bit of that down south, not a lot. But
30 we would take doctors and nurses into areas to have them check people out. The one I
31 remember we went up, oh, where was it? It was north of Tui Hoa Air Force Base. That

1 would have been out of Qui Nhon. Out of Qui Nhon we took a bunch of nurses and
2 doctors and dropped them off and they went back into a village and did a lot of
3 MEDCAP where they would even pick up kids that had cleft palates and we would take
4 them back and they would put them in the hospital and do plastic surgery on them. They
5 basically do medical treatment to villagers. Then down at Song Cau Harbor there was this
6 huge harbor just south of there, south of Qui Nhon and Trang, and it has a ship in it that
7 was sunk during World War II, a Japanese freighter that was bringing troops in. Rumor
8 had it Ho Chi Minh and his people sunk it but I don't even know if Ho Chi Minh was
9 there at the time, but that was rumor. When the Japanese were invading they blew this up.
10 But we would take doctors down there and drop them off at these villages across the bay
11 and then we would come back and build a big fire and then go pick them back up when
12 they were done and have a big picnic out there on the top deck of this ship which is about
13 three inches above the waterline. It was still there and you could still walk around on top
14 of it. We would build a big fire and cook steaks on it but that was during the MEDCAP
15 part of it. Basically, our job was to get the doctors up to these villages that they couldn't
16 get to any other way.

17 JS: Right. Okay. All right. I am kind of jumping around here a little bit. Sorry.
18 But a little earlier you were talking about John Kerry and his boat. Did you ever have any
19 interaction with him?

20 VO: All the time.

21 JS: Would you mind telling me a little bit about him?

22 VO: Sure. He was in An Thoi where the combat was for six weeks. I was there for
23 almost eight months. He was an arrogant son of a bitch but he—very condescending. But
24 he was around—even at that time he was telling everybody he was going to be president
25 of the United States.

26 JS: Right.

27 VO: But I was on two incidents with him, one was March the 19th incident where
28 the 3 boat was blown up. He supposedly got—I'll go back. He went into the village and
29 he threw this hand grenade into a bag of rice. This is before we got there and it blew up
30 and blew some rice into his butt. When we were coming out the 3 boat was blown up and
31 that's when he went off and he fired all over the rivers and everything and shot up

1 everything that they could. When we were hit he would leave the kill zone. What you are
2 supposed to do is stay there and make sure every boat gets out of the kill zone before you
3 leave it.

4 JS: Right.

5 VO: But he was just firing like a manic. But anyway, after this incident we are
6 going out of the river and the 3 boat blows up and we are over there picking up, we are
7 picking people up out of the water. We picked two guys up out of the water ourselves that
8 were blown out of the water. Then we start over and we are going to pick up this other
9 guy that fell off Kerry's boat when he took off. It was Rasman, the guy that—I don't
10 know if you ever saw the political stuff. He was on there. Special Forces guy that Kerry
11 supposedly saved his life. We were within ten foot of picking him up and Kerry's boat
12 zoomed in and picked him up. Then Kerry transfers over to our boat because we are
13 going out to the—after we got the boat and we are ready to go out Kerry transfers over to
14 our boat because we are going out to the Coast Guard cutter and he wants to be dropped
15 off for medical treatment. Once we get out in the ocean I hop out of the gun tub and clean
16 up my stuff, walk around the deck there on the fantail and we are carrying the Ruff Puff
17 that was killed. One of the Ruff Puffs stepped on a mine and was shredded and we had
18 him wrapped up he was on the fantail and Kerry was on the fantail and two other guys I
19 think were wounded in something else were on the fantail we were taking back to get
20 medical treatment, the two that were blown off the other boat. He's got this thing and I
21 said, "What happened to you?" He said, "Oh, the mine blew up next to us." "There was
22 another mine?" He says, "Yeah." Well, nobody else saw it but supposedly this mine blew
23 up and threw shrapnel into him. Well, the only problem with that is that these were
24 underwater mines and you can't get shrapnel from underwater mines. It doesn't go
25 through the water. You get concussion problems but you don't get shrapnel. Anyway we
26 took him out there and there was no blood or anything and dropped him off. The next
27 thing he sends a report in saying that we went through five kilometers of heavy automatic
28 weapons. Well, I can tell you this, if our six boats had been through five kilometers of
29 heavy weapons fire we would have all been dead. We couldn't have stood up to it
30 because there was no protection and we were out there in the middle of it. But, yeah, he

1 was quite a piece of work. He would film—we would go back in the rivers and he would
2 re-film things that happened just for his own stuff.

3 JS: Right.

4 VO: If you ever want to read *Unfit for Command* it will give you the whole thing.
5 I'm in there several times, too. But *Unfit for Command* by John O'Neill.

6 JS: Okay.

7 VO: It's a fairly short read but it will tell you everything that happened to him and
8 what he pulled. The funny thing about it when we went up to Washington, D.C., to talk
9 about this I said, "I'll tell my story but I'm telling my story. I'm not changing it for you
10 guys." They said, "Oh, that's fine. That's fine." Everybody in the room said, "Yeah, you
11 know, we may be wrong on this." So we started telling the story and everybody had the
12 same story of what happened on each one of these incidents. There were about thirty of
13 us that had been with Kerry when all this stuff happened. One of the things I got dressed
14 down for when I was on TV on Fox News with a couple of people they said, "Well, you
15 weren't on Kerry's boat," and I said, "No, but I was there in the river with him." "Yeah,
16 but you weren't on his boat." I said, "No, but," I said, "that's like saying that the soldiers
17 weren't on Custer's mule whenever he was fighting the Sioux in Cheyenne." I said, "I
18 was right there right beside him but we weren't on the boat." No, I was on just about
19 every mission Kerry was on except for when he got a Silver Star. I wasn't on that
20 mission.

21 JS: Right.

22 VO: But on his two Purple Hearts and his Bronze Star I was there.

23 JS: Okay.

24 VO: When he got back to the States and was engaging in the war protests and all
25 that, what was your thoughts about that?

26 JS: Well, I pulled out of Vietnam in 1970, January of 1970, and about four days
27 later I was on a college campus enrolled. At that time things had gotten nasty. We were
28 called baby killers and all sorts of other stuff and I didn't tell anybody I was even in the
29 service. I'm here for school. I didn't tell anybody I was in the Navy.

30 JS: Right.

1 VO: Now, when he came on—I called this good friend of mine and I said, “Can
2 you believe that son of a bitch?” That’s when he got up and started telling that we were
3 committing all these atrocities and we were doing all this other stuff. I will tell you, we
4 had no-fire zones, we couldn’t shoot. We had rules of engagement all the way through.
5 There were certain places you could shoot, certain places you couldn’t shoot, places you
6 could shoot only if you were shot at. There were times we were taking fire that there were
7 villagers in between us and we didn’t shoot. We just didn’t commit these atrocities.
8 According to him we were out there raping, pillaging, killing babies, and it just didn’t
9 happen. You’ve never seen a more—I hate to use the word honorable, but a group of
10 people that did what—I was in an all-volunteer group. We all had to volunteer to be in
11 the Navy.

12 JS: Right.

13 VO: As a matter of fact, because I was from Stillwater I didn’t even have to worry
14 about it. There was so many people that flunked out of Oklahoma State University and
15 would go down and sign up that nobody from Payne County was ever inducted, never
16 was drafted because they always had their quota. I knew this because I knew the—none
17 of us had to be there. We were all volunteers. The drug use didn’t happen in our group at
18 all. Now, well, I say that. If you are going to count alcohol as a drug, yeah, there was
19 heavy drug use for that. But, you know, the marijuana and everything else it didn’t
20 happen in our group. We were trying to do the right thing all the way through and it was a
21 very—I hate to use the word. Honorable is the wrong word because that brings on
22 Knights of the Round Table type stuff. We were just very professional about what we
23 were doing all the way through. This stuff of being smeared, that we were murders and
24 killers and committed all these war crimes is just bullshit. That’s when I decided if there
25 was ever anything I could do to bring that guy down I was going to do it. Well, I knew
26 that there wasn’t anyway that was going to happen, you know. I’m some schmuck from
27 the middle of America and he is a powerful East Coast guy. There’s no way in hell I can
28 do it. When it came around and there was a chance to tell the true story I was really
29 happy to do it.

30 JS: Sure, sure. Did he ever voice his opinions about the war and his views there
31 while he was in Vietnam around you guys?

1 VO: No, he didn't. Well, let me say this, to me he didn't. He voiced his views that
2 he was going to be president of the United States. I heard him say that several times. But
3 as far as the war was right and the war was wrong, no, he never said a word one, to me.

4 JS: Right. All right. Okay. Well, let's see. I guess we'll—aside from John Kerry
5 and back to your own experiences, when you were not on a mission, when you were not
6 on an operation, how would you spend your free time?

7 VO: Well, there weren't many ways down there. I was in three different divisions
8 and we are just talking about An Thoi right now.

9 JS: Right.

10 VO: I read or drank. That was pretty much it. There wasn't anything else to do.
11 When you "say free time," now, when we were off there wasn't a lot of free time. You
12 came back. You might come off a twenty-four-hour mission, you spent eight or so hours
13 cleaning the boat and fixing the boat up. If the boat was in really bad shape you went in
14 the dry dock then you painted and cleaned the boat in there. Then you would sleep and
15 eat and then it was about time to go out on patrol again. There just wasn't any free time at
16 all. When I did have any free time, like when we were in transit, it might take five or six
17 hours to get from one river to the next. I would go grab a rack some place and pull out
18 books and read. I read a ton of books while I was over there. Then if we could ever get at
19 any place you could buy beer we would go have beer. That was a rarity. Now, one of the
20 things I used to do when we were up on the APL was you can't have beer onboard ship
21 so they would pull this barge around just this big flat barge and on Saturday nights they
22 would give everybody two San Miguel beers from the Philippines. You get out on this
23 barge and there would be thirty of us out on this barge just shoulder to shoulder and
24 everybody would get two beers. You would get your friends that didn't drink to come
25 down there and get their beers and you would take theirs. You would start drinking beer.
26 Well, here we are, we are in the middle of the ocean, the waves are moving this barge up
27 and down, it's rocking back and forth and everybody is just getting plastered ass drunk.
28 But nobody ever fell overboard the whole time.

29 JS: Right.

1 VO: We got to do that not very often but every once and a while they'd do that for
2 us. Then there was an enlisted men's club in the village in town but there wasn't anything
3 we could go in and do there.

4 JS: Okay. All right. Did you ever get a chance to go on R&R?

5 VO: Yes, I did.

6 JS: Okay. Where did you?

7 VO: I went to Hawaii and met my wife.

8 JS: Okay. Did—?

9 VO: Go ahead.

10 JS: No, go ahead. Sorry.

11 VO: Oh, we just got—just flew in there and spent five days in Hawaii, in Oahu
12 there.

13 JS: How did it feel being away from the war?

14 VO: It was wonderful. It was absolutely wonderful. One of the things I was
15 talking about—of course, I went back. I went to R&R and got back and I was in a fairly
16 safe area. I didn't go to R&R until I got out of An Thoi. By that time I had transferred up
17 to Qui Nhon, which we had one big massive one-sided firefight up there and that was it.
18 When I flew—yeah, it was just nice being out there but then I flew back. By that time we
19 were doing ocean patrols so the—oh, we would search a couple of junks, go over and
20 find an island, anchor off, cook some steaks, watch the sun set, maybe get on a mask and
21 snorkel around through the lagoon there and, you know. We had a spear gun and we
22 would spear some fish and cook some fish but it was a very safe place to be, in Vietnam
23 it was a safe place to be. Like I said, we had one big firefight and that was it the couple of
24 months that I was there.

25 JS: Okay. All right.

26 VO: But, yeah, it was wonderful to get out of there and I sure hated going back.

27 JS: Okay.

28 VO: But it was great break.

29 JS: Right. All right. You said that you served with three different divisions there.
30 Did you volunteer to come back twice?

31 VO: Oh, no, no. It was all within the year I was there.

1 JS: Oh, okay, okay.

2 VO: Yeah, it was all within—like I said you, were supposed to only spend three
3 months in the combat zone down in An Thoi and then you got to go someplace safe for
4 the rest of the time you were there supposedly. When I say “safe,” it’s relatively safe.
5 They weren’t hosing you off the causeway at the end of each day—

6 JS: Okay.

7 VO: —these places. It was dangerous but it wasn’t any where near as
8 dangerous as the ground pounders or being down in An Thoi. We were searching—you
9 know, there was all sorts of things that could happen to you. One time when I was
10 training Vietnamese up in—we were trying to train them and I told the boat officer, I
11 said, “I’m going to go jump off the fantail and see if they’ll do a man overboard drill.” I
12 went walking through the cabin and just happened, wasn’t going to but just happened to
13 grab a life jacket. I just went over and everybody was at general quarters so these guys
14 were manning their guns and I just jumped off the fantail. I turned around and looked
15 and, of course, the ocean was kind of rough. There was some fairly good swells going
16 and I turned around and looked and these guys were just staring at me. It was like, you
17 know, “Wonder what he’s doing.” I said—man, I was hoping, all of a sudden the boat
18 just disappeared and I was out in the middle of the ocean by myself. About two minutes
19 later—it seemed like two hours—the boat turned around and came back and picked me
20 up but they didn’t do anything. Now that’s—you could do something like that and lose
21 your life, too.

22 JS: Sure.

23 VO: As far as getting shot at and stuff like that, it just didn’t happen that much.

24 JS: Okay.

25 VO: In those areas. But yes, no, I got back and I really didn’t want to go back. I
26 was ready. It was September and I had four or five months to go which seemed at that
27 time in my life like an eternity. But, yeah, you just got back and usually the things like—
28 it was always harder to go back in and get on the boats when you’ve had some time off.
29 We were talking about that this weekend. We were talking about when you were the most
30 scared. I said, “You know, as long as we were in the river even during firefights I was
31 never scared I was just—I knew everything that was going on. I was calm, collected.

1 When I was scared was right before you went into the river or if you had had two or three
2 days off.” It was just day after day after day and you were out there getting shot at and
3 patrolling and checking stuff out, it just didn’t seem to matter. But when you got a day or
4 two off, even in-country, and you had a couple of beers and you relax, you had read a
5 book, going back in was just absolute hell and that’s when it bothered me the most.

6 JS: Okay. All right. So you were, let me see if I can get this straight, you were at
7 An Thoi for how many months?

8 VO: I was in An Thoi from January until the first of September. Is that right? No,
9 first of August. Then I was in Qui Nhon until sometime in October and in October I
10 transferred to Cam Ranh Bay and spent my last couple of months at Cam Ranh Bay.

11 JS: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit more about your duties at Qui Nhon?

12 VO: Sure. Qui Nhon is a little city, a little bay. On one side we had the naval base
13 over there and then this big huge mountain that went up behind us. Then on the other side
14 of the mountain went down into the sea. Then on the other side was this giant Army base.
15 What we would do there and it was—we were not stationed onboard a ship or an APL or
16 any type of naval vessel. This was an actual land based operation. We had causeways and
17 we had all the way down, then the officers’ quarters then the main off and then the
18 officers’ club and then at the far end next to the fence was enlisted quarters and then on
19 the other side was a small village which had prostitutes and bars and all sorts of other
20 stuff which they would open up at three o’clock every day for people to go into if they
21 wanted to. The operations—and then across the way was the Army base. Our job was to
22 patrol the bay along with the Coast Guard. They had some coast guard WHECs (high-
23 endurance cutter) there. Not WHECs. WPBs (coastal patrol boat) in there.

24 JS: Okay.

25 VO: Then we had—then our job we had sectors of the coast and we would go out
26 usually about three o’clock in the afternoon, relieve the other boat, go out and patrol our
27 sector up and down for twenty-four hours. Any boats that came into view that looked
28 suspicious we would pull over and board and search. Anybody that called for gunfire
29 support we would pull over and fire our mortar to provide for—that was a rarity. But if
30 there was any troops in there that got in trouble we could provide gunfire support in for,
31 you know, a mile or so.

1 JS: Right.

2 VO: Then you do a twenty-four-hour patrol and then you have twenty-four off.

3 JS: Okay.

4 VO: Twenty-four off you usually worked on the boat. Usually on weekends you
5 could go into the city or go over to the Army clubs over on the other side. There wasn't
6 really a hell of a lot to see in the city. We usually just go over to the EM club and drink
7 beer in the afternoon and play pool.

8 JS: Right.

9 VO: It was a rather tropical-type setting, very nice, very pretty area. I did a lot of
10 interesting stuff there. That's where we did that MEDCAP and that's where that boat, that
11 ship that was sunk, the Japanese ship was in the harbor Song Cau Harbor that we used to
12 tie up to and do our patrols off there. I went through one hell of a typhoon there in a boat
13 for twenty-four hours, just beat us to death. We had waves that were as high as the boat
14 just come crashing down on top of us one right after another. I went through that for
15 twenty-four hours until we finally got to a harbor. We went I think it was ten miles in
16 twenty-four hours.

17 JS: Wow.

18 VO: It was just absolutely horrendous. I was in two typhoons and that was one of
19 them. The other one was down south.

20 JS: Okay.

21 VO: We did MEDCAPs there. We checked out boats. That's where we got to the
22 firefight that really pretty much ruined my hearing. In the middle of the night—we all had
23 these Browning automatic weapons in our bunks next to our beds to fight our way back
24 down to the boat since we weren't close to them if anything happened. All of a sudden
25 somebody started shooting up on the hillside and they said we had VC coming in the gate
26 and coming down the fence line. It was our job to get to the boats and get the boats away.
27 It wasn't to protect the base. That was the other guys' job to protect the base. We grabbed
28 these BARs (Browning automatic rifles) and ran to the boats and got our boats out and
29 then we started providing support fire for them. We just pulled off a little ways. As a
30 matter of fact, this was, I forgot what day it was, but they thought we were having a
31 fireworks display, the Army did. They didn't even know we were on general quarters,

1 that we were under attack. So we start firing our illumination rounds and we fired, just off
2 our boat itself we fired 100 rounds of 81-mm illumination rounds, of high explosives, all
3 without ear protection and that's why I still have trouble hearing today.

4 JS: Oh, okay.

5 VO: But we did that all night long and they never found a body or anything up
6 there so we're not sure if the guy just woke and started firing his gun and said VC are
7 coming or if there actually were VC coming, but we fired thousands and thousands of
8 dollars' worth of ammunition off eight or nine boats that night.

9 JS: Right. Huh. All right. Were there any other particularly memorable moments
10 there at Qui Nhon?

11 VO: Oh, yeah. That was where we stole—three of my buddies, and I have got a
12 picture of it, but we went over to the Army base to drink one night. We got through
13 drinking and it was about midnight and we had to get back and what you do is there was
14 this Mike boat where you'd walk on—you know, it's the one where the Marines run off
15 in the movies.

16 JS: Right.

17 VO: The front flops down, you walk on, they pull it up, and they drive you back
18 over to the Army base. This thing runs every hour on the hour running people back and
19 forth between the naval base and the Army base. We went over to the Army base and it
20 was midnight and they said, "Oh, we can't let you out after midnight." I said, "Well,
21 we've got to be back at the base. We're leaving on patrol tomorrow morning."

22 JS: Right.

23 VO: "Nah, you can't leave here without a—unless you are in a truck, you can't
24 leave on foot." Shit, what are we going to do? We start walking back and all of a sudden
25 here's the motor pool. We went over there and found a duce-and-a-half that had the keys
26 in it. We just hopped in it and drove out of the main gate of the Army base, drove on
27 over, drove it on the Mike boat, drove it over to our base and we kept it for about, I think
28 we got to keep that for about a month. Anyway, we painted a peace sign on the side of it
29 and 95 Charlie, which was our boat number. We were the only enlisted men that I knew
30 that had our boat that we went back and forth to boats. Finally the officers came down
31 and questioned us about it and said, "Oh, no. We just had this—" "Well, where did you

1 get it?" "Well, we don't know. It was just behind our barracks." So they took it away
2 from us and found out it was the Army's and gave it back to the Army. But we had that
3 for I think it was about a month we had that. No, we had a lot fun there. There was a lot
4 of neat things to do. Like I said, being out of the pressure cooker and getting out of An
5 Thoi was just absolutely wonderful.

6 JS: Right. When you would go into—you have mentioned going into the cities
7 and stuff occasionally. Would you have much interaction with the South Vietnamese and
8 what was your opinion of just the civilians?

9 VO: Well, let's see. I got my pockets picked. That is the only time I have ever—I
10 have traveled all over the world since then and I have never had my pockets picked but I
11 got them picked there. Not a lot of interaction, no. You know, somewhat but, yeah, they
12 were nice people. I didn't—they were trying to get your money every way they could and
13 I can't blame them because they were poor in a war-torn country. Oh, there were places. I
14 was shopping and I was trying to change some MPC (military payment certificates) into
15 dong and use the dong to go buy stuff and when I changed it these kids ran up to me and
16 ran into me and the next thing I knew all my money was gone and my watch, too. They
17 got my money and my watch in just about two seconds.

18 JS: Goodness.

19 VO: But, oh, I would go out to restaurants which the rest of the guys didn't do. I
20 would usually be sitting there with a bunch of officers, which they weren't too excited
21 about but I got into a couple of really nice restaurants and had some Vietnamese meals.
22 You would go hit the souq—well, not souqs there, but the shops. Oh, I bought a bunch of
23 silk and brought back for Shelia. Just kind of walk around. Like I said, there wasn't a hell
24 of a lot to do in those towns like that, so we didn't have a whole lot of interaction with
25 them. The most interaction I had with South Vietnamese were the ones that were in the
26 military.

27 JS: Okay. All right. What did you think of the Vietnamese food?

28 VO: Oh, I hated it. I didn't eat rice for about ten years when I came back. See, we
29 had—when I got—when I was living—when I was training them we ate Vietnamese food
30 and I just got sick of it, you know. We would have eyeball stew, all sorts of crap, fish
31 head soup, and rice for morning, rice for breakfast, then they decided—then we also had

1 when we got back to the APL we could have American chow and, you know, we'd have
2 shrimp and lobster and steak and all this other stuff. The Navy took good care of us as far
3 as food went, but then they decided they were going to try to be more thoughtful towards
4 the Vietnamese so we just started having all sorts of—and it is just crap, just rice for
5 breakfast, rice for lunch, rice for dinner. I couldn't eat it after I got home.

6 JS: Uh-huh. All right. Well, is there anything else you would like to say about
7 your experience at Qui Nhon before we move onto Cam Ranh Bay?

8 VO: Oh, let's see. No, no. I think that pretty much covers Qui Nhon.

9 JS: Okay. All right. Can you tell me a little bit about Cam Ranh Bay now, then?

10 VO: Yeah, Cam Ranh was another nice—is a very nice base. That's where, you
11 know, you see all these things where Bob Hope and all those people come to. That's
12 where he would go. I mean, when you are out in the boondocks they don't come to see
13 you.

14 JS: Right.

15 VO: But we had a couple of entertainers come over at Cam Ranh but we never
16 went to see them because you had to go over to the Army base. We had a very nice
17 enlisted men's club, a very big nice enlisted men's club. They had the boats but we
18 were—our enginemen and I, we were the only two still left on the boats. Everybody else
19 had been transferred off to either staff jobs or sent back home out of our original boat
20 crew so the two of us were still serving our boats up to the last minute. I was the leading
21 petty officer. Renshaw and I both made second-class, which nobody could figure out how
22 that happened. I said, "We just had to study and pass the damn test." "Oh, I studied." No,
23 we were—like I said, I was the youngest enlisted man in Vietnam in the Navy. I was the
24 youngest enlisted man in Vietnam that was an E-5, youngest E-5 petty officer in
25 Vietnam. But the—they were sending all these brand new officers in and they would give
26 them to us and we would go out and do some training with them and show them how to
27 run the boat and do all this other stuff and they would ship them off back down to An
28 Thoi. We were doing that. We had to be, without a doubt, the senior enlisted people on
29 boats. We had more time, more rank and everything else and we were just—so we would
30 go out on these patrols and I just hated it because this is when it really got crappy. You
31 are having to go out on these idiotic patrols that didn't mean anything and we would go

1 out and we would search a boat. This is another time we caught in some really rough
2 weather. I told the officer, I said, “We just need to return to base. We don’t need to be out
3 here.” He was scared to death. He was an ensign, brand new. I mean, he had been in the
4 Navy weeks and he was scared to death so we spent twenty-four hours out in this storm
5 just being beat to death. We go in to be relieved and we are going in and the other boats
6 coming out to relieve us out of the harbor and it says, “This is,” I think it was Rice,
7 Wiggs, Bravo. “This is Rice Wiggs Bravo 93 returning to base. Weather too rough.”
8 They turn around and they beat us back to the harbor and they were our relief boat.

9 JS: Right.

10 VO: But they were smart enough not to be out in that rough weather.

11 JS: Right.

12 VO: Anyway, we would train three or four Vietnamese. We would have three or
13 four Vietnamese in our crew and one or two officers, or one officer. We would go out
14 and we would train them a while then they would take them down south. This kept
15 happening, and kept happening, and kept happening and finally they got down, this was
16 January 2nd of ’70 and we still hadn’t got our orders out and we should have been real
17 soon. They said, “We’re having a big push down at An Thoi. We’re taking every boat
18 and all divisions and we’re going to An Thoi and we’re going up the rivers.” I said, “No,
19 I’m not.” They said, “Oh, yes, you are.” I said, “No, I’m not going. I’m not going down
20 there.” Renshaw said, “Nah, I’m not going, either.” So they said, “We’ll see about that.”
21 They came back a few—“Okay, you don’t have to go but you’re going to stay here and
22 you’re going to be assigned to the causeway duty,” which was down there where all the
23 boats are. We go down there the next morning and there’s some third-class petty officer
24 and he said, “Okay, you guys get some brooms and sweep off the causeway.” I said, “I’m
25 going to be up at the enlisted men’s club if you need me until I get my orders out of
26 here.” Basically we spent the last, I think seven days in-country at the enlisted men’s
27 club. I said, “I’m not going. I’m not doing anything. I’m not cleaning the causeway.”

28 JS: Sure.

29 VO: About the next day they said, “Okay, you’ve got your orders out.” So we had
30 our plane tickets and everything else and we were headed back. But I had had all my
31 uniforms stolen so all I had was dungarees and some jungle greens and they wouldn’t let

1 you go back in-country with that. But I had had a tailor-made suit, a three-piece suit made
2 while I was there. I said, “Well, how—can you go out in a suit?” They said, “Yeah, you
3 can go out in a suit.” So I showed up at the—they flew us out of Cam Ranh so I showed
4 up at the Air Force base in a three-piece suite and they thought I was CIA so I got up in
5 the front of the plane. It was quite a nice trip back, then I got—of course the bad thing is
6 when I got back they were mustering us out of the Navy and we were at the naval base
7 there in Seattle. They told us—I’m going to tell you a story that I told you—I’m going to
8 tell you some of the story way back at the front when we started talking. They said, “Oh,
9 you’ve got to have a dress blue uniform.” I said, “Well, I don’t have a dress blue
10 uniform.” “You can’t get out of the Navy without one.” Shit. So I had to go buy a
11 complete brand new uniform to get out of the Navy right before I got out. Anyway, I was
12 going to tell you a story. I told you earlier about, you know, Jackson Pike Street where
13 we went down to.

14 JS: Right.

15 VO: When I was there a couple of years earlier. So they came in and they said,
16 “All right, you guys can have liberty for two days then we are going to muster you out of
17 the Navy, but whatever you do don’t go down to Jackson Pike Street. We’ve had 140
18 sailors stabbed down there this year.”

19 JS: Wow.

20 VO: Or last year, rather. “We had 140 something sailors, stabbed, robbed, beaten,
21 down at Jackson Pike Street. Don’t go down there.” I said, “All right.” So we start going
22 out there. Renshaw is a little rough around the edges and stuff. He wasn’t too worried
23 about stuff. He said, “Well, you know Seattle. Where are we going?” I said, “Jackson and
24 Pike Street. That’s where all the fun is, man.” We went down there. Of course, I still
25 wasn’t twenty-one but I started drinking and we drank a bunch. The Shore Patrol almost
26 caught us. He was twenty-one and I wasn’t, but anyway we got back to the base and got
27 mustered out. But that was the story I was telling you about the Jackson Pike to get it all
28 back around.

29 JS: Right, right.

30 VO: Yeah, we flew out of Cam Ranh and, gosh, within four days I went from
31 being in the jungle to being at the campus at Oklahoma State University.

1 JS: Was the adjustment fairly difficult or not?

2 VO: No, it really wasn't. It was just different, you know. But I had a good support
3 system. I mean, all my family was there. Like I said, you know, I just told my father-in-
4 law I wanted to be on campus and I was enrolled. You know, there wasn't any problem
5 with that.

6 JS: Right.

7 VO: But got back and my wife was there and we just started back in our life
8 again. But, yeah, it was—I don't have any difficulty of these guys that are coming back
9 right now. I don't know if you have—we had a bunch of money left over after we fought
10 John Kerry. We had a couple of million dollars left over in our funds and we have been
11 giving that out to wounded veterans coming back from Iraq. We've given out almost—
12 we had got two million dollars from Boone Pickens lately, but we've give out almost four
13 million dollars to these guys. I got over to Bamsey over at San Antonio to the hospital
14 over there and talk to these young men coming back and they're just having a hell of a
15 time. Of course, they are wounded horribly—now, that's one thing about it. I was never
16 wounded. I went through a lot of crap and I went through a lot of scary stuff and saw a lot
17 of really bad stuff but I get real upset with my colleagues who were with me that are now
18 getting money for PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and other kinds of shit like that.
19 I just have a real problem with that.

20 JS: Right.

21 VO: I think if we had been in a prisoner of war camp and had been beaten and
22 everything we might have PTSD, but I don't think what we went through would have
23 brought that about. It was bad. It was bad and a lot of stuff but you just have to—you
24 need to, when bad things happen you just move on with your life. But as far as
25 adjustment, I just can't say that I had any trouble adjusting at all.

26 JS: Okay.

27 VO: I mean, I went back to a—I was getting ready to go to college, you know,
28 something I wanted to do. I had money. I had a new car. My wife and I were having a
29 good time. As matter of fact, I've never had more expendable income in my whole life.
30 We were both working and going to college. I had a job in a lab and she had a job in the
31 library. I was getting the GI Bill. We had a three-bedroom house on campus. I've never

1 had more money in my life then I had then. I don't have that much money now. But the
2 transition was minimal, I'd have to say.

3 JS: Okay.

4 VO: The only thing—what I did was I just shut up—even my family didn't ask
5 about what happened. It was a real strange thing because I remember my dad talking
6 about World War II but basically my family didn't ask me a thing about it. It was just
7 like, "Oh, you just home from a camping trip." You know, it was that kind of thing. They
8 never asked me about anything that happened or anything. By that time Oklahoma State
9 was not the hotbed of dissention but there were still a lot of, you know, baby-killer stuff
10 and everything else going on. It just caused me to just shut up. As a matter of fact, I still
11 was in the Naval Reserve so I had to go down and drill and I just hid my uniform and
12 would drive down and put it on when I got there. I just didn't want anybody to know that
13 I was in the military.

14 JS: Right. Okay. That brought up one of the questions I wanted to ask you about
15 your—you've kind of talked about this, but your reception. Did you ever have any
16 problems with civilians, with people giving you hell about being in the Navy?

17 VO: Oh, yeah, comments and stuff but basically those had come lately. Like I
18 said, I had a supervisor at Conoco that I was working for and I don't know if I told you
19 this or not, and I never told anybody even at Conoco I had been in the service but
20 somehow it came out, and she said, "Oh, you were in Vietnam?" I said, "Yeah." She
21 says, "But you don't seem crazy."

22 JS: Oh, geez.

23 VO: Well, that's true.

24 JS: Right.

25 VO: I tell you what, most of the people, and I mean everybody that I was friends
26 with, had some tour of duty in Vietnam during that time period. Came back, if they
27 didn't—let me tell you my boat crew story. You know, you hear about all these crazy ass
28 people that come back and just go to hell and drugs and all this other stuff. My
29 quartermaster came back, didn't go to college. He had about two years of college but he
30 went to work for the railroad. He worked his way up to an engineer. Then he worked his
31 way up in the union and was the chief negotiator for the railroad unions. He was doing

1 such a good job that the railroad hired him away and he became—I told him—he was the
2 guy that took away all the orphans' and widows' pensions, but he was some vice
3 president of CSX railroads when he retired. The radarman, he came back and went to
4 college about two years and dropped out of college and went to work for the phone
5 company as a splicer. He worked his way up and retired last year as vice president of
6 Southwestern Bell, whatever it is now. It's up in St. Louis. He did extremely well for
7 himself. Our engineman went to college and got his degree and was the IT director for
8 several newspapers in Jacksonville, Florida. I didn't do as well. I had to keep changing
9 jobs but I got my degree in forestry and worked as a forester and a professional Boy
10 Scout for a while. Then I got my degree in geology and was an international exploration
11 geologist for quite a few years.

12 JS: Okay.

13 VO: So every single one of us, I mean all of them that I have contact with, did
14 well and you don't hear the—we don't have anybody that, you know, you hear this under
15 a bridge with a bottle type stories, which I sometimes wonder if those really are Vietnam
16 veterans but I'm sure some of them are. The reception I guess most of us just blocked it
17 out and said, "Well, you know, if they are going to be that way we will just keep quiet
18 and just ignore it." But for the most thing it just there was no real nice homecoming. As a
19 matter of fact, I didn't get a really good homecoming until just a couple of years ago for
20 the first time. People welcoming you back from Vietnam and it was other Vietnam
21 veterans is who were doing it. The pride of doing it didn't come until just a couple of
22 years ago.

23 JS: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about that homecoming?

24 VO: Oh, sure. We were—went up to—they found a swift boat—oh, there's
25 actually two homecomings happened. We found a swift boat and they redid it and they
26 put it in the Washington Naval Yard there for the historic part of it, dedicated the swift
27 boat. We had a meeting of all swift boat veterans and there was about 200 of us that went
28 up to Washington, D.C., and it was just really great. But Admiral Zumwalt who had been
29 chief of naval operations and chief of operations, Vietnam, came forward and he gave a
30 real pep talk about how good we had done and how proud he was of us. That was the first
31 time I ever felt great pride in what I had done. From that point on got to meet a lot of

1 people basically. Then when we all got together to do this John Kerry thing and there
2 were several hundred of us that got together that in some way had served with him or
3 around him and knew what he actually had done in Vietnam, which was different than his
4 book, *Tour of Duty*. I don't know if you know the historian. He is now at the University
5 of Houston. Gosh, his name slips my mind. But he did John Kerry's history, *Tour of*
6 *Duty*. He's not a historian because he didn't even come and ask anybody else that was,
7 you know, around him.

8 JS: Right.

9 VO: Anyway, we got together and it was just like homecoming week. You know,
10 hear all, tell all the stories about what happened to you and everything else. A bunch of
11 people came in and it was just really nice because you actually felt like what you did
12 there was somebody that actually appreciated it and said something to you because even
13 back then my own family didn't even recognize what I had done. It was just like, you
14 know, you had been gone for a while. Now it's time to get back and get in college.

15 JS: Right.

16 VO: Forget that stuff. Your camping trip is over. But that's the way it was back
17 then. That wasn't just for me. That was for everybody. So it wasn't anything out of the
18 ordinary.

19 JS: Okay. All right. Well, before we wrap this up I have some broad questions
20 about the war. But one other thing I actually want to ask you about, would you mind
21 telling me a little bit about the swift boat campaign and the campaign against Kerry and
22 how it came about and could you tell me a little bit about it?

23 VO: Yeah, I will tell you about my side of it.

24 JS: Okay.

25 VO: He started running for president and this is when I knew—I told Shelia and,
26 of course, she met him in Coronado. She knew him and she had seen him on TV so she
27 knew and she knew my absolute hatred of him. He was starting to run for president and I
28 said, "I can't believe this shit." I said, "There's nothing I can do about it. Nobody would
29 listen to me. All that crap he says is just garbage." I got this call and it was from John
30 O'Neill, the guy that wrote the book *Unfit for Command*. He said, "Van," he said, "I'd
31 just like—were you there on the March 19th incident when John Kerry got his Bronze

1 Star? I said, “Well, I think so.” I said, “I can’t remember exactly which one.” He says,
2 “Well, go online and read it. It’s on his website.” I go in there and I read this thing about
3 this magnificent firefight and him pulling people from the river and bullets going off for
4 five kilometers and all this other stuff. I call him back and I said, “No, John. I wasn’t on
5 that incident at all.” He said, “Well, it’s when the 3 boat blew up.” I said, “Yeah, I was
6 right”—I said, “I will tell you how close I was to when the 3 boat blew up.” I said, “I was
7 covered with water.” I said, “The water from the explosion just covered our boat. We
8 were not twenty-five foot behind him when it blew up.” He said, “Well, that’s the
9 incident.” I said, “Well, none of that crap happened.” He said, “Would you mind telling
10 that to a private investigator?” I said, “Sure.” The private investigator called me and said,
11 “Would you write up what happened?” I wrote up what happened and sent it to him. So
12 they got all of us together and they held a press conference up in Washington, D.C., to
13 refute Kerry’s story. The main thing was, my problem was what he said when he came
14 back to the Senate about how we were all murders and killers and we were doing horrible
15 stuff, that’s what just absolutely just irked me.

16 JS: Right.

17 VO: So they held this press conference. I wasn’t part of the press conference.
18 They held a press conference and nobody came. The news media did not want to hear it.
19 They did not want to hear anything bad about John Kerry.

20 JS: Right.

21 VO: They called us and said, “Well, would you mind coming to Washington,
22 D.C., and telling your story on tape?” I said, “Sure.” I get up there and there is probably
23 thirty of us in the room and about ten of us out of that group had actually served with
24 John Kerry, so they had to make that first advertisement. That advertisement has been the
25 most effective political ad ever in United States history. As a matter of fact, the
26 Smithsonian Institute asked for copies of two weeks after it was out to put in the
27 Smithsonian. Anyway, we just started telling our story then they said, “Well, will you go
28 on and do”—of course, we didn’t have any money. We had to come up with \$50,000 for
29 that thing so we raised all the money amongst us then we went out and started trying to
30 raise money just on the internet. Once that ad came out the money just poured in. We
31 raised twenty-six million dollars during the campaign and spent all except two million of

1 it on the campaign, making ads and doing different stuff. I shut my business down, lost
2 money for about six months and just went and gave interviews. They asked me to do that
3 and I said, “I would be happy to since I was one of the ones that was on there.” I gave
4 probably five to ten interviews a day for day after day after day. But the only people that
5 would really listen us first was talk radio and Fox news. Then when we started getting
6 some traction the main media would call us and I got interviewed by the big guys at
7 *Newsweek*. Of course, they basically didn’t believe me the whole time we were talking
8 but it was basically just trying to tell a story. The neat thing came was when they called
9 down and they said, “Hey, would you like to go to the Democratic convention in
10 Boston?” I said, “Yeah.” They said, “Well, here’s the deal. There’s going to be a pass for
11 you. Just get up there and we will call you.” I fly up there. Swift Boat Veterans paid for
12 it. I didn’t pay for it. I flew up there and got me a hotel room and got a call and they said,
13 “There’s a TGI Friday’s right next to the Fleet Center. Go there and look under a stack of
14 papers. I said, “All right.” I go there and here is a badge to get into the Democratic
15 convention. It wouldn’t let me down on the floor but it would let me in radio row. I put
16 this thing on and I go walking in and they don’t stop me or anything. I go up to radio and
17 I have got one interview and I go up and I sit down and I start having this interview with
18 this guy and start telling people. I mean, the radio people all around him start looking and
19 listening. I think it was eighteen interviews I gave that day at the Democratic convention
20 to NPR (National Public Radio) radio, to NPR radio in South America. They finally
21 realized what I was doing and they started—they never did kick me out but they started
22 following me around just watching what I was doing. But I went up to Sean Hannity and
23 said, “You know, I would like to talk to you.” He said, “Nah, we don’t, we don’t know
24 anything about you.” I said, “Okay. All right.” That’s before the ad came out. Then I
25 went over and talked to Tony Snow and he said, “Yeah, I think I’ve heard about you but I
26 don’t have time for you right now. Can you come back tomorrow?” I said, “No, I’m
27 leaving.” I left and, boy, it wasn’t the next day Hannity was calling me to be on *Hannity*
28 *and Colmes*. They had had it out there so I went on *Hannity and Colmes* then from then
29 on I mainly did TV and radio.

30 JS: Okay.

1 VO: But the thing about it was is nobody—and I can't stress this enough—
2 nobody told anybody what to say in the whole campaign. Nobody, you know, benefitted
3 from it financially. The hell of it was that out of all the people that were on, there 270 of
4 us, there was probably thirty of us on the board, so to speak, the main steering
5 community. There were Democrats, Republicans, and a whole lot of us independents and
6 none of us had any connection with Republican Party in any way whatsoever. Every time
7 we would get blasted, you know, Carl Rove, I never talked to Carl Rove and I was on the
8 main steering committee, you know. It just didn't happen.

9 JS: Right.

10 VO: It was a grassroots—as a matter of fact, we have gotten a lot of flak about it.
11 Six months ago they called and asked us why aren't we getting involved. I said, "Well,
12 we disbanded four years ago. We're no longer an organization." "Oh, well, but we
13 thought you were a Republican group that were going to help us!" I said, "No, we're
14 not." I said, you know—said, "Well, that's what everybody has said." I said, "Yeah." I
15 said, "We disbanded four years ago." We had a—after the election, and we stayed up
16 because there were several of us that thought we were going to have to go to Costa Rica
17 when it was over. We stayed up and watched it and finally about one o'clock I said, "I
18 think we're safe." We had one more meeting. We met in Orlando, Florida, about a month
19 after the election and had a big mission accomplished party. That was the last time we
20 met together as a group. We disbanded. We had to keep some money around in case
21 lawyers or any other problems. We disbanded and I kept telling people, I said, "We are
22 not a political group. We're a group of people that just want to stop John Kerry." They
23 said, "Well, why aren't you trying to stop Barrack Obama?" I said, "We didn't serve with
24 him. We don't have any reason to."

25 JS: Right.

26 VO: The thing that always got me is the press never understood that we were a
27 group of people trying to tell our story and we were just shut out so we had to become a
28 527. After we became a 527 and started they thought we were some kind of political
29 organization and we really weren't. Like I said, there's probably not as many but there
30 are probably quite a few Democrats in our group, too. We all had the same horrible
31 distaste for John Kerry. One of the things that came out was that we wished that it had

1 been anybody else running for president had been a swift boat officer because we would
2 have been happy to support them 100%, but just not him.

3 JS: All right. When the night of the election and when the election results came
4 out—you talked a little bit about the party and the celebration. How did you feel?

5 VO: Oh, relieved, happy, glad. I was not a George Bush supporter at all. No. I
6 wished to hell we had two other choices. But not the lesser, but just what John Kerry did
7 to us when he came back from Vietnam and the way he—I mean, if you realized it, in six
8 short weeks he got more medals the Audie Murphy collected. I mean, except for the
9 Medal of Honor. I mean, he just was running through them. One of his Purple Hearts was
10 self—but they all were all just barely, they were scratches. I mean scratches. You
11 couldn't even see one of them. You know, he pulls that stuff and then he wants to be
12 president of the United States. Well, crap, no. It's just not going to happen.

13 JS: Right.

14 VO: I was just relived and happy but, yeah, we had our mission accomplished
15 party, banquet. We invited several of our big contributors to it. One of the things that
16 always amazed me was I—"Well, you're being given money by Republicans." I said,
17 "Yeah, the Democrats aren't going to give us any money because we are going against
18 John Kerry, people."

19 JS: Right.

20 VO: (Laughs) Why is that surprising? But we could never ever and you see stuff
21 all the time about, you know, the swift boat group and all this stuff and the press always
22 got it wrong, always got it wrong. They never knew who we were or what we were doing
23 and they still have got it wrong. It'll go down in history wrong and that's what upsets me.

24 JS: Right. All right. Well, before we wrap things up I have a few broad questions
25 to ask you about, (coughs) excuse me, about your opinion on the war and your
26 participation. You can say as much or as little as you want about these.

27 VO: Okay.

28 JS: Okay. First of all, looking back on it, looking back on your experience in the
29 war, what's your opinion of American foreign policy towards Vietnam during that time
30 period?

1 VO: It was totally screwed up. We could have had Ho Chi Minh on our side
2 during the Eisenhower administration. We stepped in it every way we could. Ho Chi
3 Minh wanted to be allied with us and we could have done that. Then we put in a—we
4 deposed a dictator and put another one in that wasn't—we helped depose an elected
5 official and then put a dictator in, basically, and then supported him and he was
6 extremely corrupt. No, we stepped in it every which way we could. We lost the war
7 politically. We lost the war at the highest level through inept activities by the State
8 Department, by the executive branch of the government, both parties.

9 JS: Okay. Do you think the U.S. should have been involved in Vietnam?

10 VO: I don't know. I don't think so.

11 JS: Okay.

12 VO: As it turned out it was—their country is really doing quite well right now and
13 we lost the war, so I would have to say no.

14 JS: Okay. All right. How closely did you follow the war after you left?

15 VO: Every night. Walter Cronkite.

16 JS: Okay. All right.

17 VO: I'm a news junky I always watch the news.

18 JS: How did you feel on April 30th when Saigon fell?

19 VO: I was, by that time I was pretty much out of it. I was in college and, as a
20 matter of fact, we had a pool on which was going to fall first, Phnom Penh or Saigon. I
21 guess I was pretty much disgusted by the loss of what we had incurred of 58,000 men and
22 gone into something and then just tossed it away. You see, you can still see it in
23 government today. But, yes. No, I was disgusted by our government. I really didn't care
24 about the country but I was disgusted by what our government had done to our people.

25 JS: Right. Okay. A last question for you. How did your experiences in Vietnam
26 affect you or did they at all?

27 VO: Oh, yeah, greatly. I would have to say it was just, it was one of those
28 experiences—and now I have talk about this to my buddies before. We were talking
29 about this last week. It's something I would never want to do but I'm glad I did it. I had
30 never—it affected me in such ways as I don't really sweat the small stuff. I'm willing to
31 take chances. I guess it's that old—I don't feel as much as a B-52 pilot that just got back

1 from bombing Germany, but you feel like you are living on borrowed time so you don't
2 try to hold back on anything. All in all, it was a great experience for me because I've
3 never been afraid of anybody or anything since then. It was that—I see a lot of my friends
4 that I have worked with over the years that did not have that military experience and they
5 will make statements like, “Well, you know, I guess I wish I had done that,” and I know
6 they do. All of you can say is that I would never want anyone to go through that and I
7 would never go through it again myself, but I'm glad I did and I am glad I have got this
8 experience behind me because it has helped me greatly.

9 JS: Right. Okay. Before we wrap things up, is there any last thing you would like
10 to say about your experiences before we bring the interview to a close?

11 VO: I don't believe so.

12 JS: Okay. All right. I will stop the recording here and then if you don't mind I will
13 talk to you for just a few more minutes.

14 VO: Okay.

15 JS: Okay.