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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with David Larsen
Conducted by Kelly Crager
Transcribed by Emilie Meadors
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1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an oral history interview with Mr.
2 David Larsen. Today is 1 July 2009. Mr. Larsen and I are at his home in Parsons, Kansas.
3 First off, Mr. Larsen, I'd like to thank you again for consenting to participate in this
4 interview with me.

5 David Larsen: Thank you very much. I appreciate it. And since you're from St.
6 Paul, Kansas.

7 KC: Yeah, we have that little connection. Let me make sure we get our feedback
8 taken care of there. Alright, first off, can you tell me when you were born and where?

9 DL: I was born in 1947 right here in Parsons out at the old Mercy Hospital, which
10 is out northeast of town and lived here until I was about fourth grade and then we left
11 here because there was no work in Parsons and we moved to Kansas City.

12 KC: Okay. Now, you said that your family left Parsons because there was no
13 work.

14 DL: Yes, sir.

15 KC: What sort of work did your father do? What sort of work did he want to do?

16 DL: Well, he just got home from the Army and there were only two jobs you
17 could have here. You could work at the ordnance plant or the railroad. There were tons of
18 guys coming home from World War II and my mom's folks lived out east of town. They
19 farmed so there was work in Kansas City so he went up and he applied for a truck driving
20 job. So he went to work for a concrete company driving a concrete truck up in Lenexa,
21 Kansas.

22 KC: What were your parents' names?

23 DL: Margie and Melvin Larsen. My grandparents out east of town are the
24 Manners. My grandma that's here at the end of this month almost eighty years at the

1 church here in town so I have, there's still five generations on my mom's side of the
2 family still alive there. My grandma's ninety-eight years old now and we just put her in a
3 nursing home last year. She lived with my mom and dad and, let's see, on my mom's side
4 of the family, my dad's side of the family, and my wife's side of the family are all from
5 here. We've been over here for over one hundred and twenty years.

6 KC: Right, you are plank holders, then.

7 DL: You bet, yes.

8 KC: In a manner of speaking. Okay, so how old again were you when you moved
9 to Kansas City?

10 DL: I was in the fourth grade so I was about nine or ten.

11 KC: Okay, what was it like for you and your family to grow up and for you to
12 grow up and the family like up in Kansas City?

13 DL: Well, we lived in Shawnee Mission.

14 KC: In Shawnee Mission.

15 DL: And then there was only one school, high school, Shawnee Mission North
16 and now there's four others. It's one of the bigger schools in the Kansas City area. I had
17 four little brothers, or younger brothers. We always get into little arguments about that,
18 but anyway we went to school up there and it was really nice. It was a whole—it was a
19 different pace of life, you know.

20 KC: What sort of things did you do? You said you had for brothers. What sort of
21 things did you do for fun?

22 DL: Well, we used to go to the show. It cost fifty cents to go to the show unlike
23 today. We went to the show and then in the summertime, because there were five of us, I
24 was kind of shipped down to Parsons and I lived with my grandma and grandpa in the
25 summertime and then I go back home and just went to school and just worked at the
26 barbershop. Let's see, my junior year I worked at the barbershop where we lived in a
27 little town within there. They called it Monrove, it'd be a little suburb of Shawnee
28 Mission, and I worked all day in the barbershop for a free hair cut a week. That's where
29 everybody got haircuts and two dollars for the day. So I lived there and they were—let's
30 see, I'm sixty-two and my brother right under me, he's sixty. And I had one fifty-eight
31 and one fifty-six, and then the baby's forty-four.

1 KC: Wow, forty-four, goodness gracious.

2 DL: Late in life, got his name out of the cartoon section and his name's Kevin and
3 we got his name out of a cartoon in the paper of the *Kansas City Star*, so there's a big
4 difference between him and me, so.

5 KC: Yeah.

6 DL: I graduated in 1966.

7 KC: You graduated high school in '66? What sort of things did you like to do in
8 high school? Sports, was there a particular subject that you liked or anything like that?

9 DL: No, just trying to get through school. I got drafted when I had eleven weeks
10 of school left and I went down and took my physical and I walked in and took my
11 physical and when I got ready to leave I asked this lieutenant in the Army if I passed the
12 physical and he said, "Why's that?" and I said, "Well, my mom thought when I was little
13 I had polio and didn't think I'd pass, you know, my physical." Down by the old Union
14 Station, down there is where they had the draft center up in Kansas City and anyway, he
15 said, "If everybody's in as good as health as you were, I wouldn't have a job." So I
16 walked out the door and they had little sandwich signs. Yeah, I don't know if you ever
17 saw them out there that said, "Sell your car, divorce your wife, graduate from school,
18 leave your girlfriend." There was a list of things on the sandwich board so I walked in
19 and I joined the Navy on a 120-day delay program and decided I'd join the Navy and that
20 way I wouldn't have to go to Vietnam.

21 KC: Okay, now let's back up here a little bit.

22 DL: Okay.

23 KC: It's 1966 and you've just graduated high school.

24 DL Well, I haven't quite graduated high school.

25 KC: You haven't quite graduated high school, but you've got your draft notice,
26 you go in for the physical. So you obviously had to be aware of what was going on in
27 Vietnam. You knew as early as '66 that it's something that could, could lead to your
28 involvement. What did you know about the war up to that point?

29 DL: Well, we knew that we'd see it at night on TV, you know, when you come
30 home and you'd see it on nightly TV. And I had a couple of cousins that were in the
31 service and Dad had been in World War II so we talked about, you know, how bad the

1 Army was, you know. Three meals a day, you know, or whatever. So I felt the Navy
2 would be pretty good, you know, to go into the Navy and I had that in the back of my
3 mind. Of course, you know, drafted. We all knew about the draft. It was a big deal. They
4 were burning flags and everything, but when we thought we'd join the Navy and we
5 probably wouldn't have to go to Vietnam and be in the Army, you know? Maybe we can
6 do somewhere else, I and a friend of mine thought.

7 KC: Well, it certainly didn't work out that way.

8 DL: No.

9 KC: Now, you said that as—you had this experience, you have relatives were in
10 the military, you father was in the military in the war. So there is an understanding of
11 what would be expected of you as a young man in the service, as a young man in the
12 Army or just a service in general. But you also mentioned that you were aware of protests
13 of the war. As early as '66?

14 DL: As early as '66, yeah. We used to watch them, you know, out on TV at night,
15 you know. It used to be they brought the war right into your home, you know.

16 KC: Right.

17 DL: On every night on the six o'clock news they brought the war right into it and
18 you would see the Army guys, we saw the Army guys and Olathe had the naval air
19 station out there. Once in awhile you would see it. My dad's brother was a career Army
20 man and he would come over to the house and he was shot over in Vietnam and he was a
21 gunner on a helicopter. We kind of thought if you joined the Navy you probably wouldn't
22 have to see much action.

23 KC: What was it like for a seventeen-, eighteen-year-old young man who you
24 know you're going to be drafted and you are, of course, eventually drafted. And you're
25 seeing this war firsthand or seemingly firsthand on your television every night. You know
26 it's controversial because of the protests and things like that. What sort of things are
27 going through your mind about, "Here's a war, here's a war that I might find myself in,
28 and here's what this war means." What did that mean to you as a young man watching
29 this?

30 DL: Well, I didn't think much about the war because I thought, "Well, if I don't
31 join the Army, you know, the Army's going to go in and do all the big work," you know?

1 I thought if I joined the Navy, some cushy job off the coast, you know, or sitting in the
2 States somewhere so that was my only thought at the time. Graduating from high school,
3 but I had eleven weeks left and when I got back to school I had a note in my locker to see
4 the principal and there were like twenty of us that took a physical because there were
5 twenty-four hundred of us. In the school I went to there were seven-hundred and forty
6 something seniors and so I went back in and he said, “Well, how many of you would join
7 the service?” And I was one of the seven or eight that raised my hand. And he said,
8 “Well, you graduated from school and you want to go on and do anything else, you
9 know, college or whatever?” and I said, “It never crossed my mind because my grades
10 weren’t that good.” So I kind of thought, “Well, this might be the best deal anyway.” I
11 had a hundred and twenty days. I probably could have backed out of it, but I just thought,
12 “Well, the Navy, you couldn’t get in too much trouble in the Navy.”

13 KC: Yeah, yeah, that’s the famous last words for a lot of people probably. Alright,
14 so you’ve got this delayed 120 days. You’re going to graduate high school. What did
15 you—what kind of expectations did you have for yourself and for your life in the Navy?
16 You say hopefully you’ll avoid war in Vietnam, hopefully you’ll find some sort of cushy
17 job, but regardless, you know it’s going to be a very drastic change of lifestyle for you
18 from being an eighteen-year-old self-centered child in the middle of the country to
19 becoming, you know, a sailor. What sort of things were you thinking about?

20 DL: Well, I always thought I’d work for this barber and I thought I might like to
21 be a barber. I thought that would be a pretty cool job, you know. It seemed like that
22 was—I’ve done a little bit of construction work in the summertime, worked on the farm
23 with my grandma and grandpa. That was kind of hard and I thought this guy’s in the air
24 conditioning, you know, cutting hair. It sounded like a pretty nice job and I would go in
25 there and I knew that probably before going to college was not even an option, you
26 know? I thought, “Well, I’ll go in and maybe get four years.” I had to sign up for four
27 years regular and two years reserve. I thought, “Well, I’ll go in and get that under my belt
28 and come out and see where I’m at and then go to college. Get enough money from them
29 to go to college and see what I’m at.” That was about it. I was eighteen and I didn’t really
30 have any direction of where I was going to go.

1 KC: Right. So it was something that you, from what I'm hearing, something that
2 would help you find a little bit of direction to get a little bit of traction to mature a little
3 bit. And the other options, of course, that military service provided. Like you said, GI Bill
4 and education, things like that at well.

5 DL: Yes, sir.

6 KC: But, of course, Vietnam doesn't figure out any of that actually. Well, tell me
7 about the basic training? Where did you go to basic?

8 DL: I took the last train to San Diego to boot camp and after that train there, they
9 started flying them, but the train was outmoded so we took three days to get to San
10 Diego. I went to San Diego and got out there and went to NTC (naval training center) out
11 of San Diego and took my boot camp training at San Diego. I got there in October of '66.

12 KC: Okay. Tell me about basic training. What was naval basic training like in
13 1966?

14 DL: Well, one of our first jobs, about two weeks after we had been there they had
15 a forest fire in San Diego. So they loaded us on buses and they gave us all a shovel and
16 we went out and we stood on a line and we made a firebreak. We did a lot of classroom
17 stuff. Firefighting, went to firefighting school. We did very limited small arms training.
18 We did hardly any boat training. Most of it was protocol on how to salute an officer, how
19 to dress, and how to do just the basic things and a lot of guys that were with us just
20 learned hygiene, things you need to know to keep clean and look sharp. But as far as
21 anything really strenuous, there wasn't a whole lot that was anything really pushy.

22 KC: Right, it's drastically different from the Army and Marine Corps, for sure.

23 DL: Yes, sir.

24 KC: What sort of small arms training did you have? What weapons were you
25 firing?

26 DL: We didn't have it. We went out with an old M-1 and go out and target shoot,
27 you know. Then you'd go out and they would raise the target up and down and if you
28 miss a target Maggie's drawers would come up. It was kind of fun, but I think we shot
29 five rounds and that was all.

30 KC: Oh, is that right?

1 DL: That was it. We didn't have anything that was really that big of a deal, you
2 know? It was just to get to you—how to use a radio on the ship and they'd never ask us
3 what we wanted to be or where we wanted to go or anything, you know? Well, it was up
4 until three day before we graduated before we found out what we were going to do and
5 where they were going to send us.

6 KC: So you were being trained for the basic, standard, blue water navy.

7 DL: You bet.

8 KC: And obviously it's not peacetime, but the blue water navy in the Vietnam
9 War at that phase wasn't nearly as extensive as it had been in in pervious conflicts.

10 DL: Yes, sir.

11 KC: I think it's safe to say.

12 DL: Right, they were just needing bodies, more or less, to say to go out and fill in
13 slots, you know, to whatever they needed to fill out a slot somewhere and everybody in
14 our graduating class didn't get to go to a school, they went to the fleet, because they were
15 shorthanded on people out there.

16 KC: They need to folks out there. They needed bodies.

17 DL: Right.

18 KC: Okay, now I guess then training the way they would look at it is, "We'll
19 teach you the things to keep you alive. The most essential things, fighting fires, operating
20 a radio, protocol on the ship, then everything else we can't teach you until you're actually
21 on a ship," is the way I understand it. You'll figure that out once you're on there.

22 DL: Right.

23 KC: Well, you say shortly before you graduate basic they told you where you
24 were going to go. What'd they tell you?

25 DL: Let's see we had a Saturday and Sunday before we graduated. No, I'm sorry,
26 Friday and Saturday. We graduated on Sunday afternoons. They'd come to us and say we
27 had orders and tell us where we were going. Mine was at an aircraft carrier, the USS
28 *Ranger* CVA 61. It was in Bremerton, Washington, in drydock.

29 KC: What did that mean to you, the *Ranger*?

30 DL: Well, I didn't know anything about a whole lot about the Navy. One of the
31 officers there said you're going to a bird farm and, of course, me being eighteen years old

1 I didn't know what a bird farm was, you know. I got to thinking about it because when I
2 first got there he'd come up to me and ask me where I was from and I said, "Kansas."
3 And he had asked me if I had any trouble with any of the Indians down in Oklahoma
4 since I lived so close to the Oklahoma border. So I thought he was pulling my leg.

5 KC: Right.

6 DL: You know, really giving me a hard time, so I just kind of smiled and went on
7 with my day.

8 KC: What did he mean by a bird farm?

9 DL: Well, that was because of all the aircraft that was on it. They called it a bird
10 farm and it was in drydock right next to the USS *Missouri*. It was in Bremerton,
11 Washington. It was right across the bay from Seattle. You could take the ferry over and in
12 1964, I think it was '64, '62 or '64, I can't remember, they had the World's Fair at Seattle
13 so when I went home from boot camp and flew home, that was the first airplane ride I'd
14 ever had. Then I left there in Kansas City and flew to Denver and then I flew from
15 Denver to Seattle and I caught the ferry over to Bremerton and it was five football fields
16 long and there was no water underneath it. You could see clear to the bottom of it. The
17 USS *Missouri* was drydocked next to us and we used to go over at lunch time and we'd
18 eat where they signed the peace treaty from World War II. We'd go over there and eat so
19 that's my first duty station.

20 KC: The world had gotten much, much bigger for you. Your first airplane ride
21 across the country. You've gotten through basic training in the Navy. You've got your
22 assignment, you're aboard the *Ranger*, such as it is, obviously, like you say, it was in
23 drydock. For a kid from the middle of the country, things are moving along fairly rapidly
24 for you, I think. And what were you going to be doing aboard the *Ranger*? What was
25 your position?

26 DL: When I got there we got down on the pier down there and there were
27 probably fifteen, twenty of us standing there and this guy walked up and he said, "What
28 would you like to do?" Of course, what do you want to do? And one of the guys said,
29 "What do you mean?" he said, "Well, do you want to be boatswain's mate," and they
30 were hanging from those little seats on the side and they had a little hammer chipping
31 paint. You could see them, you know, just looked like thousands of feet below you and

1 just concrete at the bottom so we don't want to do that. One guy looked up and said, "We
2 need people to be working in the post office, we need people to chip paint, we need
3 people to work down in the engine room." And he said, "But we need people to move
4 ammunition and man the guns." I said, "Well, that sounds pretty good because it was up
5 at the top and everybody else is down at the bottom. They took me in and I went and then
6 they have divisions and I was in the 5th Division. I got assigned to 5th Division as a
7 gunner's mate. So I was an E-3, I was just a seaman so that was my first thing was the 5th
8 Division. So I went on board and I started chipping paint.

9 KC: So they also had you chipping paint?

10 DL: Yeah, everybody chipped paint.

11 KC: Everybody was going to.

12 DL: Yeah, there's only two kinds of paint, deck grey and wall grey.

13 KC: I was thinking they gave you a choice this early in your career. It sounded to
14 me like maybe you would be chipping paint regardless.

15 DL: You chipped paint and you painted a lot and then you'd buff the floors and
16 you made coffee and you were studying to make rank.

17 KC: Right.

18 DL: Because if you made rank, and I was only making sixty-eight dollars so if I
19 made rank I'd make one hundred and sixteen so you were beating your brains out to
20 make rank so you'd have a little more money.

21 KC: So you're studying in your off hours, I assume?

22 DL: Right

23 KC: When you weren't on duty you were studying, what sort of things were they
24 having you study in order to make rank?

25 DL: Well, you had a book just common for the Navy for enlisted and it was to go
26 up to E-4 and you had a book you had to study and then you'd have to pass a test.

27 KC: Okay.

28 DL: And then they have an opening and then they have some many slots that can,
29 can be filled and your grade had to be high enough to get you into that. So, it depended
30 on whether you had somebody that was above you that was interested in helping you,
31 working with you, so at the time I had a fellow that his name was Tom Brown and he

1 volunteered to help me. We got along real good. He was originally from Lawrence,
2 Kansas, and he found out I was from Kansas so he was trying to help me make rank and
3 he'd already made E-4, gunner's mate himself, but he worked with me and it helped a
4 whole lot.

5 KC: So you were on the *Ranger* and you're chipping paint and you're studying.
6 You got to feel pretty good about your decision to not join the Army.

7 DL: Well, yeah, and we were getting fed every day and we had a nice place. They
8 had just got it all done down there where our racks were at, where we slept. So it was
9 pretty darn nice. You had sheets, you know, and we got washed sheets every three days,
10 you know. They did our laundry and then we got off, it was like a normal nine-to-five job
11 except it rained every day.

12 KC: Of course.

13 DL: And it rained for forty-two days straight and we were laughing. Sometime
14 during the day for forty-two days it rained, but we had clean clothes. You know, just like
15 having a civilian job, when you get done you can go over in town and you could go to the
16 movies or you could, you know, go over to Seattle over there to the Space Needle or
17 whatever you wanted to do, really. So it was pretty nice. The weekends you could take
18 off and you could go to the drag strip if you wanted to and so it was a pretty nice job. One
19 weekend you had duty and the next you didn't so, it was pretty nice for a little while.

20 KC: Right, right. During this entire time were you paying any attention to the war
21 in Vietnam?

22 DL: No, we would get down and we weren't even paying any attention to it. They
23 told us that we'd be going over on the aircraft carrier, that we could make what they call
24 a WESTPAC cruise, a Western Pacific cruise, and we would take our WESTPAC cruise
25 and we would have to qualify before we went over. So, that's what we were getting ready
26 to do and they were retrofitting us to get us ready to go over and, you know, changing
27 radar or whatever. And we had four 5"/54 guns, big guns on this ship and then we had the
28 armory. Our main job was to fin for bombs and we'd bring them up in elevators. And so
29 we had to check all the elevators out and go through and make sure everything was up in
30 them. All the lights were turned on and everything worked so.

1 KC: It's a very complicated system, an aircraft carrier. Like they always say, it's a
2 floating city with all those things that are taking place and the different things you have to
3 be aware of and make sure they're all operating, the elevators and all of that. Alright,
4 when was the *Ranger* supposed to make its WESTPAC cruise?

5 DL: If I remember right we left in June for our shakedown cruise. We left
6 Bremerton and we went to, if I remember right, we went to San Diego to take our trials
7 off the coast of San Diego at Coronado down there. So we went down there and we took
8 our test down there and when we got done there we made kind of a cruise. We didn't go
9 to Cuba, but we kind of made a little turn down around.

10 KC: So you went through the canal then?

11 DL: Well, no. We didn't go through the canal. We kind of went down south off
12 there and somebody said, "That's Cuba down there," so I don't know whether—but we
13 made a little trip down and turned around. We were out, planes flying and then taking off.
14 That's our primary thing was to put a plane to come in and land. I think those guys were
15 qualifying, too, but they say we were going south and that's about all they'd tell you. The
16 only thing they'd tell you in the mornings was how far you were from land so you could
17 swim, I guess. If you appreciate to swim you can swim, you know, to shore, but that was
18 about it.

19 KC: Right, well after this initial shakedown cruise, are you apart of the *Ranger*
20 when it does make this?

21 DL: Yes.

22 KC: Okay, well tell me about that.

23 DL: Well, we took our shakedown cruise and we loaded supplies on. It seemed
24 like forever we loaded and, like I said, an aircraft carrier was about five thousand guys
25 and it takes a lot to get ready to go, ammunition and everything. We got all loaded up and
26 then we left San Diego and we went to Pearl Harbor and we got to spend three days at
27 Pearl Harbor and got to see Pearl Harbor which, you know, when you're just turning
28 nineteen that's quite a deal. I got to see Pearl Harbor and then we left Pearl Harbor and
29 we went to Japan and we went to Japan and then we went off the coast of Vietnam and
30 somebody had asked awhile back what the heat was like. Well, the old microwave ovens
31 that you just open up with a blast of heat?

1 KC: Right.

2 DL: That's what it felt like, you know. We got over there and there we would
3 move the fins for the bombs all ready. That would be our job. We would have two shifts
4 of us and we'd move fins all day and we stayed on the line and they called it the line,
5 Yankee line, and that was all off the coast of Vietnam and we'd stay out there in the
6 aircraft carrier and we would relieve one aircraft carrier and then another one come in
7 and then they'd relieve you, then we'd stay there and then we'd go into the Philippines
8 for three or four days for a rest and then they'd supply us all up again and then we'd go
9 back to the line. So we would come back to the line there and then we'd go to Yokosuka,
10 Japan, for a couple, three days and then we'd go back to the line.

11 KC: What was your daily routine? You talked about the work. You'd be working
12 two shifts a day. I assume they were twelve-hour shifts?

13 DL: They were twelve hours. We'd get up and then we'd work twelve hours and
14 then we got off. You were pretty well beat so you went down and kind of wrote a letter
15 and then they had what they call a three-minute shower because the water on the ship,
16 you had a minute to get wet, a minute to soap up, a minute to wash off. So you went
17 down, you took your shower and you left there and you went back up, finally wrote a
18 letter.

19 KC: Wrote a letter to what? Your parents back home?

20 DL: Yeah, back home, you know, or your girlfriend or whoever you wanted to
21 write, your draft board maybe. There are a lot of guys that weren't happy, you know.
22 There were probably as many unhappy guys as there were happy guys. But it was hot and
23 it was miserable. We did have air conditioning, but it was the officers that used to
24 complain. They didn't have any air conditioning. Well, they would buy pop and they'd
25 fill the vents up with it to get it cold. At Yankee Station they'd sell pop for four dollars a
26 can for pop. And that was back in 1967.

27 KC: Holy smokes.

28 DL: For a can of pop, four bucks.

29 KC: Wow.

30 DL: I can remember that. But the officers, they'd send somebody down to check
31 the duct work, but of course they knew it was coming because they were all enlisted and

1 they'd tell the next guy and the next guy. So we would be aboard ship there and we had
2 two places to eat. We had the regular dining hall where you'd go for like mashed potatoes
3 and gravy or whatever. And then they had another dining hall and it was like hamburgers
4 and hot dogs and chili dogs and ice cream, you know. And so we had a little time there
5 and then we'd study for rank and we got to take our test aboard ship then for rank.

6 KC: Okay. And how'd it go?

7 DL: Well, I passed. I made E-4. I was gunner's mate and I was at the little cross
8 guns, you know. I got to sew that on. And then when I found out I sewed that on, we
9 found out that you could make money by sewing other guys' stuff on because they didn't
10 like to sew, you know. So, I made a little extra money there and everything. It was kind
11 of fun. My responsibility changed. I left from scooting tailfins, of course you call them
12 tailfins for bombs, and I got to move there and I got put up on a 5"/54, which was kind of
13 nice because with ship going there was a breeze with the doors up there and with the
14 doors up there closed on the ship and the breeze it was really nice. You had a breeze up
15 there which was pretty neat from being down below.

16 KC: Right.

17 DL: You know, you had a good breeze and got to be up there and you got to wash
18 it down, you know, with the hose, you had a garden hose you had to wash it down and
19 clean it and wipe on it, and worked inside. It was a lot better duty.

20 KC: Sounds like things are going pretty well for you here in the Navy, then.

21 DL: Not too bad.

22 KC: Yeah, for goodness sakes. Well, you said that you went to Yokosuka, you go
23 to the Philippines, you were at Pearl Harbor. Did you ever get time to go ashore any of
24 these places?

25 DL: Oh yeah, at Pearl Harbor we got to go over to the *Arizona*, we got to look all
26 around the *Arizona*. We got to go surfing and they had a—

27 KC: You surfed?

28 DL: I didn't do a very good job at it.

29 KC: I was going to say, from Kansas, I can't believe—

30 DL: It was fun getting up on your knees, but you know, just getting out in the
31 water was fun.

1 KC: Sure.

2 DL: You know, got to go out in the water and we got to go over and got to go see
3 a lot of shows because Special Services got free tickets to Don Ho, you know, there at
4 Pearl Harbor, we got to go there. And then we went to the Philippines and in the
5 Philippines they took you, where you moored the ship they would take you over to
6 downtown, they call Olongapo, and they had cattle cars and it was like you would carry
7 cattle there in the United States and you had a big bar down the middle of it. We'd all
8 stand there and hold on to this bar and they'd drive you over real, real dusty. And then
9 when you went over there they had the river which they used for their sewage system and
10 you would walk across it and there's sewage that would be floating down in there. And
11 then you'd get over it in the street in town that was called Magsaysay Drive and it wasn't
12 paved. When you first went over there it was nothing but dust. Anyway, they had little
13 window wells out in a little basement and they had alligators down into them. And you
14 would walk into this place and you'd go down the steps a little ways and down below
15 was the bar and they had different bars there. They had like California bar, a Nevada bar,
16 they had all these bars and then we'd walk out the back and there was the creek going by
17 your sewage system and they'd have a not much of a door, but you would go right there
18 in the creek, you know, and the kids would swim in it and everything there. You'd come
19 back in and they had a set of steps that went upstairs and that was to lady's of the
20 evening, who slept upstairs. And then you'd come back out and by the time you got back
21 to ship your shoes would be just dirt and your pants would be dirt clear up to the knee
22 because it was dust, dust. And so we'd go there and then we would go to Japan and Japan
23 was really nice. We'd go over get a haircut and they wouldn't use clippers on you. All
24 they'd use is scissors on you because they didn't have the power and they'd cut your hair
25 and you'd get a real snazzy haircut for two dollars. We thought that was pretty cool. And
26 then we'd go over there and there was a lot to see in Japan. We got to go to Tokyo and
27 there was a lot to see, you know. Of course, then, it was kind of like—they compared
28 them, I never been there, like Las Vegas, you know, because after the World War II they
29 had progressed and they said it'd look like if you went to Vegas here in the States. So
30 we'd go over there and they would have a lot of places to go, but we didn't eat any of the
31 food there. At both places we didn't eat very much food. We'd eat aboard ship, you

1 know. And so we never saw any dogs when we were in the Philippines and when we got
2 to Japan we didn't see any dogs at all and so, you know, the joke was, "I wonder if we're
3 eating dog meat or hamburger meat."

4 KC: Right.

5 DL: But, we didn't see it. The biggest thing about it is we'd pull into the
6 Philippines and they'd have swim call and I did it once. I didn't care much for it , but just
7 off the side of an aircraft carrier into the water.

8 KC: Now how far was that?

9 DL: Oh, I'd say it was a good one hundred feet.

10 KC: Oh, I was going to say it was about ninety to one hundred feet or something
11 like that.

12 DL: You know, it's just a guess, but it's a long way to the bottom. The only thing
13 they said to do was point your toes down because if you did it with your feet flat you'd
14 blister your feet and couldn't walk. So we'd go down there and they had an island called
15 Grandee Island and the Navy owned it and you'd go out and sit on the beach and you
16 could cook steaks and drink beer and sit out there all night and it was pretty nice. It was
17 right there and you could wear your dungarees over to it and it was pretty nice.

18 KC: So it sounds like life aboard the *Ranger* is really pretty sweet. You're making
19 a little bit of money, bringing home some scratch makes a little bit of extra money.
20 You're hitting the bars in Tokyo and the Philippines. It sounds like things are working
21 out pretty well for a guy named David Larsen. That's—

22 DL: Not bad.

23 KC: Okay, while all of this is going on, of course, the war is continuing. This is
24 the 1967. Even at this stage were you paying any attention to the war?

25 DL: Well, kind of, but they said we were putting out more ordnance than any
26 other ship and then at Christmas time, Bob Hope came on.

27 KC: Aboard the *Ranger*?

28 DL: Aboard the *Ranger*, yeah. He came on at Christmas time.

29 KC: What was that like? Bob Hope on your ship, that's something else.

30 DL: That was pretty nice. Barbara McNair was there. I don't know if you know
31 Barbara McNair.

1 KC: No, I don't.

2 DL: She was a colored lady, she was a singer. Of course, destroyers were pulling
3 both alongside to see it, you know. The big shots got to come over and see it, but she
4 sung a song, "Will You Marry Me, Bill?" I don't know if you've ever heard that song.

5 KC: No.

6 DL: "Will You Marry Me, Bill?" And she says, "Is there anybody out there
7 named Bill that could come up on the stage with me?" And I think the first hundred guys
8 in the first hundred seats took off running, I know all of them weren't named Bill.

9 KC: At least they were at that time.

10 DL: Yeah, and then Raquel Welch.

11 KC: Wow.

12 DL: Was there and I got to go up and do a twirl with Raquel Welch.

13 KC: Well tell me about that, I've got to hear about this.

14 DL: Well, she was on there and they said, "Would somebody like to come up and
15 dance with Raquel Welch?" I got kind of shoved up, you know. When there's a crowd of
16 fifty, sixty people behind you, you just got to go up and kick a twirl, you know? Because
17 there's five thousand guys. It wasn't much of a dance, but, you know, it was pretty neat.
18 That was at Christmas time. That was my first, well second Christmas away from home
19 that I was on it, so it was pretty neat. And then we got stuck at Yankee Station, we got
20 stuck on the line for, well, we were out there for about one hundred days which was an
21 uncommon thing because they would come in to relieve you, the other ships would come
22 and relieve you and they had the *Ticonderoga*, the *Enterprise*, and the *Oriskany*. I can't
23 remember the rest of them. There were five or six of them and they would come in and
24 the *Kearsarge*, yeah, the *Kearsarge*. They would come and relieve you and then you'd go
25 off. Sometime there'd be two or three aircraft carriers off the coast of Vietnam.

26 KC: Why were you on station for so long this time, on the line?

27 DL: Somebody had had a fire or had problems with their ship so we were
28 stationed there on the line and then we were getting ready to leave and then we got a call
29 and they told us we were leaving Yankee Station and we were going to the Straits of
30 Japan. They had a spy, they called it a spy ship, but it wasn't a spy ship, it was USS
31 *Pueblo* was off the coast of Korea and we went over there for a show of support. So we

1 left about one hundred and ten, one hundred and fifteen degrees there and went over to
2 Korea, off the coast of Korea and we went from, like I said, one hundred and ten, one
3 hundred and fifteen degrees in the shade. We went over there to freezing temperatures.

4 KC: So this was after the *Pueblo* had been captured?

5 DL: Captured, yeah Lloyd Bucher was the captain of the ship. I think our—I can't
6 remember if there was forty-three, I think there were forty-three people on ship. So we
7 went over with a show of force because they were trying to get the *Pueblo* back so we
8 went over and we were out in the straits out there and the Russians pulled up and we
9 didn't have any parkas on the *Ranger*, you know. We didn't have any big fancy clothes or
10 gloves or anything.

11 KC: Right.

12 DL: And things were freezing and we got over there and our anti-freeze, because
13 you put anti-freeze in your 5"/54s to make them move, but our anti-freeze wasn't strong
14 enough so we couldn't move our guns on our aircraft carrier. So our job, in case
15 something happened was to shoot tin foil out of the guns and we brought a tin foil and put
16 forty rounds in each one of them in case we had a missile fired at us. The tin foil is
17 supposed to, like, all the tin foil would reflect it, but we brought .50-caliber machine guns
18 up and set them up there and within a block of us the Russian ships would pull up beside
19 us and they would have big signs, like the most professionally painted signs you ever saw
20 that said, "Americans go home." On the side of them. If you're in the Navy you replenish
21 your ship from side to side. The Russians do it from front end to aft end. They replenish
22 that way. They don't pull alongside, they just go to the back. While they were
23 replenishing it and we would set up there for a shift of twelve hours with dungarees on.
24 We'd have two pairs of dungarees on, our little navy jackets on and all of our pea coats
25 on and we'd be sitting up there and we'd stay there twelve hours and then the next shift
26 would come on for twelve hours. And so we would just stay out there and go back and
27 forth and they'd launch planes of the ship to keep the deck clear of ice, you know,
28 because when the swells come up on the deck, you know, and they would come up in the
29 gun mount and it'd be like if you've ever—you know, winter time when you get a little
30 snow on you and it's wet and it gets real cold it kind of freezes on you. So we'd be wet

1 and our arms—our clothes would just be wet, wet, you know, and then you froze kind of.
2 And we'd spend twelve hours and then we'd leave.

3 KC: That must have been miserable.

4 DL: It was terrible.

5 KC: I would think you're thinking about wanting to be back in Vietnam dancing
6 with Raquel Welch.

7 DL: Yeah, that's basically when you're going from one hundred and something to
8 below thirty-two, that's an adjustment on your body. If I remember right it was five to six
9 days before we got there.

10 KC: Five, six days to get from Vietnam up to the coast of Korea.

11 DL: Yeah, because we weren't pushing it because we were trying to catch up with
12 the other task force, they called it a task force to get there. So that's where we went off
13 the coast of the Straits of Japan, called the Strait of Japan, so. We got an Armed Forces
14 Expeditionary Medal for going from hot weather to cold weather, is what they used to
15 laugh about. They give us a little ribbon to say we went from there to there, you know?

16 KC: Right. Well what was it like with this—it wasn't a confrontation with the
17 Soviets, but they were still there. I mean, it must have been uncomfortable, I would think.
18 Here you are, nineteen years old. What was that like for you?

19 DL: Well, the funny part about it was when they would pull up, they were so
20 prepared, you know, to stand there with big gloves on, big parkas on, and he you're
21 standing over there, you know, with none of the gear that they've got, you know, so you
22 wondered what was going on, you know, and why they were there. At the time, at the
23 time they told us that we was going there. We didn't know it was the *Pueblo*. They told
24 us that we had to go for a show of force, but they didn't explain, you know, the Navy
25 doesn't explain to you everything that really goes on. They said, "You're leaving here,
26 and you're going to join the task force and you're going here." When it was kind of over
27 with and winding down, they told us what they kind of done, but on the way, you know,
28 they said, we're going here. Well, you're too involved getting ready to go from this
29 environment to this environment that you weren't really paying any attention. We
30 weren't paying attention. We just had to be ready to get there.

1 KC: And, there's a reason why the military does this, why they don't tell people
2 things.

3 DL: Right.

4 KC: Because it wouldn't have made any difference to you, as an individual. Your
5 job would not have changed.

6 DL: No.

7 KC: It couldn't possibly serve any greater purpose to tell you that the *Pueblo* had
8 been captured by the North Koreans and you're there as a show of force. It wouldn't have
9 mattered at all. You're still going to freeze your tail off watching the Russians with their
10 signs out. Well, how long were you there?

11 DL: I don't remember. Honestly, I don't remember. We weren't there very long,
12 but we were, like I said, we left there and it was a relief to just leave there. I can't
13 remember whether it's thirty days, sixty days, or whatever. I know it was miserable, it
14 was cold, you know. By the time you're getting out of the rack you just froze to death.

15 KC: Right.

16 DL: And so it could have been two weeks, it could have been three. I just don't
17 remember it's been so long, you know.

18 KC: Just remember the cold.

19 DL: Yeah, it's cold.

20 KC: Where do you go when you're done with that?

21 DL: Well, when we left there we were headed back to the States and this Tom
22 Brown that I told you about, well, he come down. There was another guy in the division,
23 his name was Clutch, and they called him Clutch. I don't know what his real name was,
24 but they called him Clutch. He was an old second-class gunner's mate. He'd probably
25 been in twelve, thirteen years and never got past the E-5.

26 KC: Probably where he wanted to be.

27 DL: Yeah, that is kind of a stable duty and so Tom comes down and he was kind
28 of crying his eyes out and I said, "What's a matter?" and he says, "You, me, and Clutch
29 just got orders to Vietnam." And I said, "Big deal. We've just been there. What's, you
30 know."

31 KC: Yeah, you're thinking something different, I guess.

1 DL: Yeah, you know he says, “We just got orders to Vietnam.” I said, “Big deal,
2 you know, we just left Vietnam.”

3 KC: You had ice cream and Raquel Welch and Bob Hope.

4 DL: Yeah, so I thought, “No, this can’t be that bad.” Well, two of the other guys
5 were on there any they walked up and they were mad because they had applied for river
6 boats over in Vietnam, they had applied for it, but they hadn’t got taken. And here I’d just
7 made rank and Tom was a third-class, Brown, and Clutch was a second-class. He said,
8 “No, you don’t understand. We’re going to Vallejo, California, and we’re going on small
9 boats and we’re going in-country, Vietnam.

10 KC: He knew this already?

11 DL: Yeah, he’d been up to personnel and they had had their orders up there.
12 These orders had come and he knew it. And he was kind of teary eyed, and these other
13 guys were jealous because if you wanted to make rank back then, if you went to Vietnam
14 on small river boats, you could make rank pretty well and control where you went. So he
15 was really upset and he said, “They’re not going to let us get off the ship.” Well, I was
16 supposed to get married and my wife—your blues, dress blues, and she ordered all the
17 wedding dresses and everything in dress blue, the bridesmaids and everything. Well, he
18 went down and he told our captain that he wanted to, well, he went to somebody told him
19 he wanted to see the captain. They were going to let us have a week’s leave. He says,
20 “Why can’t we have thirty days, because, you know, we’re not going to be able to get
21 leave or cash in our leave.” So they come down and says, “Okay,” he says, “I’m going to
22 let you have thirty days’ leave.” So I had to write my wife, it was June the twenty-ninth,
23 forty years ago Monday, the twenty-ninth. Today’s the first of July, so forty-one years
24 ago, forty-one years ago. In eighteenth June I was twenty-one so they took us and they
25 flew us into Travis Air Force base there in San Francisco, outside of San Francisco and
26 we left there. Tom went home, Clutch went home, and I went home. We went over to the
27 airport. That was when he was talking about the time that that was our first protestors that
28 we ever—

29 KC: I was going to ask you about that.

30 DL: Well, that was our first protestors that we had ever met when we got over
31 there.

1 KC: Describe that scene for me when you meet these protestors. You'd been to
2 Vietnam and name only, but you were obviously military when you go into Travis, when
3 you got into San Francisco. What was that scene like?

4 DL: Well, back then you had to wear your uniform. We had to wear our uniforms
5 so we got to San Francisco International Airport. It was kind of, you know, it was kind of
6 interesting when you've only been in three airports in your whole life it was kind of
7 interesting. Well, anyway, it had the big windows where you can see the planes out there.
8 Anyway, there was all these military people all sit together because kind of to watch
9 yourself and when your flight was ready, they would call you to come to get your flight,
10 and I was going to fly to Kansas. Well, anyway, they had like a little raise or little
11 platform where you could see outside as well and there was some wounded guys sitting
12 on the front, Marines and Army guys sitting at the front, some had canes, you know.
13 Some had their arms gone, some had legs gone, and some of them were just crippled up.
14 Well anyway, the protestors would walk through there. That's when they let you come in
15 the airport.

16 KC: Right.

17 DL: And so they'd walk through there and I don't know what was said. I was
18 probably back about eighty feet back and there was hippies or whatever you want to call
19 them. Flower kids or whatever. They walked up and they said something to this Marine
20 right there on the front. And the next thing we all knew we saw this cane go up in the air
21 or this walking stick. And the next thing we all heard shouting and screaming, this guy
22 goes, "Look it, there's blood all over the windows." You know, when you see all of those
23 tarmacs and he said, "There's blood all over them." Of course, you start to hear MPs
24 (military police) come running and everything. This lieutenant next to us, he says, "When
25 they ask who did this, everybody's supposed to stand up." And I thought, "Well, you're
26 in trouble now." So anyway, they come over and here was these three hippies or flower
27 kids, and they were lying on the floor up there with blood all over the windows. So shore
28 patrol and military police, they all ran up. So anyway, they said, "What happened?" and
29 this girl said, "Those guys beat us up." He says, "Anybody who was involved in this, will
30 you please stand up?" and there was this lieutenant in the marines and when he stood up,
31 everybody stood up. About four hundred guys stood up so there was no way. Of course,

1 you know, by then they had doctors, they called for nurses and doctors to come. So they
2 got them and took them. Then all these people come and start cleaning up. So they posted
3 about twenty-five or thirty MPs around us until we all left. They wouldn't let us get up.
4 We couldn't even go to the head because they made us sit there and go to the head when
5 you get on your plane and couldn't get nothing to drink. Couldn't go over to the gedunk
6 machines or nothing, you know. So we had to sit there and wait until they had left and
7 somebody says, "Well, what happened?" and so he said, "Don't say nothing until you get
8 on the plane to go home because they don't want them to find out." I guess that Marine
9 with the cane, he just beat the snot out of him. I don't know what was ever said, but, you
10 know, it was pretty scary just everybody standing up at once. I figured you was all going
11 to Leavenworth.

12 KC: (Laughs).

13 DL: You know, so it was quite an experience. So we left there and flew to
14 Kansas City. Kansas City was pretty calm, but people, like when you got on the plane,
15 nobody would sit next to you. They wouldn't sit next to you and wouldn't talk to you.
16 The stewardess would talk to you and by then, I'd come home and I had four ribbons and
17 so I come home, but nobody would talk to you at all. They didn't want nothin' to do with
18 you.

19 KC: What did you think about that? What you'd seen there in San Francisco and
20 your treatment there in Kansas City? What did you think about this protest movement and
21 the way the military personnel were being treated?

22 DL: Well, I wondered what was going on and why people were, you know, you'd
23 sit down and the plane has where they'd assign the seats and you'd sit down and the
24 person next to you would get up and leave, you know, like you were the villain or
25 something. You had bad breath or something. It was really kind of scary because why
26 wouldn't anybody sit next to you, you know? It's like us sitting here. Why would—you
27 know, what's wrong? Do I smell? What's the deal? You had your sea bag with you, you
28 know, brought on. I had a little parachute bag that had my personal items I didn't want to
29 put back in luggage. I thought, "Man, these are just some weird people, different people,"
30 you know, and so it was kind of strange. I thought, "Well, something's wrong with them.

1 It couldn't surely have been me," you know? What was I doing wrong? I was just getting
2 on the plane to come home for leave for a couple weeks. It was a little over three weeks.

3 KC: What did you think about the war protests in general?

4 DL: I thought it was kind of bad because when I was later on, Jane Fonda went to
5 Hanoi and they had a pilot there and his name was Driscoll. I didn't know him or
6 anything. I read about him. Anyway, he was telling me about how Jane Fonda got him
7 hurt, you know. And after I come home, I was reading the paper and reading about
8 different things. I don't remember if it was then or later, but I was reading about all these
9 people protesting the war, you know, in the Kansas City paper, you know. It had a lot of
10 articles in it. My dad wrote the paper a lot, picked it up, and then I guess the think that
11 really drove it home thinking about it was when we got to home was turn the news on at
12 six o' clock. They'd have a fire on a destroyer or they'd have a fire on the aircraft carrier
13 or so many guys got killed that day. It was a big thing to have the body count then.

14 KC: Right.

15 DL: I don't know whether you ever read much about it. When you went out it was
16 the body count, you know, later years I found out it was a body count. They try to make it
17 sound like the more bodies you killed, you know, they wanted a count. I don't know if
18 that can make you feel good or not, but I always thought that the media was—they were
19 terrible people because they were trying to make it glorify the whole thing, you know.
20 And they didn't talk about nothing but people getting killed. So, that kind of soured me
21 on the media thinking because I didn't think that the any of us were doing anything
22 wrong. They were sure coming back at you and if you were in Vietnam and you went to
23 Korea, that we weren't doing anything wrong, but trying to get our ship back. I'm sure
24 that they had done other things, but as a kid, eighteen, nineteen years old, you know,
25 you're just kind of doing what you're told to do. You can think back when your dad and
26 your uncle and your cousins are all in the service and what a job they did back in World
27 War II and Korea. You think, "Boy, if it wouldn't have been for them, I might not even
28 be alive or be here now," so you have a lot of respect for those guys. And, you know,
29 they didn't argue or fight or jump up and down about anything, so. It's just a different
30 time.

1 KC: Sure, sure. Well, you got this leave, you say, three week leave, roughly.
2 You're going to get married during this time?

3 DL: Yeah, I was coming back. My wife had ordered a blue dress and everything.
4 Well, I was supposed to wear my Navy blue's back because I wasn't going to come back
5 until later on in the year. Well, I come back so we had to bump the wedding up to June
6 the twenty-ninth and I had to wear my whites. So, to this day after forty-one years, you
7 know, when she looks at the picture, you know, she kind of goes wild about that. You
8 know, because she had invested her money and we just got married in Parsons up there at
9 18th and Crawford.

10 KC: Okay.

11 DL: So at the old Foursquare Church in Parsons. It's been there eighty years this
12 year.

13 KC: Well, first thing I want to say is congratulations on your forty-first wedding
14 anniversary just a few days ago.

15 DL: Well, thank you. So, we went to Branson for our honeymoon and we come
16 back and got over there by McCune where all these places are at and went across the
17 railroad track and come back from Pittsburg, let off the gas and bought a Chevrolet, a '59
18 Chevrolet. Let off the gas, one step down on it, it didn't have nothing. Blew the engine
19 coming back from our honeymoon.

20 KC: Well, it's better than on the way.

21 DL: Yeah, you bet. Yeah, and we come home and then I went to, left here and
22 flew to San Francisco and took a bus to Vallejo, California. I don't know whether you
23 know where Vallejo is at. Up north to Vallejo I went to small boat training in Vallejo.

24 KC: Let me stop you before we get you to Vallejo for this training and a couple of
25 things here. One is you just got married and you know you're going to Vietnam. You're
26 not going to Vietnam aboard the *Ranger* where you're getting ice cream and USO
27 (United Services Organization). You're going to Vietnam on these little plastic patrol
28 boats, these fiberglass boats. What was that like for you having just gotten married, you
29 got literally, a brand new wife and you're going to have to leave for this war that is
30 becoming increasingly unpopular and dangerous.

1 DL: I really didn't think much about it at that point. I hadn't really even thought
2 about it. I decided that, you know, just go and get this over with and then hopefully make
3 rank and make some more money. I'm thinking about more how I was going to take care
4 of her, you know.

5 KC: Sure.

6 DL: And everything. So, I literally was thinking about that and I thought this
7 would be kind of neat going to Vallejo, small boats, you know. That seemed like kind of
8 fun. And they had the weapons aboard them. It would be kind of fun to mess with
9 something you had hands on, you know, that you could do. That would be kind of fun,
10 you know. Everybody said you make good rank and you got paid combat pay. So you got
11 combat pay so you're sending home a pretty good hunk of money. You're sending home
12 like one hundred and seventy dollars a month. Which back in '68, '69, one-hundred-
13 seventy dollars a month, that was a lot of money you were sending home. So, I thought it
14 was a pretty good deal at the time, you know. Never thought much about, you know, the
15 war or anything. We thought, "Why in the world would somebody be upset?" but when
16 we got back to San Francisco, it started over. I think in the war in the Midwest it wasn't
17 as popular as the West Coast. I don't know about the East Coast, but the West Coast was
18 pretty bad, you know. But people would, like I said earlier, people wouldn't sit next to
19 you on the plane; they wouldn't have nothing to do with you. You'd go up, so you'd go
20 up to a policeman or somebody else that's in the service to ask them, you know,
21 directions or where to go. That was about it because nobody else really wanted to deal
22 with you.

23 KC: You make it to Vallejo and you're going to be aboard these small boats.
24 What did you know about these small boats, these river patrol boats?

25 DL: They told us that they would have to get a lot of people over there because
26 they had so many of men wounded and killed. They said that half of us, probably half of
27 us wouldn't come home.

28 KC: Wow.

29 DL: At the rate it was going. We didn't know if it was hype or what it was, you
30 know? They put us on small boats and put us out to train and we would learn how to

1 drive the boats and everything and go up and down. They had like slues there at Vallejo. I
2 don't know whether you have been there or not.

3 KC: No, I have not.

4 DL: It used to be an old sub pin, okay, and they had subs there and drydock or
5 whatever and we'd go out and we'd race cabin cruisers and speed boats and we would
6 race and we'd go up and down the slues and they'd teach us how to drive the boats, how
7 to moor them, how to pull along side of the other ones. And so really it was kind of we
8 were back on this duty where you worked all day and you had the nights off. You didn't
9 have to spend any duty because there was a base there. So it was like a nine-to-five job.

10 KC: Nine to five as you're training on these boats.

11 DL: Right.

12 KC: Okay, here's what I want you to do for me now.

13 DL: Okay.

14 KC: The first time you've seen one of these boats up close and personal, describe
15 the PBR (patrol boat, river) for me. Was this the Mark 1 or the Mark 2 that you had been
16 on?

17 DL: These were Mark 1s.

18 KC: Okay.

19 DL: And it was a little over thirty-one foot long, probably about eleven foot wide.
20 We didn't have any weapons on the first ones we saw, it didn't have any weapons on it,
21 they were green, and they were fiberglass. They were real, real thin and we used to walk
22 along the side there. There's a canopy back about not even halfway, but back about a
23 third of the way. And they had a metal railing around them, the boat, and it had
24 fiberglass. The fiberglass there, you would get up on that metal thing and you'd walk
25 around to the front of the boat and you could grab the canopy as you went around. We
26 were sitting on—we never touched the canopy, we used to walk right by them and you'd
27 walk around and they had a gun tub on the front that had twin fifties in it and you mainly,
28 you sat in a little strap, and you manually just moved it around with you body. So they
29 put guns on it but they didn't give us any ammunition. They put it there. Then on the
30 back they had a .50-caliber machinegun on the back. And then in the middle they had an
31 M-60 machinegun and they had an M-79 grenade launcher. We'd get in the boat and we

1 all took turns driving the boat and learning how to drive the boat. We thought it was kind
2 of cool because we'd see the other people out in these boats, you know, for their weekend
3 or their week off, you know. Of course, they were hollering at us and we'd holler back
4 that them. We were learning to drive the boats and how to stop and what they could do
5 and how we could stand on it, so. I remember the Mark 1 as the one, the first one I saw
6 was a Mark 1.

7 KC: What was the difference between a Mark 1 and Mark 2? Just for the
8 interview's sake?

9 DL: I think that the Mark 2 went faster than the Mark 1. It'd come out of the
10 water more. The only thing that it would raise the bow of the boat up and in 2002 while I
11 was at Stennis, Mississippi, I asked the old boy when they took us out in the new Mark
12 4s, Mark 3s and if they had the same problem we had, and he kind of looked at me kind
13 of laughed, he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "When you put the breaks on, you
14 know, the boat goes down in the water," is said, "if you're not strong enough, your guns
15 are pointing straight down, you know. When it comes back up they're straight up in the
16 air or how you got them, you know back and forth." Because when you put the breaks on
17 you go down and when they come up, he says, "Well, we got the same problem you had.
18 You have to learn how to manhandle them."

19 KC: Because they're heavy guns, especially with that momentum.

20 DL: Oh, they're heavy, right. And you've got that gun tub that you turn around
21 with your body and you turn it around with your body so we had to learn how to put the
22 breaks on and hold on. Some of us got thrown over to the side simply because we didn't
23 hold on. They slam on the breaks real fast because they thought they was going to hit
24 another boat, so it was fun, you know. Racing cabin cruisers on the ocean, you know,
25 that's kind of fun. But they were fast. We used to pull up, and they called it the rooster
26 tail on the back. Okay, the slower boat would go up and go on the rooster tail to make it
27 catch up with the other one. If they were a slower boat they always went behind and the
28 fastest one went in the front. They'd come up on the rooster tail in the back of it. But we
29 trained on them and they were made out of fiberglass and they had two Detroit diesel
30 motors in them, so.

31 KC: And those Jacuzzi pumps.

1 DL: Jacuzzi pumps, right.

2 KC: Right.

3 DL: And you could go into about ten inches of water was about what we were
4 going to. We had to clean the pump. So what they'd have to do is they'd have to shut the
5 boat off and you'd have to reach down. They'd have strainers for those Jacuzzi pumps.
6 You'd pull them out and have to empty them. They always told us when we're overseas it
7 might be a little rougher, that they could pull up a small snake or something so you'd
8 kind of, you know, but you had to shut the boat off before you took one of them out.

9 KC: Right.

10 DL: And so it depended on how fast your boat went by who was doing the
11 mechanic work on it.

12 KC: Yeah, the fine tuning, I think, would make an awful lot of difference.

13 DL: Right, right.

14 KC: On a boat like that.

15 DL: It sure did and keeping the maintenance up on it would be a big thing.

16 KC: Now, were you trained at all in how to maintain the boat? Other than things
17 like cleaning the pump and things like that.

18 DL: Well, you'd have a pump, you know, and if we had to take the engine cover
19 off that there was something that we really needed to know, but as far as the engine work,
20 the engineman pretty well took care of that. Everybody had to learn how to drive the
21 boat. They'd qualify you. You'd qualify on how to drive the boat, seamanship, you know.
22 All your ropes and everything put up. You had to be able to do all your small arms; you
23 had to be able to fire every weapon on the boat. So they'd give you a test. It really wasn't
24 much of a test if they knew who you were, but there were guys that were there that when
25 we got up the next morning that weren't there. So I don't know whether they quit, got fed
26 up, or washed out. I have no idea because they wouldn't come tell you, "So and so quit
27 because, you know," because could have a mutiny on their hands and they would have
28 guys that would come down there and they were driving the boat and the radar and the
29 first ones, we didn't really have radar on them. So, they didn't have the round radar on
30 top. So we learned how to drive them. You could pull—they had two levers. You could
31 pull one back, push one forward and then it would just sit there and spin. Or you would

1 push the other way and then spin the other way, how to stop it, how to pull alongside and
2 somebody else tie it off, by keeping the boat clean, learning all your weapons, and I had
3 to learn how to clean all the weapons and tear all the weapons down then maintain all the
4 weapons. That was my job as gunner's mate. And then we had an engineman that could
5 take care of the engines and then we had a seaman that took care of all the ropes and
6 helping with everything else, and then we had a boat captain. And so we all four knew
7 each other's job, but I was blessed when I got in-country, and even then when I was
8 training, the guys I was with, they all helped you. So if the engineman had a problem
9 with the boat, we all helped him. If we got in a firefight, all those guys, they'd help me
10 clean and restock ammunition. The cleanliness of the boat, we all cleaned the boat. We
11 all took care of the boat. The only one, sometimes the boat captain wouldn't help us
12 because he was getting debriefed. But to have the boat up and ready, and you wanted it as
13 ready as can be twenty-four hours a day.

14 KC: Right.

15 DL: So we kind of took it kind of serious. There's a lot of things on the engine I
16 didn't have any clue to what was going on, but he'd say, "You need to take this back and
17 off of that while we're working." We all worked together so it made a big difference.

18 KC: What would typically be the rank of the captain of the boat?

19 DL: The boat captain was usually a second-class or above. The gunner's mate was
20 usually third-class gunner's mate. And then you had a seaman on there that was in charge
21 of the boat. So you had boat captain could be a second-class, I mean first-class, but you'd
22 have a chief. It just depended on where you were on the slot. Sometimes I would go out
23 as the seaman. One time I went out as a boat captain. I didn't like it. I told them I never
24 wanted to do it again.

25 KC: Why?

26 DL: Because if you can imagine going out in the river at night, here in the States
27 you can see your hand in front of you because there's a light somewhere. Over there it's
28 pitch dark, you can't see your hand in front of you. They'll say, "Go up the river up here
29 and go up so far and hang a right."

30 KC: (Laughs)

1 DL: And I'd tell you, its pitch dark and I've got a little radar in there, and you're
2 inside there, and you're responsible for that whole crew and it wasn't that I couldn't do it,
3 it was because it was so dark and you've got all those guys there and you're responsible
4 for those guys. And I thought, "There's other people," and there and were people that
5 were really, really good. That was just their forte. They could, they could drive that boat
6 and I mean, they could remember going down. There's a curve down there. It'd be like
7 you driving home up here to Saint Paul, you know. You know every curve, and every
8 nook, you know? You drive down the street to your house and you can tell what kids live
9 here and there. Some guys were really good at that and I didn't think I was as good as
10 they were, so there were other guys that did a little better job with that and I liked
11 working with the guns.

12 KC: Alright, so you're training yourself silly here at Vallejo. Do you feel
13 comfortable when you leave? First of all, how long was training there?

14 DL: I don't remember. I think it was like three or four weeks.

15 KC: Okay.

16 DL: And then we left Vallejo and then they took us to Coronado, off of San
17 Diego. We went to Coronado and that's when we started training with, with the Navy
18 SEALs and we trained with all the army guys there, too. We got there and swimming, we
19 did a lot of swimming. They refined a lot of skills like that and then small arms. We went
20 through hours upon hours on small arms and what to do if somebody walked up and
21 come at you and you had to go one way and the other guy had to go the other way, you
22 know, to protect yourself and turn down all of your, your guns. Then they give you—they
23 spent a whole day and they're telling you about between you make like if you had going
24 to attack the beach with the boats, how to put your boats in and veer them off or to go in
25 like a wedge shape or however. They spent a day like that, you know, teaching you how
26 to utilize your guns to the best when you have to go alongside the river like that and how
27 to pull up to a sampan. What's your best advantage to take care of you.

28 KC: So depending on the situation, like you said, you might come in as a wedge
29 for protection as well as for guns or you come in an open V depending on the
30 circumstances.

1 DL: Right, yes sir. And it'd just depend on what it was, you know. And there
2 you'd get back to probably an officer was better qualified because he probably took War
3 College and then he could put it or you could run him straight in and then veer off, you
4 know, in two boats or three boats lined up going in and then veer off. We did that and
5 then we—well, small arms is a big deal. We went over and fired small arms quite a bit.

6 KC: M-16s, M-60s, things like that.

7 DL: M-60s, M-79 grenade launcher, and .50-calibers and they taught us and learn
8 how to tear them all down and how to repair them and how to fix them. They even sent
9 parts with us and they took a part out to see if you could get it. And they had a gage
10 called a no go or go. And you'd stick the gauge in and if the no go didn't go in it, then
11 your gun didn't work, it had to be a go. You had a little gauge you carried with you that
12 the gunner's mate carried with them. And then we learned how to call in for like
13 helicopters or call in for air support. We learned that and then we went to, they call it
14 SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape training).

15 KC: You went through SERE training?

16 DL: Went through SERE training.

17 KC: You got to tell me about SERE training. Tell me about this.

18 DL: Well, at SERE, it's survival, evasion, resistance, escape school. So it's a
19 week long and so the first two days when I went down to the ocean to avoid them and
20 we'd eat clams or whatever fish we could catch or whatever. And you didn't have a knife
21 or anything. You know, you were out in the middle of nowhere and the only thing they
22 taught you was before that, that if you got real sick or got the diarrhea, that you'd eat
23 charcoal from a fire to plug you up. That was the only advice they'd give you. Well, after
24 three days of, yeah, three days, on the third day they captured you, you had to be
25 captured. So they went in and they would bring you up like a chute for cows and you'd be
26 up in the chute up there and they'd look at you and your dog tags in your mouth and
27 they'd stand there and then they would pull you out, literally pull you out. They'd sit you
28 on a stool and they'd just whack you upside the head and knock you to the floor. It's a
29 good thing, you know, we were laughing one time and we were thinking about how
30 heavy our beard would get. That the heavier beard you had the better off you were
31 because it had to hurt their hand as much as it hurt you. And then they'd smack you

1 around and then they'd make you do push ups and stand you over in the corner or they'd
2 put you in a casket and they'd shut the lid down on it. And then they'd stick a snake in
3 there with you and they were trying to intimidate you. Then they would run outside and
4 they had little bunkers, there at San Diego, little bunkers and then they made us all go out
5 except for our skivvies and they took all of our clothes of and throw them in the middle
6 of the, of the compound. It was the prisoner of war camp and they had some guys that
7 were POWs over in Korea that were there and some old World War II guys and they had
8 rubber bullets to keep you in there and they had guard towers. Anyway, the planes from
9 the airport there at San Diego, the commercial planes, every time they flew over they had
10 (makes loud buzzing sound) the old thing that went off. The guy would run over and he'd
11 grab and turn it. Well, when he did you had to run back. You had to run, grab you some
12 clothes out of the stack, and you had to go back inside and then you had to come back
13 with those clothes on. So you didn't know whose clothes you were getting because they
14 were in a big pile in there. So they'd bring you in out from in there and then they'd go in
15 and "If you'll talk to us, we'll give you a piece of Spam." And guys would sit there and
16 they would smack you around a little bit and everything. And then we went through that.
17 Well, an example is they said, "Give me some pushups." And I remember I just got down
18 on the ground to give them some pushups. "Count off." You know, and that's the normal
19 things you'd count off. So I counted to three and I got a boot in the middle of my back.
20 And anyway, what ended up happening on that deal was when we got in the old boy told
21 me, "Now here's what they would do to you. How many little kids would you kill?"
22 "One, two, three." So don't ever count off, that was a mistake. He's teaching you how to
23 do it.

24 KC: Right.

25 DL: And we went through survival school and then we spent a week, about a
26 week in survival school. So now we learning how to obey the enemy. It was quite an
27 experience.

28 KC: One of the things that always—I don't know if fascinates is the right word,
29 but something that I've always been interested in is you're going through SERE training,
30 you know that these are Americans, you know that you're being trained, you know this is
31 not a real world situation as, as intense as it is, as my understanding, as brutal as it could

1 be in as psychologically difficult as it could be, you still know that it's training. Was that
2 always in the back of your head or was it something just so intense I'm not even
3 concerned that these are Americans doing this to me for a purpose. Was it difficult trying
4 to reconcile to this that it's not real, but at the same time it is real?

5 DL: Well, two days before we got out of it, the made us all get in a line and this
6 lieutenant or colonel or whoever it was he went through and it was like they'd shut it
7 down for an hour and you walk through and you'd be punched right in the face. "Are you
8 okay with this? Is it too much for you to, you know, in your mind to think that is this too
9 much to handle? Are you being so miserably mistreated, do you understand what's going
10 on here?" Most of the—if we come in far, you know, we got two days left after we had
11 been through it for three days, you know. They would say to us, "We're going to stick the
12 snake in here." And we we'd say, "Well, go ahead and stick it in, it'll be something to
13 eat, you know." You were getting to be more than that, but we tried to escape and that
14 was our primary goals was to try to escape, but every time we'd try to escape, you know,
15 we'd get caught and so we tried.

16 KC: How did you try to escape?

17 DL: Well, they had a fence behind us and we tried to sneak a guy out the back to
18 try to escape. We didn't do a very good job. They told us we didn't do a very good job at
19 all.

20 KC: (Laughs)

21 DL: And they said that there were two places that they had wire cutters, but we
22 never found them, you know. But, yeah, it was kind of a relief that afternoon. I think it
23 was on a Friday we got done on a Friday and they took us in to debrief us. We'd been
24 there all week.

25 KC: So did you go through any sort of food or sleep deprivation or anything like
26 that?

27 DL: No, we didn't have a whole lot to eat, but it we just knew that after three days
28 we only had two days left. Now, I'm sure that in the back of your mind if you knew it
29 was going to be six years you might have cracked real quick, you know? But when you
30 figure out, "Oh, I've only got two more days, I've come this far." But then when we got
31 back to our barracks that weekend, the funny part about it was the next morning we got

1 up and we would run every morning and there were four, five guys that weren't with us
2 again, you know, so we found a few that didn't make it through that part of whatever.

3 KC: Right.

4 DL: So then they took us to like a big barn with a whole bunch of chairs in it or a
5 big auditorium and they said, "Any of you have any questions?" And Tom Brown that
6 was with me, he was still with me, he goes, "You know, we all heard it was volunteer. If
7 you volunteer for PBRs then all volunteers go to Vietnam." He looked up and he says,
8 "Sir, I heard this was all volunteer organization. How come we're here?" And we were
9 sitting together and he says, "Did you join the Navy?" he said, "Yes, sir." And he said,
10 "You volunteered."

11 KC: I was going to ask you why they picked you. No rhyme or reasons why they
12 picked you guys.

13 DL: No. They said you volunteered. We later found out that, that as we were on
14 ship that we had done such a good job that they decided that we were qualified for that
15 and the guys that were trying to get it weren't the guys that they wanted. I think they had
16 been in a long—they just weren't doing their jobs so we found that out and then that's
17 when the wife come out and we rented a motel on the beach and went to language school
18 for two weeks.

19 KC: Vietnamese language school, I assume?

20 DL: Vietnamese language school for two weeks, yeah. Learning Vietnamese
21 language and then on Friday, the thirteenth of September in 1968, they told us in the
22 morning we'd ship out that afternoon. So, we went two weeks to Vietnamese language
23 school and learn our very little limited—

24 KC: I was going to ask you, how much Vietnamese did you pick up?

25 DL: We had Vietnamese girls at college, too. I can still remember some of it. Like
26 we knew what an ID was, like your drivers license. They called it a can kook and they
27 called a young girl's first name like here in the States being Miss it's called Co and a
28 man's name is Angh. Like Angh Crager. That's what they would call you, sir. And so
29 you picked up the little things that you need. *Lai day, lai day* means come here. You
30 know, you need things like just your basic language, you know, to get you through.

1 KC: Well, part of the main, a main purpose of Operation Game Warden, of
2 course, was interdiction of river traffic for weapons and supplies and things like that. So
3 the Vietnamese language would be very, very important for you guys, I would think. So
4 was Vietnamese language and SERE, for that matter, or was SERE training and
5 Vietnamese language school mandatory? Did all members of the Game Wardens have to
6 go through those?

7 DL: As far as I know we did.

8 KC: I didn't realize that about the SERE training.

9 DL: Yeah, SERE was some took it there and some took it up at Bremerton,
10 Washington, up there. I can't think of the name of the place up there, but we took ours in
11 San Diego. I think it was Warrior Springs or something like that. But we took our training
12 there. Yeah, the SERE and the Vietnamese language, everybody I knew that were all the
13 guys that I was with that were there, there were about nine of us that were there together.
14 We all were on the same river division, so. There was one, two, and three; there were
15 four of us that come off ships so we were all, all coming together when we left there.

16 KC: Well, training's finally wrapped up. Language training is the last thing you
17 have there, I guess. How do you feel about the training? Do you think that it was, that it
18 was adequate? Do you feel that it prepared you as much as non-combat can compare you
19 for combat?

20 DL: Well, we thought we would have a couple days off, you know. We had been
21 at language school for our tenth day and they told us in the morning, "Have your bags
22 packed. Tell your wives and your girlfriends and everybody you're leaving."

23 KC: Wow, that's quite a shock.

24 DL: Yeah, it was Friday the thirteenth in September. So we are flying up in a
25 plane, our wives and everybody is down on the ground now waving at us, our girlfriends.
26 Our luggage is going another way on another plane. We're flying off and flying this way
27 and leaving them all down on the ground, you know, so we thought, "Boy, this is going
28 to be something else." So we took a commercial airline to Vietnam. We stopped in Japan
29 and then we arrived in-country.

30 KC: Alright, you've arrived in-country. Here it is, what, '68, right? September
31 1968?

1 DL: Right.

2 KC: All the trainings you've had, the years that you've had in the Navy so far. All
3 this recent training, on the PBRs and the SERE and all these things, now it's coming all
4 the way together. It's just coming full circle here. You are going to be on these fiberglass
5 boats in Vietnam, in the middle of it. What are you thinking when you entered country?

6 DL: We really didn't think much about it. The division I was in, 593, we had
7 heard they were about the best so Tom and Mike Persco and myself, we thought we were
8 blessed to be going to 593. It was 544, the river section that went to River Division 593
9 so we thought we were pretty good. And they really hadn't had a lot of casualties and we
10 thought things were—you know, you heard on the news that things were getting better.
11 Going to start pulling out and Nixon was going, "We're going to pull out of Vietnam,"
12 you know. And things have got to be getting better now. They sent thousands of troops
13 over when we landed and you could see the planes. You'd see all these guys marching
14 around and so how could you get in trouble with thousands of people. You know, we got
15 off there and they put us in a little school bus and they took us downtown. Well, on the
16 way going to downtown.

17 KC: In Saigon?

18 DL: In Saigon, yes. And looked over and one of these guys says, "It looks like
19 curb and gutter. How bad can this be?" You know, there's curb and gutter. And then this
20 one guy started crying and he said, "Look again." Looked over and the women wore
21 pants with a dress over them, they were slit on the side. The guys would turn their back to
22 you, they would turn their back to you and that was their sewer system. The women
23 would bend down and let the dress hang over them and they'd pull their pants down to go
24 in the curb and gutter along the road. Of course, that silenced everybody real, real, quick.
25 And then they took us to an old motel they called the Annapolis Motel.

26 KC: The Annapolis, yeah, right. Infamous.

27 DL: Yeah. I had to go up on the first night I was there, had to go up on the top of
28 it and guard the building. That was my first job.

29 KC: (Laughs).

30 DL: They gave me an M-14, checked out an M-14 and then the next day they sent
31 a jeep to pick us up and then we went to Nha Be which was south of Saigon. We were on

1 our way down and I will never forget, there was all these Army guys standing out there.
2 And their patrolman says, “Well, what’s going on?” You think, “Boy, something’s really
3 getting nasty,” you know, that “Well, this might not be as good as that. Anything with
4 this can’t be too bad.” I looked up and all these little hooches made out of pop cans had
5 antennas sticking out of them like back home, TVs. And the old boy said, “Two different
6 guys were bringing a load of TVs back.” He said they got hijacked and killed. And he
7 says, “They took every TV and every antenna off of it.” We looked back and saw all of
8 these hooches with the antenna and TV, but no electricity. And so we don’t know
9 whether they were the ones that did it. And then it started sinking in and then we got to
10 the base at Nha Be and we went into the base at Nha Be and reported in the base there.
11 Bill Straight was the captain in charge then.

12 KC: Let me interrupt you again if I can and just get some general impressions
13 about your early time in-country. From what you said so far, you’ve not paid an awful lot
14 of close attention to what’s going on in Vietnam. There is a military’s line and your duty.
15 There’s the political line in the order. We are saving these people in this country against
16 the spread of communism, all these kind of things. But when you get in-country, what
17 you see is kind of a contradiction. Obviously Saigon is an incredibly busy city, but like
18 you mention, in many ways it was primitive by American standards. You’re told that the
19 U.S. was involved because these people need the United States and want the American
20 presence there to help them. But then what you see are things like these soda pop can and
21 beer can hooches that are thrown together from the scraps that the Americans have left
22 behind because of this poverty that is there. But yet, you see these televisions and these
23 antennas and that Americans died. This is American property and Americans died trying
24 to defend this property and here these people are the ones who likely, possibly, could
25 have been the ones who killed them. It’s almost like an *Alice and Wonderland* kind of
26 thing, I would think from a kid from Kansas. Now, I’m painting a picture for you here,
27 and I probably shouldn’t be doing that, but what is your impression of all this going on?

28 DL: Well, all we kept hearing was it wasn’t a war. It was a police action.

29 KC: Right.

30 DL: So, you know, I don’t whether they were brainwashing, thinking, you know.
31 It was just at that time and later on it changed. But then it was just a little skirmish, you

1 know, and they put it on TV and they'd say, "Well, up north, they're down south." South,
2 the southern part of Vietnam, you know, they'd talk about a place call Vung Tau. And the
3 resort center and China Beach. Things weren't really don't get too concerned about it,
4 you know. So that was September and the thirteenth or fourteenth, they don't get too
5 concerned about it, it's nothing really to be getting alarmed about, things are fine. Well,
6 let's see, the next day we really didn't pay any attention to that. We were just so thankful
7 we were—we thought we were getting into a pretty secure place because we were River
8 Division. So we didn't really think much about, "Well, you know the war over there.
9 We'll get our time in. This didn't seem to be too bad." They had a club on the base and
10 the Vietnamese over there were impersonating Johnny Cash, you know or Loretta Lynn.
11 You know, we thought, "Well, we'll be on base and we'll go out and ride down the river,
12 you know, come back and there shouldn't be nothing that day." They said they really
13 hadn't had a lot of problems. Well, nobody in the river section had been killed up to that
14 time. It only had been existing ninety days. Nobody had really been—it wasn't that big of
15 a deal, you know. I think it was relatively new and the enemy didn't know what it was.
16 So from the reports we got this was just pretty cushy duty, you know, that you were
17 going to have it pretty well made. But they would say, "Oh, so and so." So you figured it
18 was a sniper, you know, it didn't really cross your mind, you know. I know you're
19 painting that story about why, but we just were kids and we thought, "Well, we'll just get
20 this done and go home." It won't be that big of a deal to us. Of course, we weren't like
21 Army, you know. We were in the Navy and most of the guys with us we'd known. A
22 couple of them I'd known them for a year and a half, two years. I thought, "This isn't too
23 bad, you know." We were eating three meals and they took us into a barracks they had
24 built and what they did was they took a dredger and they took the sand out of the river
25 and put up around the base. Then they went in and they built barracks for us and so I was
26 in a little cubicle made out of lockers and there were three of us in there. There was
27 supposed to be four, but the guy I was with wouldn't let nobody sleep below him and his
28 name was Donald Itzenberg. You'd walk in and there was a set of bunk beds on the right
29 and there's some on the left. He wouldn't let anybody sleep down below him. He didn't
30 want me to come in there. Well, I went in the other one. I slept on the bottom and then a
31 guy by the name of Randall, Jim Randall, J.R. slept on the top. So it was pretty easy. The

1 first week in-country wasn't anything to—I mean, we went out in the boats and got
2 familiar with everybody and then that was about it. We'd ride down the river and we'd
3 pull up against a sampan and then we'd shut the motors off and they'd pull us. And they
4 had Briggs and Stratton motors on these big long shafts. Along with the shaft went the
5 bigger the faster it went. We'd pull and shut our motors off and sit there with guns and
6 we would go through and check the sampan and go on. That was about our duty. So we
7 thought, you know, after that we kind of thought this is just pretty darn good, you know?
8 We'd get back at night, we had a mess hall to go eat in, you know, this was a pretty darn
9 cushy duty, you know. You'd do this for a year and then come home.

10 KC: This is a good time to ask you, if you would, describe for me the mission, the
11 purpose of, of Task Force 116 or of Game Warden. What was the overall purpose of the
12 mission of this outfit?

13 DL: Let's see, where we were at, we were on the Rung Sat Zone and it was called
14 the Killer Jungle.

15 KC: Right.

16 DL: And it would come up from the South China Sea up to Saigon, the river and
17 what our job at the time when I got there, my division was, as these ships had carried
18 probably sixty-five or seventy-five percent of all the supplies into Saigon would come up
19 this river. And our job was to guard those boats so that one could get sunk and block it.
20 It's like a canal or a big river coming up there. Our job was to patrol up and down and
21 make sure they got supplies up to Saigon. We were about three quarters of the way up
22 and then the Army would come down and they had PBRs and they would come down a
23 little ways and they would take over from us. But we would go up and down that and
24 then when Admiral Zumwalt took over, what he did was he went in and he decided to
25 clean it out and that was at Christmas time because of Tet. He decided he was going to
26 clean, clean it out because he didn't like us getting shot at.

27 KC: Tell me what you mean by "clean it out."

28 DL: Well, we'd go in with the Army, with the ARVNs (Army of the Republic of
29 Vietnam) and that was the South Vietnamese. We'd go with them and the Big Red 1 and
30 we'd go on it and we'd go up a little river and we couldn't turn our boats around on the
31 river. We'd go up the river and we'd let the Army guys off and they'd go in and search

1 there and we'd go in and get drums full of equipment and food and everything and
2 medical supplies and come back out. And then we'd sweep that area and when we'd think
3 that was kind of secure we would move on up the river. So we were moving from the
4 south and moving north on the rivers. Then as we moved into a new area sometimes we'd
5 turn around and go back to surprise them if they tried (unintelligible).

6 KC: You're talking about the Viet Cong?

7 DL: The Viet Cong, yeah. We had the Viet Cong and then we had the North
8 Korean regulars. We had regulars and then we had Chinese and Russian advisors were
9 also there.

10 KC: You've seen them there?

11 DL: One night they had a mortar attack or a rocket attack on Vung Tau and we
12 went in and when we went in they said he was Chinese and I cut his belt buckle off and
13 his belt off and his webbing off of his body and it had the red Chinese star on his belt
14 buckle. And they determined after with the name and the hat they found that he was an
15 advisor with the Red Chinese and then one time or another they assumed it was a
16 Russian.

17 KC: Wow.

18 DL: So, we knew they cut it off because the star, you know the red star. The Viet
19 Cong and the North Vietnamese didn't wear any kind of insignias that, that we could ever
20 see. They had pictures with money and stuff like that. But this guy had a belt buckle that
21 he was pretty proud of. And so we cut it off, we cut a lot of supplies at that time so we
22 think they were advisors showing them how to mortar or how to launch the stuff. These
23 rockets were made, they were Chinese so we assumed that was an advisor. The way he
24 looked. He's a little taller than the other ones were. They surmised all of this after they
25 looked, so I don't know whether it really come out that way when it's all done.

26 KC: Right.

27 DL: But at the time that's what we all speculated and they were doing all their
28 things, you know, naval intelligence and all of that stuff.

29 KC: Well, it certainly sounds very reasonable that that would be the case.

30 DL: Right.

1 KC: Okay, so you're part of River Division 593. What—now you're in the Rung
2 Sat Zone, alright.

3 DL: Yes.

4 KC: Was there a particular area to which your division was assigned more
5 specifically than the Rung Sat Zone or was the 593 responsible for the entire zone?

6 DL: Well, we weren't responsible because, well, we were in a way, but Admiral
7 Zumwalt or Admiral Price would come in and they would have us move to a different
8 area so as the war went on, we moved up to kind of take more control. If we could get
9 that secure, they would bring in other things, but they would always send the PBRs in.
10 593, there were about three other river divisions and we would be the ones that they
11 would come and get us and say once you go in. We were up on the upper Saigon River
12 and we'd go up and went up to Cu Chi and Cu Chi up there, we lived in what they called,
13 port-a-tents, and they were aluminum around the bottom and had a canvas top on them.
14 They set them on pallets and we would pull in and we would make a base and the Army
15 would guard us there. We would go up the rivers and the Army would ride along with us
16 on the boats and then we'd let them off. Maybe we're going in to find the enemy. And we
17 would go up there like for thirty days, sixty days, and then they'd pull us back to rest and
18 we'd get what we called that good duty down Nha Be because we'd go down to the South
19 China Sea and the destroyers would pull in, like you were talking about your dad. These
20 destroyers would pull in and one of our chiefs, he was a signalman and you'd see them on
21 get their lights trained down at us and we'd get mops and rags and stuff. And then we'd
22 toss them an AK-47 up to them that we'd captured and they thought that was pretty cool.

23 KC: (Laughs)

24 DL: Then we'd go back up. When we lived up on the river up there and then we'd
25 move on a little further north and we'd live off our boats. We'd pull our boats in and
26 we'd live off of them. They'd bring in what we called bladders. They'd bring in our fuel
27 and we'd pump it by hand. They'd bring in fifty-five-gallon drums of drinking water and
28 then they'd bring our C-rats in and they'd fly them in by helicopter. The Army would
29 secure landing zone for us and we'd pull up one at a time and fuel up and get our food
30 back off and let another one come up.

31 KC: So you'd be out for thirty to even sixty days?

1 DL: Well, I think the most we were out was like thirty days, but we'd go up here
2 and we weren't really out, we were close by if we had to get back. You know, we weren't
3 in contact all the time, but we lived down on, like there at Cu Chi, we lived there and we
4 did our laundry out in the water out there. We swam out in it and we would be up there
5 for a while so, and you had one year from the time you got in-country you had a year and
6 you'd make about twenty patrols a month. Some months were more than that, but you'd
7 average about twenty. Some months you'd get thirty one. It just depended on where
8 we're at and what the casualty rate at the time. When we made our move up north that's
9 when our casualties and they estimated about one out of three would either get wounded
10 or killed, so we were getting in a high risk area. We started losing, we started losing
11 people.

12 KC: Why don't we take a break here?

13 DL: Sounds good.

14 KC: Alright, we just had you at Vung Tau. You've made it in. This is where
15 you're going to be operating in and out of. You've described some of the things that
16 you're going to be doing with 593. If you would, take me on a typical day, a typical day
17 when you're going to go out. You're going to go up the river. What would a typical day
18 be?

19 DL: Well, we would get up—it depended whether you went in the evening shift.
20 Now we call it the evening shift or the day shift. We'd get up and, say, the evening shift.
21 We'd go down and we'd make sure our boat was okay and we'd check it out and clean
22 the strainers on it and make sure we had ammunition on it. On my boat I carried eight
23 extra cans of .50-caliber in the front and kind of put the weight on the front of the boat.
24 I'd check all my weapons and after I get it checked everybody would come down and
25 then they'd go up and they would tell the boat captain where we were going to go and
26 what we were going to do. And then we would be ready to go. Then we would get a little
27 water and sometimes they'd pick up some beer or whatever and then we'd come down
28 and we'd take out patrolling. Depending on whether we were going to take the Army in
29 for an ambush, during the daytime we would go up and down the river and they'd pick a
30 spot and then that evening you'd take them to land. So, each patrol depending on a
31 different night and then about ninety-eight percent of the time, it was just riding up and

1 down the river, checking the sampans. If anybody crossed the river that wasn't supposed
2 to be there, but usually we'd just pull up alongside a boat and tie off and start checking it.
3 In the evenings if anything moved on the river at night, we shot it. We owned the river.

4 KC: At night nothing's supposed to move. The local population knew that and
5 regardless you're on the river, you shouldn't have been on the river.

6 DL: Right.

7 KC: And so that's what a lot of people didn't understand. And when you were
8 talking about the war and how it impacted, come back to think it was really a war was
9 Tom Brown and I talked about him before here, he got killed. He'd come in and he got
10 killed so he was one of the first ones that got killed and that kind of, you know, knowing
11 somebody for that long. So that changed my idea that this really is a war, you know? It's
12 just not a police action. You know it's really; they're really trying to get you.

13 DL: Right.

14 KC: How does that affect you otherwise emotionally, psychologically? When
15 someone that you have been with for so long, you guys were on the *Ranger* together.

16 DL: Yeah, we were on there. It was hard. We talked about it the other day when
17 they're writing this book that they're writing about our division. And it was real hard
18 because we were pretty close and I didn't know until about, oh, three months ago he had
19 a daughter.

20 KC: Oh, wow.

21 DL: And she was down here in Arkansas. She called and we talked, she was
22 adopted. I didn't really know it, but we didn't talk a lot about family or anything. You
23 know, we were lucky to be with 593. We always thought that we were just another one of
24 the river divisions, but Admiral Zumwalt we thought we were one of the best so that kind
25 of changed, but we would go up and down the rivers and we checked thousands upon
26 thousands of sampans and when you had a firefight, it lasts in just a few minutes, but the
27 rest of the time was you'd say boring. You just got a lot of sun.

28 KC: Okay. Well, you're out on one of these patrols. We'll get to an insertion here
29 in a little bit. But say you're out on one of these patrols. You're just up and down the
30 river either during the day or during the evening. And you see these sampans. Did you

1 search out every sampan? Were there some Vietnamese locals who you knew were okay
2 or you knew had papers? Or did you stop and search every sampan that you came across?

3 DL: The patrols we were on, when Mr. Morgan and Mr. Madden, they were two
4 of our officers. We searched everything. We stopped everything, we had them lined up.
5 And we searched everything. I got to take that back a little bit. It depended on what area
6 we were in. If we were in an area where we had had a lot of problems, you know, but
7 they told us one time, I don't know whether this was right or not, but during the day, they
8 were your friends at night that were the enemy, about half of them. So if there were ten
9 people then five of them were your enemy that night when it got dark. We were pretty
10 good. We were pretty conscientious about checking everything and making sure that they
11 were on the—the hardest thing to check, they called them taxi cabs. They would have
12 forty people on them. It was real hard to check them, but there would be sometimes we
13 would think we would find something and we found very little because they were smart
14 enough to know that they transported them and we were going to catch it. So that stopped
15 a lot of supplies and stuff from being carried down the river. So we were hurting them
16 pretty bad.

17 KC: On a patrol, and you're a gunner's mate, are you on the front tub or the back
18 tub? There's not a tub in the back, but the gun's in the back. Where were you?

19 DL: I was usually up on the front gun tub and I spent about ninety percent of my
20 time on the front gun tub. The only time that I didn't spend on the gun tub was when I
21 would come back around and take over the driving job or something that drastically
22 happened. But I was on several different boats. I was probably on about, I was trying to
23 think the other day, probably on about three or four different boats, completely different
24 crews. And some of the guys staying on the same crew for almost the whole time we
25 were there.

26 KC: You moved around a little bit?

27 DL: I moved around quite a few times. Sometimes I would go out and be the
28 seaman on a boat because they were short, lacking of seaman. I got to be seaman on a
29 boat and like I said earlier, sometimes I drove the boat a couple or three times and didn't
30 like that. Then I'd go out as gunner's mate and usually the gunner's mate took the front
31 gun tub. When you pull up against a sampan to guard it, we usually took our small arms

1 because it would be real hard to tick those .50-calibers around. So we would stand up on
2 the boat and we would have our small arms on. I had a .38 and an M-14. We would
3 usually stand there with our weapons in our hands to make sure that if somebody did
4 something that it's a lot easier, if you had to shoot, than to try to wheel the guns around, it
5 might be too late.

6 KC: Sure. And with a sampan pulled up right next to you it'd be very difficult hit
7 them, I would think at that range.

8 DL: Right next to you, now if it were fifty feet that would be different.

9 KC: Yeah, then they'd be dead in the water.

10 DL: Yeah.

11 KC: But right next to you it'd be pretty difficult I would think. So, take me
12 through one of these, one of these. You pulled up alongside a sampan, you're standing
13 there with an M-14 or .38 and you're watching it. Is everybody trained on the sampan or
14 are others looking out on the river or the canal making sure that there's no one else
15 around? How'd that work?

16 DL: Your cover boat would watch for you and you'd pull up alongside and you'd
17 throw a rope over to them and they had to take it and they had to tie it off. Then we'd
18 shut our motors off and the boat captain would stay at the throttle. He would stay there
19 the whole time and then the other guys would stand up and the guy on the aft .50 usually
20 stood on that .50, but the seaman and the patrol officer would—a lot of times if you had a
21 good patrol officer, he would come up and the gunner's mate in the front and stand on the
22 boat and then you'd watch that whole boat. You would kind of covering the boat. There
23 would be three of you kind of covering the boat. And then you'd have a patrol officer and
24 there was one patrol officer on both the boats so there would be eight guys go on each
25 boat and then you'd have a patrol officer. So, he would sometimes get up and help you
26 too or look around, you know, if he was interested or who's doing his job.

27 KC: So either the patrol officer or one of the other members of the crew on the
28 boat would pull up, tie off, and say what? You're looking for papers I would assume?
29 Authorization?

30 DL: They'd start checking papers, but one of the guys would get off and start at
31 the front of the boat and go on down. We had a little like a little rod or like a piece of

1 rebar and we'd go long sticking it down to see if we could find anything, but I honestly
2 can't and I was trying to think of this the other day, I honestly can't say I found anything
3 on many of them. You know, we found their papers, they all had the same name, you
4 know. I think that, you know, it was one of those things that we never found a whole lot
5 of anything, you know, going down the river like that. But we did stop the enemy
6 because they knew they couldn't ship it down the river. Before they'd come in and before
7 Game Wardens came in, they would just control the river so we were putting a stop to it.

8 KC: Did you ever have anyone in a sampan try get away?

9 DL: Oh, yeah. Well, we'd be going down the river and look up and spot a sampan
10 and they'd take off on us. And then we'd have to take out after them. Usually then, oh,
11 not very many times, quite a few with the other kind. Probably three or four times they'd
12 jump off the boat or would run or go in the water and you'd fire at them. But when you
13 yelled at them if you didn't stop then you'd open fire. But the protocol was you're
14 supposed to yell "*Lai day*," which meant "Come here." And they were supposed to come
15 to you, if they didn't then that was your cue to open up on them, but like I said, if they
16 were really rolling, but I had very few. Some of the other guys had a lot more of them
17 that tried to get away from them.

18 KC: The ones that tried to get away from you, were they just afraid or they didn't
19 want to be messed with or do you think they were carrying contraband?

20 DL: I think the ones that were trying to get away from us were carrying
21 contraband, I really do. And a lot of them would take off, but see, sometimes if they were
22 in the same spot the same day, the theory we had after awhile was the ones that was in the
23 same spot at the same day, because, you know, they would be fisherman or tree cutters.
24 You had to cut down trees for the wood or they'd fish. Okay. But if you went by them
25 there was no fishing gear out or there was no tree cutting, you know. And seeing them
26 you would wonder why they're back there. So that's kind of what we had to learn how to
27 adapt to that.

28 KC: I was wondering what sort of things you'd pick up as cues. What sort of
29 things made you suspicious other than maybe not having the equipment on them, but was
30 there anything else?

1 DL: Well, a lot of times when it was how well they looked, if they looked pretty
2 fit looking, you know, and didn't look thin and skinny, you know. They were kind of
3 clean, not that squeaky clean like what you'd say like that, but to see them you'd think
4 they're pretty healthy, you know, and their hands weren't dirty. You'd think, "Now,
5 what's going on here?" So you'd look up and the other thing was their boats, if they had
6 old boats and stuff. But see, the Viet Cong and the North Viet Cong, or the North
7 Vietnamese, were two different things. The Viet Cong were like your Army Reserve
8 here. You know, they were reservists. Now, North Vietnam, they were more regular type.
9 So you could kind of tell. The Viet Cong would run away faster than the North
10 Vietnamese did. The North Vietnamese, they tried to be a little more slick, like they were
11 more professional. So, sometimes we felt like we had one, but we couldn't really tell
12 because they were so good, you know, so intelligent and really done a good job.

13 KC: Tell me about one of these insertions. You say that you were using or
14 working with the ARVN as well as with the 1st Infantry Division, the 1st ID.

15 DL: Yes.

16 KC: Take me on a typical insertion. How many infantrymen, how many, how
17 many ARVN would be one of these patrols for an insertion?

18 DL: Well, sometimes—I'll take you back a little bit. Navy SEALs would come
19 and the Navy SEALs would be the first they called. They would come in and we would
20 put three or six on our boat. Then during the day, if you're on day patrol, they would go
21 down the river and we'd let them off. And they would go in and look around and see if
22 there's trails, you know, like deer hunters do around here. They go in and look and then
23 they'd come back on and draw out a map, so they'd draw a map out. And then that night
24 we would come back in and we would pull up to the bank and there would either be three
25 or six of them on a boat and they would roll off the boat and go in. It depended on who
26 they were. The Navy SEALs went in for more like—they would go into a village to recon
27 a village or to go into kidnap personnel.

28 KC: A very specific purpose was what they went in for.

29 DL: They knew exactly where they were going. Now, the ARVN, which were the
30 South Vietnamese, they would come on there, but they weren't going to be off there very
31 long. They were going to get back because not that they were scared. I mean, they didn't

1 want to be out there that long. There would be three to six on your boat depending on
2 what you were taking in. Some of them, we could carry six or seven real easy on the front
3 of the boat. The lurps (LRRPs, or long-range reconnaissance patrols) liked to go in, and
4 that's the Army. They liked to go in with, with three guys on the boat in case one of the
5 boats got hit or something happened that they'd have more speed. They didn't want all
6 those guys on one boat because it went slower. So they would divide up more and put
7 three guys in each boat. We'd go down during the day and they would map out where
8 they thought they were going in and that way we had an idea where we could pull in and
9 get in quiet and slow with a bunch of branches, you know. So when you went in and
10 you'd land and you'd shut your motor off, say, a block or two away and shut your motor
11 off and then drift in at night, so. Each one of them depended on what they were. We took
12 in a couple of snipers before and they actually got off the boat out in the water, slipped
13 off into the water while we were still moving and kind of waded over to the side because
14 sometimes it was just a little creek and they would get off there and just come walking in.

15 KC: Now, for the sniper mission did you stick around or did you come back and
16 pick them up or did you drop them off and never saw them again?

17 DL: The time or two that I remember I never saw them again. I don't know where
18 they went. The other ones like the Army lurps we'd pull in and then at a designated time
19 we were supposed to be back. Usually it was a designated time because they didn't want
20 to call in the radio nobody could hear them.

21 KC: Right.

22 DL: So we would go in at like eleven o'clock at night or ten o'clock at night when
23 they were ready to pull in and they were ready to come out.

24 KC: What about the SEALs?

25 DL: The SEALs? They were, they were the quietest. You never heard a whole lot
26 and they would come back aboard and they never radioed back, as I remember, but they
27 would come back on. They were really quiet. They were, they were good.

28 KC: Tell me; tell me about it a little bit more. Your experiences with SEALs from
29 what you've seen, tell me about these guys as a group in general. Or any specific people
30 if you remember them.

1 DL: I don't remember a whole lot about them then. I probably know more about
2 them now, but they were real quiet and very professional. When they went off they
3 always seemed to get what they wanted. I think they probably did more recon missions. I
4 don't think they went in for ambushes. I think they went in and did intelligence. I think
5 they went in to probably capture a prisoner or to go into a village and observe. I think it
6 was completely different than the Army going in for an ambush. This is just my own
7 observing them going in. They didn't go in to set up to encounter the enemy. They went
8 in to find out where the enemy base camp was at or where they were at. It was
9 completely two different things.

10 KC: Sure, sure.

11 DL: From what I understood when they went in, you know.

12 KC: Yeah, gathering intelligence occasionally, assassination was something that
13 they would be involved with, as well. Intelligence and bring things back and bring back
14 prisoners, like you say, from my understanding.

15 DL: Right.

16 KC: What about their personality? You're on the boat with these guys.

17 DL: They didn't say a whole lot which was, you know, when you've got that boat
18 shut off, you know, you're scared, they're scared, too. I know when they're getting up
19 there, you know, and everything's so quiet. You can't hear anything when they get off.
20 They actually go off the side and you can't hear them rip off the side, you know, it's
21 scary to them to think that, "I wonder what's going to happen next." You wonder about
22 it, you know, but you never talk to—very seldom do you talk to those guys when they get
23 on there. You kind of have an idea where they're going. They say, "We're going to be in
24 here for two hours or three hours." And there's not much talk, you know, it's pretty quiet.
25 Like if you've ever been out on the river, you know how much if you say something how
26 loud it carries. It's like we were laughing because somebody said, "When did you go to
27 the bathroom?" and I said, "You didn't." You didn't because you kept quiet because, you
28 know, if you've ever been on the river and you heard somebody take a leak over to the
29 side how much noise it makes. You can hear it a mile away. And the other thing was that
30 we talked about was smell, too. When you're out in an environment like that it's like deer
31 hunting. You've got to be real quiet and no smells or no—

1 KC: Right.

2 DL: So it's a whole different thing, you know, a whole different way of life.

3 KC: The more you smell like your environment the safer you are.

4 DL: Right, right.

5 KC: Especially in close quarters and circumstances like that.

6 DL: Yes, sir.

7 KC: So when you drop off the—say you would drop a unit of just standard leg
8 Army, they're going to set up and ambush. You bring them in, you drop them off.
9 They're in there for their ambush. Do you go back to Vung Tau, do you go back to patrol
10 ling, or do you stand back, say, half a mile or whatever it might be and then wait for
11 them?

12 DL: Well, most of the time we'd come up and they call it night water ambush. We
13 would go into the bank and we'd let them off and went back over across the river so we
14 could watch behind us so the aft .50 would be on the bank back behind us. And then
15 when we were ready to get them we could pull back in, straight back in. That's where we
16 did a lot of ours. Some days we would just take the boat and we'd let them off and then
17 we'd just tie it to a tree and just sit there all day. You know, pull up against a tree and just
18 sit there all day and never move.

19 KC: What was that like?

20 DL: Well, you know, after you sit on a strap that's about six to eight inches for
21 about eight hours it gets a little hard. You know, it's just a strap in the gun tub.

22 KC: Right.

23 DL: It gets kind of hard, you know? Other days, like I said, we were out in the
24 South China Sea and you could do just about what you wanted to do. Every day was
25 different, you know, and some days it was just so boring that you just didn't know what
26 was going to happen. And other days it was, in fifteen minutes you'd done more in fifteen
27 minutes than you had in three weeks.

28 KC: What would you do on those boring days?

29 DL: On those boring days? Oh, we'd sit there, take a lot of pictures, took a lot of
30 pictures. Out at the South China Sea we would just sit out there and kind of sun bathe,
31 you know, and not do a whole lot. But we knew that it could change. We always laughed,

1 when you put your flack jacket on it was so hot, you'd turn it inside out and put it on and
2 wonder if it'd ever work wrong side out. You know, if you were on boring days like that
3 you would cook beans and wieners, had a little stove and you'd put all your beans and
4 wieners in a pan and cook beans and wieners. You'd put them on the muffler on the boat
5 to warm them up. You'd put them in there and a little pump up little gas stove like we
6 bought. And so we'd fix our food, you know, we had a good time, but I meant, it just
7 depended on where you was at, where you was going. We'd go to LST (landing ship,
8 tank) to *Harnett County* and that was an old LST from World War II and they had
9 moored and we'd pull up alongside and get to go down and eat with those guys inside. It
10 just depended on where we were at. The Army was there, a base and we'd pull up
11 alongside and go up and meet with them, you know. And sometimes it wasn't boring and
12 other times it was, so it just depended. Every day seemed like it was different.

13 KC: Was the *Harnett County* your LST? The one that you guys used regularly?

14 DL: Well, we used that. I can't remember the other one. We used the *Harnett*
15 *County*. You'd pull in down below and they had a bar that went out across it and you'd
16 tie it to the bar and you'd have to walk over and take the little latter up to the top of it and
17 we'd go up to it. They had a lift and they could reach down and pick the boat up and
18 make them take it out of the water and put it up on top, if I remember right. And they
19 could work on the boats because they were fiberglass if they had a hole in them.

20 KC: Right.

21 DL: They were sitting ducks those, the *Harnett County* was. We'd pull in there
22 and you could go down and eat when you wanted to and stuff like that. Anytime you left
23 like that you'd always leave a guy with the boat. You'd try to leave a guy or you'd say,
24 "We'll be right back." Or something like that.

25 KC: Okay now, you drop in, say, for example, a SEAL team. That seems to be the
26 sexiest of the groups we've talked about here.

27 DL: Right.

28 KC: You drop in a SEAL team. Because of the stealth of a SEAL mission, would
29 you go back to the opposite bank and wait or would you back away from it and entirely
30 go down the river and wait for them? What would you do in the case of a SEAL team?

1 DL: We wouldn't go down the river. Now, if there was more than one or two
2 boats and two boats would go across the river to the other side and then the other ones
3 would deploy further down the river to your right or left or to the sides of you so you had
4 firepower if you needed to protect guys on the beach. The patrol officer kind of had an
5 idea where they were at, you know. And where we could fire and where we couldn't fire.
6 He probably knew what they were doing, but it was no mean to ours because we didn't,
7 you know, I didn't care what they were doing. At the time it really didn't matter squat to
8 me what they were doing because all I knew was I got to be here at this time and this is
9 where I'm at and this is what I'm supposed to do.

10 KC: Well, you're waiting and you're sitting there in that tub and you're butt
11 begins to hurt and all that for sure and it's boring, but it's also got to be, I would assume,
12 frightening to be sitting there for, say, seven, eight hours.

13 DL: Yeah, it's scary. I know guys, we talked about it a lot and it does get scary
14 when you're just sitting there and especially when they start hearing noises, you know.
15 And, of course, your mind after seven to eight hours sitting there and your mind, "Did I
16 hear something or did I not hear something?" And your mind plays tricks on you when it
17 comes to that.

18 KC: Was there any time where when you're in this kind of position and you're
19 waiting all this time. You say your mind's playing tricks on you, you're waiting for
20 sounds, and you hope you don't hear them then you hear them. What sort of things are
21 you listening for?

22 DL: Well, usually you're looking up like you're on the water and down there
23 you're kind of watching the water and if you hear, on the side of the boat you know how
24 you hear lap up against it? If you hear a different sound from that and you're looking to
25 see. The whole time you're looking to see if there's a boat because these boats come
26 around the corner and they're just like little canoes. So they come around the corner and
27 so you've got to keep your eye out. They would get so close to you, they would get
28 fifteen, twenty feet from you before you knew it because it was that dark.

29 KC: What would you do if that was the case then? You've got one coming up, but
30 you've got to be quiet. What would you do?

1 DL: Well, you'd get so far up then the other guys hopefully they heard you and
2 you had a spotlight on and you'd hit the spotlight and you'd yell and they never did, they
3 always jumped so you opened fire up. But some of the guys, a couple of guys even had
4 the boats run into their boats.

5 KC: Wow.

6 DL: Yeah, they got that close before they knew it. But it was pitch dark, too. You
7 couldn't see your hand in front of you, but if you walk out my door here tonight, you'll
8 be able to see across the street because of the light, you know. But there you can't see
9 nothing but your hand. And the water's dark and murky. I mean, the boat's dark green,
10 you know. You're sitting there, you stick your hand out in front of you and you can't
11 hardly see your hand, yeah. So everything you've got right here, you're feeling
12 everything right here. So when a flare goes off, you know, it's kind of like when we were
13 talking that one time. You know how you turn a light on in the bathroom and you shut it
14 off and you know where you're going or in the bedroom? It's the same way there. If a
15 light comes on you really get your eyes adjusted real quick to something. Then
16 sometimes on each boat but sometimes the patrol officer has a night light and that helped
17 a lot. So, it's just depended on when it was and what we were doing. Usually we'd just
18 lay back across on the back bank waiting for the other side until they called.

19 KC: How did they call?

20 DL: Well, they'd call on the radio. They had a radio they'd call us if they needed
21 us. Or sometimes it would be a flare, they'd pop a flare. Depending on the color of it or
22 they'd say, "Pick us up at daylight or go down the river a half mile or a half click then
23 come back up and pick us up, up here or we'll meet you at such and such a point at such
24 and such time." That's why I said earlier, if you're on a river and it's that dark and they
25 say, "I'm going to meet you down here at three hundred yards." That's kind of hard to
26 find that in the dark so it takes a little bit of talent.

27 KC: So it's just a matter of—it depended on the mission. It depended on the
28 patrol, whatever it was. Now, you mentioned that you would be sitting up here at the
29 bank and one of these sampans might come around the corner. You want to be as quiet as
30 you can because you've got guys on the ground and on the beach doing their thing, but
31 that sampan comes across, you throw that light on, you holler at them and you have to

1 fire on them, obviously, they're not supposed to be out there. What does that do to
2 mission secrecy?

3 DL: Well, that depends. They might, when we open up on them, they're probably
4 coming back to the beach on the other side. It's just every one of them is different, you
5 know. They'd move back or what they were told, you know, when they were doing it.
6 You know, when they were planning for the mission to go on, you know, and you were
7 planning to go on patrol, but every time that you had a debriefing and they told you
8 where you were going to go in at, what you were going to do. And that was usually the
9 boat captain and patrol officer. So, that kind of left me out of the loop, which was just
10 fine with me.

11 KC: Yeah, it didn't matter, like we said before, there's a reason why they don't
12 tell people things at a certain level. That's perfectly fine.

13 DL: I didn't need to know because I knew what I was supposed to do.

14 KC: Alright, okay. So you're done with this particular patrol. You've got these
15 guys safely extracted and you head back. Take me through what you do when a particular
16 patrol was over.

17 DL: Well, when we would go back in off patrol and let's say we had fired our
18 weapons. Okay, when we'd come in and we're like up in the upper Saigon River, what
19 we'd do was we'd pull in, we'd let them off and they'd go in and then we'd pull in and
20 they had a big bladder with a hose and we got there and crank and we'd fill our gas up so
21 we could get out of there in case we had to. Then all our weapons, we'd clean all our
22 weapons and if we were at a base, they had old fifty-five gallon barrels cut in two. They
23 had diesel in them and cleaning solvent. We'd clean all of our weapons and then we'd
24 wash the boat off and then a couple guys would try to rest. If we were back at Nha Be,
25 which is the base that we were at, it was secure, the Army secured it. We'd tie three boats
26 up together, they were in threes. And the reason they were in threes was in case we had,
27 this was what I was told that in case you have a mortar attack, you go down and you cut
28 the one boat off and then all three of you get in the boat, middle boat would take off. So
29 you'd take three boats taking off at once. That was what, I remember Talmage, you know
30 and I'd kind of laugh and never had to had that happen, but we'd come in, clean it up, and
31 then we'd try to go get some rest and then we'd come back again.

1 KC: Where would you try to rest? At a barracks or on a boat?

2 DL: We slept a lot on the motor, on the motor cover, rather, and we would sleep
3 on the boat. Sometimes we'd let a guy sleep on there if we were out on the river you,
4 know. And that pretty well caught him up. We had bunk beds where we were at, at Nha
5 Be, but when we got up at like Cu Chi up on the North Saigon River, we'd usually sleep
6 on the engine cover or up on the canopy, we'd lay back on the canopy to rest, you know,
7 if we knew we were going to be out a long time. But we'd come back in where they had
8 these little port-a-tents and then just had an old cot and we'd try to get some rest, but a lot
9 of times we just slept on the boat because if something happened we could get to the boat
10 fast.

11 KC: What about food?

12 DL: We had when we were in like Cu Chi up there on the river the Army had a
13 chow line you could go through and get a hot meal. And at Nha Be they had a mess hall.
14 During the day we had C-rats, the old C-rats, not the new ones, but the old ones, you
15 know, in cans with the pound cake and the peaches, and let's see, I'm trying to think of
16 some of them.

17 KC: Ham and lima beans.

18 DL: Oh, yeah, that was a big.

19 KC: They were called something else considerably different there.

20 DL: Yeah, and lots of PBR (Pabst Blue Ribbon) beer, lots of it and Seagram's,
21 had a lot of Seagram's. I drank a lot of coke.

22 KC: Now, other than the obvious, patrol boat river, PBR, Pabst Blue Ribbon,
23 PBR, why were you guys drinking PBR? Or was that the reason?

24 DL: That was the only beer that they had when we were over there.

25 KC: Is that right?

26 DL: It had formaldehyde in it, you know, to preserve it. That was the only reason
27 that it was there. They brought it down to you whenever you would stop and get it. It was
28 pretty available. I don't know whether they had any other kind. I really couldn't tell you.

29 KC: PBR with formaldehyde, that sounds good.

30 DL: Yeah. It was worth a lot of money, man.

1 KC: Yeah, I bet it was really good then. Okay, say you've been on one of these
2 things when you're out for seven, eight hours and you're sitting in the dark and you're
3 twenty-one years old, you're scared to death out there. And it's over and you come back,
4 even if you haven't fired your weapons. Does this take some sort of toll on you
5 emotionally or psychologically when you get back? Do you have to just rest and try to get
6 it out of your mind? How do you deal with that?

7 DL: Gee. I guess you don't think a whole lot about it unless something terrible
8 happens. You wind down. All you know is you got to get ready for the next time. In
9 twelve hours or six hours or whatever, and they call down and tell you you've got to be
10 able to go back out and patrol. I saw very few people that didn't, unless they were
11 wounded or killed, that didn't make their patrol when they were called to do it, and so, as
12 a matter of taking a little bit of pride, too, if the other guy can do it, I can sure do it. But
13 it was like, "If I can just get next week done, I'm just a week closer to going home." I
14 think that was of in the back of your mind all the time. I never thought much about that,
15 but it was kind of strange because you don't really think about that getting in and I think
16 you're so tired at the time. You were busy and if you wanted to go out on another patrol
17 they'd let you go out on another the patrol.

18 KC: I bet they would've been glad to.

19 DL: Yeah.

20 KC: Well, take me on this, you mentioned this, what was it, thirty days up at Cu
21 Chi, up there? Can you take me on that overall mission? That was a long time that you
22 were out. What was the purpose of what you were doing up there?

23 DL: At Tet Offense they have every year they have what they call a Tet Offense.
24 And anyway they were moving arms and ammunition and they would come across a
25 river. So to try to stop them, we went in and they would put us on the river and it might
26 just be a mile long and we'd go up the river and our job was kind of like bait. Our job
27 was to go up the river and then draw fire and then call in for a helicopter strike, or take
28 the Big Red 1 in, for example, and take them in and clean them out. Our job was just to
29 draw fire and if anything moved, and so we would ride up there and then we would turn
30 around and come back and it just depended on whether they wanted us to stay up there.
31 Really, it was kind of funny because they might want to just go up there for an hour and

1 come back for six hours and wait until they thought it was feasible for them to move, you
2 know. These guys aren't coming back and then they would send us back up, you know.
3 So it just depended on what some of these — "Well, I'm tired now, I think we can go
4 home now." Or "I'm not tired, we'll stay another hour." I think it was by the seat of your
5 pants sometimes because you didn't have a schedule. And every time you didn't have a
6 schedule, you know, I think they thought, "It's going to be at nine o'clock in the morning
7 tomorrow we'll be there at nine o'clock." If you don't show up at nine, I think, "Well,
8 tomorrow they're not going to be here at nine, we can just slip through there."

9 KC: Right.

10 DL: And I think that's kind of why the Navy did so good because there wasn't a
11 set pattern of anything when we went in, but as we went in we were securing our area and
12 we secured it clear from the South China Sea up. We were securing. I mean, we were
13 driving them out because they knew they couldn't move anything. At night they would
14 retreat and go into Cambodia so I think they knew that we were pretty well doing our job.

15 KC: And how would it be secured behind you? Just more constant patrols and a
16 larger Army or ARVN presence, things like that to hold onto it, just to keep them away
17 from the river?

18 DL: Right, but they knew if they tried to cross it, that we would stop them and so
19 after awhile they knew, it's like my river division I was in 593. They knew that if we
20 were up that river that we were going to stop them. They knew that they just couldn't
21 keep coming and coming and coming. Some of them tried the same spot and every time
22 they did they got wiped out, so. So I felt like we were pretty well pushing them out of the
23 area, you know, because well, they'd come and spray Agent Orange on everything and
24 killing all the, defoliant. So you could actually see quite a ways, you know. But they
25 would bury stuff and everything, but you couldn't see around the corners because the
26 banks, when the tide went down, you'd be sitting down and you would have your banks
27 overhead of you sometimes depending where you're at and they'd go down, the tide
28 would, and you'd be sitting like you were down at the bottom of a bucket, you know?
29 You couldn't see up the side.

30 KC: That wouldn't be very comfortable.

1 DL: No. A couple of times we had to take, the flag was on the boat, on the back of
2 the canopy. Sometimes we'd take it off and we'd have to take our M-60 and put it up
3 there, get it up high enough to get it so we could see over the bank. Because it was like
4 we were down in a hole.

5 KC: Depending on the tide of the South China Sea coming through the river.

6 DL: Right. We had to do that a couple times. Some of the other ones did it more
7 than we did when the tide really moved. We were lucky. We only had to do it once or
8 twice, but we had heard them say, "You can take your M-60 and put it up on top."
9 Because it'd be like down in the basement, it's kind of hard to see somebody up on the
10 top, you know. It was kind of interesting.

11 KC: So now you're essentially bait as the word in this mission at Cu Chi. Were
12 you just—were you still trying to interdict sampan traffic or do you just go on up there to
13 see if somebody would notice you and fire at you and then drive them back?

14 DL: Sometime I think all we did was going up there for—we didn't see a lot of
15 boats, but I think it scared the general population out of the area. And so we were really
16 going up like we were bait and just tried to draw fire. And that was part of our, I think
17 that was part of our reason. The other part was we had enough firepower we could take
18 care of ourselves. But it was a—it got narrower as it gets further up inland. It gets very
19 narrow up in there on some of them. They would string, we had two big long antennas on
20 the boat and they would take a piece a wire across and they would put through four
21 grenades like in a bunch in the middle with their wires crossed and they were hoping you
22 would blast by with your antennas and catch the wire and blow your boat out.

23 KC: So booby trapped for PBRs.

24 DL: Yeah, so I never saw one. I was real glad of that. The first thing was you
25 would say, somebody would say, "What are you doing?" I says, "I guess you'd just break
26 your antennas of," you know, but how can you react that fast when you're doing twenty-
27 five miles an hour? If you think you're out in your car and you're doing twenty-five and
28 you've got to stop because when you put the front down, the boat's still got to stop.

29 KC: Right, even as fast as they stop. That was in one boat length.

30 DL: Right. So I was always wondering about whether we can break them off, you
31 know. But it's kind of interesting to think, you know? Because you'd hear other guys tell

1 you, “Hey, so and so had this happen to them. What do you think we ought to do?” You
2 know?

3 KC: Well, you’d have to learn the lessons from other people if you could, or
4 always keep it in mind, like you said.

5 DL: Right. As a matter of fact, you learned to do a better job was hearing what the
6 other guys did and then they’d come down and say, “You ought to try this and you ought
7 to do this.”

8 KC: So the communication between boats and between people was pretty good I
9 would assume.

10 DL: Oh, yeah. All the people that I was with were very good, very conscientious.
11 They were about the best I’ve ever seen, but I sometimes kind of think about that. They
12 were picked because the guys that really wanted to do it didn’t get to do it so whoever
13 was doing the picking for the river divisions, he knew exactly who to pick to be, you
14 know, there. And some of them were better than other ones, but I don’t think there was
15 anything better or anything worse than any of the rest of them. I mean, I think you could
16 have served with any river division, but somehow how they picked them, they picked
17 them because they wanted them. It wasn’t because you wanted to be in it. Now, some of
18 the guys volunteered, volunteered, volunteered, until the guy, I guess they got tired of
19 hearing from him and then they let him come. But I would say seventy-five percent of
20 them didn’t even bother to volunteer for it.

21 KC: Did they clearly, people who were putting these together clearly knew the
22 type of personalities and the type of performance that they wanted from the people who
23 would be there. And just wanting to be there wasn’t enough.

24 DL: Right.

25 KC: What would you say, and we’re getting off the chronology here a little bit,
26 but what would you say those characteristics were?

27 DL: Well, one of the things was they all worked together real well and it didn’t
28 matter whether it was your job or my job where you’re at now. Somebody comes over to
29 help you because you got too much work to do. It kind of took a little bit off of you. I
30 found that to be one of the things. The other was there was no rank involved, you know,
31 it wasn’t like “I’m an officer and you’re an enlisted man and you’re the low man on the

1 totem pole.” I saluted probably three times when I was in-country. I mean, it was very
2 informal, but the guys that we had were twenty-two, twenty-three that were officers and
3 you were twenty-one, twenty, nineteen, and they were twenty-three, and twenty-four. So,
4 when you showed up I was thinking about that the other day. You didn’t salute them, but
5 you had the respect for them, “Yes sir. No, sir.” You weren’t down at the boat. You took
6 care of your stuff and nobody would come up and say, “Your guns are dirty. The boat’s
7 dirty.” You never heard that the whole year I was over there.

8 KC: None of that so-called chicken shit of military life.

9 DL: Right, right. I mean, and it was like nobody would come down and say, “I
10 don’t like the color of your shirt.” The only thing I ever heard anybody ever say was, “I
11 think you better put your flak jacket and helmet on because the other day when we went
12 by here—” Well, you know, it’s pretty nice of him to tell you. But as far as that nobody
13 hassled anybody or anything. You had your problems, you know, but you didn’t have
14 them with other people. And so I think that was another big thing. And the other thing
15 was when they come down and said, “Can you go in and do this?” You just, “Yeah, let’s
16 go, let’s get it done.” But you worked as a team, too. It’s like where you work out, you
17 know how that goes, but if you’ve got a real major problem, you know, you can go say,
18 “Okay, we got this problem, okay?” This is an example of it. We got this call and they
19 told us all to come up and get together. I thought, “Boy, somebody’s going to get into
20 trouble.” When we went up, “There’s no nude sunbathing.” If you took your shirt off or
21 your shorts, but no nude sunbathing because it’s just too hot and you’re going to burn.
22 That’s about the biggest thing.

23 KC: (Laughs)

24 DL: You know, so it’s a life when you’re at work, you know. You know, if
25 you’ve got a problem you just put it to the troops. This is just the way it is.

26 KC: Yeah, you’d think that nude sunbathing thing would take care of itself after
27 the first time.

28 DL: Yeah, pretty bad. Yeah, third-degree burns.

29 KC: Woo! You said just a second ago in passing, you were talking about this
30 camaraderie and this teamwork that you all had on the boat. You said you have your
31 problems. What kind of problems were they?

1 DL: Well, we would go down and get ammunition, pull it in and not being able to
2 get fuel, you know, and logistics. Mainly it was the logistics. It was not a big problem,
3 but when you got in sometimes it would be hard to get fuel or something like that would
4 come up. Of course, after you've been gone twelve hours, you know, "Boy, I can't get no
5 fuel, I don't want to go up, I want to do this." So I'd go up and you couldn't—it wasn't
6 like e-mails today and getting your mail, you know. "I haven't gotten any mail for two
7 weeks. Where's my mail at?" You know, little things like that.

8 KC: Right.

9 DL: And that's the hard part because you've been out doing this all day and then
10 you come in and you think everything ought to be at your beckoning, you know? And it
11 doesn't happen in real life, so why should it happen there? But that's the way you felt. Of
12 course, there wasn't a whole lot of worrying because you were just kids. I don't think
13 anybody worried about, really worried, worried about anything. I don't know if it sounds
14 right, but we didn't worry about a whole lot. If it happened it happened and we'd get over
15 it and go on.

16 KC: How often would you get mail, since you mentioned it?

17 DL: It depended. If we were up on the river they would hold it sometimes for us if
18 we were up north and we'd come back to Nha Be and they'd have it. The big thing was
19 then reel-to-reel. It was kind of like your little [recorder] thing here. You'd talk on your
20 reel-to-reel and then you'd ship the reel to your real home. That was a big thing.

21 KC: Did you do quite a bit of that?

22 DL: No, a couple of times they had some of those reel-to-reel things, but that was
23 about it. The rest of the time it was writing postcards, wrote a lot of postcards. We didn't
24 write a lot of letters. We wrote a lot of postcards. It's been a lot of years ago.

25 KC: Okay, when you get back, say whether it was these missions to Cu Chi or
26 wherever it was, what sort of other sort of things? You'll want to take a shower as
27 quickly as you can, of course, if you can. And you want to make sure the boat is in shape
28 for the next patrol. What other sort of things would you do when you were back at Nha
29 Be?

30 DL: Well, at Nha Be they had a club there. They sold pop and beer over there.
31 Usually we just went up and sat down up in our little room up there. They had like a

1 lounge downstairs, but it was TV, but it was old reruns like *I Love Lucy* now, you know.
2 It was just the service, somebody from the Army gets up, you know. Our biggest
3 entertainment was we listened to radio in Saigon and we would sit and listen to it. When
4 we were on the river we listened to Martha and the Vandellas, *No Place to Run and Hide*.
5 We listened to a lot of Tammy Wynette, and Loretta Lynn, and Johnny Cash.

6 KC: Right.

7 DL: And, like I said, Martha and the Vandellas. It kind of changed there, their
8 music kind of changed there. We would have record players that were probably two foot
9 by a foot and a half. They held about twelve batteries in it, big D batteries and we would
10 play the record player. It only played it about six times because you couldn't play it any
11 longer because the batteries would wear out.

12 KC: Even with twelve big D batteries.

13 DL: Yeah, of course, you know with the heat and everything, you know. That was
14 about it, but most of the time you went up, you know, and just kind of go on over, you
15 ate, and you went back. You cleaned up and you'd go down and Nha Be was a pretty
16 good sized base and they'd repair helicopters there and boats and stuff. You'd sit around
17 and sometimes they'd take a jeep and go into Saigon, you know. That was a very few and
18 apart that you did that, so it was kind of interesting.

19 KC: Now you were mentioning the music earlier, and music in the Vietnam War
20 and the Vietnam Era is very, very important for who we are as Americans. Culturally it
21 said an awful lot about who we were. You were talking about some of my favorites like
22 Johnny Cash and Tammy Wynette, I just love them both. And Martha and the Vandellas,
23 fantastic music. Well, you said it began to change later on. How did it change? I think I
24 know what you're going to say here, but tell me, how do you think it changed?

25 DL: Well, it all got, it got, and it wasn't as happy music. I guess the best way to
26 put it was it wasn't fun. It was more serious type music than before you have Johnny
27 Cash and some of them. You know, Tammy Wynette and Little J-O-E. I used to laugh,
28 "What was that guy's name again? J-O-E, you know.

29 KC: (Laughs) Right, from that song "D-I-V-O-R-C-E."

30 DL: Yeah, and so I said, "Well, we graduated from," you know, *The Beverly*
31 *Hillbillies* on TV, graduated from the fourth grade you know how to spell

1 D-I-V-O-R-C-E. Her little J-O-E, you know. But it changed. It was just the style and the
2 different, was just the style change, it was time for other people to come along, I guess
3 and it just changed. And so I know that a lot of the guys kept their reel-to-reel and some
4 of them still listen to their reel-to-reel, you know, because they would tape it. So it was
5 kind of funny, you know, that we all thought that was really something. And then you'd
6 go over to the club over there and they'd have those Vietnamese pretending to be Johnny
7 Cash or Loretta Lynn, you know. They'd be, you know, with the accent, you know,
8 Vietnamese. Of course, they had that French accent and they'd be trying to play music so
9 it was kind of fun. But mainly we just went back and kind of listened to music, did a lot
10 of writing home and just a lot of sleeping.

11 KC: Well, let me get back to this music question again.

12 DL: Okay.

13 KC: It's one that's piqued my interest. You say that it wasn't as fun, it wasn't as
14 lighthearted. What songs do you—say you go from, from "Stand by Your Man" say you
15 go from whatever Johnny Cash song it might have been. What music—can you give me a
16 specific example of the music as it changed? What were these songs that weren't as
17 lighthearted or weren't as fun?

18 DL: Oh, I can't remember because we didn't listen to them. We'd kind of ignore
19 them, but you know you'd listen to Simon Garfunkel or The Beach Boys, and they were
20 good, but Credence Clearwater Revival. You'd listen and then they'd have these people
21 that would come in and would be off and they'd be singing about the war, you know.
22 And they'd be telling about the war. Well, I guess like what we were talking about
23 earlier, you'd be kind of immune to it. I mean I like to hear The Beach Boys and you
24 heard about surfing and the California girls. You'd like to hear that part or you like to
25 hear something about home and you didn't want to hear about the other things that they
26 were talking about.

27 KC: Right, right.

28 DL: And I really can't remember, about it, but I always thought that country-and-
29 western probably stayed the steady good part compared with the other stuff because the
30 other ones had to branch off because I guess it couldn't make it as country-and-western
31 singers, I don't know.

1 KC: (Laughs)

2 DL: You know what I mean? They had to go out and find something new to sing
3 about.

4 KC: Right, and I think it was probably part of the general social climate of the
5 United States. It became, music became, a vessel of protest, I think. A way for people to
6 express their beliefs and what they thought was right and what they thought was wrong.
7 The war was obviously a central part of this. The war was not a fun thing and war was a
8 wrong thing in my people's eyes, and the music began to reflect that.

9 DL: Right.

10 KC: I could also see why you're on a PBR, you're twenty-one years old, the last
11 thing in the world you want to hear is something that is bringing you down and telling
12 you that the mission you're serving is some sort of illegitimate mission. I bet that's the
13 last thing in the world you want to hear. I can see why The Beach Boys would still
14 remain pretty popular.

15 DL: Yeah, everybody had their own, their own thing, but I never heard of any of
16 the other stuff. You know, it was pretty lighthearted stuff, but when you didn't hear it, it
17 just got, I don't know I can't remember whether if it turned off or what, but you just
18 didn't hear it, you know, you didn't pay any attention and you just walked away or
19 whatever, I can't remember.

20 KC: Right, right. Well, let me stop here for a second. Okay, like I just mentioned,
21 I want to get on the record the mission, the patrol, the mission in which your actions
22 earned you the Navy Cross. This was big stuff. This was a fantastic story and what I'd
23 like to do is get this in your words in as much detail as you can give to me. So, feel free
24 to start at the very, very, beginning and take me all the way through it.

25 DL: Well, it happened forty years ago this August, August the 2nd. I was on patrol
26 with Carl Fletcher, he was my boat captain. He lives in Chula Vista, California. Carl was
27 my boat captain and he was my patrol officer. I had three other guys on the boat.
28 Zimerman, he was the boat captain and I had Bill Dunn. I can't think of the other one on
29 the boat at the time. We went on patrol that day. We went out and we went down the
30 river and we looked for what they call hot spots, a place where the brush was knocked
31 down and everything was knocked down. It was pretty warm that day and we saw, up in

1 this spot we had saw what looked like they had been coming across the river. So we had
2 taken our Army lurps, long range Army guys and so they marked this area and they said,
3 “Well, tonight we’re going to come in. It looks like they’re really moving stuff across.” It
4 was at the upper Saigon River. So we have been getting hit pretty hard up there. So, that
5 night that he put together, that afternoon what he put together were six boats would go
6 down the river. There’d be three Army lurps on our boat and three of them on Charlie
7 Vance’s boat and he was the captain on one other boat. So two boats roared by like they
8 just went by and then down the river that evening then the next two boats, which I was on
9 one of the other ones, we come down and we pulled into the bank and we dropped off our
10 three then they pulled in and dropped off their three. We backed out and then two other
11 boats come down the river and went past where we were at and went down a little ways
12 and then they all met together about fifty yards south of where we were at and they both
13 turned and went the other way again. So it sounded like the boats were leaving and boats
14 were coming and going. So, we hoped that they didn’t know that we had left the long
15 range lurps in there and so we pulled over on the opposite side of the bank. My boat and
16 Charlie Vance’s boat, I think it was Charlie’s boat. And then the other two boats were to
17 our far right, maybe to two hundred yards and the other two boats were the other way.
18 We had been in there about an hour and we heard this explosion and we thought it was a
19 rocket, but we couldn’t tell and it just lit up the sky like a big fireworks display would. I
20 mean, and you could see like bottle rockets coming, you know, like that. Then I was in
21 the front gun tub and my chief, Carl, he said, “Let’s go.” Zimmerman was new in-
22 country, the boat captain on my boat. And anyway, took off for it and he ran it right up on
23 the bank and Carl Fletcher was my chief, I mean he was in charge. So he grabbed the M-
24 60 on the back and maybe five hundred rounds and I’m just guessing that they had five
25 hundred rounds. So, he handed it to me and said, “You need to get in there to help them.”
26 So I climbed off the boat and two other guys come off the boat behind me.

27 KC: I don’t want to interrupt here. Had you ever had to do this before?

28 DL: No, this is the first time. Yeah, if you were on a PBR you weren’t supposed
29 to get off the boat. That was it, that was the rule, don’t get off that boat because all your
30 cover and security and everything was on that boat. You were trained for that boat, but
31 these Army guys, there were six of them in there, six or seven of them—I think there

1 were six—and they got hit with a rocket. The guy that called was real, real weak and
2 could barely make the call. So, I jumped off the boat and the other boat that was next to
3 us, it come in and when it did there were two guys in there and they hopped off the boat.
4 There were a total of about seven guys, other guys that hopped off the boat. I hopped off
5 the boat and if you were looking straight ahead on the right side, in the middle was the
6 Army and I was on the right side, going up the right side. I was going through the bank I
7 probably four hundred-fifty, five hundred rounds with me. I was going up the side and it
8 didn't take me a long time, but it was really thick and I couldn't see and you had rockets
9 going off and small arms fire. And you could see the tracers. They were coming right at
10 you. I was trying to stay down a little bit but it would actually cut the nipa palm off above
11 y'all. The little trees up above you had just, it had cut the branches off. That was how
12 close they were getting. I ran up and went to the right side of them and got up there and
13 when I got up there they had been hit and I couldn't see a whole lot. I got up there and
14 when I did, I could see about, oh, three or four people I assumed were people, but
15 shadows, you could see shadows, but like I've been saying this whole time, it's dark. I
16 mean, it's dark. Well, they asked about setting flares off. Flares were going off and
17 everything, but when a flare goes off you just see it just like that. And so there was this
18 real big shadow and so I hit the ground on that side and they were firing. You could see
19 all the rockets and stuff coming at you. And I was on the right side of the Army and so I
20 hit the ground and opened up and took about, oh, probably three times back and forth
21 real, real slowly with my M-60. Because they'd told us when we were at school if you
22 want to stop somebody. If you just shoot straight ahead, all you're going to do is hit
23 somebody straight in front of you. So I swept it as far as I could to the right and it would
24 come back around, but I was limited on my left because the Army guys were on my left
25 there. So anyway, I went on the left and then after I swung over to the left over there I'd
26 come back around again and then I stopped for just a real quick split instant to wonder if I
27 was in the right spot because I couldn't get my gun around to the left, but they were there.

28 KC: Were you in visual contact with the lurps?

29 DL: No.

30 KC: You just knew that they were there.

31 DL: They were there. I could see them in the pop flare.

1 KC: Okay.

2 DL: That they were there and they'd been hit by a rocket, some of them were
3 dead then. I didn't know at the time some of them were dead. I think, I think maybe one
4 or two, but we never heard. We still, to this day, they'd talk about—this is just one night,
5 you know, out of twenty-some firefights you're in and this is just one night. I don't know
6 whether it was six, seven. There's two of them alive now maybe that are still alive or may
7 have passed on since then. Well anyway, I stayed there and I commenced firing and then
8 I could hear other people talking. So I kept firing at what I assumed was the enemy. They
9 figured there was one to three of them right there when I got up there. At the time they
10 thought there was like, oh, maybe fifteen to twenty. They later determined there were
11 thirty-five to fifty that were on the bank there. Well, I could hear small arms weapons
12 going off and then I started hearing another M-60, at that time it was just rockets going
13 by, flares going off, and it just got real intense for a few minutes. I mean, things were just
14 going crazy.

15 KC: Now you said you heard another M-60 which means somebody else was on
16 the ground with an M-60.

17 DL: Yeah.

18 KC: And they were behind you or to the other side?

19 DL: We were to the other side, over there on the other side and later found out
20 that was Bob Tipton was on the other side. There was Terry Shorts, Charlie Vance, Walt
21 Thomas, Bill Dunn, I can't think of the other ones, but there were seven of them.
22 Anyway, four of them were in there shooting, but Bob Tipton went in with an M-60 and
23 he was on the other side. He was on the left side and he got there just maybe three or four
24 minutes after I did. And time, I mean it's something that you can't realize. Time, you
25 don't have any idea what time and you're trying to remember everything when you were,
26 you know, when you were taking all of the training we talked about earlier. You're trying
27 to remember all the training that you had had to sweep back and forth, you know. Slow
28 down because you thought if somebody really rushed you, you'd hate being out of
29 ammunition. I know that sounds crazy, but you're thinking, "If I can just keep them down
30 'till help gets here," you know. I wasn't really thinking in the back of my mind, "I'm
31 gonna wipe out thirty people." What I'm thinking, "If you can keep their head down,"

1 you know, and somebody's shooting at you, it's the way they talk when you went to
2 school. If you're shooting at somebody, the instinct is to keep down, you know. So I
3 figured if I was shooting at them, you know, that they would keep their head down and
4 not run toward you because they figured if they stood up and come at you. And as the
5 flares would go off, you could see shadows in there. So we kept firing and so I kept firing
6 and then I started hearing people talking over next to me. I was running out of
7 ammunition and I think it was Terry Shortz—he was on one of the other boats—Terry
8 stripped the Army guys of their ammunition and he brought it over to me because I was
9 running low. The other guy had plenty and he was standing up and he was shooting like a
10 wild man. I don't know if you watched that film or not. (Mr. Larsen is referring to a
11 video documentary of this firefight that he donated to the Vietnam Archive.) He was just
12 shooting, going crazy, but I was staying down and just going back and forth as slow as I
13 could to keep, keep somebody from coming at me. And so I kept firing and then I heard
14 Charlie. I heard him say, "We're going to get you out of here." Somebody said, "We're
15 going to get you out of here." So, they come back, three or four guys did, and they started
16 bringing stretchers in and bringing them back. I kept firing the whole time. I think I got—
17 talking about earlier I about how this guy going back and we were talking about how he
18 had the tank on. We talked about how many times he went back. I don't know how many
19 times they brought me ammunition. I can't, I can't honestly remember how many times
20 they did, but it was more than twice. I remember that I got ammunition. And so I kept
21 firing and just going real steady back and forth to the right, to the left. Then all of a
22 sudden we were there and a helicopter come in and big old spot light come on and all you
23 could hear was like deer running or cows. You know how when they run can hear this
24 noise, you could hear this rustling noise. Of course, it was nipa palm and those big leaves
25 that made this noise and they'd come in and they'd just laid down thousands of rounds,
26 you know down in the bottom. Well, when they started laying them down as the Army
27 guys come out and we started backing up a little bit, we moved back just a little bit, we
28 kept working our way back. And then finally got the Army guys on there and I think
29 there might be out of six of them I think there were two of them or three of them that
30 were alive then and the other four had died. One of them walked out but the rest of them
31 didn't. So they got back to the boat and climbed on the boat and they had went down, two

1 of the boats had went down and covered one side and the other side, the other two boats
2 that were on the right and left side of us and they had fired in on an angle like this
3 because they knew where we were at. So we had fire on both sides of us and so there
4 were three guys that were firing and there were four guys that were taken off the beach.
5 So, we backed up to the boat, climbed on the boat and my canopy had—I had two guys
6 on the canopy laying up there and then I had two laying on the deck in front of me. And
7 so, I grabbed my M-14 and an M-79 grenade launcher. You know what that is, like a
8 hand grenade, but in a gun.

9 KC: Right.

10 DL: I grabbed it and I had the M-60 and so I had a box that just had them so I put
11 about two hundred and fifty rounds maybe. I had a clip on my M-14 where you could
12 switch it over and I had them taped so I could switch from one side to the other side. I
13 grabbed it and I had a bandoleer hooked to it. It used the same rounds that the M-60 uses.
14 So I had it, I had an M-79 grenade launcher, and I had about eight rounds for it that were
15 all right there on the front on the gun tub.

16 KC: The regular grenades or the anti-personnel?

17 DL: The M-79 grenades. Yeah, no, they were the M-79 grenades, but they were in
18 a little cloth little thing that they put them in. So I grabbed that. I had about eight rounds
19 and I grabbed it. I had them all hooked together where the rounds were hooked to the M-
20 79 in case you had to pick it up when you did you brought the ammunition with you, you
21 know, so you just didn't pick it up and have to reach down and pick the ammunition up.
22 So I had it, also, if you had them take it with you, you were going to have more than two
23 rounds. I had a sling on so I swung both of them on this soldier and I threw up my other
24 soldier and I put about maybe two hundred rounds, I can't remember. But I put them up
25 on there and I had that M-60 so we went down the river, not very far and then there were
26 four of us and they had picked up the Army, two of our boats had went in because they
27 had inserted on up the river so we went to pick them up. So when we got there we had to
28 set up a landing zone in there to go in to Medivac these guys. So they had to set up a
29 perimeter so we were short help so I jumped off the boat and two other guys did and then
30 the Army walked by and they didn't have enough guys. So we went out and made a
31 perimeter up there and Larry Bissonette, you know, Larry.

1 KC: I know Larry, yes.

2 DL: Larry was incoming charge, obviously from the Navy side of it. So, Larry
3 went up and he ran into the helicopter up there. Of course, you know they've got lights
4 and everything. They'd asked Larry why, you know, they always talked about the lights,
5 you know. They said he wasn't worried because we were out there and had plenty of
6 weapons to, you know, that we were going to watch out for him, and that was the thing
7 we always talked about watching out for each other. But we went in and then we
8 medivac'ed them, but Carl Fletcher, he was the patrol chief. Carl called for the helicopter,
9 called for the medivac, and he called for flares and he coordinated where to pull the boat
10 in for the landing zone. He was within twenty feet, they say, where he was supposed to
11 be. In the pitch of night, he pulled the boat in and so when you're writing up the after
12 action report, you know, he had pulled that boat within twenty feet and think about it just
13 going as fast as you can, pulling in here in pitch dark, you know, just pulling in.

14 KC: With all this chaos.

15 DL: Yeah, going on and people trying to administer first aid. Charlie Vance, he
16 was on the other boat. Charlie went in and he carried two litters out in there and Terry
17 Shortz was in there and Hayes Dunn and Walt, I can't think of Walt's last name, but
18 anyway, they went in and Bob Tipton was on the other side of them so we got pulled out
19 and we got back away. Well, we went back up the river and the next day they'd come in
20 and they found blood trails going in there. At first they, like I said earlier, estimated there
21 were fifteen to twenty people that were in there, is what they first estimated. But they said
22 later on that there were over fifty people that were in there. So, we went back in there to
23 check. Well, they found one body in there and they take their bodies home like we do.

24 KC: Right.

25 DL: So, nobody got killed, but the thing is when people write about it and they
26 talk about it, they always talk about whether you did this, well, see, when the other guys
27 went in and they saw, you know, they might not have saw, but they were getting shot at,
28 too. It just happened that I happened to be on that side and be the first one up there. I got
29 the Navy Cross and then the other seven guys that went in, they all got Bronze Stars that
30 went in there. But, like we've been talking about, because that was just one night, I think,
31 if it hadn't have been for everybody going off the boat and having the same firepower,

1 you know, we don't know what I did as well as some of the guys that had M-16s, some of
2 them had grenade launchers. We don't know what the outcome would have been if one of
3 them hadn't been there. Because that much firepower might not have stopped them if we
4 didn't have it. So, that's basically what happened and then that was just one night and
5 twenty-seven different times, so that was just one night. If each guy hadn't had done what
6 he did, it might be different because there was nobody, no Navy casualties. But there
7 were twenty-seven sailors and they all got into somewhere into it, so. And you're not
8 supposed to leave the boat so that was quite a thing. But people asked, "Well, you did this
9 and you did that." Yeah, I think if the guy with the M-16 hadn't have been there while I
10 was, while I was shooting to the right, and he was shooting to the left up there, that guy
11 that was in front of him maybe could have killed three or four of us so it was a team
12 effort and that's what a lot of people don't understand when it comes to it.

13 KC: I think you're right about that. I think that people see medals as an individual
14 achievement, but so many times with people that I've spoken to over the years say that, "I
15 wear this medal because of the other people who are there," you know. I was telling you
16 about the individual on Iwo Jima, one of the Marines won the Medal of Honor. He said
17 he wouldn't wear it. He didn't think he deserved it and he wouldn't wear it until one of
18 his comrades said, "You damn well better wear this because all these other people died
19 while you were there. So you wear this in honor of them." He said, "Well, when I had it
20 explained to me that way, I realized it wasn't something they were trying to make me out
21 to be some sort of hero. It was everything we were all involved in that, that's the
22 importance of the medal, that's the importance of the commendation." I think that's the
23 same thing I hear you saying here.

24 DL: Well, see, we got to talking about it. We did a job and I think the important
25 thing was to get everybody out regardless if they were dead or alive and we got them out.
26 Like I said earlier, each one of these guys did a job that in a few years, and I'm sixty-two,
27 so in fifteen years when you're still a kid.

28 KC: (Laughs)

29 DL: Really, when you're a kid you're twenty-one. And we're gone and a few old
30 Navy chiefs went in there and a few kids and a few officers. One of them there did a job
31 that probably the Navy, today would've thought, "Boy. The Navy was in Vietnam. I've

1 heard that before.” They did a job that people won’t even know about. Hopefully, like
2 you said, somebody will read about it or, you know, something like, but they were
3 remarkable for what they did and they were probably the best you’ll ever see because
4 how many times in my lifetime I’ve heard: “The Navy did this. The Navy did that.” It’s
5 always, “Well, the SEALs or the Army or in the Air Force.”

6 KC: Right.

7 DL: You never hear: “The Navy did this.” So it’s something that people won’t
8 even know about, they won’t even know about it. Even though a lot of people know
9 about it there won’t be—and this was just one night, this was just one night. So, when
10 you think about all the other times, you know, that you hear them talk about some other
11 nights that were probably just as big as this, but that was just one night and I think in, like
12 I said, in a few years, somebody will say, “Well, the Navy didn’t do much. Why would I
13 want to join the Navy? I want to join the Army and see some action.” And that’s what it’s
14 going to be like because the guys that did this are, are something else. You’ve met a lot of
15 them, Carl Fletcher, Larry Bissonette, Charlie Vance, Bob Tipton, we call him Crazy
16 Bob.

17 KC: (Laughs) Right, Bob’s a character.

18 DL: Yeah, but that’s Bob and that’s the way he’s been his whole life.

19 KC: Right.

20 DL: And it’s nothing against him, that’s out of respect for him. That’s just the
21 way he is. And if he wouldn’t have had that, “Let’s get this job done.” Or Terry Shortz or
22 Charlie Vance, if they hadn’t have had the, “Let’s get this done.” Walt Thomas, that’s the
23 other one. Walt Thomas. If they hadn’t had that, “Let’s get in and get it done” attitude,
24 you know, but it’s not very seldom that even the job that you’re on and I’m on that we
25 have people that come up that want to help us. And those guys would help you do
26 anything.

27 KC: Especially in those circumstances.

28 DL: Yeah. It’s just like I talk to—you knew Carl Fletcher wasn’t going to let that
29 boat move until you were on it. If you were dead, alive, or dragging, he was going to
30 make sure you were back on that boat before he moved that boat. He was going to make
31 you accountable that you were on that boat. And that’s hard for a lot of people to

1 understand, you know? They understand that, “You did this or did that.” The only reason
2 I got it, I was there first and somebody else couldn’t have been first. I always tell them I
3 had the fastest boat. You know, really.

4 KC: (Laughs) It was just something you guys like to say anyway.

5 DL: Bob’s always saying he had a fastest boat, but he had a fast boat and got there
6 and Carl—see, another thing was Carl had that M-60 to hand to me.

7 KC: Yeah, he was the one who told you.

8 DL: Yeah.

9 KC: “Take this and get out there.”

10 DL: Yeah, I mean I could have said, “I ain’t gonna go,” you know what I mean?
11 But you knew that they were in trouble. So, it was the matter that I had the fastest boat. I
12 was the oldest guy seniority-wise to anybody on the boat. And I had been there longer
13 than any of them. I only had a month to go before I come home.

14 KC: Wow, a lot of people wouldn’t have been interested in doing very much at all
15 being a short-timer.

16 DL: Yeah, the one that the people don’t realize is what Carl did. You know, when
17 I wrote up the after action report, Carl’s the one that, that told the guys to go in, got the
18 flares, he got the gunship, he made sure he had ammunition, he told to get the stretchers.
19 He was literally the boss. He was telling them all what to do and go in and do it. And
20 when he come back he said we needed to set up a LZ (landing zone). As we’re going
21 down the river, “We need to set up an LZ. You three guys go do this.” So really, when
22 you get to thinking about it, you know, talk about we all did a job. So everybody, like I
23 said, we just all did the job and we took care of it.

24 KC: What was—and I don’t even know if you can answer this question. Here you
25 are, twenty-one years old. You’ve got these lurps who are in dire straits. Carl knows that
26 it’s a mess. So much so that he goes straight into the bank. No maneuvering, just get up
27 there as far as you can because you’ve got to get in there. Carl turns to you and hands you
28 an M-60 and four hundred, five hundred rounds and says, “Get in there.” You probably
29 don’t have time to think, but what, if anything, what goes through you mind?

1 DL: Well, Carl will be seventy-nine. Kim, his wife, is eighty-three I think and
2 Carl's seventy-nine. So I'm sixty-two. Carl's about eighty, so there's eighteen years
3 difference. It'd be like your dad saying, "Here you go, Kelly, take this and go do this."

4 KC: Right.

5 DL: There ain't no, "No, I ain't gonna do it," you know. And Carl's pretty good
6 sized.

7 KC: Yeah, Carl's a big guy.

8 DL: "Here, we'll be right behind you. Here it is. Well, get in there." And you
9 know, you don't have time to react, but you knew they were in trouble when they called
10 for help. So you knew that you was going to go and help him, but it was the idea, of, you
11 know, a lot of people saying, "You didn't ask him what you were supposed to do?" Well,
12 no, you've been through all this training and the only thing I could think of was get on
13 the right side of them because they couldn't have them in front of you. And a lot of
14 people says, "Did they knew you was coming?" And I say, "No, they didn't know I was
15 coming." And that was hard for a lot of people because they could have shot back at you
16 because they would have thought somebody was coming in behind them.

17 KC: Right.

18 DL: So it was a matter of getting around the side and then after you fired a few
19 rounds and, you know, I don't remember the exact time that somebody said, "We're
20 going to get you out of here." Whether it was me or somebody else to make them know
21 that we were, we were coming with help to get them out of there no matter what, but
22 Carl's the one that he made all the decisions. All you did was, you know, you're a robot
23 kind of like and here it is and you go in and you'd just react and try to remember all your
24 schooling, you know. Talk about laying down. He said, "Lay down, but don't fire off.
25 Don't just hold on steady on the gun and just burn all your ammunition up." It won't do
26 you no good if you don't have nothing and somebody is attacking you.

27 KC: That's a real big heavy club when you're out of ammunition.

28 DL: Yeah, that's about it, yeah, I never thought of it that way, but, you know, if
29 you don't have any more rounds, you don't have a pistol, you don't have anything else,
30 you're up in the tree, or up a creek without a paddle.

1 KC: Now, you've had this kind of training and you said one of the rules, never get
2 off the boat. To get off the boat is to leave your lifeline. You're leaving your cover,
3 you're leaving your ammunition, you're leaving your communication, and you're leaving
4 your link with the world that is not shooting at you.

5 DL: Yes, sir.

6 KC: And Carl Fletcher says, "Take this," something you've never done before,
7 "get off this boat," which you've been told never to do, run into this strange area, I
8 assume grass was probably reasonably tall. How tall would you say the undergrowth
9 was?

10 DL: Some of it was probably—

11 KC: Three feet, something like that?

12 DL: Three feet tall, yeah. So you're ducking down.

13 KC: The nipa palm is over your head and you've got the grass. You're running
14 through this, you don't know where these guys are, you're trying to find them when
15 you've got flares, and you've got fire going on. I assume that the enemy's fire is firing at
16 you the entire, or firing at the Army lurps the entire time. Do you have any time to think?
17 You said, you used the word "robot" and I hear that an awful lot. But did you have any
18 time to think about, "Holy, this is, this is frightening."

19 DL: It, it doesn't bother you until it's all over with.

20 KC: Okay, expand on that. You say it doesn't bother you until it's all over with.
21 Did it bother you when it was over with?

22 DL: It bothered me because we couldn't get in there faster. Because, you know, if
23 you're laying here hurt and you can't get over to you even if you're ten feet away and
24 then when you do get there, how much that time, and that time, we're talking about from
25 the time you got off there and went however many feet it was in, it'd seem like it was one
26 hundred miles. It sure did. That time to get to that spot and if it had just been just a little
27 bit different. You know, if we'd have been parked there when we first heard that, if we'd
28 been on that same side because we had to go clear across the river and it'd be like the
29 Neosho River out here. It don't seem very far, but when you start the motor up, start it up,
30 put it in gear and wham it down and run it up the bank, you get over there and they hand
31 it to you and you get off. Well, that seems like forever. And then to run from there clear

1 up to there and being shot at where you're going. You don't go in a straight line. You try
2 to, you know, so if they do catch you in a glare that you try to remember.

3 KC: Right.

4 DL: Everything that they tell you not to do and lay down. But like I said, a big
5 club, I never thought of it that way, but I don't think it'd been a very big club. But you try
6 to remember and all they ever taught us is to try to hold them so they don't continue their
7 attack. It's not that you're going to—by the time you get up there that you're going to
8 wipe them out. You're not going to wipe nobody out. All you're going to do is suppress
9 them long enough to get help in. And that's what I think I did. I suppressed them long
10 enough that the gunship come in and Bob got up there because if I had to go up there and
11 been up there for ten minutes I wouldn't probably wouldn't be here today because, you
12 know, the only thing, I got there to scare them enough that if they were on the right by
13 the time I got over to the left and if they are still coming from the right, I was coming
14 back for the next wave. And that's all I could think of the whole time was just, you know,
15 like that. Because if somebody's coming at you, eventually they're gonna get around to
16 getting to them, hopefully they don't stand up too long.

17 KC: Right. Now, you could have been lying in the grass, you say its two to three
18 feet high. There could have been a mound five feet away from you that could've possibly
19 have eaten every round you threw out there. If there was just a mound that was
20 surrounding you.

21 DL: Yes.

22 KC: So, you at the time, you hoped you were doing the right thing but you
23 couldn't have known that you were doing the right thing.

24 DL: Well, you didn't know. See, and that's the other thing. Why don't you just
25 open up like this? Well, you hold down on a trigger. Well, you know, any gun you got if
26 it's automatic—I don't know if you know this or not—you hold down the trigger and you
27 go like this do you know how many rounds you go through? So that didn't do any good.
28 If I seen a guy come up here on the side of me, I guess you'd tell me you're out of—
29 really, seriously, you're out of ammunition because you just, you know, I guess
30 somebody laughs, "Yeah, but if somebody would have rushed you at least you had a
31 fifty-fifty chance of getting them." You know, you don't think about all that until it's all

1 over with and you're sitting down and you're thinking in the back of your mind how
2 stupid you were or how dumb you were or we shouldn't have gotten off the boat. But if
3 you hadn't what would have happened to those guys? You know, another thing was you
4 wouldn't be able to bring them home to bury them. And we'd never left anybody in on,
5 on PBRs we never left anybody. If somebody got killed we always made sure that they
6 got back, so. You'd sit back and think, "If something had just been a little bit different,
7 you know, maybe they were already there and they were waiting for us when we got
8 there." But I just happened to be the first one off the boat, you know? They would get up
9 there, so.

10 KC: When—I'm sorry, go ahead.

11 DL: No, go ahead.

12 KC: I was going to ask you, when it's over with you've got the medivac. Larry
13 Bissenet is directing these things in, once everybody is out—

14 DL: Yes.

15 KC: And you turn around and go back, do you go back, I guess, to you go back to
16 Vung Tau?

17 DL: No.

18 KC: Do you go back to the LST? Where do you go? Or I mean to Nha Be.

19 DL: No, we got back on the boat and then we pulled down and we finished our—
20 we kind of went down to the wide part of the river and just stayed back out of the way for
21 a little while to kind of regroup. You know, our guns were dirty and we needed to put
22 ammunition in it and we were trying to reload and everything so we had to get away from
23 the bank and we went down to the river a little ways. So if they were waiting in an
24 ambush, sometimes they'd wait for you, you know, if you were three hundred yards
25 down the river and then you'd pulled in there before, they might be waiting in there for
26 you. So, we kind of went down the river so we could reload and put ammunition in to
27 make sure everybody was okay. And then that next morning we left there and we went
28 back to the base. They went right back to Nha be. They went on to like the base they
29 were at at that wasn't the regular big base, so they went back. And we went back and we
30 cleaned our boats up and they'd debriefed us and then they went in and the Army went in
31 the next day and they followed blood trails around and found out. That's when they

1 estimated there was thirty-five to fifty, you know, but they found one body, so, like I
2 said, if we would have known that they'd been in there we could have probably put them
3 in in a different area, you know.

4 KC: Right.

5 DL: But that's one of the things.

6 KC: How could you know?

7 DL: Yeah, right. You know, you think about it and you sit and talk about it, but it
8 was just—it one was night just like twenty-some other times, you know, that would have
9 been a firefight, you know? You just never know. Some days you go out for three weeks
10 and never get shot at. The one time you don't think you're going to get shot at you get
11 shot at.

12 KC: There it is.

13 DL: Yeah. But I just happened to be at the right place. Like they say, just the right
14 place at the right time. You know, you don't remember, you honestly don't remember. I
15 wrote it up. I don't remember what the guy on the right of me was doing. I don't
16 remember what the guy on the left of me was doing. All I know was I was there so when
17 somebody (makes sound of someone dropping something), that's Terry. I can remember,
18 you know, "Terry, give me ammunition." Well, I'd like to just go up and give you a hug,
19 you know. That's all you were doing. You were trying to suppress their fire, but I think
20 you would be stupid in stating that you ran up there and you did it all yourself. I think
21 you'd be a real, really ignorant to think that because, you know, if they just thought it was
22 one person and nobody else was coming they would've—fifty people would have come
23 right at you.

24 KC: Right.

25 DL: You know it's the matter of the odds then.

26 KC: Right.

27 DL: And think they are going to get you plus those guys. And that probably
28 would have been a big thing for them, but it's just real fortunate that it was not a lot of
29 flares going off, not a lot of things happening, but just real fortunate I had enough
30 ammunition I could keep firing because I could have run out at any time. I couldn't have
31 been so excited when I hit the ground, I could have held down on it the whole time, but

1 you were just trying to do what you had been trained to do and just do your job and hold
2 them off. Because you knew, you know, you know when you have five other boats
3 behind you somebody's coming to help you. I guarantee that. That's the kind of people
4 they were. You knew they were going to be there, but it was a matter of how fast it could
5 get there, you know. And then when the other boats opened up to cross shoot like this
6 (gesture), and then the helicopter come in. You don't think about 'til years later and fifty
7 people. Well, that's a lot of people. If you thinking of what, in sixty-five, seventy feet,
8 there's fifty people.

9 KC: Wow.

10 DL: You know, and that's just being a conservative that you've got—and my
11 house here is fifty feet across. It'd be just like right here, there's fifty people in your
12 house. All outside your house there's fifty people and you're twelve, fifteen feet from
13 them so you don't know. At the time you think there's ten to fifteen people and there's
14 fifty people. Well, you know, they hit the ground from the minute you open up, they hit
15 the ground. Because they were smart and they hit the ground, but then they figured out
16 that the North Vietnamese, I think I told you this earlier, and the Viet Cong are different
17 in their fighting styles.

18 KC: Sure.

19 DL: And they think that what we hit was the hardcore—

20 KC: NVA.

21 DL: NVA. They weren't the reservists or the pajama-clad. These were the
22 hardcore.

23 KC: What about that body they found?

24 DL: They didn't elaborate on it at all, they didn't. There were a lot of blood trails,
25 but we had found out earlier when I was over there that they took the bodies just like we
26 did. We don't want to leave them because—and we assumed that after, you know, after I
27 read a lot of things over the years, the last three or four years, there were advisors with
28 them, you know, and they could have been Chinese or Russian. So, we're pretty sure that
29 there was probably somebody in there that they didn't want, you know, us to see or have
30 an idea of what was going on. That was a pretty professional ambush, you know. If the

1 lurps had run in and set up and been in there an hour, how did these guys, you know, they
2 were pretty darn good to get in that close with a rocket.

3 KC: Right.

4 DL: Because I'm sure these Army lerp guys weren't asleep when they saw it
5 happen.

6 KC: Yeah, it's pretty safe to say.

7 DL: Yeah, but to get that close, you know. And for me to get up and them be on
8 my left side and to be twelve feet in front of me, that close, how close they had to be to
9 shoot that rocket. The time that I got from there up to there, a couple of them said, "I
10 don't think it was more than three minutes from the time the boat got from the other side
11 to up there." So, think about it in three minutes. Of course, they were being careful
12 coming at them. But to be twelve feet away by the time I got there, they had to be awful
13 darn close. How did they get that close to the Army lerp guys, you know? Of course,
14 your mind just—

15 KC: And the lurps are no slouch.

16 DL: Yeah. Right, right.

17 KC: They know what they're doing.

18 DL: Right, so in your mind you're trying to, you know, everybody's trying to
19 figure out what in the world happened and the only thing that I could say was, and to
20 really be honest about it is, I wish we could have got there faster. And that's about all you
21 can say. If it would have been just a little bit different, if they'd been maybe fifteen feet
22 closer to the river, or spread out a little farther, you know, they'll never know what the
23 reasoning was for either side.

24 KC: What about when you get back? Do you have to decompress, so to speak,
25 after a firefight like this? Do emotions and the physical aspects of being in such a
26 firefight with the adrenaline flowing? Do you have to have a time where you say,
27 "Whew! I just need to sit down and think about this for a bit afterward." ?

28 DL: Well, you're so drained. I mean, like you said, you're emotions are just really
29 drained. When we got back to base, the big deal was to get a shower. You know, just to
30 relax, you know, with a shower. We used to, "I'll buy, you fly". You ever hear that in
31 high school?

1 KC: Quite a bit in high school, as a matter of fact.

2 DL: Yeah, well, Cokes were a big thing. We had a guy, I bought him Cokes for a
3 whole year because he'd fly and we went up and took a shower and come back and said,
4 "We'll buy if you'll fly." He wasn't even on my patrol and went and got four or five
5 Cokes and brought them back. Went off and sat and had a can of Coke and we'd got our
6 boat cleaned. But it'd take, sometimes it would take two hours to clean the boat and go
7 up to the ammo locker and get ammunition and bring the ammo back down on the boat
8 and everything. Get it on there and make sure that everything was running. So if you did
9 get called out or you'd have, you know, a mortar attack or something did happen. Of
10 course, you never knew what was going to happen, you know. So the best thing was to
11 keep your boat ready to go and be prepared so that's what you tried to do, you know. So
12 you kind of unwind but you knew that you had to get up in so long. They debriefed you
13 and then you and then you knew you had to be back on patrol the next day. So it was like,
14 "Well, you just got another job done. I'm glad I made it tonight. I'll be back tomorrow
15 night, I guess."

16 KC: Now, did you write up the after action report for your boat?

17 DL: I wrote—each person that went in wrote what happened.

18 KC: Okay.

19 DL: And then, see, I didn't even know that I was going to get the medal I got. I
20 was aboard, I went aboard the USS *Oriskany* and they called me up, went down to the
21 personnel office and they said, "We just got a citation, some citations for you". I said,
22 "Some citations?" He said, "You got a Purple Heart, you got a Bronze Star, and you got a
23 Navy Cross."

24 KC: You got all three?

25 DL: I got all three of them at the same time.

26 KC: So you were injured on this?

27 DL: No, I wasn't injured. That was before that they had never got to me and he
28 says, "Did you know you got a Purple Heart, you never got it." And I don't even
29 remember why.

30 KC: Is that right?

1 DL: Yeah, so I got a Purple Heart. Well, they just give that to me, but my Bronze
2 Star and my Navy Cross I got at the same time onboard ship. They guy next to me was a
3 commander in the Navy and he'd been on the aircraft carrier, the *Oriskany*. When I left
4 Vietnam and went there and he got a Bronze Star for keeping the motors running all day
5 on the carrier.

6 KC: (Laughs)

7 DL: Charlie Vance and I laugh about it. Ours are all with Combat Vs. So officers
8 get promoted by their, that's part of their promotion, I guess. I never understood all that
9 but that's how they get promoted, but we laughed. Charlie says, "Who's this guy?" and I
10 said, "One guy who got a Bronze Star for keeping the motors running on their aircraft
11 carrier." And you know, I remember how we was talking to these guys down in the
12 engine room. But it wasn't like Larry. Larry was out on patrol with us.

13 KC: Right.

14 DL: You know, a lot of officers didn't do that. I was blessed to have officers like
15 him and Mr. Morgan, Mr. Madden, Mr. Straight.

16 KC: Yeah, I've heard good things about Larry. People seem to, in the
17 organization seem have a lot of respect for Larry.

18 DL: Yeah, Larry, he's hard, but he's fair. He's really fair. We had three COs in
19 593. A great bunch of guys. Like I said, I think the Navy did a real good job when they
20 picked the guys that we had. You know, it's remarkable when you sit and look after
21 forty-plus years, went back, you know, you see a lot of what goes on today, you know.
22 People arguing about, "Well, I've done this," and then there's a lot of people that, "You
23 didn't make rank." You know, "Why didn't you make rank?" They give other guys a fit.
24 Well, what difference does it matter? You know, after forty-some years, but as far as that,
25 you're not pick a nicer bunch of guys that were going to be there to back you up. I would
26 hate to think that you climbed off that boat and you didn't have anybody to back you up.
27 But if somebody would've went before I was, I would went behind him. And that's hard
28 for people to understand in this world today.

29 KC: What has this one engagement—and like you said, you were involved in
30 many other engagements, twenty-some-odd other firefights. But this one was the one to
31 which—this is probably a bad way to put it—but a claim to fame being made from there.

1 You're David Larsen, Navy Cross winner. What has this engagement meant to you in the
2 years of since this time sense August of that year?

3 DL: Well, let's see here. I've been wrote up in several books. I've done an hour of
4 TV show where I was the star for the show. They are writing a book now of our division,
5 593, and quite a bit of it's about me with other pictures. I've been invited to be a guest
6 speaker at several places. I have a memorial out at Coronado, California, out on the wall
7 out there. I've been invited for ship commissioning and there were thirteen of us and
8 we've got Navy Cross recipients I'm only one of nine of them left. I've just been very
9 blessed to have a lot of things come my way, including this right here.

10 KC: What about you as an individual? As a person? As you look back on it, and I
11 don't know how often you think of this, but when you look back on it, what sort of things
12 did you learn about yourself from this?

13 DL: I've never thought about that, never even, even right now I wouldn't—
14 sometimes I wonder whether we could have done a better job, you know. I think there's a
15 little doubt, you know, because we hated to see those guys get killed and that's the doubt
16 part about it. It was part of everything else, it was a job. I think we did a job that most
17 people hardly ever know about. It was just something that the Navy just doesn't every
18 write much about and that's fine, but I just wish we could have done a better job as a
19 whole.

20 KC: Very good. You were involved in, what would you say, maybe twenty-seven
21 different firefights?

22 DL: Twenty-some.

23 KC: Twenty-some? Do you have any other ones that stand out in your mind?

24 DL: We had one where Darrel Tucker got killed on our boat and he was, a rocket
25 come in and decapitated him. I was gunner's mate on the boat and Carl Fletcher went to,
26 I wouldn't say all the way decapitated, but pretty well. Carl Fletcher went to give him
27 first aid and I took control of the boat and drove the boat. That was one time. One time
28 when we neared a sampan that turned a corner and we took rocket fire and we run out of
29 ammunition. We were firing on the bank so much that we took pop flares because we
30 were trying to leave. And so we took pop flare and we were out of ammunition. I think
31 that's why we were trying to save a little bit of ammunition, thinking back now.

1 KC: Yeah, because that one time is all that it would take.

2 DL: And take pop flares and going down the river and hitting them like this right
3 in the nipa palm so, you know, like we had some secret gun or something, you know. But
4 we got hit pretty hard. Each one of them was, I would say, probably twelve to fifteen of
5 them were really not gruesome, but they were hard, they were hard firefights. The other
6 ones you were fired at, you fired back. But some of them were, I'd say half of them were
7 pretty intense. But none of them that we had to go on to the beach like we did August the
8 second. So, I'd say twelve to fifteen of them were probably, very, very, very intense. You
9 wouldn't want to go back and do them again, they were that—I wouldn't say stressful,
10 but they were intense enough that you just didn't want to do them again.

11 KC: Right.

12 DL: Excuse me, some guys really, really, really were good at—Jim Davies and
13 Bob Monzingo and these guys, I mean, Bob Monzingo was probably about the best there
14 was in our river division. He had over one hundred firefights.

15 KC: Wow.

16 DL: And he has like, four Silver Stars and three Bronze Stars and he spent two
17 tours over there and he invented a lot of things for the ambushes and stuff. These guys
18 were really good and I was just blessed to be with probably one of the best outfits—
19 they're saying it was probably one of the better ones, but the other ones were good, too. I
20 don't want to take anything away from the other ones.

21 KC: Sure.

22 DL: Because I knew all those guys and they're great bunch of guys. You've met
23 them.

24 KC: Right.

25 DL: And it's, you know, it's really hard to say, but when you see what the guys
26 did in my division, your thinking, "Wow. I didn't even stack up against these guys." You
27 know? They think I stack up with them. I don't think I stack up with them because
28 they're that good. So it's pretty impressive. Like I said earlier, I think that those guys,
29 that they're underestimated. Just because you won a medal doesn't mean you're the best.
30 I mean, we're talking about guy' who've got—and I'm not for sure—three Silver Stars,
31 three or four Bronze Stars, and he's probably got fifty medals. Well, why wouldn't you

1 be: “Wow. I served with this guy. And he thinks you’re something. But look at this guy
2 here and he don’t say nothing.” So, see, it goes both ways.

3 KC: Right. Well, why don’t we take a break there for today?

4 DL: Okay.

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Interview with David Larsen

Session [2] of [2]

Date: 14 July 2009

1

2 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr.
3 David Larsen. Today is 14 July 2009. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas
4 Tech University and Mr. Larsen is joining us from Parsons, Kansas. Mr. Larsen, you
5 were discussing, or we were discussing off the tape, these other firefights that you were
6 in. You were involved in twenty-some-odd other firefights as part of River Division 593.
7 And I know that there were a few that stood out in your mind a little more clearly, I think,
8 than some of the others, one in which you were wounded, shot in the leg, I believe, and
9 another one in which Darrel Tucker was killed. Could you elaborate on some of those for
10 me please?

11 David Larsen: Well, the one with Tucker was, he was up front and a rocket come
12 through and hit him and we went firing back and there was nobody to drive the boat
13 because my chief, Carl Fletcher, he went to help Tucker. So, I took over the helm of the
14 boat to drive the boat and we made a firing run and then we went on to evacuate Tucker
15 and then the other time that we had it, we got rockets and everything. I got shot in the leg
16 and we had a couple other guys wounded, but not serious and we made the firing run
17 until we run out of ammunition and then we went on and we all went to the infirmary and
18 none of us were flew into the field hospital.

19 KC: Well, let me back up here a little bit. On this particular mission in which
20 Tucker was killed, it sounds like there was quite a bit going on here. Could you take me
21 through that from, say, the beginning? Where were you going to and it may have just
22 been a spot on the river, but take me through that thing in as much detail as you could on
23 that particular mission.

24 DL: Well, we were—Tucker had been in-country, oh, a couple of weeks and it
25 was kind of like we were still showing him a lot of things like to be the boat captain and
26 probably to be a patrol officer. We were just going down the river and we really didn't
27 have a mission that day. It was more like a training exercise, really, or just go out to kind
28 of, you know, to see what was going on, going down the river and teach the other guys
29 kind of what to do because the only way you got broke in when you come in-country was

1 to go out on the river and get shot at. And so we were kind of out, really weren't looking
2 for any real major problems, but we did get into some problems there.

3 KC: Now, did you know that where you were going could be hot? That there
4 could be some enemy action there?

5 DL: No, that was one of the things that when we were talking the other day that
6 you didn't know, one day you might go by and it could be pretty good and then the next
7 day you could come by, they were trying a different spot so until Agent Orange kind of
8 clicked in and they kind of cleared the banks, you know, a little bit more, we got hit, but
9 the further we went north into Vietnam up around Saigon, Agent Orange hadn't been
10 used up there so it was a little thicker and a little more bushy and so we were a little more
11 sitting targets than what we used to be. So, some days you could drive by and they tried
12 to change, the bad guys tried to change where they were at, too.

13 KC: Sure, sure. So you were just moving along up the river and the firing came
14 from nowhere, I assume?

15 DL: Yes, it just comes out of nowhere and I assumed it was a rocket. They had
16 two kinds of rockets. They had a B-40 and they called the other one a B-41. When they'd
17 go off, sometimes they would go all the way through the boat and make a hole and come
18 out the other side.

19 KC: Wow.

20 DL: And explode, so you'd hope they were above the water line, but most of it as,
21 I call them primitive now to what we had, you know, they're shoulder-held so it took a
22 pretty good shot with the boat to be moving. I think most of theirs was just luck.

23 KC: Yeah. Okay, now when they opened fire on you, was there any small arms
24 fire?

25 DL: Yes, when they opened fire with a B-40 or a B-41 rocket they would open up
26 with SKSs, they were Swedish-made rifles and some of them were single-shot and then
27 they'd open up with AK-47s. And so there'd be mortar fire. Sometimes you would get it
28 from both banks of the river and they were laying for you and sometimes you would just
29 get it from one side.

30 KC: What about—I'm sorry, go ahead.

1 DL: Sometimes they'd wait when you got to a corner and they'd get you right
2 before you got to the corner and they'd shoot at you and then when you turn the corner on
3 the river, they'd be waiting for you, a whole bunch of them and then to shoot back at you.

4 KC: Wow, so they'd refine their tactics as well, then, hadn't they?

5 DL: Yes, they were kind of learning like we were. And we were running into
6 more, I think I told you before, we were running into more real, as we went further north
7 up towards Saigon, we were running into more regular ARVN, or not ARVN, but North
8 Vietnamese because they had the reserves like the Viet Cong.

9 KC: Okay, now, back on this mission in which Tucker was killed. You say
10 sometimes they'd fire from one bank, sometimes from two banks, what about this
11 particular case? Was it one or both banks they were firing from?

12 DL: I think it was one bank and I'm not sure about that for sure because it
13 happened so fast, a rocket went off and he went down and Carl Fletcher, he was driving
14 the boat and he went around to take care to get first aid to Tucker and when he did that
15 left nobody at the helm so I took over to helm on the boat. Small arms fire and everything
16 pushed to get us out of there while everybody was firing. And then we'd come back
17 through them, made a firing run back through on the way to head for a medivac for
18 Tucker.

19 KC: About how long did you stay in the area? Did you turn back around
20 immediately?

21 DL: It was really fast because we went down until we weren't getting shot at
22 anymore and then we made a U-turn and we'd come back and opened up with everything
23 we had and headed for a landing zone.

24 KC: Did you have any idea at the time how badly wounded Tucker might have
25 been?

26 DL: No, not until we got down the river a little bit. And then we realized that he
27 was dead and Carl did everything he could do to revive him.

28 KC: Carl seems like a, I don't know how to put it, certainly a very active, very
29 kind of in-charge kind of guy. Obviously, he was in charge as boat captain, but he seems
30 like a guy who was certainly not afraid to get in the middle of something and then to
31 delegate while he was doing these other things. You mentioned that earlier in the

1 engagement for which you won the Navy Cross that Carl Fletcher was instrumental in
2 making all this happen.

3 DL: Yes.

4 KC: And help coordinate things and getting things started like that.

5 DL: Yeah. Well, you know, they always say that the chiefs kind of run the Navy
6 so I kind of think that's true about Carl at the time he was in, you know. He just did a
7 good job.

8 KC: Now, you mentioned before that you didn't particularly care to drive the boat
9 at night, especially. But I would assume that in the particular case that things are moving
10 so quickly and that there is an emergency with one of your mates being shot that nothing
11 like that crossed your mind. I would assume that you would move out as quickly as you
12 could.

13 DL: Right, right. See, that was what we were all trained to take the other person's
14 job if we had to. So that's why everybody learned how to fire the weapons and
15 everything. We could all drive the boats, but I guess it's just like anything else. Some
16 people are more qualified than other people or are better at that little task than other
17 people are.

18 KC: Now, when you made this run back up, you know that you received some
19 pretty heavy fire and you're going to make this firing run, this pass back through there.

20 DL: Right.

21 KC: What sort of things are going through your mind? You're turning around and
22 going back from where you just received this fire. What sort of things are you thinking
23 about?

24 DL: Well, the first thing was to get out as fast as we could. We couldn't go the
25 other way because I hadn't really been up the river that far and I don't remember why we
26 went the other way and went back south except that the other way we did know was good
27 and we knew we had a landing zone that was south of there. So when we come back
28 around we thought if we laid down some heavy fire, and we had some pretty heavy
29 firepower with three .50-caliber machineguns and M-60s and small arms and we had,
30 let's see here, on that particular day there were, let's see, Carl, there were five of us on
31 the boat. Well, there were five or six of us on the boat, I can't remember, but we had

1 plenty of people to man the guns and when you're laying down three .50-caliber
2 machineguns on a bank, that kind of makes your head duck.

3 KC: Yeah, I would certainly think so.

4 DL: It'll cut down little trees, you know, real little trees like here in Kansas. They
5 would cut down a tree, you know, pretty quick.

6 KC: So you make this firing run. Do you fire until you're empty then head back to
7 find some aid?

8 DL: No, what we do is we just turn the corner, go about, we'd run about seventy-
9 five yards or whatever and then we'd turn around and we made the turn and then we'd
10 come back through and we opened up on the bank and we just kept on going until we had
11 got, oh, like a quarter of a mile up the river or however far. And then we'd stop shooting
12 and then we went into our LZ.

13 KC: Okay, now, at this time are you in communication with people who were
14 going to provide the aid to get to the LZ to try to get Tucker out and get some care?

15 DL: Our cover boat that was behind us, they were doing all the radioing and they
16 were taking care of all of the radio and eventually as we got down the river they would
17 come up alongside of us and on up the river a little ways. So they kind of took over the
18 radio communications because we were, really we were, at that time, we were two men
19 short, but we still had plenty of help, but they had a full crew and could operate the radio
20 better than we could.

21 KC: Right, right. Now, when you get to the area where you can offload Tucker,
22 had he died by this time?

23 DL: He had passed away by then.

24 KC: Okay, well, pick up the story from there. What happens from this point on?

25 DL: Well, we all go back to base, they'd write the reports, we all go back to base
26 and our ammunition's out, we go back and then Carl goes up and they get what they call
27 after action report. Everybody writes down what happens and we tell what happened and
28 each boat tells what they do and then we go to requisition for ammunition and we get
29 ammunition and we fill up. I can't remember whether we went back on patrol then,
30 whether we had enough time to go back on patrol or not. If I remember correctly, we
31 didn't go back on patrol. I'm sorry, go ahead.

1 KC: Now, we've talked about this before, but this time you've lost one of your
2 boat mates. Was this a first time that this had happened to you?

3 DL: Well, I lost Tucker and that was the only one that was on my boat. I had other
4 boats, cover boats that they had lost people on, but Tucker was the only one that I had.
5 We lost Chief Smith and I was on the boat with him. We lost Tom Brown. I think I talked
6 about Tom. We had went through training on the aircraft carrier together.

7 KC: Right.

8 DL: And then we had lost Terry Simpson and we had been on the same boat
9 together so there were four guys that I knew personally that I was with and not at that
10 time, but they were on different boats and they had been on my boat, but I had been on
11 their boats that had died. I know four of them really close.

12 KC: Can you describe what it was like to, to lose someone in this?

13 DL: Well, it was probably, I think about it now and I think about the four guys or
14 five guys or all the guys in 593 and then you had the Army over there any everything. It
15 isn't so bad when you don't know them, but when you know them it's kind of hard. I
16 thought when Brown died that I would probably end up in the hospital with a nervous
17 breakdown, if you really want to know the truth.

18 KC: Is that right?

19 DL: Yes, it was kind of emotional because we had been so close. He had come the
20 night before up to my, there where we stayed in Nha Be and he had said, "I want you to
21 take my wallet and my keys." He had some stuff for me and he says, "I'm not going to
22 make it tomorrow." I thought he was just kidding and we'd been out and been shot at
23 quite a bit and he said, "No, I'm not going to make it." And so I told him, "Oh, don't
24 worry about it, things will be fine." You didn't want to dwell on stuff like that. The next
25 day he got killed so it's kind of hard. You know, you think should you be that callous or
26 not, but I don't know. It comes out that you lose them and it's something that impacts
27 you the rest of your life. You remember them or you'll see somebody that looks like them
28 when you're walking down the street or a smell or a sight or somebody named Terry or
29 somebody named Tom. You'll think about it just a second, you know, when they're
30 talking to you.

1 KC: Now you say that Brown came to you the day before, like it was some sort of
2 premonition or something?

3 DL: Yes, yes. He come the night before when we were in Nha Be and he was
4 down about four cubicles from me and he come in and told me that he wasn't going to
5 make it. You know, at the time I'm sure that everybody was feeling kind of bad because
6 some people had been killed and we were getting shot up pretty good. I don't know
7 whether, you know, he just said that because he was scared or whatever, but we kind of
8 dismissed it and went on and the next morning saw him and he went out patrolling and
9 got killed that day.

10 KC: Wow. And this would be just pure speculation, but did you witness anything
11 in his behavior prior to this that would have led you to believe that maybe that he's not,
12 that he doesn't have the—I don't want to say doesn't have the faculties to deal with this,
13 but that he was being troubled over this?

14 DL: No, I think it was because we had been in more firefights up to that time than
15 we had for a long, long time because we were going into a new area. When we first got
16 over there it was a little slow. The guys commented on how slow it was. I think the first
17 sixty, ninety days, I can't remember. The first sixty or ninety days we didn't really get
18 shot at that heavy and at this time that he'd come to say this, he had been in a firefight
19 just a few days before and we had a loop on our berets and what they did is you cut the
20 loop if you was in a firefight, in two, at the bottom where you just had two strands
21 hanging and if you were in a firefight and they saw somebody go down, one of the bad
22 guys go down, you got to cut a V in that piece that you'd cut. Well, it took us a little
23 while and when we did it, it all happened—some of the guys would get in a firefight but
24 just being shot at and Tom and I, we were one of the two that I can remember. Well,
25 Litzenburg, Don Litzenburg was another one. And Randall, J.R Randall that stayed in my
26 cubicle that they got to cut theirs in two and got to cut a V in it all at the same time.

27 KC: Wow. What sort of things do you do to cope with the loss of these guys that
28 you knew?

29 DL: Well, I haven't really had to really worry about it. I've had nightmares for a
30 little while when I first come home and every once in a while I'll have something that
31 will come up that will make me think about it, but they were young enough I hoped that

1 God's took care of my part and let me be a little comfortable with it, you know. It was a
2 difficult time and I just pray to God that they're in a better place.

3 KC: Right.

4 DL: And so I have a lot of respect for them and the other guys that died over there
5 and we're losing, we're starting out and starting to lose a lot of the guys, you know. In
6 the next few years it's going to take its toll with them. So, some of them it's going to be
7 harder to cope with other than other ones that you were close to. Thank the Lord, it's all
8 worked out and I'd sit and visit with the wife about it and then the guys I'm with, they're
9 really good at being around with and we talk about all the funny stuff now and what a
10 good job we did and get together and so it's all worked out.

11 KC: Well, take me on this mission in which you received the Purple Heart, where
12 you were shot in the leg. And again, be as, as detailed as you can.

13 DL: Okay, well, we were going down the river and I usually sit in the front gun
14 tub and anyway, I wanted to change places and I had another guy, his name was Wiley,
15 he lives in Yukon, Oklahoma, right now. Anyway, Wiley wanted to sit up at the front gun
16 tub and I had come around on the M-60 in the middle of the boat and we were going
17 down the river and we started getting shot at and we changed positions. When we
18 changed positions, I got in the gun tub and he got back on the 60 and about that time a
19 round went through the boat and I guess it went out on the other side and it went through
20 and it hit me in the leg and then I had a piece hit me on my rear end. We had what we
21 called diapers and they were flack jackets that you wore and they looked like a big
22 diaper. I had my flack jacket it was so hot, we don't know whether they ever worked, but
23 it was so hot we'd reverse them. We'd put it on one way and we'd put the other one on
24 the other way. I had mine turned the other way and I got it, had turned back the right way
25 that it's supposed to go. I hadn't had it zipped up and anyway, whatever this round that
26 come through, one round hit me in the leg and then a whole bunch of shrapnel then a few
27 minutes later. I got shrapnel in my arms and my back and got cut a little bit. It went
28 through the diaper and cut my rear end a little bit, like a good nick across your rear end
29 all the way from one side to the other. I got hit on the right side so I knew that we had
30 only got shot at on the right side because when we went to the infirmary they laughed
31 because they could tell that everything had come from the right side of you.

1 KC: What was it like? What does through your mind when you've been hit like
2 that?

3 DL: You know, it was more that now that I think about it a lot, it was more of,
4 "I'm alright. I'm not, you know, this could have been a lot worse," you know. That round
5 could have gone through your head or through your chest, you know? You're blessed
6 every day to walk this earth so it wasn't your time and God's allowed you to be here forty
7 years later so I think that that's the one thing that crossed my mind because He could
8 have took me right then and He didn't. I just got shot in the leg and got shrapnel in me.
9 I've had a lot of things like that happen, you know. I guess you call them near death. I
10 haven't had any near death misses, but you think about that now years later and the boat
11 all shot up and somebody dead on the boat and thirty-foot long. So there's a guy
12 probably, there's five guys so you've got a six-foot slot down that boat. If it's thirty foot
13 long six foot's yours, six foot's the next guy. Well, you know, they're shooting blindly
14 so, you know, it's kind of strange—it's not strange, it's the good Lord that you're not
15 killed then so He has a purpose and a time for all of us.

16 KC: Now, were you still maintaining your fire after you'd been hit?

17 DL: Yes, that was the one thing that we did. We never let up. As a matter of fact,
18 the intensity and the fire that we put down was heavier then than it was before because,
19 you know, when they first fired you're kind of thinking, "Gosh darn," you know. "All of
20 a sudden they're firing at you. Who's firing at you?" You know, the first thing you're
21 thinking on your first few firefights and you're thinking, "Good grief." And so you turn
22 around and you turn the gun tub around and you open up and you have to do it buy brute
23 force on the boats we were on so they had to raise the guns up and down and the first
24 couple of times you're in a combat situation, you know, it's a little scary, it's a little scary
25 all the time, but it's a little scary because you don't know whether you're going to hit
26 anything or whether all your training so you really get intense. You've got to be careful
27 because you know you're going to come back by or it you go around the corner they're
28 going to shoot at you again so you can't just lay there with a steady stream of firing at the
29 bank. You've got to think, "Well, if I get one hundred yards up the river I might get hit
30 again."

31 KC: Right.

1 DL: But we'll eventually get to a secure spot and I'll be able to reload. But then
2 you always had, one thing about us, we always had a cover boat right behind us or in
3 front of us and we could rely on them. So really, we just doubled our firepower.

4 KC: After you'd been hit and, like you say, you continue on here. You're firing
5 into the bank. When do you get to seek medical attention?

6 DL: We weren't hit that bad. Mine didn't go all the way through my leg. It went
7 in and it went in about an inch and a half into my, into my knee, on the side of my knee.
8 And so, it hurt like four or five bees that stung you, but that was about it. We went on and
9 did our job and then when we got into base we kind of just limped up to get first aid,
10 reached in with a pair of tweezers and they put a little glue on there, put it in and wrapped
11 it up, took out a little shrapnel, put a little iodine on it and you were okay.

12 KC: Wow.

13 DL: I mean, it was like if you were serious, if you were really, really hurt, but we
14 weren't—I don't think you'd call it hurt, hurt, hurt like, you know, it went all the way
15 through and you were bleeding that much. You know, you wrapped a band-aid around it
16 and they tied it. There were two strings on each side and you just tied it to you and went
17 on. So, it wasn't a life threatening thing, you know, at the time.

18 KC: Not a lot of blood loss or anything like that.

19 DL: Not a lot of blood loss. Of course, sometimes we'd talk about that. You
20 know, that ammunition that they had over there had been brought all the way down from
21 North Vietnam so some of that was pretty old ammunition.

22 KC: Sure.

23 DL: So it might have been a blessing for a lot of us because it was pretty well
24 wore. You know, they probably didn't have very clean guns so it was kind of hard for
25 that round to get out and go very far.

26 KC: Right, right. Plus being, you know, being literally carried by probably on
27 somebody's back.

28 DL: Right.

29 KC: For the entire distance of the trail, yeah, that shakes up the ammunition quite
30 a bit.

1 DL: Yeah, and they wouldn't know whether they would have old ammunition or
2 whatever. You know, ours was in lots so we knew if we got a bad lot of ammunition so
3 we were real blessed that way.

4 KC: About how long would you estimate the time was between when you got hit
5 and when you got the medical care?

6 DL: Oh, thirty minutes. It wasn't that long. Time, when you're in a firefight or
7 somebody's shooting at you, time goes really, really fast. You don't look down at your
8 watch or nothing. You're just, "I got to get this done. This is my job." Because my
9 thought was if I did my job the best I could, I figured the other guys would, we were all
10 gonna be okay.

11 KC: Right.

12 DL: And so you really worked really hard at that. And so a nick or a scratch or
13 some little thing like that wasn't a big, big deal. Now there were times it was a big deal
14 when somebody had got shot. They would stay on board and they'd bandage up and
15 they'd stay on so they could guide the boats so they could get things taken care of and
16 then they medivac'ed them or took them off. But if we weren't really—and a lot of us,
17 unless you were dead or really hurt seriously, we didn't say a whole lot. We were pretty
18 quiet about it.

19 KC: Now, why do you suppose that was? Was it something like, "I see these other
20 guys doing it, so I'm going to do it. I'm not going to express my pain or fear," or
21 whatever it might be? Or was it something that you just did individually?

22 DL: I think it's something you chose to do individually because we didn't want
23 the other person to, to really worry about us. I don't think I'm saying that right, but I
24 don't think we wanted them to worry about us and that we had a job and we were doing
25 the job and there was a lot of guys that didn't want to make a big deal out of it because
26 they didn't want to go home because they didn't enjoy it, but they liked the time that they
27 were there. And so they didn't make a big deal out of it because it was just another thing
28 that was just life on the river.

29 KC: Right. Well, what about this—well, let me go into something different here.
30 You were involved in many different firefights and you've relayed I think three of them

1 to me throughout the course of the interview so far. Were there any others that stand out
2 in your mind for any particular reason?

3 DL: We, we had firefights where the rest of them were you would be on a big
4 river, and I think you can identify the Neosho River is out here?

5 KC: Yes, sir.

6 DL: Okay, how wide it is maybe half a city block maybe at its widest point, I
7 would assume. And you would be going in and they would open up fire and our speed
8 had a lot to get us away so that was something. When there was no brush on the sides of
9 it, we were okay, but when you got in a brushy area like that, speed got us out of a lot of
10 things. So we'd just flat just put it down and go as fast as we could. And then we'd turn
11 around and come back and we'd open up on the banks and we'd call for artillery. So,
12 besides when I talked about my Navy Cross, I didn't get that close to the enemy, you
13 know, ten, twelve foot. They were on the river and we didn't stay and just stop the boat in
14 the, the middle of the river because they could have eventually just blown us out of the
15 water, you know?

16 KC: Right.

17 DL: And we were fiberglass, so, you know, we were kind of like sitting ducks.
18 They used to say that we were a floating coffin.

19 KC: That must have made you feel good.

20 DL: No, it wasn't much fun when they would say that. But the whole boat was
21 fiberglass except around the very, very top where the top met the bottom part at the top.
22 And that was metal around the top of it. They had Mark 1s and Mark 2s. The Mark 2 got
23 a little better where they had the front down on it. The Mark 1 stood up a little higher in
24 the front.

25 KC: Alright, now here you are, I believe you were twenty-one years old at the
26 time during your tour there. What sort of things, when you get time to think about home,
27 what sort of things were you thinking about?

28 DL: Well, I wondered what I was going to do, you know, when I left over there I
29 still had time left in the Navy and I wondered where I was going to go and whether I was
30 going to stay in it or not. I wondered about that. I wondered where we were going to live
31 and what I was going to do for work because there was a lot of places you couldn't get a

1 job then at a lot of places that they were telling me about. I didn't know whether to stay
2 in the service and make it a career or not and whether I was going to get out and do
3 whatever I wanted to do. I thought about that and then as it went on, you thought, "Well,
4 I might not even have to worry about that," you know? So you kind of played it day by
5 day. "I made it today and I'm doing good. We'll see what tomorrow brings."

6 KC: So were you keeping count of the days you had left or was that something
7 you just put out of your mind as much as you could?

8 DL: No, we kept track of it. They had a little Snoopy. Remember Snoopy?

9 KC: Oh, yeah.

10 DL: We had a little button and it was Snoopy and it had a "short timer" on it. And
11 if you had like thirty to forty-five days left, they'd give you a little button that said "short
12 timer" on it, Snoopy. The guys would say, "There's an old timer, he's going home here
13 before long. We better take care of him." You know, it's kind of a joke. We would put a
14 little button on and I've still got mine in all my stuff, but it's a picture on a medal pin of
15 Snoopy and it says "short timer" on it. We did count our days 'til we come home.

16 KC: What sort of relationship did you have with the new guys that were coming
17 in?

18 DL: Well, the new guys we had a pretty good relationship, but when I started to
19 leave and probably four or five months before I started to leave, they started introducing
20 the Vietnamese on the boat and the Vietnamese were starting to take over on the boats
21 and we were teaching them how to drive the boats and fire the guns. So the new guys
22 who were coming in, they were kind of like teachers and teaching the new guys and it
23 was different because you didn't have all Americans on the boat.

24 KC: Well, tell me about that some more. You're talking about turning over the
25 boats to the Vietnamese, part of this overall Vietnamization, as they call it. What was
26 your opinion of that policy overall?

27 DL: Well, I thought it was pretty good because where we were at in the delta, we
28 were actually winning the war and we were going north and these Vietnamese sailors that
29 were coming in, we were training them and they were real, real young and so they would
30 listen to you and come in and they were very, very good and we would teach them
31 everything and then we'd have like—there would be the four guys on our boat and then

1 we'd have maybe a couple of Vietnamese with us. And eventually we would let them
2 drive the boat, we'd let them fire the guns, but when we got in a firefight it was like
3 having an extra gun on the boat. But they did a very, very good job where we were at. I
4 think the Navy and the Vietnamese navy was better trained in Vietnam than most people
5 know and they did a better job, I think, than the Army did because I think it was the
6 training they received from the Navy.

7 KC: I'll be darned. Interesting. You don't always hear that about the Vietnamese.

8 DL: Right. Yeah, if I remember right the one that was on my boat's name was
9 Loc, L-O-C, we called him Loc, and he done a real good job. And then we had trained
10 others, but I think the Navy was completely, like I said, completely different than the
11 Army. I think it's because we took the time so they lived with us, they stayed with us,
12 they ate with us, and we taught them how to do it. I think that's what made the difference
13 where we were at.

14 KC: And yours was certainly a more specialized kind of thing.

15 DL: Right.

16 KC: When you were on your boat, by yourselves, you'd live on that boat for
17 twelve hours a day and had to be very, very close with those individuals. Let's face it.
18 There's some skill to driving a boat that isn't necessarily there when you're walking as
19 ground troops.

20 DL: Right. And see the other thing was, and I don't know this to be a fact, but
21 there were some of them that come down that we never saw, so I think they were either—
22 and I really think they were weeded out, you know, out of the group. Because there was
23 some that we never saw come back. So, I think we got where we were at, we got the
24 cream of the crop and I kind of think that maybe had to do with our leadership in our
25 division or with Task Force 116.

26 KC: What sort of things did you find to be the most difficult when it came to
27 training the Vietnamese to take over for you in these boats?

28 DL: Some of the—when we got into—we'd make a firing run at a beach and we'd
29 take like, from World War II they called it cruiser style. They'd put one boat out in the
30 front and then you'd flank it on each side and then flank it behind and then we'd make a
31 firing run on a bank because we'd really got hit hard. And sometimes they didn't want to

1 go in like that, they wanted to call in for helicopter support. We had to tell them that if
2 they showed them what we could do, you know, and go in and we were being shot at and
3 not lay back. If we laid back they'd keep hitting us so we had to kind of show them that
4 we weren't going to be, I wouldn't say scared, but afraid of us. And so we would push,
5 push a little bit in to show them that we weren't going to let them back us down.
6 Sometimes some of these Vietnamese didn't like the thought of going right up to
7 somebody shooting at you.

8 KC: Right, I think we can all certainly understand that.

9 DL: (Laughs) Yeah.

10 KC: What about the Vietnamese language? You had had some training back in
11 California. Was there any difficulties with the language?

12 DL: No, we went to two weeks' language school and then most of the, most of the
13 language we got over there was Vietnamese, but they had a lot of French over there
14 before, so a lot of words that they left behind, the French did, were French, and I had nine
15 weeks of French in high school. So I could pick up a few words there and then plus going
16 to language school, I picked up enough of the Vietnamese so you could—you didn't
17 really talk to them that much, but you knew enough. Most of the sailors from the
18 Vietnamese navy that come onboard, they had sent them to school if they knew, or pretty
19 much knew our language.

20 KC: Oh, wow. Okay, now during this time did you, did you ever get the
21 opportunity to take any leave? To get a little R&R (rest and relaxation)?

22 DL: You get one week's of R&R when you're in-country like that, that's what we
23 got. I got to go to Hawaii and meet my wife.

24 KC: Oh, tell me about that, the parts that you can.

25 DL: Well okay, they call it Fort DeRussy at Hawaii and my wife was there and
26 they had all the wives line up and the guys would get off the bus. They'd fly you in and
27 they put you on a bus and drive you in. Of course, only being married for like June and
28 seeing her at Christmas time, you know, not seeing her every day. What was it? After
29 Christmas. It was in January of '69. Anyway, the funny part about it was, they had us all
30 walk up to the front and they didn't have us find our wives, the wives had to find us
31 because we couldn't picture them, you know, because the times in the States had changed

1 to where the girls that had long hair when we left—a lot of us were laughing about it—
2 and they had cut their hair. So, if you've never seen your wife in short hair, you know,
3 you were really staring hard to find your wife in long hair. So you had to find her. When
4 we went in they had us line up and then the girls found us and we went and rented a car
5 and went and saw Don Ho and we went and toured Pearl Harbor and we went out to the
6 beach almost every day. We stayed—the wife cooked a couple of breakfasts, but that was
7 it. We ate out the whole time. So we spent a week there and then I went back to in-
8 country.

9 KC: Now, you hadn't been married for very long before you left. What was it like
10 to see this, basically this brand new bride?

11 DL: It was pretty awesome. It was strange, you know, because like I said, you
12 didn't know her because mine showed up with short hair.

13 KC: (Laughs)

14 DL: And she had long hair and it was curly and then she cut it off before she went
15 to Hawaii because it's going to be hot. You know, that was kind of strange and the funny
16 part about it, I guess, if I look back on it now is, she had never been outside of Parsons,
17 Kansas.

18 KC: Oh, is that right?

19 DL: Yeah, she had been out to LA to go to Bible school and come back home, but
20 that's the only place she'd ever been in her whole life. The other time was when I took
21 her to San Diego. So this time, this was about her third trip. She had never really been
22 anywhere so it was more of an experience for her and she was really googly-eyed or
23 whatever because she had never been, you know, anywhere like that.

24 KC: Right, quite an experience for married David Larsen.

25 DL: Yeah, especially from Parsons, Kansas.

26 KC: Well, you've been in combat for—how long have you been in combat before
27 you went on R&R in Hawaii?

28 DL: Let's see, September, October, November, December, and January. About six
29 months, five months. Five to six months.

30 KC: Okay, your tour is about halfway over, roughly.

31 DL: Right.

1 KC: You said it started a little slow, but things certainly, obviously picked up.

2 DL: Right.

3 KC: You get to meet your wife in Hawaii. Your new bride in Hawaii, but you've
4 seen these things in combat in Vietnam. Was there any difficulty trying to relate to this
5 woman that you hadn't seen in all this time after what you had experienced?

6 DL: No, I think it was just having the time off. I thought about that probably as
7 much as anything and I think it was the time off and I was so happy that I had that time
8 off that I enjoyed it probably more that week than a lot of weeks in my life up 'til now.
9 Because that one week was like, I don't know whether you'd say numb or whatever, but
10 you knew you got a whole week off. You didn't have to worry about getting shot at, you
11 didn't have to worry about anything happening because you were gone for a week.

12 KC: Okay, let me ask you the inevitable follow up to this, then. You know you
13 had that week off and it's fantastic for you, but you also know that you have to go back.
14 What was it like going back?

15 DL: That was the quietest plane ride or any ride I've ever been on. So, I guess we
16 were all just thinking of why were we going back. Because you'd been there and most of
17 the guys, most of the guys that went to Hawaii because you could go, you could go to any
18 place. You could go to Hawaii, you could go to Hong Kong, you could go to Australia.
19 So, the majority of the guys that were married went to Hawaii, so it was pretty somber
20 ride back home. I know that all of them thought, "Boy, I wonder in six months if I'll get
21 to see her again or what's going to happen." We used the old reel-to-reel to make, you
22 know, to talk on to send it home and I would send her a reel-to-reel and the only machine
23 they had was at our church. She would take it in and get to listen to the reel-to-reel so I'd
24 send her one about every two months. And so, I never thought much more about I was
25 going back. I was in the Navy, and like I said, I got six months so I thought I was doing
26 pretty good.

27 KC: So I would guess that the trip to Vietnam initially, as part of Task Force 116,
28 you didn't know enough to be scared, you didn't know enough to be nervous about what
29 you were going to be involved in. But this second trip back after your visit to Hawaii with
30 your wife, you knew exactly what you were going to be involved in. You had six more
31 months of that intensity. What was that like for you?

1 DL: Well, it was alright. Honestly, the whole time that I spent over there I didn't
2 really think about that part of it. I just thought, "If I can get through today, get through
3 tomorrow, I'll be alright," you know? If I don't—I never thought of it like that. I just
4 knew that if I could get the today and get through tomorrow I'll be alright. And I never
5 let it go beyond that.

6 KC: Okay, now you've already said that you were counting your time down a
7 little bit. You've got yourself with a short timer. You've got Snoopy counting the days
8 for you. Tell me about your leaving Vietnam. The last day you were there. Do you
9 remember that?

10 DL: Oh, yeah. The day before Carl comes down and I had Steve Hall and Tom
11 Hall were on my boat and we all shook hands, got a picture of that in all my stuff. We
12 shook hands and went up and they had my travel orders to go into Saigon and went to
13 Nha Be and they had a jeep for me. They had—I can't remember the guy's name that
14 drove me, but got on the jeep. I had my sea bag, threw it on, and then I had a parachute
15 bag, a little bag like you carry on the planes now and that was a parachute bag and I had
16 it. I got on the jeep and they took me to Saigon and I went to the Annapolis, they call it
17 the Annapolis Hotel, and turned my weapon in there and got my travel orders and then I
18 left and went to Tan Son Nhut Air Base there in Saigon and we got on a commercial
19 airlines. It was completely full. There was Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force. We got
20 in a plane and we took off there and we flew to Japan and at Japan we refueled and then
21 we left there and we flew to Travis Air Force Base in California.

22 KC: What was it like, what was the atmosphere like on that plane as you were
23 leaving Vietnam?

24 DL: It was, it was really, really quiet until we got in the air and they served—you
25 could have a beer or a mixed drink when you got up in the air and got out away from
26 Vietnam they let you have a beer or a mixed drink. I think it was more to relax us than it
27 was everybody else. We got a beer or a mixed drink and the guy next to you, most of
28 them were tired and we had uniforms, but most of us still had that smell. I don't know
29 how to describe that smell. You had that smell that you had over there. Some of the
30 officers were a lot cleaner than some of the enlisted ones. We had our uniforms and
31 didn't have a whole lot of anything except what was carrying home. A lot of guys had

1 packages and stuff like that that they were bringing home, but it was pretty quiet in a
2 sense, but it wasn't. You would talk to the guy next to you, but you didn't know him and
3 he didn't know you. That was kind of like, you were going home with your own emotions
4 and he was going home with his emotions.

5 KC: That's a good way to put that. Okay, you say you flew into Travis. What was
6 it like when you reached the West Coast?

7 DL: Well, when they said we were about an hour out, it was like everybody got
8 really excited and then when we got to the, we call it the continental United States and
9 they told us the continental United States, that was another time we got excited. And then
10 when we saw that we were coming into the States and saw land, that was really good.
11 And then they said, "We'll be landing at Travis Air Force Base in X number of minutes."
12 Anyway, we got ready to land and right before the plane, he said, "Make sure your
13 seatbelts are on, we're getting ready to descend." You could have dropped a pin and
14 heard it in that plane. It was that quiet and it was so quiet. Then when it hit the runway,
15 you thought you'd hear cheers and all you heard was people crying. You know,
16 everybody tells me they hear cheers. On the plane I was on, all you'd hear was people
17 crying. They had made it and they were so thrilled they didn't scream or holler, they were
18 crying. And tears, you'd look over to the guy next to you and tears would be coming
19 down their face, you know, that we had made it, you know. It was real, real quiet and
20 they said to get off the plane after I got up there and it was real, real quiet. Then, as we
21 got ready to get off the plane, the guy next to you, he'd reach over and kind of give you a
22 big handshake or a hug, you know, we made it. Then we started to climb off the plane. I
23 hear a lot of other guys say that cheered and everything, you know, but on the plane I was
24 on they cried and you didn't hear a whole lot. It was pretty quiet.

25 KC: How were you greeted when you got to Travis?

26 DL: At Travis we were, as we got off the plane we were greeted very nicely by
27 the military and there were a few of the officers that were on the plane with us that their
28 families were there. Ninety-nine percent of the guys didn't have any family there so when
29 they got off there the Army was waiting there to take the guys that had to go wherever
30 they were going and the Air Force was there and you got to go up at that time. We went
31 up to—the Navy had a place and the Army and the Marines. You'd walk up to them and

1 they kind of assist you where to go from there and how to catch your flight and
2 everything to go home or to your next duty station. There were a lot of guys, say, fifty
3 percent of them that were getting mustered out.

4 KC: Now, you had additional time in the Navy. Were you going to go home for a
5 little while?

6 DL: I was going to go home.

7 KC: Okay, for how much time did you have back home for leave?

8 DL: Let's see, I had two weeks' leave because I'd used my other time, I had thirty
9 days and I had used it up before I went over there and I used a week. I had two weeks'
10 leave. I got a taxi cab and I took a bus to San Francisco and then I got a taxi cab when I
11 got to San Francisco and then they took a cab, there were three of us so we took a cab and
12 we went to San Francisco International Airport and we got there and then we left there
13 and I flew to Kansas City and I don't know where the other two guys went. And so I
14 come home and the wife and I stayed a week and then we packed up and we drove to
15 clear back to San Francisco, Alameda.

16 KC: You drove back?

17 DL: Pardon?

18 KC: The two of you drove to San Francisco?

19 DL: We drove from Kansas, from Parsons, Kansas to Alameda and we had a
20 week to get there. Then I went out to Alameda and we were stationed on the south side of
21 the bay at San Francisco and I would get up in the morning and Don Litzenburg, that I
22 was overseas with, he ended up being there right about the same time or a little after. Him
23 and his wife Diana, and me and him would ride over and he was on a destroyer over in
24 the bay over at San Francisco and I'd ride over and they'd stationed me on the USS
25 *Oriskany*. So, my wife lived, we lived in Alameda and I finished out my time on the
26 aircraft carrier *Oriskany*.

27 KC: How much time did you have left?

28 DL: I made a WESTPAC cruise on the *Oriskany*. I went back overseas and it was
29 a fire bucket. They had a fire every day on it. It was something else. It was fighting fire
30 all the time. We'd flood the magazines and we had fires and it was like a nine-to-five job.
31 We would work, every other weekend we had off and we lived over in Alameda, we

1 didn't have much money and we would drive back and forth. Don would drive one day in
2 his Mach I Ford and I'd drive the next day in my Firebird.

3 KC: Okay.

4 DL: And we'd drive back and forth and then he got out a month before I got out.

5 KC: So it wasn't that you were stationed on the ship, you were allowed to come
6 and go.

7 DL: Yeah, we were allowed to come and go because they had kind of changed the
8 West Coast system for aircraft carriers and all that. They had kind of moved them around
9 and spread them out up and down the West Coast. They used to bunch them up, but like
10 they used to have four or five of them in a port at the same time or wherever, but like at
11 San Francisco, we were the only aircraft carrier there and the *Oriskany* was a World War
12 II ship and they were outfit new radar and all this so I got a little home port advantage
13 there.

14 KC: During this time after you'd gotten back from the war, did you still keep up
15 with the war? Did you pay any attention to what was going on over there?

16 DL: Yes, because the guys that were over there some of them still kind of
17 corresponded with me and they would write and say how bad they getting hit or not.
18 After I got home from out of the Navy, we would watch TV in the evening at five o'
19 clock and they would show you pictures because they were turning over to the
20 Vietnamese and you would see how different it was and you'd hear about all the things
21 that were happening and that the peace talks weren't going good and everything. So, it
22 made you turn the TV off because you didn't want to hear about it, you know? And you
23 kept touch with a few of guys and so the big thing was every night on TV they'd tell you
24 about the body count.

25 KC: Right.

26 DL: How many Americans were getting killed. I think it was a thing like, "The
27 Americans got this many, Americans got killed." And then they would tell how many
28 Vietnamese got killed and it was just like a spitting contest.

29 KC: Well, what did you think about the way the United States was withdrawing
30 from the war?

1 DL: Well, we had a lot of opinion about it because Jane Fonda had been in North
2 Korea, I mean, in North Vietnam. A lot of guys had talked about that and how they
3 treated the prisoners and everything. We thought that the government at the time was
4 being really, really soft on them because they wouldn't bomb them. And then we couldn't
5 go into Laos when I was over there. They wouldn't let you into Laos to go in after them
6 so they would cross the border like you were in Oklahoma and Kansas. They'd come up
7 from Oklahoma and hit us and then we couldn't go back across the line and hit them. So
8 we thought this was kind of chicken deal here, you know. A lot of politics.

9 KC: What do you think about the way Nixon was fighting the war?

10 DL: I thought, personally, I thought Nixon did a pretty fair job. I think that if they
11 would have left Nixon alone and they'd let Westmoreland and Abrams, General Abrams,
12 if they had left them alone instead of all these people telling them what to do and how to
13 do it, I think that probably that we would have went on and went north. I don't think we
14 would have won the war, it would have been like Korea is today. They'd have a South
15 Vietnam and a North Vietnam. But I think if they would have let the military and Nixon
16 take the fight to them, but I think there was too much media and too much politics to let
17 them go ahead and let us win the war.

18 KC: Well, what did you do once you left the Navy?

19 DL: I left the Navy and I'd come home and got back to Kansas and I went to
20 work. I worked, oh, a couple of weeks at a plastic manufacturer and then I worked a
21 couple of weeks doing odd jobs and I mowed and it was real hard to go get a job because
22 when you went in they'd say, "Where have you been the last year?" or "What kind of
23 experience do you have?" I had decided to go to college so, I had went to college. I was
24 going to college at night and I was sitting in the college and we had a day class and I was
25 sitting in the class and the instructor that was in the class up at Johnson County
26 Community College goes, "There's some parts of communism that are good," and I
27 thought to myself, "You know, here I've been over just in-country and over there for a
28 year and he's telling me there's like seven points and some of those points were good."
29 And I thought, "Well, this isn't very good hearing that there's some parts of these are
30 good. How do you determine which ones are good or bad?" So, I quit there and walked
31 out of school and went up and told the dean I was quitting. I walked out and went by the

1 post office. They had a sign at the post office. I went and got an application for the post
2 office and then I worked the for a few years at the post office and then my mother-in-law
3 and father-in-law that was in Kansas City. My mother-in-law and father-in-law both were
4 declining in health so I moved back to Parsons and my dad retired when he was sixty-two
5 and I didn't have a job. I was working at Quick Trips at night and during the day I was
6 helping me uncle put insulation in that lived here. My dad retired at sixty-two and then he
7 took his money, sold his house, my mom and him did and my dad and I went into the
8 concrete business. And now my son works for me so it's third generation.

9 KC: A lot of the things you've said here, coming back home there were clearly
10 some difficulties in terms of education, finding jobs, just the general way people
11 perceived Vietnam veterans. What sort of things were the most difficult for you in
12 adjusting to life in the States after your tour in Vietnam?

13 DL: Well, one of the big things that we had was the boat motors when we were
14 overseas. One of the big adjustments was we laid on the boat motors. So, when I come
15 home for a lot of years I had to run a fan when I went to bed to have that humming noise.
16 I guess one of the other big things was we didn't button our top button on our pants when
17 we were in-country because we had to get out of our pants quick. You know, if we had to
18 get out of them for a snake or whatever reason, a fire or getting shot. I didn't button my
19 top button for a lot of years, you know, for my pants. I'd bend over and somebody would
20 say, "Hey, your pants are unbuttoned at the top, you know?" It doesn't sound like a big
21 deal but it did to a lot of people. And then if you would go to an event like Veterans Day,
22 you'd go to a parade or you belonged to the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) and you
23 would be at the VFW and you would come home or you would have your hat or
24 something and somebody would say, "Well, I see you were in the service. Where were
25 you at?" You'd say, "Vietnam." And they'd say, nine out of, I wouldn't say nine, but five
26 out of ten would say, "Oh, you're one of those baby killers," or "What were you doing
27 over there? Why didn't you go to Canada?" That's kind of the way it's went and it took a
28 lot of years, you know, and you sit back and think, "Well, you know, it was just the
29 Army, but it was the Navy, the Air Force, and the Marines and all of us, but some people
30 thought you should have said you weren't going to go.

31 KC: How do you react to that?

1 DL: Well, to this day, there are people that get excited about it. They had a forum
2 two years ago at a church here in town and the pastor at that church had actually been on
3 the White House steps and was on the cover of *Time Magazine* protesting the war. He
4 lives here in Parsons. He said, "Well, I didn't know that you just went because the
5 government told you you had to go." And he says, "I thought you volunteered to go over
6 there." He said, "I thought it was wrong since I was a kid and I still think it's wrong." He
7 says, "I think you should have stood up and told them that you weren't going to go."
8 Well, I mean, back then it was a different time it is today, but I think most of the guys
9 stood up, you know, that their country means more than that to them. I think today as you
10 think about these guys, you know, that I was with. They opened doors for people, they
11 run for office, they're mayors of cities and do things for people. I think that they're just a
12 breed that come along that didn't let that other side push them around. This pastor at this
13 church, he's retired now, but he still doesn't have the time of day to speak with me if I
14 pass him. So, there's still that thing that they think they were right and that you were
15 wrong.

16 KC: That's obviously a type of scenario that so many Vietnam veterans faced
17 when they came back from the war.

18 DL: Right.

19 KC: And many are obviously and understandably still very, very bitter about it.

20 DL: Right.

21 KC: Very interesting, very interesting. Well, let me wrap this interview up with
22 just a couple more questions, if I could, Mr. Larsen. One is, when you look back at it,
23 forty years later, you look back at the American involvement in Vietnam. What do you
24 think the lessons were for the United States? Both good and bad.

25 DL: Well, the bad part was we didn't let the military win the war and I think
26 that's why we lost it, if you could consider it a win or a loss. The thing that I can say
27 being in the Navy is that where we were at, we were winning the war. And it took months
28 after we left Vietnam, when they pulled out of Vietnam, it took them eight months before
29 they took over the area that we were in. Some of the guys on some of the boats that they
30 had there was because they ran out of supplies. A lot of the boats that we were on made
31 their way to Thailand and China, they actually broke away from there. So we were

1 actually winning the war there, but the politics were so bad and they didn't let the
2 military go in and win it as far as, "What did we do? What should we do right now to
3 make it better?" I think you've got to let the military go in and run it. I don't think you
4 can ask some guy that's sitting up in Washington and they all vote that we need to come
5 home because it's a money issue or we're not going to win it or so many people had died
6 and I don't think you can take the human toll of life for freedom and make a decision.
7 "Well, now we're going to pull out because twelve thousand people have died." I don't
8 think that's right. I think that you go in for so long, but you go in and you take care of
9 business and then you get out. I don't think our government wanted to then. I think our
10 government—another thing was for the economy. There were a lot of people that made
11 big bucks off the war in Vietnam and they'd come home and you would see companies,
12 little companies that had made huge dollars off of them and have prospered because of
13 the war. I still think that right now that the only thing that people look at is, in my
14 opinion, is people look at so many people got killed so we got to be out of there. The
15 people that are in Congress and the big shots or however you want to call it, they're the
16 ones that our trying to dictate it and I think if they let the military and the military go in
17 and take care of it, I think it would be a lot better.

18 KC: What about yourself personally? What did you gain? Maybe that's not the
19 right way to say it. What did you learn about yourself as a result of your experiences in
20 the war?

21 DL: Well, my mom was a good, and so was my dad, was a good church-going
22 person. My dad had been in World War II and he was a little ornery. The two of them
23 offset each other, if you know what I mean.

24 KC: Right.

25 DL: I had went over with—I wasn't the meanest guy or the toughest guy, but I did
26 my job and I look at it now and the guys I met, and it makes me think when I get off a
27 plane or I see a flag or see a sailor or a soldier or a Marine and seeing how blessed I am
28 because if at the time, we hadn't done something then, these people that are free now
29 over there wouldn't be free and there's quite few of them that are free that they got to
30 escape South Vietnam. To see how they lived and some of the other countries that I'd
31 seen we're so blessed to live here. It made me a better person to think that I can have like

1 you come my house and interview me and sit and talk with me. There's a lot of places
2 overseas you can't do that.

3 KC: Right, right.

4 DL: And there's a lot of places that you can't get up on Sunday and go to church.
5 There's a lot of places that you go to have a cup of coffee and if you sit down and you
6 disagree with the guy next to you that they'll just shoot you for disagreeing with them
7 about politics or the flag. I guess the hardest part or the part that makes me feel good is if
8 you think burning that flag is the right thing and you want to protest, well, you know, you
9 have a right to do that, but I have a right to fly my flag and not burn it. I think where I
10 live is important and the older I get I think how proud I am that I got to live in a country
11 where I didn't have to be told my kid's going to be sent to a school and he's going to be
12 an Olympian, like over in China. And they're going to take your kid away from you.
13 Well, I think that's just terrible. I think, you know, the more that I grow and get older, the
14 more I'm prouder to be an American because we have these rights and privileges.

15 KC: What about the men you served with? I know many of the members of the
16 Game Wardens Association and it's a great group of guys, great group of men who
17 performed just tremendous acts of heroism and courage for the country. What is your
18 opinion of the men you served with?

19 DL: Well, their about my best friends. We're all close and it's not just our river
20 division, but it's the other river division. I was saying the other day, in a few years, all the
21 chiefs that we had like Bob Monzingo, Carl Fletcher, Hank Swain, Jerry Staples, they're
22 all going to be gone and then the officers we had and then you've got a bunch of enlisted
23 kids that are all going to be gone. And most people won't even have an idea that the
24 Navy did what they did in Vietnam. In another fifteen years they'll be gone. They did a
25 job that they picked these people and I don't know who picked him, but they had the best
26 you'd ever seen. And so, each one of them as an individual can tell you stories, like I
27 have, about their time in Vietnam and they were about the best group of people ever put
28 together. I know that my mom and dad have met quite a few of them and my dad was in
29 World War II and he says they're nicest bunch of guys you've ever met. Now, I don't
30 mean that they're angels, but I mean, that they respect people and they treat you good and
31 if I needed something, I can call them and it's something that I was with the best. That's

1 the way I kind of look at it. I was put with the best and I thank God that I got put where I
2 did. So that's one thing that I've thought about over the years. Somebody will say
3 something about somebody. I hold no grudges, any of them or have anything to say
4 against any of them because they all did a job and at the time it was a tough job and they
5 did a good job. You hear people say, "Well, so and so didn't do this." But I don't know
6 how you could say, after forty years and I think it's just time and I think people are going
7 to find out in time that the guys that were there did a job that nobody else could have
8 done.

9 KC: Well, Mr. Larsen, is there anything else you would like to add to this
10 interview?

11 DL: I don't think so.

12 KC: Okay. Well, then we'll put an end to it. Thank you very much.

13 DL: Uh-huh.