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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Sam Eaton
Conducted by Kelly Crager
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Transcribed by Hailey Stewart**

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

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1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an Oral History Interview with Mr.
2 Sam Eaton. Today is 19 December 2012. We are in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University. Mr. Eaton, to begin to this interview I'd like to get some
4 background biographical information from you, if I could. Could you tell me when you
5 were born and where?

6 Sam Eaton: October 7, 1944. Elm Street Hospital, which has been torn down, but
7 was a dog hospital before it was torn down. Denton, Texas.

8 KC: In Denton? Okay, and what were your parents' names?

9 SE: Ellen Louise Dougherty and Samuel Henry Eaton Senior.

10 KC: Very good. Now, did you have any brothers or sisters?

11 SE: No.

12 KC: Only child?

13 SE: Only child.

14 KC: What did your parents for a living there in Denton?

15 SE: Dad—when he graduated from Dallas Tech, I think. I've got the information
16 in my genealogy. That's correctable if I make a mistake. After that he went to work as an
17 air conditioning mechanic. From there, he went to work at North American where he met
18 my mother who was working at North American, and they were basically draftsmen.

1 About 1943, Dad joined the Army Air Force. He wanted to join the Naval Aviation. They
2 wouldn't let him, but the army took him into the Army Air Force. He flew as a ball turret
3 gunner on a B17. Twenty-four and a half missions over Europe in the eighth Air Force.
4 The half mission was because the plane got blown out from underneath him and they had
5 to walk home. One of the stories was, you know, when you crash land a big airplane with
6 a lot of gasoline in it you really don't want to hang around and see how well it burns, and
7 the pilot reportedly ran so fast he lost his shoes.

8 KC: Now, did you dad ever talk to you about his service in Europe?

9 SE: Some. Again, he died in 1957, so what I have is stories that he told me that I
10 remember. Mom's family basically moved to Denton in the 1850s—1851-52. The old
11 Altman Cemetery, which was the original Dougherty Cemetery—first Dougherty burial
12 was Rebecca Dougherty in 1852. Our Dougherty family is listed on the Texas county
13 Missouri 1850 census, so sometime between 1850 and 1852 they arrived at the county
14 seat of Denton county.

15 KC: Now, tell me what it was like growing up in the 1940s and 1950s.

16 SE: Well, we moved around a lot. My earliest memories are of Rose Hill, Illinois
17 where dad was studying at the Frank Lloyd Wright Institution to become an architect, and
18 we lived in a rented farmhouse with a hand pump for water in the house, and an outhouse
19 that seemed like a million miles away especially when you had to go outside through the
20 upstairs window because of heavy snow. The people next door had a dairy farm, and got
21 to milk cows by hand, and a lot of that stuff. I actually went to kindergarten and started
22 first grade. When dad finished with school, a little bit hazy, but I think we went to
23 California to be with a friend of his and they had a business they called Visual
24 Engineering, which was drafting. What they did is they took the blueprints, and I'm
25 familiar with the B-52 because I actually watched them do this. They took the blueprints
26 of the B-52, and actually drew the parts like a photograph, and the airplane and the parts
27 and how they fit together as an assist in building manufacturing jigs. Later, we moved
28 back to Denton and tried to establish Visual Engineering in Denton, but the market
29 wasn't really there. Moved back to San Diego, and lived there 'til 1960 a friend of ours, a
30 Frank Lowenstein, lived in San Juan Teotihuacan Estado de Mexico outside of Mexico
31 City and had a jewelry business. He manufactured jewelry, brought it up to the United

1 States and sold it; and also, had a hotel, a farm, and a restaurant. In 1960, I spent the
2 summer down there. Wasn't a very apprentice jewel smith, so they put me out hawking
3 the hotel and restaurant 'til the competition complained too much, then I stopped. Got to
4 drink with a federal coronel quite a bit, which was interesting. I don't know if you've
5 seen the movie *For Greater Glory*.

6 KC: Mm-mm, I have not.

7 SE: Do, it's quite interesting. The Mexican government declared war against the
8 Catholic Church in 1926, and they strung up men, women, and children, Catholics on
9 telegraph poles for hundreds of miles along the railroads and that sort of thing. It may be
10 a false memory, but I actually think I heard a little bit of talk from the colonel about that.
11 He wouldn't have been in the Federals at that point in time, but it was interesting. I
12 hitchhiked to Acapulco and back, got Montezuma's revenge, and went back to Texas.
13 Mom was still living in California; decided I liked Texas better. She came out and joined
14 me.

15 KC: Now, what age did you move back to Texas?

16 SE: That time I was sixteen. 1960. Might have been a little bit before my
17 sixteenth birthday. Went to Denton High School. I went to Selwyn because my mom got
18 a job there. After I got out of high school, mom went back to California. She was a lot
19 happier in California. I stayed in Texas. Worked fixing cars for a while. Eventually got a
20 job at Missile Systems Corporation building snake eyes for Vietnam. Bomb fan assembly
21 where they bomb out like that.

22 KC: Right.

23 SE: Okay, I don't have to go into detail?

24 KC: Please feel free, as much as you like.

25 SE: Okay. The snake eye is a speed break arrangement for bombs so that a fighter
26 bomber could come in and drop the bombs at low level without getting blown up.

27 KC: Now, you said this was for Vietnam, so what year would this have been?

28 SE: Well, that was 1964 or 1965. I left something out there. When I got out of
29 high school, I hitch hiked, wound up in Chicago, got busted for sleeping on the beach
30 drunk in Jacksonville Beach, Florida. Was held pretrial for nine days and went to trial,
31 plead guilty, and the judge kind of shook his head and said, "They brought you in for

1 this?" And ten days with credit for time served, then wound up staying with my aunt
2 Mary in Chicago. Worked a number of places there. Actually, did some not very
3 successful dirt bike racing. Scrambles, TT, enduro. Never was any good at it; had fun.
4 Then, went back to Texas and got a job working on cars, then missile systems
5 corporation. A Navy recruiter came up one when I was already twenty-one and said,
6 "Okay, it's getting close to time for you to get drafted," this was in 1965, and I said,
7 "Yep." He said, "Okay, here's what we can do. I can put you in the Navy. You'll have a
8 reasonable place to sleep. People won't be shooting at you. You'll have hot foot, and you
9 can actually learn something." Sounded like a plan. He said, "You might have to be off
10 the coast of Vietnam, but you don't have to worry about going there." So, did that. Went
11 through basic in San Diego. They gave me a test; offered me nuclear power school. I
12 thought it sounded like a great education; really was, so went to mechanist mate school in
13 Great Lakes. Went to nuclear power school; basic at Merr Island. Graduated at Idaho
14 Falls. Was kept on for engineering laboratory technician training. Sent to New London,
15 Connecticut for submarine training. Physically failed after I completed the course and
16 was in limbo there for several weeks. Then they sent me to USS *Bainbridge*, and I found
17 out that while the training in nuclear power school was really outstanding, the actual
18 nuclear power work was mind dullingly dull. You had to know everything, but you never
19 did anything. You had to know it for emergencies, but the stuff was really pretty mind
20 dullingly boring. They said, "You know if you really stay, we'll let you stay. We'll do
21 everything, but you don't seem happy here. What do you think about the Navy? You
22 know, forget nuclear power. What do think?" "I don't know. I haven't been in it yet."
23 When they quit laughing, they said, "Good answer." They gave me one bad quarterly
24 mark; not that bad, but they said they'd have to. Sent me to air conditioning school and in
25 air conditioning school they asked me if I would be willing to go to Vietnam; I said,
26 "Yeah, sure."

27 KC: What did you know about Vietnam at this time? Even prior to enlisting in the
28 Navy?

29 SE: Well, it was a topic of conversation, and I'd heard so much BS on both sides
30 that I actually was kind of curious, and I was pretty determined that I was going to
31 actually learn some Vietnamese, so I didn't have to listen to what foreigners had to say

1 about it; where I could actually talk to somebody who might know something. My
2 opinion on Vietnam has evolved over the years based on how unintended consequences
3 have ruled out. The international communist conspiracy, the Bolshevik conspiracy, out of
4 the Soviet Union was evil. Was a threat to the world, and whatever you say about the
5 battle in that war known as Vietnam, any war has questionable battles. We won that war.
6 If you don't believe me, ask the ambassador from the Soviet Union. You won't find one
7 that exists anymore.

8 KC: Well, let me ask you this. You mentioned that you had heard things from at
9 least a couple of different points of view about Vietnam. What were the two sides that
10 you heard? I mean, again, this is early 1964 and 1965, this era.

11 SE: Right, and I'd heard—well, I'm actually going to about 1970 because I didn't
12 get to Vietnam—I didn't get to counterinsurgency school at Coronado Island until 1970,
13 so we're really—before I join the Navy, most of what I heard was pro. The bit I heard
14 that was anti tended to revolve around MacArthur's, "Don't get involved with land wars
15 in Asia." Now I am kind of—been in the Navy since I'd gone to boot camp in October of
16 1965, and I didn't get to Vietnam until June of 1970. Now, I did a tour off the coast
17 abroad the USS *Bainbridge* in 1969.

18 KC: Okay.

19 SE: So, before I actually set foot in Vietnam there's quite a bit more of discussion
20 pro and con. I was pretty well sheltered from a lot of the more unkind things that
21 happened to people because I spent very little time in the United States between 1969 and
22 1975. I was not in the United States much. I was either in Japan or Vietnam.

23 KC: Right. So, you enter in 1965 in the Navy. I wonder if you can tell me about
24 the Navy at that time. What was the attitude among the ranks of those you saw in the
25 Navy? Those you encountered in the Navy, with regards to Vietnam or the service in
26 general.

27 SE: Well, we were starting to get—there were actually draftees in the Navy at that
28 point in time and even in the Marine Corps. You had a lot of the lower enlisted—I left the
29 *Bainbridge* as a E4, although one of the little things they did is they gave me my
30 automatic promotion to E5 as I left with the bad remarks. E4 and below—let's say at
31 Great Lakes in 1966. When I was mate school, mechanist mate school, the enginemen

1 who also trained there were concerned about Vietnam. Some of them were draftees, and a
2 lot of people in the military would rather have not been there. I found it interesting. In
3 today's military, from what I understand, most people who join—well, everybody who
4 joins is a volunteer; at that point in time even the volunteers were somewhat coerced. In
5 1965 and 1966, a lot of people, you know, some people made a career out of the Navy. I
6 probably would have if I hadn't met my wife. A lot of people wanted out as quick as they
7 could get.

8 KC: Sure.

9 SE: When I was going to nuclear power school that was sixteen-hour day grind.

10 KC: Describe that grind for me. What did nuclear power school consist of?

11 SE: Okay, the basic; they took you from two plus two to calculus in six weeks.

12 The idea behind basic nuclear power school was to have a working understanding of the
13 Schrodinger Waveform Equation.

14 KC: Do you mind explaining that to someone who may not be familiar with it?

15 SE: Again, the Navy took six months and sixteen-hour days to try to explain it to
16 me, but basically what stuck in my mind most about it—do you know what a barn is?

17 KC: Yeah sure.

18 SE: No, do you know what barn is?

19 KC: Yes, absolutely.

20 SE: What is a barn?

21 KC: A barn (laughs).

22 SE: Actually, it's an artificial imaginary unit of measurement used to describe the
23 probability of various nuclear interactions. This is down to the minus twenty-third and
24 minus twenty-four centimeter. Basically, what the nuclear physicist—it struck some
25 nuclear physicist, I might have known his name at one point in time, looking at this stuff
26 and said, "Gee, this is as big as a barn," so the unit of measurement is barns. The essence
27 of nuclear power is basically probability of nuclear interactions, and this is what the
28 Schrodinger Waveform Equation—barns are derived from the Schrodinger Waveform
29 Equation. We had to understand that. We also got courses in basic nuclear powerplant
30 engineering and so on.

31 KC: This is pretty heavy-duty stuff then?

1 SE: Yes. The minimum IQ [Intelligence Quotient] to get into it was 120. Same as
2 Annapolis. No body with 120 ever passed. They refused to raise the minimum IQ
3 required to get into nuclear power school because you can't have an enlisted school with
4 a higher IQ requirement that you have to get into Annapolis.

5 KC: Well, there you go. So, how did you take to all this?

6 SE: It was interesting. It was basically sixteen hours a day pretty much for a year
7 and a half before I got through that. Six months at Merr Island. I think that's when the
8 USS *Guitarro* sunk. That was a submarine. They had two sand crabs, that's shipyard
9 civilian workers. One in the nose—I think his nose might have been—I might get this
10 backwards and I might be thinking about something that happened when the *Bainbridge*
11 was home ported there, but they had one sand crab who was in the nose whose instructors
12 were to put a three degree tilt on the submarine and another one in the tail whose
13 instructors were to keep the submarine level.

14 KC: Devil's brewing.

15 SE: And the USS *Guitarro* sunk.

16 KC: Wow, incredible.

17 SE: After that, then basic. I got sent to Idaho Falls to our national reactor test
18 facility, and I went to the prototype, which was A1W, which was the prototype reactor
19 that they used to test the reactor design for the USS Enterprise and got to play with a
20 nuclear power plant for six months. As part of my graduation exercise, I had to know the
21 location of every signal valve, what it did, what it was made from, and why they chose
22 the specific metals they chose. I had to be able to draw the piping system memory, the
23 wiring system from memory, explain all the electrical components, reactor safety
24 planning. There were five people. Civilian Westinghouse graduate chemist, PhD safety
25 engineer, two enlisted instructors, and one officer instructor, and me. They had an hour to
26 go ask me anything at all about anything to do with the reactor. There was something
27 political because one of the instructors wasn't exactly on my side, but he didn't like one
28 of the instructors and wanted to make me look good, so he kind of subtly guided things
29 and I got a lot better grade than I deserved.

1 KC: Is that right? Now you mention that the training, the education itself was
2 very, very good; you're very pleased with that, but when rubber meets the road, it wasn't
3 really your cup of tea it sounds like.

4 SE: Well, basically it was you were doing watch standing abroad ship, but
5 anything that was wrong at all had to be referred up, and you had virtually no authority as
6 a watch stander. I wasn't the only one that use to jokingly say that if you wanted to take a
7 dump you had to have at least a commander and five other commissioned officers
8 examine how you wiped your butt to make sure you did it right, and I understand the
9 logic behind that. I'm a great admirer of the admiral workover. The United States Navy
10 has never had a serious reactor incident in its entire history. But I'm a generalist. You
11 know, I raced motorcycles; I've sold magazine articles; I'm probably going to die a
12 farmer in Vietnam. You know, I'm not really—I've been an air conditioning contractor,
13 I've owned apartment buildings, worked for my wife as a diamond wholesaler, been
14 military police; you know, I like doing different things and I don't like to be locked into
15 one thing. One thing I loved about Vietnam and loved about the Navy is I never had the
16 same job very long, and to be a successful nuclear powerplant operator you have to be
17 exceptionally well focused on just that and nothing else. You can't even think about
18 anything else while you're doing it. I admire nuclear powerplant operators who can do it.
19 Maria's—

20 KC: Your daughter, Maria?

21 SE: Yeah. She hasn't married the guy. He's asked her several times in front of us,
22 but they've been living together for a long time. He was a successful nuclear powerplant
23 operator. Did his six years in the Navy, his time on submarine, and he's a civil engineer
24 now; and I can't do it. You know, not happy doing it.

25 KC: Right, and when did you come to this realization? About what time was it?
26 Did you say 1968? 1969?

27 SE: Well, basically when I got abroad ship. I was thrilled with what I was
28 learning, got on board ship, and realized what my job was; and made an effort and really
29 tried. My superiors saw I was trying and saw that I really wasn't happy with it, and sat
30 me down and said, "What do you want to do?" They did me a bit favor. Kicked me out of

1 the nuclear power program, shaved my head, and sent me to Vietnam. Best thing that
2 ever happened to me.

3 KC: Now what did you want to do in the framework of the Navy? Did you have
4 any idea?

5 SE: Not really. Dad had been interested in the Navy. I've always been interested
6 in mechanics. Spent an awful lot of my life working in mechanical trades in the Navy and
7 civilian until essentially—well, did computer support for a while. My wife, when she had
8 a roadside produce stand in Denton and she—well, I was working for Wendy's, had my
9 hands up inside troubleshooting the deep fryer that wasn't working. 440 volts. So, to have
10 my meter up there I had to have my hands in there and to get my hands in there I had to
11 lay on the floor; on my back on the floor laying like this. They had a mentally challenged
12 person whose job was cleaning the floor and I was where he normally dumped his bucket
13 of water, so here I am, this bucket of cold wash water. Of course, I deliberately froze and
14 didn't even twitch until I figured the best way to get out of it and slowly got out and went
15 to the manager. Manager wasn't that sympathetic. Finished repairing everything, told my
16 wife, and she says, "You're quitting." Wound up doing technical support for computers.
17 Microsoft certified; that stuff. My wife got tired of the heavy lifting and decided that
18 selling diamonds wholesale would be more profitable and less heavy lifting than selling
19 produce. Had a pretty good job; I loved it. "Honey, you're quitting."

20 KC: Let me take you back here. Once you decide—and then your superiors
21 obviously decide, "Look here's a guy who's well qualified. Bright guy, but this just isn't
22 for him." Where do you go next?

23 SE: Air conditioning and refrigeration school.

24 KC: Okay, and where was that?

25 SE: San Diego. They asked me if I would accept orders to Vietnam. I said, "Yes,"
26 and from there I went to Merr Island counterinsurgency school.

27 KC: Tell me about that.

28 SE: I got the abbreviated version. I didn't have to get tortured or do the POW
29 [Prisoner of War] thing.

30 KC: For the SERE [Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape] training and
31 things like that.

1 SE: Right.

2 KC: Mm-hmm.

3 SE: I will never forget one naval officer who lectured us about service in Vietnam
4 and informed us, “Now, be very careful of what you say in Vietnam because the
5 Vietnamese do not have any swear words at all in their language.” *Du ma* (laughs). Okay.
6 Shows you how good some of our prep was. But we got a basic Vietnamese language
7 training. A really good Vietnamese language textbook, which I lent to the author of some
8 of your fiction works, James Mitchell. He hadn’t returned it to me, but we helped out
9 with Vietnamese on some of his books. There’s a nice acknowledgement on one of them.
10 We were in the same writers’ group.

11 KC: I see.

12 SE: Got weapons familiarization. Been around weapons a pretty good part of my
13 life, anyway, so didn’t get a whole lot of that. Some really basic Vietnamese language.
14 Pretty much academics. I was there eight weeks—not that long. It was a decent school,
15 but it had its little weirdities.

16 KC: Like what?

17 SE: Well, like that naval officer telling me that there are no cuss words in the
18 Vietnamese language. But it was well intended. I flew into Tan Son Nhut. Went to the
19 Annapolis barracks and was sent to YRBM-21.

20 KC: And for someone who might not be familiar, what was the YRBM-21?

21 SE: It was a mobile repair barge, and we repaired riverine boats, riverine craft.

22 KC: And where was it located?

23 SE: It was located—the nearest large city Hanoi, and the nearest town was An
24 Lang. It was six or seven miles this side of the Cambodian border on the north bank of
25 the Mekong River, and we were in the Mekong River, about the middle of it.

26 KC: Right. Well, let me ask you this. Here you are, you’ve accepted this duty into
27 Vietnam, but did you have any idea what you’d be doing when you accepted this
28 assignment?

29 SE: Not really. I figured it’d be an interesting ride.

30 KC: Right. Interesting. Did you have any sort of reservations at all about going
31 over? Now granted, you’re in the Navy. It’s a different thing from being in, say, the 25th

1 Infantry Division or something like that, but did you have any reservations about going
2 knowing what you knew about the war?

3 SE: One thing I did do before I left. I've hitch hiked a lot in my misspent youth or
4 well spent youth; and I put on my navy uniform, and I got one of these card signs, and I
5 wrote on it Saigon, and spent about a week on the road talking to people. I talked to a lot
6 of people from military veterans, World War II veterans, Korean War veterans, Vietnam
7 veterans, hippies, prowar, antiwar; and I really wanted a feel for the United States before
8 I left because being out on the road with your thumb stuck out gets you, at least back
9 then, got you a pretty general sample of America. I was curious. My dad was in the
10 military. My grandfather was in the military for World War I. Haven't been that many
11 wars that we haven't been involved in. Been focused on the ride more than anything else,
12 and my life's been a really good ride. You know, I've got virtually no regrets. There's a
13 couple of things that I said to people that were hurtful that I really wish I hadn't, but
14 that's about as serious as it is. I don't wish I'd done something else and made more
15 money. When we owned apartments in Los Angeles I could have stayed on and made a
16 ton more money. My wife knew that. When I took her to see my old hometown, "We're
17 moving." Life's a journey, and I really like—I say oriental. I only know Japanese,
18 Vietnamese, and Chinese, but the word for religion, at least in those three languages, is in
19 Vietnamese *dao*. In Chinese, I think it's *dao* as well. Tao in Japanese, but that's the same
20 word, and it really translates as path, and I like that word a lot better than the word
21 religion.

22 KC: Well, what did you learn on this journey that you're talking about before you
23 wind down, before you go to Vietnam? You're talking to a lot of people. You're seeing a
24 cross section of American countryside. What did you learn before you left?

25 SE: Pretty cool country. Even those with pretty different opinions were pretty
26 cool. I didn't accept any of the hippie tokes or any of that. Did drink a little bit of alcohol.
27 It was a country worth defending. Very few rational people at that point in history
28 disagreed with the threat of international communism, and at that point in time the
29 antiwar were telling me, "Well, if they invaded the United States I'd go and fight, but I
30 don't want to take the chance of getting myself killed." Well, okay, I've raced
31 motorcycles before. I'm really very cautious about how I do things, but the thought that it

1 might get me killed has never stopped me from doing anything in my whole life and I'm
2 far enough along that I really doubt it ever will.

3 KC: So once you make it back and you're leaving; where did you leave the U.S.
4 from? Did you leave from San Diego? Did you go up to San Francisco?

5 SE: Yeah, we flew out of Travis.

6 KC: Okay, you flew out of Travis then. All right, now you mentioned coming into
7 Tan Son Nhut and, of course, this is 1969?

8 SE: 1970.

9 KC: Okay, this is 1970.

10 SE: June of 1970.

11 KC: Tan Son Nhut is a busy, busy place. Saigon is a very busy place. I wonder if
12 you could give me your impressions of Vietnam when you first encountered Vietnam.
13 You step off the plane; what do you see? What do you notice?

14 SE: Well, it wasn't what I saw and what I noticed as much; it was the smell. This
15 is going to sound weird, but it felt like home.

16 KC: Is that right?

17 SE: I really don't know why, and I've never Nuoc Mam before, but I was pretty
18 comfortable. The family does have a pretty well documented Cherokee heritage. We did
19 not qualify for Cherokee citizenship, but one brother would be accepted, another brother
20 would be rejected. It was a compensation for lost property. If the federal government
21 compensated you for specific lost property for a particular time, and you appeared in
22 particular census roles you were Cherokee. Didn't matter if you were hundred percent
23 white and didn't matter if you weren't on that and you were hundred percent native
24 Cherokee, if there is such an animal because Cherokees were always pretty mongrel. If
25 you got the right stamps, you were Cherokee. Blood had virtually nothing to do with it,
26 and when they'd count blood on the modern ones this might be percent of blood of
27 someone who had very little at that point in time like John Ross's children. He was
28 quarter native American I believe.

29 KC: All right, to take you back to this point, you mentioned that you feel
30 comfortable in Vietnam and then you started to discuss native American Cherokee blood.
31 What was the connection there?

1 SE: Well, I wish I knew. It was a feeling. It wasn't anything more than that. But I
2 felt comfortable. Well, again I'd spent time in Mexico. I'd been going across the border
3 since the early 1950s back and forth. Used to ride horses on Rosarita Beach. Took my
4 wife to the Rosarita Beach hotel. We stayed there and ordered breakfast. This was after
5 we got to the United States. They brought out a bowl of hot sauce. She grabbed it.
6 Wonderful soup. Then we got busted by customs getting back into the United States
7 because she was still on a parole letter rather than green card. Got chewed up. Again, I
8 moved around an awful lot and spent quite a bit of time in Mexico and pretty comfortable
9 just about anywhere. You know, in the military, especially the army, ninety percent kind
10 of fold into this little group and hardly ever leaves base and has to live in a little America,
11 and five percent of us go native.

12 KC: And Vietnam felt like a place perhaps that, again, obviously you felt pretty
13 comfortable. All right, now you're going up to this repair facility. Describe this facility
14 for me. The twenty-one you said it was, right?

15 SE: YRBM-21, yeah. I do have some pictures of it. It's 250 feet long or
16 something like that. It's a barge. It's got machine shops, electrical generators, troop ship
17 style burr thing, water treatment. We got our drinking water out of the Mekong River,
18 which if you don't purify it—this is one of our responsibilities where I worked. We were
19 A gang, which meant we handled the barges repairs. Whatever they were. We were in
20 charge of making sure the water was safe to drink. When I first got there, they assigned
21 me deck duties. I was landing helicopters at night and stuff like that. The snipes, that's
22 the machinery people said, "No, here's one of us. You can't have him." I was shooting at
23 floating stuff on deck watch and dropping hand grenades over the side. Concussion
24 grenades.

25 KC: Right. VC [Viet Cong] swimmers, things like that.

26 SE: Worked there. Had a super boss. First class, and I was second under him.
27 There were three to four of us. We stayed on, and by mid-1991 it was getting pretty thin.
28 The Vietnamization program was going pretty strong and thirty or forty of us left when I
29 left, and my boss and I got into a knock down drag out here, out ranked me and got to
30 stay on the YRBM-21 and I was sent to Nha Bay. I got the last laugh because he stopped

1 by the harbor master's office to say goodbye on his way back to the states and I stayed
2 several months more.

3 KC: I wonder if you can give me an idea of what your daily life was like on
4 YRBM-21.

5 SE: Long hours; seven days a week. Widely varied work. My wife was the
6 doctor's assistant and was very interested in improving her English skills and I was very
7 interested in improving my Vietnamese, and she was one of the Vietnamese that helped
8 me.

9 KC: There on the—

10 SE: Right.

11 KC: Okay.

12 SE: We wrote a book, parts of which were published and sold for a fortune in
13 other magazines, about her; because her life provides a lot—a General McKinnon wrote a
14 forward for us, and to kind of mangle what he said, we Americans were really clueless
15 about what was going on and this is what the country was all about and we were pretty
16 clueless about it, which I think is a fair statement. There's a lot of insights into Vietnam
17 and the American Vietnamese interaction and you do have the manuscript here?

18 KC: Yes, I think one of our faculty members does have it, and for anyone who
19 might be interested, of course, we'll also have an interview of your wife after this as well.

20 SE: Right.

21 KC: All right, here you are. You're trained in air conditioning and refrigeration.

22 SE: Well, trained in just about everything because I'd gone through machinist
23 mate school. I'd worked extensively in a nuclear powerplant, and so pumps, valves,
24 machinery in general, I'd repaired cars at Bay Field Industries, which later became
25 Missile Systems Corp when I was making the snake eyes. Actually, I had a problem—I
26 was a machine operator, operating the cut off saw and I had a problem with the cut off
27 saw. It broke; a very expensive, big carbide tipped saw blade, so I took the blade back to
28 get it exchanged, said, "I've got a problem on my machine." "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Blades
29 just break." I kept telling them, "Something's wrong with my machine." "Well, what do
30 you know?" I said, "Again, something's wrong with my machine." About the fifth one of
31 those blades when they didn't have anymore, "Okay, so you've got a problem with your

1 machine? You're so smart your transferred." So, they put me over in the repair
2 department, so I got pretty good introduction into hydraulics and automatics and
3 adjusting precision machinery. No one machine whose table was from about here to
4 there.

5 KC: Around ten feet long.

6 SE: Yeah, and how very gently with a ten-pound lead sledge I would adjust.
7 We're talking a couple of tenths of thousands per whack. I'd worked on racecars in my
8 spare time; mostly sports cars, but some super mod. Never got interested or involved in
9 drag strip.

10 KC: Right. What types of repairs would you typically make? You're on the
11 YRBM-21 for about year; year tour, I'd assume. What would the daily routine be like?

12 SE: One reason I really liked it is there really wasn't a daily routine. Whatever
13 was broke, "Okay, fix it." One thing I particularly remember because I kind of took a
14 little bit of command even away from my first class. We had what we called Amys and
15 they were barges and we had outward motors for them that were 671 Jimmy Diesels, and
16 they had—like some of your boats have the prop shaft where it raises, and lowers hooked
17 up to an inboard. It's kind of like that. We had a busted connection in there we had to fix.
18 What we had to do is we had to use the ships crane to lower this down, and it had to be
19 fed in—splined; had to be fed in. The only way to do it was somebody had to stick their
20 hand in between this one plane—it was solidly attached to fifty-ton barge, something like
21 that, and so a thousand tons of YRBM-21 on the upper one.

22 KC: Not a comfortable place to be putting your arm.

23 SE: Well, I basically told everybody else they weren't going to do it, and I did.
24 We did it at dawn in the morning when the river was glass, and we had lookouts all over
25 the place looking for boats making a wake. Pena and I—the first class and I did get into a
26 knock down drag out. I won that one. I sold him basically because I wanted the most
27 qualified person guiding the crane. He was more qualified to guide the crane operator
28 than I was, and I wasn't about to let somebody junior making me do it, so that was the
29 argument won. Boringly, it was no real problem. I don't think my hand was in there more
30 than a couple of minutes.

31 KC: Right. So, these are the kinds of things that help make the days go by there.

1 SE: Right.

2 KC: And, like you say, you're doing a variety of different things and you've got a
3 lot of training whether formal training, informal training; you're a handy guy to have
4 around it certainly sounds like. And, I'm assuming, that the same breakfast, and dinner,
5 and lunch, and these kinds of things. What about off duty? What did you do when you
6 weren't working these days?

7 SE: Study Vietnamese. Every once in a while, they would arrange for us to go to
8 Saigon on something or other. Eventually we wound up granted liberty in An Lang, so
9 we could go ashore. I've also got a plaque at home that I'm real proud of, and I've got a
10 picture of me and a chief couple of other people getting a local credential award for
11 helping build the first secondary school in that town. The building's still there, or it was
12 last time I was back in An Lang.

13 KC: So, you're helping with these kinds of things, okay. Interesting.

14 SE: So, I've got that award. I was really interested in that sort of thing. A lot of
15 people weren't.

16 KC: Now, is this something you were asked to do, ordered to do, volunteered to
17 do?

18 SE: Volunteered. The opportunity was made available. I tried to sell a lot of
19 people on it. I tried to sell people in the United States into shipping me some stuff to help
20 some of the refugees. We were there on the Cambodian incursion, and when the
21 Vietnamese were evacuated out of Phnom Penh and one thing I'll never forget was this
22 young dead child that got hung up on us. A friend of mine, my counterpart, went up on
23 the first all Vietnamese run to Phnom Penh. You know, shipping supplies to Phnom Penh
24 and they got in a fire fight going up. Lost a couple of people. Pulled liberty in Phnom
25 Penh and eight got killed. The Vietnamese and the Cambodians don't get along. One
26 thing I'll never forget is on the mess decks some Cambodian and Vietnamese got in a
27 little bit of an argument and the Cambodian pulled a pin on a hand grenade, held it up
28 against the Vietnamese chest, and I wasn't close enough to do anything, but some people
29 did get that taken care of without the hand grenade going off. The Vietnamese and the
30 Cambodians do not typically get along well.

1 KC: Well, it sounds like you're looking for other opportunities obviously. When
2 you're not on duty you're willing to go out, do some work; building this school was a
3 great example of it. What was your opinion of the Vietnamese people, and to a lesser
4 degree, the Cambodians who were refugees at this point? What was your opinion of these
5 folk?

6 SE: Okay, there's an old saying. This old guy sits by the gates of his village and a
7 stranger comes by and says, "What are the people in your village like?" The old man
8 says, "Well, what are the people where you came from like?" "Well, they're evil, thieves,
9 cheats, and take advantage of everybody and everything like that; and I'm looking for
10 someplace better." And he says, "Well, same here." Next guy comes by and asks the
11 same question. "Well, what are the people where you come from like?" "Well, you know,
12 pretty much normal people. Most people are pretty decent, some of them aren't, and if
13 you try to get along you can generally get along with most people. Accept the few you
14 can't. So, what are they like?" "Well, same here." I tend to say I hate everybody equally
15 until they prove different; I'm prejudice against everybody until they prove different, and
16 I am prejudice against civilians. No insult intended. I tend to get along a lot better with
17 military. Realistically, people are people; and I didn't notice that much different.

18 KC: Their culture was something that you, I guess—was it something that you
19 embraced? Was it something you made a conscious effort to learn about? Was this
20 something that came easy to you?

21 SE: I'm culturally fairly agnostic. Okay, in Vietnam and Asian countries, I don't
22 know so much about nowadays, but—and smoking's going out. In the United States
23 when I was growing up and when I was young, a man always lit a woman's cigarette and
24 always opened the door for her. In Vietnam, a woman always lit the man's cigarette and
25 opened the door for him. I treat these as signs of mutual respect, and I don't really give a
26 shit who lights whose cigarette. I don't care. I'm in Vietnam and it's changing some, and
27 a woman wants to light my cigarette because that's the way things are, great. In the
28 United States if women smoked and I smoked—I quit in 1973. Saw a training film about
29 how to shoot people by the light of their cigarettes. If they're holding their cigarette, it's
30 100 yards. If they're inhaling it, it's 300 yards. If they're striking a match, it's damn near
31 a mile. I said, "Uh, do I really want to do that?"

1 KC: That's a pretty good slogan right there.

2 SE: Well, I'm the only person I knew that quit smoking because of that thing.

3 KC: So again, it sounds like this is a place that you found a way to be comfortable
4 in. The job is something that you find interesting. Working on different things all the
5 time. You are finding the opportunities to get away from the American village, like you
6 say, and learn more about the culture. You're new deep in the learning the language it
7 sounds like. It sounds like it's a really good fit for you. So, let me ask you this, as a
8 member of the United States Navy you're there on the YRBM and you're repairing the
9 ship, of course, but you have other responsibilities on the ship. You're going to have
10 PBRs [Patrol Boat, River] and things that are coming into resupply and things like that.

11 SE: Well, I didn't work on those.

12 KC: No, but they're probably coming in.

13 SE: Right, they are. That was their job. After the game wardens left, which is
14 TF116, and my wife was the first female member ever accepted by game wardens.

15 KC: Oh, is that right?

16 SE: She was also the first female given—not associated membership, but full
17 membership in mobile river marine.

18 KC: Oh, that's amazing. We've worked extensively with both of those group, as a
19 matter of fact.

20 SE: I think there's been a second woman admitted to full membership; she was a
21 nurse.

22 KC: Very cool.

23 SE: To the best of my knowledge, those are the two women.

24 KC: All right, now you've got these guys who are coming in off the rivers—of the
25 river boats, and of course, you're on this ship with other members of the Navy. You've
26 got an idea of what's going on, and this is again in 1970. What is your view on the war at
27 this point? How is it being prosecuted? How the United States is faring in this thing?
28 Were things good? Were things bad? That you're hearing about the war—what do you
29 know about the war as it's taking place?

30 SE: To me, Nixon actually was fixing a lot of what was broke about the war. The
31 history I've studied and a guy I've done quite a bit of correspondence with, Ki Fong, and

1 he was assisted WHYGH or something in the book *Black April*, which is an unbiased
2 look at the fall of Saigon from both sides. They did extensive research in the Vietnamese
3 archives, the American archives, and the participants from the North Vietnamese side,
4 various VC, and various South Vietnamese. Very interesting book. Bac and I were there
5 when this was happening, and I've only been only to read about half of it. Beautifully
6 written, beautifully researched, and too much of that hits close to home. Determined to
7 finish it one of these days, but it's painful.

8 KC: What about in 1970, though, when you're there? What were you seeing?

9 SE: I'm seeing that we were going back to what we should have been, which was
10 essentially advisors and support. Zumwalt, I actually met him once.

11 KC: Is that right?

12 SE: At Nga Bay. This would be early 1972 or right before he left to become CNO
13 [Chief of Naval Operations]. Can't give you the exact time, but it would probably be
14 January or February of 1972. He was making a farewell tour and he dropped into Nga
15 Bay, and gave us a pep talk and said, "Okay, who here doesn't like their orders?" And I
16 had two tours in-country, which qualified as double sea duty, and time onboard the
17 *Bainbridge*, so I was qualified for shore duty, and I had orders for USS *Orleck* coming
18 back to Vietnam. My hand went up. He says, "Okay, I've got this nice little lieutenant
19 who will come take your names and complaints." I got a CNO flag on my service records
20 and got reassigned shore duty in Japan.

21 KC: Hm interesting. Now, you mentioned that—this is two tours that you would
22 have—

23 SE: In-country.

24 KC: In-country, that's right. And one of these was your time abroad the
25 *Bainbridge*?

26 SE: No.

27 KC: Okay.

28 SE: That was my first tour. My second and third tours were in-country.

29 KC: All right, and I want to go back and talk to you about the *Bainbridge* as well.
30 All of the rest of it, that's fine. When your first tour is up, you are obviously volunteering
31 for another tour. Why?

1 SE: Well, that was YBM21; I volunteered to extend on the YBM. Now the
2 *Bainbridge*, we sailed back and forth doing SAAR, and that sort of thing. We actually a
3 terrier missile and I understand shot down a MiG. Pulled into Da Nang harbor and for
4 four hours didn't get off the ship. A hand full of people got off the ship, including one
5 enlisted whose brother was there in-country. We had one fire, which is interesting. The
6 fire was on the way over, so fire on board ship when it's a thousand miles walk to the
7 nearest land is interesting.

8 KC: I'm sure.

9 SE: Firefighting they teach you, and I had been to the specific firefighting school.
10 Beyond the normal training; I've actually gone to firefighting school. We also went
11 through a typhoon that actually sank a ship or two. That was interesting. Forty-five
12 degree plus rolls.

13 KC: Oof. Wow.

14 SE: I didn't really find anything—I was attempting to learn the complete steam
15 piping layout of both engine rooms, wiring, all the details to pass something like the cross
16 crew exam and was having a lot more trouble than I did with the A1W because there
17 were two plants instead of one, and I actually didn't have as much time to study because I
18 had to work too. I was getting pretty tired of memorizing the meteorology of specific
19 valves by the time.

20 KC: All right now, let's take you back again to the YRBM-21 and you've got a
21 year here. You're going to extend?

22 SE: Right.

23 KC: Why did you chose to extend?

24 SE: I liked the work. Really felt a lot at home on the river than I did at sea.

25 KC: Why do you think that was?

26 SE: I like the smell of the land. I love the ocean, but you know, again I could
27 swear up and down that I felt a lot more home on the river than I did at sea. I would have
28 extended indefinitely, although I would have preferred, which I did a little bit of, running
29 cargo or something like that up and down the river. I would have probably extended for
30 that until hell froze over.

31 KC: Interesting. What were you going to be doing during this second tour?

1 SE: Well, same thing, except that during the second tour we became officially
2 advisors; we were transitioning into that on the first tour, and second tour we definitely
3 were becoming that. We became the XUS YRBM-21 on our evaluations and so forth. My
4 main corral with what was going on was I thought we were backing off the advisors too
5 quick.

6 KC: Well, tell me about this. Tell me about the whole process of teaching the
7 Vietnamese sailors to do what you do. How do you approach that?

8 SE: Well, couple of things you have to understand. The requirements to get into
9 the Vietnamese Navy as an enlisted man were tougher than the requirements to get into
10 the Vietnamese Army as an officer. They were very smart people. Now, having said that,
11 there is no word in Vietnamese for wrench, or there was not at that point in time, there is
12 now. Was for hammer; *cay bua*. No word for screws. No word for much of anything. You
13 take somebody who'd grown up, spending virtually all the day light hours with his nose
14 pointed at the south end of a water buffalo behind a plow and it was interesting. When the
15 Navy trained the Vietnamese earlier, they would ship them to the United States, put them
16 in English language school because the words didn't exist in Vietnamese, then send them
17 to the school. They'd spend in America going to an eight week school because they had
18 to get the language first. And I had enough language that I was able to communicate with
19 the people.

20 KC: Really paid off by this time I would imagine.

21 SE: By this time, it paid off and it's one of the reasons I was one of the tail end let
22 go. Again, I think that the—getting rid of the American fighting forces made a lot of
23 sense except for air support and some other things. One thing Wes Moreland really did,
24 and I've got some marine cap friends and I'm a huge admirer of the marine cap program.
25 That's where put a squad of marines in a village to help defend it.

26 KC: The Combined Action platoon.

27 SE: Right. Wes Moreland hated it. He tried to destroy it. He was strictly—he was
28 an artillery officer and I assume a great artillery officer because he made it all the way up
29 to four-stars, but nothing I've seen about the Vietnam War leads me to think he was the
30 right general to put in charge of it. Nothing I've seen about Lyndon Baines Johnson—

1 I've heard, and I can't swear that's it's true, have you heard how Lyndon Baines Johnson
2 got his silver star?

3 KC: No, tell me.

4 SE: Okay, apparently, now Lyndon Baines Johnson was a VIP [Very Important
5 Person] commissioned officer in the Army Air Force. Now, his pilot who was flying
6 around made a detour to fly through what had been through a heavy combat area—aerial
7 combat area within the last twenty-four hours. When he landed, got off the airplane, put
8 in LBJ for a silver star for being involved in that combat area during the qualified time.

9 KC: Well, being a congressman can certainly have those privileges when it come
10 to those kinds of things.

11 SE: I don't know—I've seen it pretty well documented and I'm reasonably
12 confident that it's true. But yeah, it fits.

13 KC: And even if it's not true it should be—one of those kinds of things.

14 SE: And I actually think it is true. I accuse LBJ of being the squad leader in chief
15 because he really got too involved in things and his choice for running things for general,
16 I think was the wrong choice. I actually respect Creighton Abrams and I've heard really
17 good things about him from people who have a lot more knowledge than I do. Abrams
18 seemed to be running the war the right way which was okay. Support the Vietnamese; get
19 them up to snuff. It's really their war.

20 KC: Well, speaking of getting the Vietnamese—bringing them up to snuff, part of
21 that is what you're doing in this second tour. I mean, you're an actual advisor teaching
22 them; helping them learn what it takes to do what you and others before you would have
23 been doing before.

24 SE: Right.

25 KC: Again, take me back to this process. How do you approach this? What is
26 your strategy for teaching the Vietnamese the things they need to know to pick up when
27 you leave?

28 SE: The lack of knowledge—number one I've got really smart guys, and so the
29 brains are there. What's not there is the technical knowledge. Knowledge is teachable,
30 brains aren't. Basically, just tried to teach them and the brains were there. It took
31 patience, it took putting hands on. If you're talking about air conditioning, you're

1 basically moving one heap from one place to another. You can put a hand one place and
2 show that it's cold and put the hand the other place and they see that it's hot; what you're
3 doing is moving the heat. They'd been boiling water for tea for a gazillion years. They
4 understand what a boiling liquid is. I don't really—if you got really smart people and all
5 they lack is knowledge.

6 KC: Just a matter of trying to impart that to them.

7 SE: Right.

8 KC: Then again, patience, of course, would be a really big part of this and your
9 proficiency with the language, of course, comes in here as well. Now, is this what your
10 entire second tour?

11 SE: No. Sort of. When I went to the harbor masters office, I was let go for and I
12 was part of turning over a couple of LCUs [Landing Craft Utility] and lesioning between
13 the Vietnamese crew and the Americans that they had to deal with to get their ship craft
14 up to snuff. In one case, I stole two 50 caliber machine guns. I mean, literally I stole. The
15 LCU has two turrets. Aft where they've got dual 20mm cannons. Okay, those cannons
16 were gone. No loose 20mm cannons available anywhere I could run across, and the
17 mount's an even bigger issue, and there's no way in hell that I'm going to walk off with a
18 20mm cannon in my back pocket. But I did manage to walk off with a couple of 50
19 calibers one at a time, and I got them mounted instead of the 20 mike-mikes, which is
20 kind of shitty. You're talking about regrets in life; god, I wish I could have got them
21 those weapons they deserved. Don't regret anything I did; I did everything possible, but I
22 regret that outcome.

23 KC: Well, that brings up a good point. Do you believe—as you look back on now,
24 do you believe that this process of Vietnamization as a whole and you, specifically what
25 aspect, and what part of it you were working on—your view of it. Do you think that the
26 Vietnamese were receiving the proper training, the proper education, and the proper
27 equipment to do this; to pull it off successfully?

28 SE: It was rushed. Undermanned, underfunded, under timed. That was the
29 political decision of the United States. We'll change the subject a little bit history of the
30 Vietnam War. Archimedes Patti was the station head, Tonkin Gulf station head, WWII,
31 and he's the guy that worked with Ho Chi Minh. Wrote a nice book about him about that

1 thick. I've read it a couple of times. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was absolutely insistent
2 that the French were not to be given Vietnam back—Indochina back. He thought that
3 their colonial policies were abominable. He always was a mild speaker. Okay, Roosevelt
4 dies, Truman's president, the war ends, we're busy occupying Japan and the Philippines.
5 Friend of mine, Bill Wills, was an OSS captain and he was actually in Vietnam during the
6 timeframe I'm talking about; it's also well documented. The British Army reoccupied
7 Indochina. They accepted the surrender of the Imperial Japanese Forces in Indochina and
8 immediately rearmed them and used them to reoccupy Vietnam. When the French were
9 let out of POW camps, they really didn't like Orientals much, and they killed quite a few
10 of them that were unarmed, which means they didn't kill any of the Japanese; they only
11 killed Vietnamese who had suffered horribly. My wife's mother used to tell all kinds of
12 stories about how bad the Japanese occupation of Vietnam was. In Ho Chi Minh's
13 government, again well documented, sent requests to President Truman and everything
14 else, to help save his country. Short of going to war against England and France, there
15 wasn't much he could do. He did embargo shipping American arms to Indochina period,
16 and shipping arms under American flags to Indochina. You know, he embargoed the
17 French war effort. Now, a George Kennan and I forget what Nipsy's first name was.

18 KC: Paul.

19 SE: Paul. Came up with what's been affectionally known as the Truman Doctrine,
20 which was basically hold the line, Communism really sucks and if you leave it alone and
21 don't let it eat new territory it'll collapse; Truman adopted this. Truman's policy towards
22 the French in Vietnam did change when Mao took over China. When the Korean War
23 started the French were our cobelligerents against the international communism.
24 Eisenhower kind of inherited that; he kind of continued the same operations that had been
25 going on with the—that had been set in motion under Truman. Didn't do a whole lot, but
26 basically did what he could to uphold the Truman Doctrine. Okay, now John F. Kennedy
27 gets involved and ramps things up quite a bit under advisors and to me made the horrible
28 mistake, although I understand the logic, I still think it was a horrible mistake of
29 acquiescing in the coup d'état that got rid of Ngo Dinh Diem and his assassination. I
30 actually watched his sister on TV in the United States giving congress hell over it and
31 telling us how much we would regret it because we could have let Vietnam go. You

1 know, advisors, okay the South Vietnamese couldn't handle it. We tried to help them and
2 let it go. We didn't own the problem until we were complicit in the assassination of Ngo
3 Dinh Diem. Okay, Kennedy probably would have been a lot better war leader than
4 Johnson. Kennedy had actually been there and done that, and actually understood
5 something about what fighting a war was all about, and Johnson just didn't. He stuck his
6 fingers in everything, and put in, I don't want to say incompetent people, but people who
7 were not suited to that specific job in charge and probably used up all the tolerance
8 America had for that war. Nixon came in—Nixon actually served in combat and had
9 intelligent plan and I think it would have worked. The North Vietnamese think it would
10 have worked. A lot of people don't understand how touch and go the fall of Saigon
11 actually was. There were a couple of bad breaks. Our four core, even perhaps a bunch of
12 three core, would have been able to survive as their own state. When Nixon was in, he
13 might have even been able to pull it off except for that stupid Watergate mistake.

14 KC: So, what you're saying here obviously is that given the political pressure and
15 therefore time constraints on the Nixon Administration, the Vietnamization policies
16 therefore had to rushed, and from what you saw from your perspective on the scene doing
17 what you were doing that this is the reason why the Vietnamese were not given the
18 proper amount of time to receive the proper amount of training, the proper amount of
19 equipment, etc.

20 SE: We gave them equipment that was not up to TOE [Table of Organization and
21 Equipment]. We shortchanged them. I personally was involved in shortchanging them;
22 so, yes. Again, if Nixon—if Watergate hadn't come up; could've gone either way, but I
23 think there's a lot better chance that we would have a divided Vietnam today. I, for a long
24 time, and I still do hold congress in absolute contempt for basically betraying an ally.
25 Now, we received letters starting in 1976 and we were allowed to send her family \$200,
26 \$100 of which would go to the communist official to distribute among the rest of it, and
27 \$100 here family could have. Bit by bit things changed. There's something called *kinh te*
28 *moi* that became official in 1986. *Kinh te moi* translates as new economics, and I
29 translated it as, "Hey this communism shit sucks let's try and do something that works.
30 It'll take us a while, but let's do it." That was becoming visible even before then. My
31 wife went back to Vietnam for the first time in 1992; scared the shit out of her. We went

1 back together in 1995. It was obviously a communist dictatorship, but not a particularly
2 harsh one. We talked to people, and people were telling us—just kind of shaking their
3 heads, “You know, six months ago there were uniformed guards with AK-47s all the over
4 the place, and you could not say anything without getting in trouble.” Now, these guards
5 are still there. They’re not uniformed. They’re in civilian clothes and they’ve got
6 concealed handguns, but they don’t give a shit what you say. Don’t even think about
7 trying to steal an old lady’s purse. One of her half brothers was Don See Nook Khan Sa,
8 basically a sergeant first class chief petty officer in the Phoenix Program. He hit some of
9 the heavier reeducation, and when he got out after a few years the first time he just bad
10 mouthed the VC and everything else constantly, so they sent him back and let him out a
11 couple years later. This kept going on for years and years and years because he was really
12 thoroughly pissed off with them. Finally, and this is around the time we’re talking about,
13 the reeducation camp called him and said, “Okay, you’re going home. We don’t give a
14 shit what you say. Say whatever you want, we’re through with you. We’re not coming
15 after you, you’re not coming back. Get the hell out of here; I don’t want to see you again.
16 If I see you on the street, I’m crossing the street.” He ranted and raved for a while, and
17 then basically shut up; it wasn’t funny anymore.

18 KC: By the end of this second tour do you marry Bok?

19 SE: No. I submitted the paperwork to get married. I’m transferred to Japan, and
20 one of the reasons I didn’t want to get on the *Orleck* is I wanted to be close to Vietnam,
21 so I could actually get something going—get us married. I was assigned permanent shore
22 patrol duty. I think it’s no longer a facility now, but Atsugi, Japan. Did everything I
23 could. Went through channels. Tried to get permission to go back and visit, and when I
24 had leave available. I did discuss it with the basic commanding officer and told him what
25 my plans were; that I was going to buy a ticket to Bangkok with lay over in Saigon, and
26 he says, “You know, if you get in trouble down there, there’s not much we can do to help
27 you.” I said, “Sir, if I get in trouble down there you didn’t know I was there.” He says,
28 “No, I can’t do that. I’ll do what I can, but I can’t promise much.” Okay, and guy’s a
29 provost marshal. One of them a real good friend of mine, Robert Sentelly, and he retired
30 to become a US Marshal and he was a criminal investigator. Made pretty good money of

1 me because everybody was betting, I'd get killed and he had been to Vietnam, they
2 hadn't. When I came back, we were even better friends.

3 KC: So, this would have been what? 1972? 1973?

4 SE: Yeah. 1972, 1973. I was going back and forth illegally. Trying to jog the
5 paperwork along and so forth. In 1974, I arranged to get discharged in Japan, and again
6 the people were helping me out. I'd gotten married in 1973 legally, sort of, and the
7 commanding officer says, "Okay, now then, what we're going to do is you've got
8 married back pay, but the day you walk out this door you're submitting a letter to your
9 senator, and we'll write it for you, and you sign it."

10 KC: And what was the purpose of the letter?

11 SE: It was to tell him that I wanted married pay for my wife. The day I left they
12 handed me the letter and I had a stamped envelope, and on the way out I stuck it in the
13 mailbox, and a few months I got a check.

14 KC: All right. Why don't we take a break there for now?

15 SE: Okay.

Interview with Sam Eaton
Session [2] of [3]
Date 6 February 2013

1 KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Mr. Sam
2 Eaton. Today is 6 February 2013. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech
3 University, and Mr. Eaton is joining me by telephone from Vietnam where it is 7
4 February 2013. Mr. Eaton to begin today's session on the interview one of the topics we
5 didn't spend much time on when we had you here for the first part of the interview was
6 that first tour you had aboard the USS *Bainbridge*. I wonder if you might take me through
7 the narrative of your time abroad the *Bainbridge*, and again, this was in the first half of
8 1969. Can you tell me about your time abroad the *Bainbridge*?

9 SE: Yes sir. I went to the *Bainbridge* after washing out of submarine school for
10 medical reasons in 1968. I was assigned to an engine room as a newly graduated nuclear
11 powerplant operator as a third-class machinist mate.

12 KC: All right.

13 SE: We spent the regular time getting ready to deploy overseas, and in January of
14 1969 we left for West PAC. Now, I tend to separate a West PAC from full tour of duty in
15 Vietnam. Number one, on the West PAC in most cases, not all, you basically stayed of
16 the coast of Vietnam and when you went ashore on the *Bainbridge*, that was in the
17 Philippines a few times at Subic Bay, at Perth and Bunbury in Australia, and that was at
18 Ka Shung in Taiwan. The *Bainbridge* did pull into Da Nang harbor for several hours
19 for officer conferences with people ashore and one of the seamen whose brother was
20 serving at Da Nang also got to go ashore and visit his brother, which was my sole
21 experience actually in Vietnam during that tour. The rest of the time aboard the
22 *Bainbridge* was basically doing regular machinist mate—E-4 machinist mate work in the
23 nuclear powerplant and training as well as, you know, just basically the same stuff you do
24 aboard ship anywhere. There were three exciting moments on the *Bainbridge*. One, we
25 got in the middle of a typhoon and had forty-five plus degree rolls. One, we launched a
26 terrier missile and apparently from the reports we heard, actually shot down a MiG. And,
27 we had a fire in one of the engine rooms. Fires aboard ship are considered serious as you
28 either put them out or you walk home and walking home across the thousand miles plus
29 of the ocean is not recommended.

1 KC: How did this fire begin? Do you know?

2 SE: I'm not sure. Probably an electrical short and some petroleum product, but
3 that was about it. My general quarters assignment was damage control in the bow part of
4 the ship. I forget the exact terminology for the boatswain's mate equipment station and
5 the very bow of the ship. I had, while on board the *Bainbridge*, had of course what the
6 called the USS Buttercup which was a replica of one of the compartments aboard the
7 Saint Paul, replicating damaged it suffered in that compartment during World War II, and
8 what they did basically, after training on various damage control, they put you in the
9 compartment and sank it while you've got to try and fix leaks and everything fast enough
10 to keep from sinking. I did note that the water in San Francisco Bay at that point in time
11 was quite chilly.

12 KC: Yeah, I'm sure that it was. Now, once that there is a fire aboard ship, again
13 like you mention, there's no alternative to putting this fire out and saving the ship other
14 than letting the thing sink, so what are your responsibilities? What are your duties when
15 this fire takes place?

16 SE: Again, it depends. Basically, the fire never got major, and you have various
17 firefighting equipment including firehoses, which everybody's trained on. CO2 fire
18 extinguishers and so forth, as well as foam. We basically got it with foam and CO2.
19 Using fire hoses in an engineer room where you've got a lot of electrical and electronic
20 gear is rather frowned upon if there's any possible alternative.

21 KC: Now you're going to be aboard the *Bainbridge* here for roughly six months
22 there in 1969. How did you take to seaboard life? What was it like to be on this ship for
23 that length of time?

24 SE: That was interesting. We were putting in—our watch schedule was four and
25 eight. We had four hours on, eight off; we also worked during the regular workday. We
26 were putting in twelve to sixteen hours work a day including watch standing. We kept
27 pretty busy. I found the Philippines, Taiwan, and Australia quite interesting and worth the
28 trip. I also learned that watch standing aboard a nuclear powerplant is excruciatingly dull.
29 I'm not criticizing the way it's run because I can't conceive of a better way of running it,
30 but the regulations that I experience were incredibly strict and virtually any decision had
31 to be cleared up the chain. Basically, we were excluded from all but the most minor

1 decision making. Laughingly—I joked, and it’s an exaggeration, but if you took a dump
2 and wiped your rear it took four officers commanded by a lieutenant commander to
3 inspect and make sure you did it right.

4 KC: Well, that certainly gives some idea of how strict things were when they
5 were dealing with a nuclear powerplant.

6 SE: And I believe still are.

7 KC: Yes, I’m sure. I would be surprised if it were otherwise.

8 SE: To the best of my knowledge, the Navy nuclear power program has never had
9 a serious nuclear powerplant failure.

10 KC: Now, when does your tour aboard the *Bainbridge* end? What is this?
11 Probably May or June, something like that? Maybe July of 1969?

12 SE: The paperwork for that is back in the United States, but I believe the end of
13 June.

14 KC: End of June.

15 SE: I could actually check it and find out. I stay aboard the *Bainbridge* a while a
16 longer, basically into 1970, and when we return to the United States we basically did
17 deferred maintenance and so forth. The command structure decided that I was
18 progressing at the rate they wanted, and asked me how happy I was, and I basically told
19 them what I’ve told you including the requirements for wiping your rear end and they
20 thought that was funny. There’s a lot of truth in it. Exaggerated, but it hit their sense of
21 humor quite well. They asked me what I thought of the Navy and my answer was,
22 “Really don’t know. I don’t think I’ve been in it yet. I might like it.”

23 KC: Right because your experiences were definitely limited by your MOS and
24 what you were working on. Working with the nuclear facilities and things like that, so in
25 a lot of ways you’re right. It would have been quite different from a typical time there in
26 the Navy, I would think.

27 SE: Yeah, and they thought that was real funny too. They said, “Okay, here’s
28 reality. If you want to stay and keep trying, we’ll back you up 100 percent. You can stay
29 as long as you want and keep trying as hard as you can, and we’ll take care of you. If you
30 want to try the Navy for a change, we’ll have to give you one set of quarterly remarks
31 and in order to justify kicking you out of the nuclear program, we will also, in exchange

1 for that, give you your automatic promotion that we've been withholding to machinist
2 mate second-class or E5. That's what we can do." "Yes, I'll take it." So, they sent me to
3 air conditioning and refrigeration school. Now I was an only child. I was asked if I would
4 accept orders to Vietnam and I said, "Yes, I would."

5 KC: And this is when you go back aboard YRBM-21 for that first tour.

6 SE: Right, I went through counterinsurgency school and then I was flown into
7 Tan Son Nhut. Went to what they called Annapolis and was transferred to the YRBM-21.

8 KC: Now, in the previous interview session that we conducted a couple of months
9 ago, you gave us a pretty thorough description of your time there, at least the first tour
10 abroad the YRBM-21. Now you also mentioned that you extended for another tour
11 aboard this. This was the kind of life that you enjoyed better. Something was different
12 everyday and that appealed to your personality and what you liked to do. Working on
13 different things and seeing different kinds of things; and you also extend for another tour
14 there. I wonder if you might tell me a little bit more about your second tour—or, third
15 tour, not second tour but third tour.

16 SE: Well, two in a half or third tour, whatever.

17 KC: Right.

18 SE: Basically, my supervisor and I both extended. Felix was a lot like I was, and
19 we got along real well, and he was first class machinist mate. Basically, we transitioned
20 away from supporting the US Navy to supporting—US Navy mostly PBRs, occasional
21 tangos, and swift boats, and so forth; and, no I don't think John Carrey ever showed up.
22 Carrey. Carrey is big news in Vietnam right now as secretary of state.

23 KC: Yes, I'm sure he probably is.

24 SE: He and John McCain are both very popular. We transitioned toward
25 supporting Cambodian Navy and Vietnamese Naval Forces. As time went by, our crew
26 was increasingly changed out to Vietnamese naval personnel. We transferred command
27 of the YRBM-21 to the Vietnamese navy. I forget exactly when that would have been
28 around. Around July or August. Again, I've got the record. I could look it up, and give
29 you roughly, but around probably July or August of 1971. We became the XYRBM-21,
30 and those of us who stayed aboard were basically training the Vietnamese personnel to
31 take over our jobs. Basically because of my language skills and that fact that I did get

1 along with Vietnamese, I was retained thoroughly long into that. I will note that the
2 quality of food we ate when we no longer bought it from the naval ship stores or the—I
3 think it was an Army commissariat, not Navy. We were able to buy our food local.
4 Quality of food we ate improved dramatically. Basically, I worked at training people to
5 take over my job. Felix and I had a friendly fight over who got to stay longest. I lost; he
6 was senior. It was a little bit ironic because he stopped by Nga Bay on his way out of
7 country and I kind of waved at him and said, “You won the argument about who got to
8 stay on the YRBM-21 longest. Guess who’s staying here longer?”

9 KC: Now, at this time you were aboard the YF866 is that correct?

10 SE: I was at the harbor master’s office. I was only aboard the YF866 for a month.

11 KC: Okay, all right. And what were you doing at the harbor master’s office?

12 SE: My designation in my paperwork was interpreter/duty driver, and when they
13 needed somebody to talk to the Vietnamese I did it, and when I wasn’t doing that, I drove
14 a truck.

15 KC: What sort of things would they ask you to translate for them?

16 SE: Well, turned over two LCUs. 14-96, I believe, and maybe 14-60. I could be
17 wrong on the designations. I’ve got a picture of one of them. Basically, what they did is
18 they had me gophering between the harbormaster, taking care of what they needed, what
19 we could do for them; and the Vietnamese had somebody they could talk to who could
20 tell the American military what they needed, so basically, I shuttled back and forth
21 between the crew of the LCUs we turned over and the harbormaster’s office gophering.
22 Getting whatever needed done. I actually stole two 50 caliber machine guns, malduces.
23 One of the LCUs—the LCU is supposed to have twin 20 mike-mike set ups and tubs; and
24 this one was completely unarmed. It did not have anything except small arms; and there
25 were no 20 mike-mikes available, and if I’d had to steal a 20 mike-mike I couldn’t put it
26 in my pocket. So, I used deception and a bit of lying to persuade the base armorer to look
27 the other way while I walked off with two off the books malduces. I didn’t carry those in
28 my back pocket either; I actually got somebody to help me carry both of them off and
29 take them over to the LCU. That’s a pretty good example of what I did.

30 KC: Yeah, and you mentioned previously that in this Vietnamization process,
31 often times the Vietnamese didn’t have the kinds of equipment that you thought they

1 should have, and this would be a very good example of it, and of course, you're using
2 your own guile to procure them for the Vietnamese; for the LCUs. Now, your facility
3 with the Vietnamese language must have been pretty impressive by this point I would
4 think.

5 SE: Well, it didn't impress me, and my ability in Vietnamese at this point doesn't
6 impress me either; but most Vietnamese are kind of enough to say that my Vietnamese is
7 actually very good. If I'm with an American I can sometimes fool them into thinking I'm
8 fluent, which I ain't.

9 KC: Now, also during your time in Vietnam, obviously, you meet your wife, Bok.
10 When and under what circumstances did you meet her?

11 SE: Her original job was as a maid for the EOD [Explosive Ordinance Disposal]
12 crew; we had an EOD crew aboard. We also had a helicopter unit HA(L)-39 [Helicopter
13 Attack Squadron Light] aboard, and she was originally hired on there. She had worked
14 previously as the nanny to the commander—the Vietnamese commander of a Vietnamese
15 base camp that had a number of American special forces about it. We wrote an article
16 about that that got published in gung-ho magazine, which is pretty funny. She was
17 basically trying to make side money doing needlework and so forth, for anyone who
18 would buy it. She learned that I was interested in Vietnamese. I had Vietnamese
19 Machinist Mate Second-class Cung, who was helping me with Vietnamese, and later a
20 warrant officer whose name I forget. Cung and I we spent a lot more time working
21 together than that warrant officer worked with me. So, she asked me if I would help her
22 improve English, and she would also help me with my Vietnamese. We did that for
23 nearly a year. One interesting story for Machinist Mate Second Cung is he was on the
24 first convoy up to Phnom Penh—first Vietnamese convoy up to Phnom Penh, and they
25 had to fight their way up and had three or four KIA [Killed in Action]. The Pull Liberty
26 in Phnom Penh got in a firefight and lost about a dozen. Vietnamese and Cambodians
27 have a history of not getting along very well together.

28 KC: Right, right. You'd mentioned this before. Tragic episode, obviously.

29 SE: One of the scariest moments was when a Cambodian had a frag grenade,
30 pulled the pin, and held it up against a Vietnamese sailor's chest. I was out of the lethal
31 range of the frag grenade, but this was on our mess deck—but I was on the mess decks

1 watching it. It got calmed down, but there was an awful lot of that sort of stuff going on.
2 We also got to watch the evacuation of Vietnamese from Phnom Penh and LCUs going
3 down the river. The well decks were just absolutely stacked full of people. Standing room
4 only, and an awful lot of bodies slowed it down.

5 KC: And when was this occurring?

6 SE: This would be late—in basically, the evacuation of Phnom Penh; I had an
7 Army friend that was in the incursion, and this basically happened about the same time as
8 the incursion.

9 KC: Okay, so we're talking spring of 1970 then.

10 SE: This was later than that. It would have been end of 1970. First part of 1971.

11 KC: Okay, now if you can, explain to me how this relationship between you and
12 Bok, who's going to be your wife; explain to me how this developed over time. What sort
13 of difficulties were there with seeing her, and getting time off to see her, and this
14 developed over the years because obviously she becomes your wife later on?

15 SE: Basically, and my wife I think covered this, one day I was going down one of
16 the ladders, or stairs in civilian talk, and Bok fixing to lose her job because she refused to
17 sell drugs or do prostitution for some of the Vietnamese sailors who were coming on
18 board, and they threatened to kill her and made one attempt.

19 KC: Wow.

20 SE: Anyway, we met on the stairs, and apparently she had decided that out of
21 everybody aboard the YRBM-21 I was the only suitable victim, and she said, "I love you,
22 Sam," and I said, "Oh shit. We need to talk." What she had mind, basically, was getting
23 some money out of me for as long as I stayed around. So, what she said is, "You know, to
24 set me up for the rest of my life what I need is two cows," which was a really big deal at
25 that point in time as far as money goes in Vietnam, and it's a pretty big deal today to own
26 a couple of cows. Anyway, so I didn't quite have the money yet. Borrowed it from Pena
27 and gave her the money to buy the cows. I arranged to—this was in September of—early
28 September. Again, don't hold me to dates exactly, but early September 1971. Okay, she
29 had already left the YRBM-21, and she came back—she had visiting privileges and she
30 came back. Later, after the EOD team left, she became an interpreter and assistant for
31 medical officer Dr. Carling. We kept her aboard as long as it was safe for her, but around

1 September she came aboard for visit. She wasn't working at the time. Again, this is forty
2 years ago; and told me that her family—the money she had been making basically went
3 to feed family and relatives and friends. Her job basically was feeding a lot of people in
4 the villages, and she was doing the needlework. I met her in June of 1970 when I came
5 aboard, or slightly after. She was seventeen years old and really didn't have a selfish
6 bone in her body. She basically did what she could to help her family and other people,
7 and everybody on board knew this and she was everybody's little kid sister. That kind of
8 floored me. I said, "Okay, meet me at," forget the name of the hotel, "in Saigon on such
9 and such day," actually in Cho Long. Name might come back to me. Really nice Chinese
10 hotel. At that point in time, I started the paperwork to try and legally marry her because
11 everybody really did care about what happened to her and wanted to see her do well; she
12 was a war buddy. I felt like it'd become my responsibility. I showed up at the hotel,
13 didn't really—she'd either show up or she wouldn't, and she did. Basically, she was the
14 sort of person that I wasn't going to abandon and I didn't. I had to make a couple—I
15 believe three illegal trips to Vietnam while I was working permanent shore patrol in
16 Japan. I arranged to get discharged; and the first time I went back, everybody at the base
17 knew it, including the commanding officer. The commanding officer had me come into
18 the O Club and talk to him and said, "I know what you're doing," and all this stuff, "and
19 if you get in trouble there, there's not much I can do to help you." I said, "Sir, if I get in
20 trouble there you don't know anything about this." He said, "No, I'll try to help, but
21 won't be able to do much." I'd put in paperwork previously requesting permission to go
22 to Vietnam legally and had been turned down by the Army in Vietnam. It had gone all the
23 way up to the Pentagon. You know, special request chit?

24 KC: Mm-hmm.

25 SE: I sent a special request chit in to have permission to go to Vietnam. Went all
26 the way up to the Pentagon and the Navy, transferred over in the Pentagon in the Army,
27 and all the way back down to Vietnamese local command, and Vietnamese local
28 command refused. If you've ever been in the military and had a special request, mine
29 made it to the DOD [Department of Defense] level. Crossed over boundaries.

1 KC: Now, getting married to a Vietnamese national at this time would have been
2 a difficult thing to do. What kinds of other difficulties, in addition to this, did you face
3 trying to get married to this woman?

4 SE: Well, everybody was on my side, and basically, with very few exceptions and
5 those people essentially lived in Saigon or the big city and had assignments where they
6 were close to command and stuff like that, I don't of anyone including myself that was
7 able to get married to a Vietnamese personnel while on the service. I know it happened
8 on rare occasions to people who were stationed in Saigon, but my paperwork went
9 through. Basically, no problem. I had the completed paperwork and approved paperwork
10 when I was transferred to Japan. When I was transferred to Nga Bay, again this was in
11 my wife's story, I sent a letter a day to a mailing address for a couple of months and her
12 brother who was in the Phoenix program was stopping by the city, and saw a letter
13 addressed to his sister from me in the trash, pulled it out and said, "What's this? This is
14 my sister." The guy said, "I've been getting these and throwing them away every single
15 day for over a month." "Well, how many have you got laying around, and let me have
16 them when you get them." We reestablished communication and she was able to visit me
17 in Nya Bay, and I was able to get to Saigon occasionally and I set up some things with
18 the Navy—with the Catholic Relief services. She said, "Before I leave Vietnam, I got to
19 meet your mother." Mom had a stepson who was a TWA [Trans World Airlines] pilot.
20 They were flying all over the world, so it wasn't that big a deal for them to drop by
21 Saigon. I've got pictures of my wife and mother in Saigon; me in a Navy uniform, and
22 her husband. So, I got things set up. My paperwork was all approved for a fiancé visa to
23 the United States, which is what I was able to do.

24 KC: Okay, and when was this?

25 SE: This was basically early 1972. I went to Japan, and I was able to get the—
26 here's my wife wondering in. I was able to get—which is a lot harder in the United
27 States—I was actually able to get permission for her to enter Japan. What I couldn't do
28 was get an exit visa or even a passport to put it in for her in Vietnam, which is why I
29 wanted to go back to Vietnam and see what I could do to straighten things out, and
30 everybody in the command at Atsugi knew this, and that's why they were pretty
31 sympathetic. Although everybody, except for a first-class quartermaster who became a

1 criminal investigator—he was doing a criminal investigator’s job named Robert Sentilly.
2 He retired from the Navy as a criminal investigator and became a US Marshal. He had
3 been to Vietnam a few times on TAD [Temporary Additional Duty]. Anyway, he made
4 pretty good money of me because everybody wanted an even money bet that I’d get
5 myself killed, and he knew Vietnam better than that and he knew me better than that. So,
6 he made good money taking those bets.

7 KC: So, when do you finally get married, Mr. Eaton?

8 SE: On my second trip back, we go ahead and get married illegally without Navy
9 permission. Legally, we got married in An Lang in the Mekong Delta, but actually we
10 were sitting in Saigon and the local community judge brought the marriage register book
11 and married us in Saigon, although the paperwork was a little bit screwed up and they
12 had me—had us legally married a day before I actually arrived in Vietnam. Then, at that
13 point in time, basically started making arrangements and doing the paperwork to get
14 discharged in Japan rather than in the United States. And the command was very helpful.
15 One thing they did do since I was married; they wrote a letter for me—for my signature,
16 that they handed me the day of my discharge that I could sign and mail to Senator Tower
17 to get back married pay.

18 KC: When do you officially leave the Navy?

19 SE: In 1974. I’d have to look at my paperwork to see exactly the day, but middle
20 of 1974.

21 KC: And you’re back at the States when this happens?

22 SE: No, I’m in Japan.

23 KC: In Japan with this happens, okay. Now, once you are officially separated
24 from the Navy and are married, pick up the story there. What do you guys do then? Do
25 you come directly back to the United States to pick up your life there? What was the
26 story?

27 SE: No. I catch the next plane to Vietnam. I’m out of the gate and I believe I had
28 to stay in a hotel one night close to the airport. In Vietnam, and I had made some pretty
29 good contacts in Vietnam. In Vietnam, I basically—I had money saved up. I had \$1,300
30 of back marriage pay coming, and I’d previously set up extended study program for a
31 master’s degree in economics at the University of Oklahoma. I’d taken leave back to the

1 United States and started that, and I was collecting G.I. bills for that. When I landed in
2 Vietnam, we basically set up to have my check come to Vietnam and I found out that
3 there was a University of Maryland campus. That's a real formal term, but the University
4 of Maryland was still holding classes in Vietnam. I'd taken a number of classes in the
5 University of Maryland, and I'd gotten the University of the state of New York or New
6 York State Department of Education accredited degree for—when I was in Japan I spent
7 most of my off duty studying, taking club tests, taking USAFE courses, and USAFE tests.
8 I had an incredible number of approaching 300—I wound up with way over 300 semester
9 hours of college credit, and state department of education gave me a degree based on that,
10 including a lot of college courses I took at the University of Maryland at Camp Zama. I
11 found out about the University of Maryland and applied to take Vietnamese language.
12 The individual who was head of the Vietnamese language department was Dr. Don Thum
13 Phap, who also was head of the language center of the University of Saigon. Dr. Phap
14 had weakness with English. His weakness was his English was too perfect.

15 KC: Is that right?

16 SE: Now, he'd almost graduated from John Hopkins before he got called back for
17 army duty, and worked his way through John Hopkins teaching Chinese, French, Italian,
18 German as foreign languages, and he spoke all of them a little bit too perfectly. He
19 needed somebody who had a degree, my degree was acceptable, and whose English
20 wasn't as good as his, so that his students would be exposed to real world English. So, I
21 got hired to teach English as a second language because my English was bad enough.

22 KC: (laughs) Funny how that works, isn't it? And where were you teaching at this
23 point?

24 SE: That was the University of Saigon.

25 KC: Okay.

26 SE: And he gave me nine semester hours credit by examination. You know, he
27 talked to me a while in Vietnamese for the Vietnamese I'd already learned, and I picked
28 up an additional twelve semester hours of Vietnamese language for a total of twenty-one
29 on my University of Maryland transcript from courses he taught. I also took a number of
30 other courses, one of which was with Lieutenant-Colonel Shockly who was head of the
31 AO [Area of Operations]. Well, some of the courses I took because I was very interested

1 in Political Science and Dr. Shockly was an incredibly qualified—or Colonel Shockly.
2 He said, “I don’t care what you call me as long as you point colonel or doctor before it,
3 because I worked damn hard for both of them.” One of the things I remember most that
4 really stuck in my mind is Colonel Shockley was saying, “You know, when I was a
5 young lieutenant and captain running around in Indochina, I’d get these strange orders
6 from the Pentagon. You know, sometimes they seemed really strange and didn’t make
7 any sense, but that was the Pentagon, and they had all those experts back there who knew
8 everything, so I never worried about it. Later on, in my career I was given the Laos desk
9 at the Pentagon. About six months at the Laos desk it suddenly dawned on me, I was the
10 one giving those stupid orders nobody understood and I didn’t know ten percent of what I
11 knew when I was actually there.” That really impressed me and that was an excellent
12 incite into Dr. Shockly’s mind and one reason I really enjoyed his courses.

13 KC: Now you’re there at the University of Saigon. We’re talking 1974 this
14 timeframe, right?

15 SE: Right. I was at the University of Saigon, I had college credit on my
16 University of Maryland transcript, I was taking college courses at the University of
17 Maryland, and I was also enrolled eventually through this politics, et cetera deal at the
18 Buddhist Graduate School of Business working on a master’s degree in economics again.
19 I’m interested in economics.

20 KC: Yes, it certainly sounds like it.

21 SE: I have quite a few college courses in economics, and a lot of those are
22 actually classroom courses.

23 KC: Now you’re here in Saigon while all this is going on, and I wonder if you
24 could tell me what it was like in terms of how the war was progressing. This is after
25 American forces leave Vietnam in early 1973. You’re going to still be there working as a
26 civilian teaching at the University of Saigon, etc. What was it like to view the war as it
27 was taking place at that point?

28 SE: Well, the war was pretty well under control. There were problems. Probably
29 the best book on the subject is called *Black April*, and it’s a very even-handed look at the
30 fall of Saigon and it goes into the history of it. It’s very even-handed. I’ve been in contact
31 for many years with one of the people who helped the author write it, and the author had

1 just incredible access to the North Vietnamese records as well. Basically, there's nothing
2 I can say that *Black April* doesn't cover better. I have trouble reading it, and I haven't
3 finished it because a lot of it hits home. But as far as the civilian life in Saigon, you didn't
4 go out on the street at night. After midnight you could get shot, but it was pretty well
5 peace time in Saigon. I did make a couple of trips out in the Delta to where my wife's
6 hometown was, and that was doable. Now, when we start talking late, you know, getting
7 into 1975 and when things are actually going. What happened was the United States did
8 not provide the support that had been promised. The South Vietnamese Army essentially
9 ran out of bullets as there's a large ammo dump still sitting in Bien Hoa that amateur
10 Americans wired to explode if somebody opened it and did not leave a back door, and it
11 might accidentally go off one of these days. That may sound strange, but if you've been
12 involved in logistics, you understand that frequently you got the wrong stuff and used up
13 the stuff that's the right stuff and what's left over is the wrong stuff. The sort of stuff they
14 had wasn't usable for the type of war they were doing because they didn't have the fuel
15 for mini fighter operations or helicopter operations. Again, this is well documented in
16 *Black April*. The horrendous restrictions placed on fuel, POL [Petroleum, Oils, and
17 Lubricants], and these sorts of things that we promised to supply, so they used up
18 basically all the ground based munitions for weapons that the Vietnamese military
19 possessed, and the only ground based munitions left were for weapons the American
20 Army had had and wouldn't fit Vietnamese weapons. You know, again, we're getting
21 into logistic stuff, but there's a major munitions dump that nobody's even thinking about
22 going into because the people that wired it left no back door. Am I making sense?

23 KC: Yes, absolutely.

24 SE: Okay.

25 KC: Let me know this. Were you in Vietnam as the time came when Saigon fell
26 in April of 1975?

27 SE: Yes.

28 KC: You were? Can you take me through that episode? Tell me about that from
29 the start to the finish. From the offensive to what you see going around Saigon to what is
30 taking place on the ground there, take me through this compelling experience.

1 SE: Well, Saigon itself—we watched most of it on television. Now, my apartment
2 was several blocks from the presidential palace. I definitely remember the fire attack on
3 the presidential palace and, again, I watched Thieu's speech on TV and it bored me. You
4 know, he was in the presidential palace, just escaped a bombing attack, and he was
5 putting me to sleep.

6 KC: Is that right? Why was that the case?

7 SE: Well, again, I may have reacted to the speech differently than a lot of people
8 did and Veith or something like that, the guy who wrote *Black April*, had some pretty
9 good things to say about Thieu's competence as a military leader and pointed out some
10 real unlucky breaks that happened. You know, just real bad luck. There was one instance,
11 and again this is new knowledge I've obtained recently, but there was essentially a law
12 failure. Firing mechanism broke instead of launching the law. The commander of the
13 basic Can Thum wanted to blow up the tank that was coming through the main gate, and
14 he was sitting there with the law, pulled the trigger on the law, nothing happened. The
15 trigger mechanism fractured. Again, going to *Black April*, a bunch of things just really
16 flabbergasted the North Vietnamese Army and the government of North Vietnam,
17 because things just went too well for them and too bad for the South Vietnamese Army.
18 Now, we watched all of this stuff. We watched the pictures of the people with World
19 Airlines Daily, or whatever his name was that was the owner of World Airlines,
20 evacuating people out of Da Nang. You know, this got everybody's attention. We did not
21 get resupplied, and things collapsed. A lot of people did some incredibly heroic fighting,
22 but when the North Vietnamese Army went into the civilian areas where their wives and
23 children were, a lot of people went to take care of their wives and children. They pretty
24 well came down around Lang Can. The South Vietnamese military forces, navy, marine,
25 army units, and so forth stopped the North Vietnamese cold for nearly a month and
26 devastated six North Vietnamese divisions. There's a gigantic statue where this took
27 place that the current Vietnamese government put up for how incredibly fierce the battle
28 was. Essentially, when the ammunition ran out the defense stopped. Now, we left on the
29 eighteenth of April according to the embassy records that are online. We left the
30 eighteenth of April 1975. I'd always thought it was the nineteenth of April. The plane we
31 left on was a C1-41, and it was half full. You know, I'd made many contingency plans on

1 how to get out because I was able to see the writing on the wall, and I'd always had my
2 doubts that the United States would live up to its commitments. My interest was getting
3 my wife, and at that time we had two daughters, out.

4 KC: Mm-hmm. Tell me the process by which you left. How do you decide what
5 you're going to take with you? How do you make arrangements to make sure that you
6 have a seat or several seats, I guess, on the flight out of Saigon?

7 SE: Well, basically, you went in. I went in with six or seven suitcases and we
8 prioritized. I knew which suitcases I would dump first, and I think we basically got on the
9 plane with two suitcases for four people. We were basically crowded into the bowling
10 alley at the Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and there was a lady there, a GS something or other
11 clerk from the embassy who was basically stamping letters of parole. You know, you
12 showed up, showed your papers. And our two daughters had American passports; I had
13 an American passport; my wife had documented permission to enter the United States on
14 a fiancé visa, and so there was a quick glance at the paperwork and basically some quick
15 hand chicken scratching on a mimeograph letter of parole. And it went to the DS
16 something or other who had to be taking the Zennies because she was just a machine
17 stamping those things as soon as they showed up. You know, stamp, sign, stamp, sign,
18 stamp, sign; a couple of seconds each with no let up. Basically, they called names out and
19 loaded us on planes. We'd hit there about as early as they decided to evacuate Americans.
20 Now, Don Thum Phap beat me out of the country. I was still teaching at the University of
21 Saigon, and he was already at the internment camp in the Philippines. I didn't know that,
22 but he didn't show up for work one day and I did. They put us on a plane, and we wound
23 up at an internment camp, Clark Air Base. For one day, the next day, they put us on plane
24 and flew us to the United States, which was the last plane that went to the United States
25 until after the complete fall of Saigon. Now, I didn't see that part. Eighteenth of April I
26 was gone.

27 KC: Well, this must have been, I would assume, not just exciting, but perhaps
28 frightening episode in your family's history. What was it like for your family? You have
29 two young daughters; you have a wife; she's leaving the only country that she's ever
30 really known. What was it like for the family? What kind of pressures did you face?

1 SE: Well, the daughters were too young to understand anything. One was nine
2 months old; one was about two years, so they didn't know anything. My wife lost it. We
3 were on an open truck being hauled to the airport, and she was trying to jump out and I
4 slapped her across the side of the head hard to get her attention, so she can honestly claim
5 that—you know, everybody says about immigrants, "Well, nobody beat you up and
6 forced you to come to the United States." I beat her up and forced her to come to the
7 United States.

8 KC: Right, right. So, with all of this as background, there you are abroad the
9 plane leaving Vietnam, headed to Clark Airbase. This must have been frightening for
10 everyone, I would think; obviously, you must be concerned for your future and the future
11 of your family.

12 SE: Well, I was pissed more than anything else. I felt like the family I left behind
13 the in-laws I left behind the friends I left behind the students I left behind had been
14 betrayed; and I was pissed enough that there really wasn't much room to be scared about
15 anything.

16 KC: Well, take me through the journey here in the United States once you arrive.
17 Well, first off, when did you arrive in the United States?

18 SE: Nineteenth or twentieth. Days confuse me a little bit. We landed at Travis. I
19 was able to get communication to my mother who lived in Los Angeles, and mom and her
20 husband, again technically stepfather but I was already in the Navy when they got
21 married. Went up and picked us up at Travis. Took us down to Glendale in California,
22 and, well, I went to work as quick as I could. You know they helped me out a little bit,
23 naturally, to start with. Pretty soon I decent job working for Hinny Well. Got a little bit of
24 money together; started speculating in inflation. There were a lot of really bad quality
25 rental units in horrible locations that you could buy real cheap; no money down, just
26 leave-make, and I'd seen inflation hit Japan. I knew it was going to hit the United States,
27 and I bought everything I could. We wound up owning an office building, house, and
28 twenty odd units scattered around—apartment units scattered around. A couple of years
29 later when inflation had drastically increased the value, I had four plex that I bought no
30 money down, I paid half the title insurance in cash with four trustees for 32,500 and sold
31 it SHA. Carried ten percent note for part of the down payment for over 67,000, something

1 like that. Two years later did the same with the other properties. Lost money on a couple
2 of them though. The office building, I leased to a doctor who was illegally pedaling
3 prescription drugs, and I just bailed out of that one because I wanted nothing to do with
4 drug dealing and let that go back to the guy who sold it to me. Lost money on a house
5 there, and one in San Bernardino, but made good money overall. You're never going to
6 be perfect. We started to a little bit of—bought a motor home and did a lot of touring and
7 stuff. Drove out to my, quote, home village in Texas; my wife fell in love with it and
8 said, "We're moving." "Okay."

9 KC: And when was this?

10 SE: That was 1981. Well, we went in 1980, and we actually got all the logistics
11 together and moved in 1981.

12 KC: Now I wonder if you might tell me what it was for your wife settling in this
13 new country. What kinds of difficulties and things did you encounter as you have this
14 Vietnamese wife and Vietnamese American children who escaped Vietnam before the
15 fall? What kinds of difficulties or even opportunities did you encounter as a result of the
16 circumstances that placed you there?

17 SE: A lot less of either that I might have suspected, and I'm than you would
18 expect. Now, to run our buildings and make money, I was on cash loan and I had to be
19 there. The areas in Los Angeles where we were living were pretty down scale compared to
20 Watts. I'll give you example on that four plex I was talking about. When I bought it the
21 lady who lived there moved out because she asked one of the tenants for the rent and they
22 beat the shit out of her. The lady upstairs from the previous owner got murdered; her
23 husband murdered her, so they took him off to jail. The previous owner's little pet was
24 downstairs across the hall from her. With a bounced rent check in my pocket, just to say I
25 did it, I gave her \$200. She'd had her husband thrown in jail for some reason or other;
26 gave her \$200 and helped her move out in the middle of the night. Evicting somebody in
27 Los Angeles is incredibly difficult. Now, the guy upstairs who beat up the previous owner
28 for asking for rent, I went through the procedure and evicted him because he was the best
29 of the lot. Now, very black neighborhood, lightly shifting Mexican, and there was the
30 Korean that bought a house next door to me; and I moved Mexicans in. My Spanish isn't
31 near as good as my Vietnamese, but most of our properties—okay, I'm going to get

1 racist. If you're dealing with the type properties I am, you absolutely positively under no
2 circumstances want to rent to a white person, they're trash. Blacks aren't a whole hell of
3 a lot better. The only people you want to rent to are either Mexicans or Orientals.

4 KC: Why do you say that?

5 SE: Basically, because of the neighborhood. Any white person who is unable to
6 get a job and earn decent enough money that they don't have to live there is trash. With
7 blacks, it's not that much different. I had a little bit better luck with blacks than I did with
8 whites, and Mexicans and Orientals—never really rented to many Orientals, but
9 Mexicans and I got along just fine—or Spanish speaking people; some weren't Mexicans.
10 I had Cubans and South Americans. You want a really have something weird go on in
11 your mind, I used to translate for my tenants to my wife. You know, my wife would want
12 to talk to tenants, and they couldn't really speak English and she couldn't speak Spanish,
13 my Spanish wasn't that great, and my Vietnamese was a bit better. Anyway, so I'd do the
14 translating and didn't have a whole lot of problems translating from Vietnamese to
15 Spanish unless I paid attention to what was being said, and if somebody said something
16 that caught my attention, I just totally fell apart mentally. You know, I'd almost start
17 gibbering. I don't know if you've ever gone through anything like that or not?

18 KC: No, I certainly haven't. Now, as you're looking back on this time, with the
19 Fall of Saigon in late April 1975, you spent three tours, or two and a half tours as you
20 say, and your wife of course is a native of Vietnam; what was it like to see the Saigon—
21 what was it like to see all of South Vietnam fall to the North Vietnamese?

22 SE: Again, one of my prayers was that'd I'd never run into one of my students
23 that I'd left behind because I would have had real trouble facing that; because they
24 actually did believe the Jefferson and Washington, and founding fathers, and all that
25 stuff. Most of them. I was very unhappy and bitter. I still despise the people responsible;
26 most of them, fortunately, are dead. The people who were responsible for—you know,
27 it's one thing to never get involved, it's another thing to do low level advising like
28 Eisenhower did, but it's another one to get involved in the murder of the President of a
29 country because you don't like the way he's fighting a war. Like Colin Powell says, "If
30 you break it, it's yours," and Kennedy broke it. Real good case could have been made for
31 winning or losing as Eisenhower was doing it, and again, if you study Kennan's writings;

1 Kennan wanted containment, but he didn't want a full-scale Vietnam War for the
2 containment. You know, it was a little bit more rational than that. Again, hindsight is
3 twenty-twenty, and a lot of my attitudes and beliefs have changed over time. We had the
4 discussion the other day about what's better for American interest in Asia. Divided
5 Vietnam with South Vietnam firmly on our side, and North Vietnam firmly under the
6 Chinese domination; or a united and strong Vietnam that is independent, and friendly to,
7 and interested in good relations with America, and is quite concerned about Chinese
8 aggression. If you phrase it that way, it's a no brainer. My loyalties are to the United
9 States, and there's stuff I've had to swallow.

10 KC: Like what?

11 SE: Like the assholes that betrayed Vietnam.

12 KC: I thought you might say something like that, yeah. Well, I've got just a
13 couple more questions for you, Mr. Eaton, to wrap up this interview. The first one is, as a
14 veteran of a Vietnam War, how do you think your experiences in Vietnam most effected
15 your life? And this is a big question for you given everything that you went through, and
16 your life after the war; but how did the war most effect your life?

17 SE: Improved it.

18 KC: How so?

19 SE: Well, I'm a lot different and I think a better person than I would have been
20 otherwise. I know a lot more, I've experienced a lot more, I might have even got a little
21 bit of wisdom. Don't know about that, and I'm afraid to ask my wife. Right now, in
22 Vietnam, my wife and I essentially—behind our back there was an election held
23 apparently and we weren't consulted, and we got elected family elders; and I'm basically
24 in charge of the family.

25 KC: And what has that role meant to you?

26 SE: A lot of headaches because I try to do a good job. It's not a job I especially
27 wanted; it's not a job I ever tried to get.

Interview with Sam Eaton
Session [3] of [3]
Date 7 February 2013

1 KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Sam Eaton.
2 Today is 7 February 2013. I'm in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas Tech
3 University, and Mr. Eaton is joining me again by telephone from Vietnam, where of
4 course it is early morning on the 8th of February 2013. Mr. Eaton, before we had the little
5 technological snafu yesterday that ended our call a little abruptly, you were talking about
6 what the Vietnam War meant to in terms of lasting impact, and would you mind picking
7 up some of the thoughts you had with that?

8 SE: Well, you mentioned a lot of things about, was I afraid at certain times; and I
9 did live through interesting times. Again, there's a rather interesting—there's a rather
10 famous Asian curse that you'd be condemned to live in interesting times, but to me that
11 was a feature rather than a draw back. You know, I'm looking back on my life, especially
12 when I was eight or nine years old, I said hateful things, and I remember in third grade
13 being a bit of a bully. You know, these are things I'm not proud of, but overall, my life
14 I'm very happy with it. Wouldn't trade virtually any of it for anything else. It's been a
15 hell of a ride, and I've accomplished the things that I set my mind to accomplishing. I
16 was there, did that. Surprisingly enough, and this is a little bit surprising to me, I'm still
17 alive and I'm still doing things. The last few things I got started I told my wife, "This is
18 going to be about the last thing we're going to be able to do, let's go ahead and do it." I
19 told her that the first time several times ago.

20 KC: Right. Well, I've got just one last question for you Mr. Eaton. As you look
21 back on the history of the Vietnam War, and again you are certainly a student of history,
22 what do you think is the lasting legacy of the Vietnam War? No easy question to address,
23 I'm sure.

24 SE: Well, going back on history, I'm not aware of any lasting lessons. Now, there
25 were lessons that were learned from the Roman times that we adapted into the structure
26 of the American government, but how lasting this will be is an open question. You know,
27 Benjamin Franklin very famously said when asked, "What were you guys doing at that
28 convention?" He said, "Basically, ma'am, we created a republic, and we might even keep
29 it for a while." Again, Rome was a kingdom, was a republic, was an empire; things come

1 and go. So, I don't know if there is such a thing as a lasting lesson. I really kind of think
2 that, for a lack of a better word, God has created a stage. He's made us human with
3 human frailties and given us our own will or ability to make decisions. We decide what
4 we do on this stage, and how we deal with our frailties; we have free will. At some point
5 in time, I expect there's some sort of a judgement and how we performed we performed
6 on the stage, and how we dealt with our frailties, I imagine, is going to be the subject. I
7 suspect that a good many atheists will actually go through judgement quite a bit better
8 than some of the more seriously organized religious people would believe. I don't know
9 that there are lasting lessons. Again, I think the big problem in the Vietnam War was the
10 Kennedy Administration broke it and we were stuck trying to fix it. The guy who
11 succeeded Kennedy was intellectually unequipped to deal with the repair job. A lot of
12 people blame Wes Mooreland for losing the war in Vietnam, and I agree that Abrams
13 probably would have won the war in Vietnam, but to be fair to Wes Mooreland, he was
14 trying to preserve the Army as a valid fighting force against Russia should Russia invade
15 Europe. That's a justifiable position, but I think Kennedy basically broke it. Shit happens.

16 KC: Well, Mr. Eaton, is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview
17 before we bring it to a close?

18 SE: I will point out that all but ten of last forty-eight years I had some sort of
19 military status. Either active duty, reserve, or retired; so, I'm basically professional
20 military and my outlook is not the same as the average guy who was drafted and spent a
21 year running around in the boonies. I'm also an Army Air Force brat—I was born while
22 my dad was flying missions over Germany in a B-17. The family's got a long history of
23 military service. I don't know how my outlook—well, my outlook is quite a bit different
24 than most people. Any other questions you'd like to ask?

25 KC: No, sir. I think that we're at a good point to stop the interview then, and I
26 certainly thank you for your time.