

Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Joe Gambone
Conducted by Ron Frankum
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Transcribed by Tammi Mikel

*Reviewed
by KS
1-20-01*
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JG
1-20-01*

Ron Frankum: Hello, Mr. Gambone?

Joe Gambone: Yes?

RF: Hi, it's Ron Frankum.

JG: Yes, sir.

RF: How are you doing today?

JG: Oh, real good.

RF: How's our time looking?

JG: Looking good.

RF: You think you'll be able to sit down and talk for a bit?

JG: For how long, you think?

RF: Well, we can go as long as you want today and if we happen to need a second section we can just figure that out at the end of the time. It won't be more than probably 45 minutes, but it's really up to you if you need to head out because I know you've got some other things you need to do.

JG: I don't know if I've got that much information, 45 minutes worth.

RF: Well, that's okay. We'll just talk and then we'll...I've got this series of questions and we'll sort of go through those and maybe you'll have some stories to add. We'll just kind of see how it goes.

JG: Okay, fine, whatever.

RF: Well, I guess I already know that you served on the USS Estes, which would be the easy first question, but I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your service prior to the operation and how...the situation of the Estes at the time when you found out that you were going to be a participant in the operation.

JG: Well, we weren't too sure. We were in [Anawetaw] whenever we got called out. We finished an operation in [Anawetaw], the atomic testing, and before we knew it

we were headed for Vietnam. We didn't really know that much about the operation overall until...well, there were rumors going around that we were going to go there to evacuate from Haiphong to Saigon and other than that...

RF: They didn't really give you any sort of direction?

JG: No, they didn't give us no direction whatsoever. All we got was the rumors, you know. Rumors started around the ship and we were going to be extended to perform some operation in Vietnam. Nobody was too aware of what was going to happen.

RF: How aware were you of the situation in Indochina at the time when you heard you were going to head out over there?

JG: We weren't aware of nothing really, not too much of anything, no. we knew the French were there.

RF: Really, sort of the very basics?

JG: Yeah, right.

RF: What rank did you hold when you were on the ship?

JG: Do what, sir?

RF: What rank did you hold?

JG: I was BM1.

RF: BM1?

JG: Ocean Mate 1st Class.

RF: Okay, what were your areas of responsibility?

JG: All the first division, all the forward part of the ship.

RF: What type of things did you do? I'm curious.

JG: Seamanship, any type of seamanship, lower boats and bring boats in and things of that nature.

RF: Anything that they needed, basically? Is that right? Is that what you say, sort of anything required in the forward part of the ship?

JG: Yeah, any type of seamanship.

RF: Okay. As the Estes was going towards Haiphong, did your captain or the officers offer any sort of...

JG: Guidelines?

RF: ...preparation, guidelines, things of that nature?

JG: No.

RF: Or is this sort of you'd know what you were going to do once you got there?

JG: I don't think the captain ever came on the loud speaker and said anything about the operation. I don't know whether he was too sure of it. Admiral Savan was in charge, I think. I don't think the captain ever came on the loudspeaker and informed the general crew what was happening. I don't think he was too aware of what was happening.

RF: When the Estes got into north Vietnam and the Haiphong area, what was the role of the ship?

JG: Control ship, in control of all the ships there in the operation.

RF: Do you...I'm curious, because I was somewhat familiar that they were the control ship but I'm not really sure what that entails in terms of was it logistics for picking up refugees?

JG: No, we were more or less...how can I...we did carry the 100,000, transported the 100,000 family to Saigon.

RF: That's right, yeah.

JG: We were overall in charge of the whole operation. We just ran back and forth from Haiphong to Saigon making sure all the operations was going alright, more or less.

RF: Did you ever get a chance to go ashore in Haiphong?

JG: Not in Haiphong, Saigon.

RF: In Saigon you did?

JG: Yes, uh-huh.

RF: Okay, I'll ask you about that in a little bit. In Haiphong, did they give you any reason why you couldn't go ashore?

JG: No, they didn't give no reason.

RF: It was just that that was the rule of the day?

JG: That was a little bit...nobody could.

RF: Did you get a chance to see from where...where was the ship docked? Was it right there in the harbor?

JG: Where, in Saigon?

RF: In Haiphong.

JG: We just anchored out. We just laid to outside. We never did dock, dock side.

RF: But you were in Haiphong Harbor?

JG: Yeah, right, in Haiphong Harbor.

RF: Did you get any sense if you remember looking over what the conditions were like at the time?

JG: Couldn't see too much, really.

RF: You were far enough out?

JG: Uh-huh.

RF: Okay, I was curious. I guess not too many people were allowed to go ashore.

JG: I don't think so... anybody got a chance to go ashore as far as I know.

RF: Oh, there were a few.

JG: There was?

RF: Yeah.

JG: Military?

RF: Yeah, well, yeah, in the Navy, a few of the doctors. A few of the doctors were able to go.

JG: Doctors? Oh, well, yeah.

RF: And some of the...

JG: They'd been treating the refugees I guess.

RF: Right, and then they had some people go over to help clean up the camps and make sure the sanitary conditions were as best as possible, things of that nature, but not too many people actually were able to go over. Was the Admiral on the Estes?

JG: Was what?

RF: Was Admiral Savan on the...

JG: Yeah, he was aboard the Estes.

RF: Did you ever have a chance to interact with him at all?

JG: No, not... say hello, and you know.

RF: Just sort of the average...

JG: General courtesy.

RF: Now the Estes itself, there was only that one family?

JG: Right, the 100,000 family.

RF: One of the things I'm interested in is sort of the conditions of the refugees as a whole. Was that, as they came on, try to get a sense of what their appearance was like or what they felt?

JG: Oh, kind of shaggy, nothing...how do you...they weren't well groomed, I should say that. They were kind of...looked like a couple of what you would say here as bums. In San Diego, we see them down there, like a homeless person, you know?

RF: Okay. So I mean, that sort of...

JG: I think...did they have some pictures of them? No, I can't remember if they had some pictures in the crew's book or not.

RF: I know that I have a picture of that family.

JG: Oh, you do have a picture of the family?

RF: I believe I do.

JG: The 100,000?

RF: Yeah, yeah, that was a big public relations episode.

JG: Yeah, that was big public relations. We didn't get too involved in the politics of it, you know. We were more or less do our job as deck seamen, whatever.

RF: Did you get a chance to interact with the family at all when they came aboard at all?

JG: They were more or less...they didn't want regular people to get too involved with them I guess.

RF: I wonder why that was?

JG: I don't know, really don't know why that was I guess.

RF: Probably one of the things...

JG: You didn't see too much of them, really. I mean, they kept them around the officer's quarters more so than anything.

RF: I guess that's sort of...

JG: I don't guess we were...I wasn't really that interested in seeing them anyway. I didn't have any desire. I was there to do a job and do my own job and...

RF: And get on with that? I've talked with a lot of gentlemen and that's sort of been the general theme I think.

JG: Have you had a chance to talk to any of the officers on board?

RF: I haven't yet.

JG: They could probably give you somewhere...they kept that family pretty well out of sight.

RF: Pretty sequestered, I suppose. Well, again, that was the only group that the Estes actually took down?

JG: Right, that's the only one.

RF: When you were...why don't you tell me a little bit about Saigon at that time. Did you have a chance to have a shore leave at all?

JG: Oh yeah, we always tied up at the pier right across from the Majestic Hotel, right there, the ~~the~~ hotel there, and we did a lot of sight seeing, and the kids running around trying to rob our white hats and all this stuff.

RF: How did the Vietnamese people treat the sailors?

JG: They were very hospitable. I'm trying to find the right word.

RF: Pretty good treatment?

JG: Oh yeah, right.

RF: Very hospitable?

JG: Right, hospitable.

RF: Do you remember what it was like to be in Saigon at the time, because you did get to tie up at the pier?

JG: Yeah, tied up at the pier, right. I think we were the only ship at the pier.

RF: I think that's true, yeah.

JG: We were the only ones that got to tie up, because of Admiral Savan and the control ship.

RF: Right. I suppose it had...

JG: Then they had to go out and politic with every who. They had politics with the Admiral Savan and who he went to see, the Ambassador or whoever.

RF: Right, Ambassador Heath, probably.

JG: Yeah, uh-huh, about what they do.

RF: What did you get a chance to do when you got ashore?

JG: Got to visit, you know, go out like to a motel or two, go out to the corner bar and have a few drinks and what have you.

RF: Was there any sense at that time of...because, I mean, that was a pretty turbulent time in Vietnam and in the south, in terms of they'd just...the French were really on their way out and they weren't sure what they were doing. Do you remember any sense of how the people sort of felt?

JG: I think they were all pretty happy to see us, I think. They figured Americans had the money and the women and what have you, the kids and everything. They always seemed like they had their hands out, wanted a few American dollars or whatever.

RF: Well, yeah, yeah.

JG: You know, typical.

RF: What other types of things sort of stand out in your mind during this trip, because I guess your experience is a little bit...I think it's unique in a sense from a lot of the people that I talked to in that you were on the command ship and you had only the one family.

JG: Yeah, we had one family. The other ships probably had even more experience with the refugees because they had so many on board, you know. Have you talked to any of them yet?

RF: Yeah, I've had a chance to talk to a couple of people on LSTs, and a couple of people that were on the Montrose that were down there. Tomorrow I'm going to talk to a gentlemen that served on LST 887.

JG: Which one?

RF: 887.

JG: 887?

RF: Yeah, and then the Constellation, I've had contacts with gentlemen on the...and then on the Escari which was a repair ship. It stayed in Henrietta...

JG: Which one?

RF: The Escari, stayed up in Henrietta Pass and didn't really interact.

JG: They must have more information than I have really, them guys that did most of the carrying of the refugees and we were more or less just a control ship.

RF: As being on the control ship, were there...I imagine that like you said, you probably had a lot of rumors coming through or a lot of stories coming through. Are there any there that stand out particularly in your mind that were proven to be true later on down the line?

JG: No, the only rumors I can remember that we were transporting a lot of communist from Haiphong to Saigon and they were eventually going to take over the whole country. How true that is, I don't know. That's the only rumor I would think about hearing. But they were just scuttlebutt like rumors.

RF: How long had you been in the Navy when the operation...

JG: Well, I retired in '61. I had 20 years in '61. Yeah, about 15, 14 years, 15 years.

RF: So you were career?

JG: Yeah, I was a career.

RF: Were there...I guess this is sort of, again, an unusual question, but were there any crew members who sort of stood out during the operation that come to mind?

JG: Do what, now?

RF: Individuals that sort of stood out?

JG: Stood out?

RF: Stood out in your mind?

JG: Oh, stood out?

RF: Yeah.

JG: No, not really.

RF: Did you ever have a chance to meet Doctor Dooley?

JG: No, I never met him, no.

RF: I guess he did have...he occasionally had some meetings with the admiral.

JG: We were just regular military men. The officer class were a little different. We never got to meet any of the big officials of the whole thing.

RF: Right, any of the sort of VIPs as it were?

JG: Yeah.

RF: How about...I guess I'm curious too, your job was a little bit different in that you didn't have direct contact with those that were being transported...

JG: No, that's right.

RF: Were there any particular feelings or emotions that you took away from your participation, something that stands out in your mind as you think back on it, as when I first contacted you, you kind of wondered why I was doing what I was doing?

JG: I don't know. My only thing I understood was, "What the hell are we doing over here?" as far as I know, and "Get this thing over with so we can get home!" That was 11 months we'd been on that tour of duty and I got to the point where I was ready to leave, get out of there.

RF: Now that was 11 months...not 11 months in...

JG: 11 months since we left San Diego to the time we returned. No, we were there about four or five months I guess.

RF: The Estes was one of the first ships as I recall. It was the first ship.

JG: The first ships there.

RF: In August of '54.

JG: They came from all over I guess.

RF: Do you recall any of the other ships that participated?

JG: No, no, in fact we didn't see very many of them. As far as I could understand I just never saw any in the Harbor too much. They must have kept them somewhere else offloading the refugees. Where'd they...we never did know where they offloaded them at.

RF: It was in the Port of Saigon.

JG: Huh?

RF: It was in the Port of Saigon.

JG: It was? I never got to see them, really. I remember seeing French ships the first time we went in there, seeing the French flag on some of them ships there.

RF: Down in Saigon?

JG: Yeah.

RF: What about up in Haiphong? Did you ever see the British aircraft carrier?

JG: No, we never did see that.

RF: Okay, because I've heard about that but I haven't been able to find any information on it and I know they were involved.

JG: The British aircraft?

RF: Oh yeah.

JG: They were involved, huh?

RF: But I don't know what they did; I don't even know the name of the aircraft carrier, but I'm sure it has a name. After the operation was done, did you ever follow what was going on in south Vietnam before the United States became more heavily involved?

JG: No, never did follow anything, no.

RF: In that period in the '50s?

JG: After that operation we went to I think Singapore for recreational...they let us have some...and make shell packs out of the [pollywogs] across the equator?

RF: Okay, yeah.

JG: All ^{of OWS} [?] was a shell pack already, and I'd crossed the equator before, but...

RF: But it's still something.

JG: Yeah, right, and we initiated a lot of them.

RF: Well, are there any types of looking back and thinking about the operation, any types of memories or stories that sort of...that you remember that you would want to make sure the people knew about?

JG: No, sir.

RF: So how would you characterize the whole episode if you were going to sort of summarize...I mean the reason why I ask you, from your vantage point, did you see it as a success or a failure?

JG: I see it as my duty to go anywhere that the government sent me but I thought it was a waste of time and waste of manpower. I was very...I'm very pro military anyway, I'm a very patriotic guy.

RF: I don't think you spent 20 years in the Navy if you're not.

JG: If I had my way I wouldn't send our ships there because we had no business there, I don't think. Maybe other people have other opinions.

RF: There's always more than one opinion for something like this. Did the nature of the fact that it was a humanitarian effort, did that ever come into play as much?

JG: Not really, not on my part, but it could have been...

RF: Some of the others?

JG: Yeah.

RF: I wonder if that's maybe those who saw the refugees. I think those who saw them, at least the ones I've talked to, seemed awful proud of what they did.

JG: I figure after all that money we spent transporting and moving people here and there we still got kicked out of there, so I don't know if it was beneficial or...all the people we lost, all the young men, young military men we lost, stupid operation.

RF: Yeah. You said, actually, and this is sort of getting off the point a little, I'm curious, you said you joined the Navy in 1941?

JG: Yeah, '42.

RF: '42, right after...so you were...

JG: January 7th. It was my 17th birthday.

RF: Was it? And was this probably a result of Pearl Harbor and entry into the war?

JG: Yeah, right.

RF: Did you serve in the Pacific Theatre during the war?

JG: Oh I was in...where? European Theatre?

RF: In the Pacific Theatre?

JG: No, I started out on the North Atlantic escort duty across the North Atlantic, Liverpool and Northern Ireland and Scotland, all those places.

RF: That must have been quite a...quite an experience

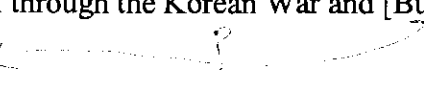
JG: Mediterranean, North Africa, Iran, Algiers, then [2] and I think it was '44, the beginning of '44 or '43, late '44, I can't remember, we went over the European Theatre headed towards Japan and all them places, China, Sing Tau, China, Tin Sin. We evacuated Tin Sin.

RF: Okay, you were a part of that operation?

JG: Uh-uh, [2] ^{evacuated} Tin Sin the Chinese.

RF: Were you over during the Korean War as well?

JG: Oh yes, I was the Korean War, all through the Korean War and [Bussan].

RF: Okay, you were part of [Boson]? 

JG: Yeah, we were part of Korean operations.

RF: And [Enchan] as well?

JG: Yeah, [Enchan]. I was on an LST then, I forget what number it was. We were hauling drums of high test gas then to [Enchan], [Bussan]. I was on the Estes, too, in Korea too but I was on the LST, too.

RF: When did you first get on the Estes? Do you remember? Was it during the Korean War?

JG: Was I there during the Korean...I think it might have been after, I don't know. I can't remember right off hand without looking at my record there.

RF: You must have had a crew's book for the Estes?

JG: Yes.

RF: Do you have one for the '54-'55?

JG: That's the one I have.

RF: Does it talk about the Passage to Freedom at all, the operation in Indochina?

JG: It just mentions a little bit about it, not much.

RF: I haven't seen that one.

JG: Oh, you don't have that one? I have that one.

RF: I've seen others. Usually it's just a few photographs, not too much, a map.

JG: It mentions 100,000 refugees and shows a picture of Admiral Savan and all the other command officers.

RF: Well, is there sort of...the last open ended question is is there anything that you think I should...that you know that I should know in order to write a better history of the operation?

JG: Not really. See, I didn't know how helpful I would be. 46...when I get to thinking about it, I think, "Oh, I forgot to mention this!"

RF: Well that's what I wanted to say, too, if there's a point where you go, "Gosh, darn it, I should have told him this!"

JG: Well I'll call you if I do.

RF: Please do, and that's actually happened before with some guys because this happened 47 years ago!

JG: Yeah, that was a long time!

RF: Well, for anyone that's a long time.

JG: I was surprised when I got that letter from you that mentioned Passage to Freedom. A lot of people don't even remember that.

RF: Well, the majority of people don't.

JG: I still use the Naval hospital here in San Diego. I had a couple of Vietnamese doctors and they didn't even remember anything about the Passage of Freedom. I don't know if their folks didn't tell them or what.

RF: It only confirms in my mind that it needs to be told, at least somewhere in a book so that if someone's interested they can read about it.

JG: I'm surprised they didn't even know about the Passage of Freedom.

RF: A lot of Vietnamese don't know and probably the majority of Americans don't know about it, but it still is pretty incredible.

JG: You'd think the Vietnamese would remember that, you know?

RF: You would, but that was sort of the beginning of 20 hard years for Vietnam.

JG: Yeah, right, I guess so. ^{I guess some of them got} [?] flew out of there and flew to the States I guess when the communists took over.

RF: Right, in '75. There's almost a million Vietnamese in the United States today.

JG: That whole operation was a waste of money and a waste of lives I think, that's the way I look at it. I mean, if I was told to go again I would go, I'm very patriotic.

RF: Well, soldier's duty.

JG: Right. I'd put my uniform on tomorrow but it won't fit anymore! I've managed to keep my weight down pretty good.

RF: You're also in a pretty part of the country, San Diego. My parents live in Del Mar.

JG: They live in Del Mar?

RF: Yeah. I grew up in Del Mar, so I'm very familiar there.

JG: How long since you've been back?

RF: I was back...when was I back there...in November of last year.

JG: Past November?

RF: Yeah, I'll try to get out there.

JG: We've grown since. Old San Diego city has really...

RF: They're really doing quite a bit of work on it, aren't they?

JG: Yeah, yeah, we've got lots of improvement. We're getting a rainy day today.

RF: Well, that's unusual.

JG: Yeah. It's supposed to be a big storm here Sunday, too.

RF: Here in Lubbock, Texas we're waiting on that rain. I hope it will because we need the rain.

JG: I drove through Lubbock one time, but other than that...when we had a big motor home. I still work now, I'm 76, but I still stay busy doing plumbing for seniors and things.

RF: Well that's great.

JG: I'm no couch potato, that's for sure.

RF: I haven't met too many Navy men that are.

JG: Yeah, right!

RF: I really haven't, including my current boss who spent 20 years in the Navy, too.

JG: Who?

RF: My current boss here at the university. He spent 20 years in the Navy.

JG: You're not a professor, are you?

RF: Yes, I am. I run the Vietnam Archive here and I also teach in our honors college.

JG: What do you teach?

RF: I teach on the Vietnam War.

JG: Well you probably know more about it than I know!

RF: Well I know some things but I'm always willing to learn a little more, otherwise it would be any fun. If I knew everything then I wouldn't have any challenges.

JG: How's the people feel about the Vietnam War, your students?

RF: They want to know, they want to learn about it. For so long it hasn't been taught and it hasn't been discussed. Similar to the interest in the second World War and the interest in the Civil War, Vietnam is getting that same interest from the younger generation. All of our classes are full.

JG: Do they feel that it was a waste of money and time and lives?

RF: The whole war?

JG: Vietnam.

RF: Well I think any...

JG: No, I don't think World War II was.

RF: That's a harder question to ask.

JG: You should ask that question.

RF: I do, I do. We talk about that for quite a bit. Quite honestly, the bottom answer is the intentions were right on target, but the practice did not work out and that was the big problem. I mean, anytime anyone loses lives...

JG: I'm still fighting the VA from that atomic testing. I've got some blood disease I got and lost a low platelet count, and they still push my claim forward. They're just messing around with me, I guess.

RF: Well, unfortunately...

JG: Since I'm' retired you figure you got your money, you got your pension.

RF: Well, that's unfortunate.

JG: I'm going to still fight them to the end or they put me in my box.

RF: Well, absolutely. Maybe they're counting on you not so you might as well keep going at it.

JG: I'm going to live to be 105, that's my determine.

RF: That's great.

JG: Then I'll start praying for more.

RF: That's right, that'll be the first installment. Well I certainly appreciate you taking the time to talk with me. If you think about it...

JG: I have your phone number, and I'll call you if I can remember anything of any importance I'll give you a call.

RF: Thank you very much.

JG: You're welcome. Have a good day.

RF: You too, sir. And this is February 23rd, Friday, talking to Joe Gambone, USS Estes who served during the Operation Passage of Freedom.