

Interview Number 2 with Captain Howard Kerr, U.S. Navy (Retired)

Place: Captain Kerr's home in Vienna, Virginia

Date: Tuesday, 9 November 1982

Subject: Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., U.S. Navy (Retired)

Interviewer: Paul Stillwell

Q: Captain, let me begin this second session with an observation about the value of oral history, that it can provide explanations and insights and additional information that aren't contained in the official records. What can you say about the quality and completeness of the command histories for Commander Naval Forces Vietnam?

Captain Kerr: In late 1968, I began to read the command histories that were being compiled in Saigon and sent forward to the appropriate office in Washington which would, I assume, become the official history of the U.S. Navy effort in Vietnam. These command histories had been crossing my desk since I arrived there, and as an administrative role that I had, I'd put an initial on them and send them out for signature by someone to be forwarded on. But after we'd been in-country for about two or three months and I had a much better feel for what was happening, I then began to look at these command histories with a little more critical eye. First of all, we didn't have a historian in the sense of someone who even had a background in that field. An officer was assigned to that billet like any other

billet in Vietnam. I don't recall who it was, but I remember having a discussion with him one night, and he basically saw his job as just collecting and collating messages that came into the headquarters, and putting them in the right chronological order and sending them forward. Also, he was not a substantive player in the NavForV arena, nor was he expected to be. But it seemed to me that--based on my personal knowledge of what was going on, the role that Admiral Zumwalt was playing, the shaping of the new strategy for employing forces, the increasing strong relationship with the Vietnamese Navy, an effort to reshape them to begin to assume more and more duties, and also because I had an understanding of the background and the framework in which Admiral Zumwalt was working--I thought that the official histories that were being sent in were wholly inadequate for someone 20, 30 years from now to sit down and read and try to understand what was really happening. It's not that the material that was being sent in didn't have some value and wasn't accurate and wasn't correct. It's simply that it did not give you the full flavor of what and why things were happening. They were just as I said, a collection of messages, official message traffic, reports of incidents on the river, reports of firefights. There was no analytical effort, and there was no serious effort to put it together in some meaningful way so it tied together. So I was concerned about that, because I felt that there was an awful lot happening in those three or four months since Admiral Zumwalt had arrived, and I couldn't see any of that being reflected in

the official history. So I went to see the admiral and told him of my concern for this and suggested that we try to find someone who could bring a little more discipline, a little more analytical ability to this job so that the story could be told a little bit better than what it was. An officer who had just gotten his doctorate degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy was under orders to come to Saigon to work in the MSTS office, of all places.* This is a good example of the kind of detailing that was going on in Vietnam. Here you had a fellow that the Navy had just spent X number of dollars and three years of his life to get a doctorate degree in the discipline of international relations, of which history is a big part of that discipline, and he was being sent to be an administrative officer in the MSTS office. You know, that's the container ships, the merchant arm that was supporting us. So I had our personnel people have him report to our office when he came in, and I knew who he was. I had gone to school with him at Fletcher, a fellow by the name of Dick Schreadley.** Dick is ^Wnot out of the Navy and a newspaper editor in Charleston, South Carolina. And he's a very intelligent, very capable guy, and I explained to him what was my assessment of the official history of the war in Vietnam that was being put together. I asked him if he would be interested in a reassignment out of the MSTS office

*MSTS--Military Sea Transportation Service, which has since been renamed Military Sealift Command. This is an arm of the Navy which provides logistic support through its own ships and chartered merchant vessels. It had a very active role in hauling war materials to Vietnam.

**Commander Richard L. Schreadley, USN.

over to the NavForV staff to take on this job of trying to put a little more meaningful history together. Dick indicated that he would be, so we had him go up to the office and take a look at what was being done. Admiral Zumwalt wanted some confirmation that my own assessment was accurate. Dick came back and said that the situation was far worse in his judgment than what I had indicated to him, and he would be delighted to take on the job. So I went to see the admiral and cleared it with him and Dick got assigned to that job. By the way, he'd be someone that might be of interest to you people in terms of putting this oral history together, because he did that for the next year, I believe, while he was in Vietnam.

Q: Fortunately, part of the output of that was published in the Proceedings, so it's available already.*

Captain Kerr: Okay. Good. Well, it goes to show you I don't read the Proceedings as closely as I should.

Q: Well, was this something of the old school tie at work? How well had you known him at Fletcher?

*Schreadley wrote the following articles:

"SEA LORDS," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, August 1970, pages 22-31.

"'Nothing to Report' A Day on the Vam Co Tay," Proceedings, December 1970, pages 23-27.

"The Naval War in Vietnam, 1950-1970," Proceedings (Naval Review Issue), May 1971, pages 180-207.

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Captain Kerr: Well, Dick and I had gone to school there together for a year. It was a little bit of the old tie, but, hell, the important thing is to get somebody in who could begin to put together a little better history. Had I gone back to the bureau and requested that, we would have gotten the same kind of bureaucratic response, "We'll look for somebody," and then next summer somebody would have come out. And I saw Dick rolling in. Had he been going to an operational unit or to a job down in the Delta supporting the war effort, I wouldn't have made any effort to try to pull Dick into the headquarters staff. But he was going to be an administrative officer at the MSTs. So I thought that he could be better used in the NavForV headquarters than over there.

Q: Was it being treated as a collateral duty before that?

Captain Kerr: No, there was a fellow up there full-time. But, as I recall, he had been a first lieutenant on an LST or something, and he just took the messages that came in each day and put them in a pile, and at the end of each month put grommets through them and mailed them off to Washington, and that was the history of the Vietnam War.

Q: The old philosophy that a line officer can do anything.

Captain Kerr: Well, line officers are certainly educated to put

grommet holes in messages and compile them.

Q: One of the observations that has been made about Admiral Zumwalt is that he could accomplish much more than most people can. Do you have an explanation for that?

Captain Kerr: Well, yes, I think number one he was more intelligent than most people. He was very perceptive, very analytical, a man who was capable of taking in enormous amounts of material, synthesizing that material very quickly, shedding the irrelevant aspects of it. You know, the kind of guy that gets right to the heart of the matter. He's also somebody who worked more than anybody else. His day generally started about 6:00 o'clock, and he'd go running in the morning. I'd go with him. In fact, I'd never done any jogging in my life, and one morning he came in to my bedroom at 6:00 o'clock and rolled me out on the floor and said I had five minutes to be downstairs in my tennis shoes, and my jogging career started. And I still do it today.

He worked harder, plus he had a capacity to deal with routine things very quickly. The staff would work for hours putting together the paperwork for him and, you know, a guy with a more bureaucratic view of things would spend the whole day reviewing it, and Zumwalt literally would go through it in 15 or 20 minutes. In other words, the things that he focused on were the things that he considered to be

essentially important, and particularly essentially important for the commander to focus on. And those things that other people should be focusing on, he let them focus on them. He didn't sit there and review what they did and cross the "T's" and re-dot the "I's" and change the syntax and the wording, unless it was something that was very important to him. So he had a tremendous capability to set priorities and sift through the things that were unimportant and give them the sort of casual attention that was necessary. Plus, he didn't spend much time each day, like a lot of us do, with mundane things, like, "What are we going to wear today? What's my schedule today?" Those things were taken care of for him. For example, he had a lot of support from his staff, which allowed him to focus on other things. Most of us got up in the morning and wondered if we had enough clean clothes to wear. The admiral had things laid out for him. The reason I'm getting at this is not to point out that it takes so much time to lay things out, but the admiral was always thinking about the next event, analyzing things, preparing himself for the important things that were coming up to the point where he didn't even pay any attention to what he was putting on. I remember one morning, the steward was gone, and the Vietnamese houseboy went up and laid out some clothes for him. They laid out a set of green fatigues. They laid out white socks and white shoes, and a khaki combination cap, and that's what he came down in. And as he walked into the dining room for breakfast, we all looked up at him. Suddenly I started laughing.

He looked down at me and said, "What's the matter with you this morning, Howard?"

And I said, "Admiral, have you looked at yourself in the mirror?"

There is no doubt that he had looked at himself in the mirror, totally missed the fact that he had three different uniforms on. And I suggested that he return, and since we were going out in the field that morning in a helo, that he might want to take his white shoes and socks off and replace his combination cap with the appropriate fatigue hat that generally was worn with that and put his boots on. That's what he did. Then he raised hell with me because the wrong things had been set out for him.

Well, I guess the point of this thing is that his mind was always occupied with what I considered to be the important things that he was focusing on, and to the point where he could just literally set aside in his mind this horrendous plethora, I guess, if you will, of mundane things that all of us deal with each day, trying to match a tie with a shirt, making sure we've got the right socks on, et cetera. He never focused on or paid any attention on those things at all. So he was able to exclude all those things and focus on the things that had his attention. So I think for all those reasons he was a guy who crammed, oh, hell, sometimes a week into one day. I used to always feel that I'd get up at 6:00 in the morning and I'd go to bed at 12:00 at night, and I still felt like I was ten miles behind, trying to catch up.

Q: Well, there's the lesson in that story in a larger sense--that it's very important what is brought to him in the sense of paperwork too. And that puts a tremendous obligation on the officer who performs the filtering function.

Captain Kerr: Well, that's true and that tells you a little bit about how he did business. He always liked to have an alter ego, generally a junior officer like myself, Bob Powers, somebody who was with him all the time, who understood what was on his mind, what his priorities were, and it was to serve this filtering purpose so that you got to him the things that he was concerned with.* And for another purpose--to make sure that the people who he had talked to, and wanted to get something from, understood exactly what it was he wanted, so that there was an efficiency in what they were doing. In other words, by having this alter ego, he saw it as a mechanism that created enormous efficiencies in his day as well as in the days of the people that were supporting him. I think it worked very well. It did put a burden on the person who was in that role. And a lot of times, it was not always understood, particularly by more senior officers who basically saw things in the more classic organization chart. In other words, the flow of things should be in accordance with that organizational

*Lieutenant Commander Robert C. Powers, USN, who served on the staff as logistics plans officer and requirements officer and then flag lieutenant. His Professional Note, "Beans and Bullets for Sea Lords," was published in the Proceedings, December 1970, pages 95-97.

chart. But, as I think I've mentioned earlier, Admiral Zumwalt had an essential distrust of a bureaucracy. He understood that there were things that the bureaucracy had to do and only they could do. But when it came to the formation of policy and the setting of the priorities and the implementation of that policy, he always liked to have an alternate means to succeeding in those areas other than having to deal with the staff.

Q: One of your many roles on his behalf was as his eyes and ears to go places he couldn't go. Could you discuss some of these situations in an operational sense?

Captain Kerr: There were a number of occasions when the admiral wanted to get some feedback on conditions out in the field, either based on something he'd heard, that he wanted confirmed, or some concern he may have had. It wasn't that he didn't have total confidence in the commanders whom these people worked for to report to him. But he understood that there were times when, well, like the captain of a ship, he just doesn't always know what's going on in the engineering department, and sometimes it's good to know. I could go out. I was a lieutenant. I was the same age and vintage of the people that were out there. I could sit down and talk to them, and I was able to kind of put together the flavor, the content of what was happening, what wasn't happening, what was on their minds, what were

they happy with, what were they unhappy with, what would they like to see changed. And also we could get some data points on whether or not the policies that were being set in Saigon were actually filtering down to the level that they had to be implemented. I guess some people would say I was a spy for the commander. They would see it in that light. I never saw it that way. I never came back to Saigon and put anyone on report with the admiral. My job was to go out and not only assess what the circumstances were, but also I think I served a purpose, a lot of times, in defining for them what this policy coming out of Saigon was when sometimes their immediate commander hadn't defined it for them in the terms that they fully understood. So I don't think it ever created any problems. I think it irritated a few people, but, well, that's just one of the collateral costs of implementing a lot of change. And that's really what Admiral Zumwalt was doing. He was changing things all the time, and I don't mean that he was changing his policy constantly, but he was changing the role of the Navy in Vietnam, and he wanted to make sure that people understood and sensed the direction that he was moving, and why these things were happening. He was out constantly telling them, and so I went out like a pollster or something to test the pulse and see what it was. I took on quite a few jobs of that nature and, I think they were helpful not only to us in Saigon and to the admiral, but also to the people in the field in that when I left, I think, they had generally a clear understanding of what it was the admiral was doing.

Q: Was there also a sense of transferring information the other way, that you could act as a conduit for these junior officers to get things to the admiral they might not want to send through the chain?

Captain Kerr: Well, that's true. There's no question about that. That was part of it. I tried to be as discreet as possible with that. Some of the information I just never took back. Yes, I had to make a judgment call. Was this a disgruntled young officer who was trying to put his boss on report, or was this a young officer who was bringing to my attention a matter, an issue that was of such importance and moment that it should be brought to the admiral's attention? A lot of times the commanders had already brought these to his attention, and this served to confirm what they had told him. So, I think, once again here, I'm trying to point out here that we were trying to do this in a very concerned, positive, measured way to ensure that there was a flow of communications from the commander down to the lowest guy, and from the lowest guy back to the commander without interfering unduly with the chain of command.

Q: Did you find any cases in which the junior officers wanted to be more aggressive than they were being allowed to?

Captain Kerr: No, I didn't find that that was a problem. If anything, I found just the opposite to be the problem, that a lot of

times they were overly aggressive in a situation that had political overtones, and, therefore, in retrospect being too aggressive is the wrong way to go. I remember one case in particular where a young officer took a boat up, I forget the name of the waterway, but it separated Cambodia from South Vietnam. He saw some VC collecting taxes and went after them, and they shot at him. He opened fire and shot at them and jumped out of his boat and chased them with a shotgun, and was in Cambodia. This resulted in an official protest from Prince Sihanouk at the time.* So, here was a case where the fellow had been a little too aggressive. On the other hand, the guy was being shot at. He didn't understand the political sensitivities of the situation. That was a dimension that probably pervaded this war. You know, it was the political dimension, and we couldn't expect all the officers to understand that, and certainly it shouldn't take priority when you're getting shot at if you're the guy that's on the scene. There were also instances where the officers were caught in this enormous dilemma of whether or not to open fire on something that was moving at night in the water, or not to fire on something that was moving. I remember one lieutenant getting me aside one evening and in a very emotional, tearful way telling me that he had been told that he was to waste anything that moved on the water after midnight. He said he just couldn't do it, because he knew that a lot of these movements on the water were just locals who were out at night for very routine,

*Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodian head of state at the time. This incident is discussed in the Proceedings, August 1970, page 26.

peaceful, domestic reasons, and if we started opening fire at everything that moved we were going to end up by killing a lot of innocent people. Yet he was under direct orders from his immediate superior to do that, and he found himself in a very difficult situation where he didn't want to disobey his orders, yet on the other hand, his conscience wouldn't let him do what he had been directed to do.

Q: How was it resolved?

Captain Kerr: Well, these things aren't really resolved. We listened to them. I expressed the fact that I certainly understood his dilemma and would take it back and discuss it with the admiral, and I did. And, whenever the admiral had an opportunity to visit, he would raise these issues with the commanders. But, you couldn't start tying the immediate commanders' hands. You start laying down too many criteria and, as you know, it becomes no policy at all. I don't think we ever resolved that kind of thing. I don't think we ever resolved it in the whole war. It was just something that every young man that was over there and out in a boat at night had to deal with almost individually. There just wasn't any way, because, hell, the reason the order had been put out by the commander in the first place was that there were too many examples where that peaceful family is coming home and the mother takes out a grenade and throws it in the back of the boat as

they're waving at the sailors. So, viewed from that context, it was the right order to put out. Viewed from the context of the kid who had to execute it, it is a very difficult thing to do. So we had a lot of that. As I said, there was no real way to resolve those things.

Q: Did you encounter areas in which junior officers were ordered to do dangerous things in which they felt their immediate superiors didn't have a proper appreciation of the risk involved?

Captain Kerr: Oh, I think so, but I don't recall anything specific where somebody brought that to my attention. I think there were cases where some of the junior officers thought that some of their immediate superiors were missing the action while they sat back at headquarters on the radios demanding more information on how the fight was going. As far as they were concerned, if they wanted to know, they could come out and find out. But I guess that happens in any conflict. It wasn't one of these issues that was brought to my attention too often.

Q: We've talked about the three primary task forces that conducted Operation SEA LORDS. What about Admiral Zumwalt's role in connection with covert operations, the SEALs and so forth?*

*SEALs--(sea-air-land) are a group of Navymen who undergo very rigorous physical training and weapons training. They act as sort of a guerrilla force that can be inserted from the sea in order to perform covert operations on land.

Captain Kerr: Well, SEALs, of course, were in-country, as you know. They were in the Delta. They were headquartered there. There were, of course, SEALs who were brought covertly into the country. These were SEALs who were assigned, I believe, from the Navy to a civilian agency for temporary additional duty. Then they were sent in-country and were assigned to be an advisor to a Vietnamese district official. An individual's identity as a Navy enlisted man, as a Navy SEAL, was never disclosed, either to that Vietnamese official or to his military counterpart who was generally an Army lieutenant colonel or colonel who was on the advisory side. This sometimes presented some problems, and I know that General Abrams did discuss that with Admiral Zumwalt once. And I went out and spent five days once down in the Delta getting around and talking to a lot of these individuals and finding out what particular problems they were having. Other than the fact that generally the colonel, once he found out, was enraged by the fact that this civilian advisor that he assumed was a member of the CIA, or some other civilian agency, found out he was an enlisted Navy man, and that disturbed him greatly. There really weren't any other serious problems with it. From what I could see, they did the job that they were sent in to do.

Q: What was that job?

Captain Kerr: Well, their job was to advise the Vietnamese official

and to assist him in counterinsurgency operations in his district. And the manner of those counterinsurgency operations was sometimes very gruesome.

I went out on a couple of night missions with these guys. I had no idea what it was they were going to do when we went out. It's the kind of level of warfare that, you know, is essential in that kind of environment, but it's very gruesome, I guess, is the word and untraditional in the sense that the kinds of things that naval officers are trained for; even with myself I had no background, understanding, or concept of what these guys did and what they were doing until I went out and watched them in the field.

Q: What did you do on these missions?

Captain Kerr: I stayed alive. That's what I did. I basically stayed in the background by their orders. They didn't want me involved at all. They were willing to take me along to observe and see what was going on, but they didn't want me involved. I wasn't trained to do that at all.

I remember one night we went out with a group of Vietnamese SEALs, and this fellow that I was with was an advisor to these people, assisting them in their counterinsurgency operations. They came upon a Vietnamese camp. There must have been seven VC in that camp. They were sitting around, some were eating, some were smoking. They came

in from three different directions, took them by surprise. The American and myself--I was off in the shadows of the trees. The Navy man did not participate. The Vietnamese SEALs moved in quickly. They lined these VC up. They tied them, blindfolded them, and they started querying the first one, and all of a sudden this guy pulled a knife out and cut open his stomach, took his liver out, and then went across and wiped it in the faces of the other guys. They got all the information they wanted after that.

Q: Gruesome, as you say.

Captain Kerr: Very gruesome, yes.

Q: But effective.

Captain Kerr: Well, I can only assume it was effective, because I saw an awful lot of dialogue taking place after that first one resisted the questions. I didn't understand; it was all in Vietnamese, of course. But it was very gruesome and a level of warfare that I had never been trained in or understood. One reads about it. You see movies about this, but until you're actually out there in the field and see it firsthand, you can't really appreciate it.

Q: Did Admiral Zumwalt have any specific doctrine to try to prevent

atrocities against innocent civilians?

Captain Kerr: I don't recall. I do know that we had rules of engagement that covered this. The admiral was responsible for vigorously enforcing the rules of engagement. I don't recall many lapses in those rules of engagement, other than the one I mentioned up in Cambodia, and that one got resolved fairly quickly and easily.

I remember the lieutenant when he got called up to Saigon for an interview that same day to find out what the hell he had done. He was told that Sihanouk had accused him of firing into Cambodia and killing innocent civilians. And this kid, with much aplomb and not the least bit of hesitation or deference, turned to whoever it was that mentioned that to him and said, "Well, you tell Sihanouk he's a lying son-of-a-bitch."

That's basically what the State Department did, but they did it in the usual diplomatic language.

Q: I was reading in Commander Schreadley's article about a JG named Bernique.*

Captain Kerr: That's the same guy, yes. In fact, we renamed, in Vietnam that body of water he went up as "Bernique's Creek." It probably is still in the maps of Southeast Asia.

*Lieutenant (junior grade) Michael Bernique, USNR. See Proceedings, August 1970, page 26.

Q: We started in a little bit on the admiral's day and life around the enclave. If you could pick it up there, the sorts of accommodations that he and you had, and the admiral's mess and so forth.

Captain Kerr: Well, we lived very comfortably. The house that the admiral had was right next to the headquarters. It had been the home of the head of the military advisory assistance group through the Fifties, and then it was General Westmoreland's quarters when he was the commander of the Military Advisory Group, Vietnam.

When General Abrams relieved General Westmoreland, he wanted to live out at the MACV headquarters.* He didn't want the time added to his day of transiting back and forth. Plus, there was a security risk also; every time you were in a car driving around Saigon you were a target.

So this house was made available to Admiral Zumwalt about two months after he arrived in Vietnam, and we moved in. It came complete with two Vietnamese families that had been there for two decades--took care of the house and grounds. We had four or five stewards that were assigned to the admiral. And myself and another aide by the name of Lew Glenn, and the chief of staff, and the admiral lived in the house.** It was just traditional Southeast Asia opulent living, I

*General Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., AUS, relieved General William C. Westmoreland, AUS, as Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam in 1968, shortly before the arrival of Admiral Zumwalt.

**Lieutenant W. Lewis Glenn, Jr., USN.

guess you could call it. A big house, big ceiling fans. It was very nice. But, you know, it wouldn't have made any difference to Admiral Zumwalt whether he was living in that house or something much smaller than that, and much less opulent. He never cared about those things. He didn't want that house because of the size or anything. It was the convenience; it was right next door. It was offered and we took it; that's all. In all the time I worked for Admiral Zumwalt, he in comparison to all the flag officers I've ever known in the Navy, he was the least concerned with and insistent upon perquisites. He just never cared about them at all. They just weren't a part of his makeup.

Q: Was the South Vietnamese cuisine included in the regular diet?

Captain Kerr: Yes, and much to our--well, we liked it, but let me tell you—we all paid a price for it at one time or another. In fact, I became, myself, very, very ill after one meal and almost had to be medevaced to Clark Air Force Base.* I passed out up in my room from illness, and I was so sick I couldn't even crawl to a telephone to get help. The admiral came back from some function that night and walked into my bedroom and saw me laying on the floor and got me out to the hospital at Tan Son Nhut. Yes, we enjoyed the Vietnamese food, but the conditions under which it was prepared sometimes demanded a price.

*Medevac—an evacuation for medical reasons.

We tried to have the Navy stewards do most of the cooking, but occasionally the Vietnamese would insist upon preparing something for us.

Q: Did you ever have any concern that you might be poisoned or whatever?

Captain Kerr: No, I don't think we ever thought in those terms. I don't recall that I did. The stewards used to watch the Vietnamese when they would be preparing the food. No, we never really thought that we were targets, although I don't know whether I mentioned on the last one to effort to ...

Q: Please do.

Captain Kerr: We used to play volleyball every day after lunch, and obviously someone was watching our schedule, because one day the admiral went out in the field, and I didn't go with him that day. I stayed behind, and all of a sudden I heard this enormous thunderclap. I went outside, and someone had thrown a satchel charge over the fence onto the volleyball court where we played. So they were watching us, and there was an attempt on the admiral's life, although he wasn't present and they didn't know it.

One thing that we did try to do was to prepare ourselves to defend

the compound in the event there was another Tet, although we didn't do a very good job at that. I don't think naval officers are very good at that kind of thing. The only people we had to help us were the stewards. I was always concerned that somebody was going to get shot every time we tried to practice. Plus one of our predecessors had, a fellow by the name of Kerrey, who's now the new governor of Nebraska, had been the aide in Saigon.* He kept enough ammunition and hand grenades in the closets to blow the whole house up if it took a hit. And I had all that removed. I was afraid that somebody would pull off a stray round and we'd all go up. We weren't nearly as well trained as you'd see the Army. When General Abrams would go through Saigon, God, he had gun jeeps fore and aft. His aides all decked out in M-16s and grenades. We just never did that. I think it goes to the lack of training that you have.

Q: Did you have Marine guards?

Captain Kerr: Well, we did eventually. We did when we got concerned about the admiral's--well, when we first got there we were just driving through the streets of Saigon. I used to carry this .38 pistol in my briefcase—a big warrior, you know, with a .38 pistol in his briefcase, and that was it. It was all we had. We got a little concerned that that wasn't enough if somebody decided to shoot at us.

*Robert Kerrey.

So we got a jeep and we got a couple of Marines. I even had some second thoughts about that, because whereas those guys could protect you if somebody is tracking you, they also tend to attract the attention of people who may not know who you are. So it had its pluses, but it also had its risks involved.

Q: What about domestic enemies? Was there any effect from U.S. war protestors on the effort there?

Captain Kerr: No, no. I don't recall any U.S. protestors in Saigon. Is that what you mean?

Q: Well, I mean more people, such as Jane Fonda and Ramsey Clark, who were speaking against the American war effort.* Did this have any effect in weakening the influence of what Admiral Zumwalt was trying to do?

Captain Kerr: No, none whatsoever, none whatsoever. Clearly, their impact was on the people in this country. I say this, the radio-television networks in Saigon would play everything these people were saying. They never kept it from the soldiers and sailors. You know, like the effect of Tokyo Rose, I don't know that it ever had that much effect. You always see in the movies where people were

*Jane Fonda is a movie actress; Ramsey Clark served as U.S. Attorney General from 1967 to 1969.

sitting around listening to her and laughing and joking about her. That's basically how it came across in Saigon. They'd put Jane Fonda on television; everybody would clap and jeer. No, I don't think it ever had any impact at all.

Q: To what extent did you in the compound have the ability to keep up with news?

Captain Kerr: Well, we had daily news summaries that came in by messages that the Navy did. We had the Stars and Stripes.^{*} We had newspapers from home. We had the evening newscasts in Saigon. Plus, once a week the radio-television office in the Pentagon would send us all the television networks' news programs for the week. They were generally edited, so we just got that that had to do with Vietnam. But, then, of course, that was 80% of what was on the air each night. The domestic stories here in the country that were unrelated to the war, they generally edited out. We had a pretty good picture of what the news was reporting. Then the admiral made a habit of meeting with a lot of the in-country news people on a routine basis at least once a month. We'd have them in for dinner or for a lunch or for a briefing. We had a chance to talk to all the news broadcasters, as well as the writers from major newspapers and news magazines that were in country.

^{*}A daily newspaper with separate editions in Europe and the Far East, published by the U.S. armed forces for a readership comprised of service personnel.

In fact, I remember one evening having a long discussion with a fellow from Time magazine, and I told him that--he had written something about the Navy's efforts in the Delta. I got him aside and I said, "Look, you just know that's not true."

And, he said, "Look, and I'm ashamed of that." He said, "I'm ashamed of my magazine and my editors." He said, "The story that came out in Time magazine bears no resemblance to the one that I sent to New York."

We wouldn't go to the point of condemning his editors for slanting his story, or redoing his story to conform to an editorial position they had taken, but it was clear that that's what was happening.

Q: In what sense was it slanted?

Captain Kerr: Well, I forget the specifics now, but the point is that it was slanted in a sense that it came across in a very negative way about the war effort in Vietnam, when it should have been a very positive story, should have supported the things that the administration and the President were saying, as opposed to chinking away at their credibility. We'd see the same thing in the television news stories. We'd sit there and watch five days of news in one hour. I mean the general drift and theme and bias and the position that they were taking, and then using interviews and statements and other things out of context to support that was very obvious. I remember the case

where they were going into Cambodia. This newsman jumped up on this tank and asked this kid what he thought about the President's thrust into Cambodia. And, this kid says, "Hell, I don't even know where we're going. Nobody ever tells me anything."

Then the newsman turns around and he said, "And here we have another example of the failure of the commanders to tell the troops what is going on."

He'd probably asked half a dozen other people who all might have said something, "Yes, we know we're going in and we understand that it's going to be dangerous, but we consider this to be an important thing to do." That wouldn't be used. What would be used was the kid who had said something negative.

Q: Well, that may have been one of the reasons that in my reading of Admiral Veth's oral history he had a very negative view toward the news media.* Was there that kind of negative view on Admiral Zumwalt's part?

Captain Kerr: No, not at all, not at all, I don't think so. You know, the admiral worked very well with the news media. He had a very good press fellow, a guy by the name of Jack Davey.** I think, one of

*Rear Admiral Kenneth L. Veth, USN, who was Admiral Zumwalt's predecessor as Commander U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam. He is the subject of a Naval Institute oral history.

**Commander John R. Davey, Jr., USN.

the things, of course, was that the admiral was very honest, very forward, very candid with the news media in telling them his story, and they always appreciated that. No, I don't recall him ever having a problem along those lines. Nor do I think he developed overall-- he'd be unhappy about a given story, the way it was written, but in general, no, I don't think he had that negative feeling about the press.

Q: Well, a smart, ambitious guy on the way up can use the media to enhance his own cause.

Captain Kerr: Yes, that's true, but also Admiral Zumwalt was something, had something that the people were interested in reporting on. He was young, he was new, he was articulate, he was charismatic, if you will, and he had a story to tell. And, that story always supported General Abrams' efforts and the administration's efforts. So in that sense the admiral never slanted anything to assist himself. But, yes, I think the press that came out on Admiral Zumwalt in Vietnam was very helpful to him.

Q: Well, many times that is a result of the factor of cooperation. You're more inclined to go along with somebody who helps you.

Captain Kerr: No question about it.

You're asking me did Admiral Zumwalt know how to use the press? Sure, he did. He understood the importance of it and understood that the press could be helpful to him. I wouldn't say that he overly courted the press, but he certainly was cooperative with the press, and the press were cooperative with him.

Q: Did General Abrams issue any guidelines for dealings with the media, things that could not be talked about?

Captain Kerr: I'm sure he did, but I just can't recall right now. There had to be guidelines out. But I just don't remember now any of the specifics other than the fact there were guidelines.

Q: Certainly, though, it was much more open than the censorship that had been a standard, say, in World War II.

Captain Kerr: Well, I don't think there's any question about that. My God, we had television cameras all over the country, and they were basically interviewing people on the field and putting them on the evening television news. So, yes, in that sense that's very true.

Q: So the nature of the times contributed to the openness.

Captain Kerr: Oh, yes, sure. But I think the fact that the news

media were able to insist upon so much access to people and to events suggests that it was a whole new set of circumstances surrounding the reporting of Vietnam than in any other war that this country had ever been in.

Q: To what extent did the admiral bring in officers from the field to his compound to meet with them there?

Captain Kerr: Well, he did this on a fairly routine basis. He'd bring his commanders in quite often to discuss things with them. But a lot of the officers who were leaving Vietnam would come by, and they'd spend the night, have dinner with him, and discuss their views of the war, their views of the Navy's effort. Unfortunately, it seemed like most of these were leaving the Navy. Most of these young officers were leaving the Navy. I think these officers had an enormous impact on Admiral Zumwalt, not just those who came through to say goodbye, but those that he would see out in the field. I think they shaped his thinking a great deal in what he did when he became CNO. He had great admiration and respect for what these young officers were doing, and I think they influenced him tremendously.

Q: In what sense?

Captain Kerr: Well, in the sense that--look at some of the early

things he did as CNO. They wanted to get rid of what we know as "Mickey Mouse." They couldn't understand why the Navy would still impose that type of thing. They couldn't understand why a person that had a neatly trimmed beard couldn't retain that beard. You know, they'd go out in the field and you'd have kids out there living under miserable conditions, under fire each night. It's hot. They'd have these torrential rains. Eating out of tin cans. Living in boats. Miserable conditions! They never complained about those. What they complained about was why they couldn't have a beard. What they complained about was the "Mickey Mouse." And, it made a lot of sense, it seemed to me, and what the admiral picked up on immediately was, "My God, if these guys aren't complaining about the conditions under which we're asking them to fight, the least we can do is remove from them those things that are bothering them." So I think in that sense they had a great impact on him. Plus, he felt that these officers, young officers were being tested in the real arena that mattered for a military person, in that the types of stress and strain that they were under would serve them throughout their Navy careers and their civilian lives in ways that people who had never been put in that situation would be able to match them. And so, I think, when he became CNO, he basically saw that as his constituency, as his natural constituency, and that the future of the Navy rested more with these young people, what they had learned and brought with them out of that Vietnam experience than with a lot of traditions and regulations

that long since should have been removed from the system.

Q: Was there any concern that these people coming from the harsh living conditions you have described might feel some resentment when they saw how the admiral lived?

Captain Kerr: No, no, not at all. We've exaggerated how the admiral--I mean, we lived well, but let me tell you, Admiral Zumwalt was in that helicopter every morning. He spent more time in the field, exposed to enemy fire, meeting with, talking to, examining, understanding what was going on than any military commander in Vietnam, and they understood that.

Q: That would prevent the resentment.

Captain Kerr: Well, sure. You know, if he would have just been sitting in Saigon in that big house holding dinners each night, no, nobody is going to respect a military commander in wartime living like that. But, you know, we were in the air almost every day. Wherever the fight was, that's where he went. Wherever the difficult situation was the night before, he got reports on, that's where he was the next morning, and they knew that and they understood that.

Q: To what extent did logistics support and supply support concern

the admiral?

Captain Kerr: Well, I don't think there were any real logistics problems, but the mentality sometimes of the people who were supplying it was a problem. I can remember that we got a message one day from the type commander back in San Diego telling us that the preventive maintenance reports of PBRs in the Delta were coming in too slow. You know, after we laughed about it, we all got angry, because some of those boats had been sunk by the Viet Cong. I guess those things always happen in wartime where you have people who are totally removed from the scene of action, and their universe is the same whether it's wartime or peacetime. We found that sometimes the distance between San Diego and Saigon was far greater than just the mileage distance. I think that probably the biggest problem was trying to get people to understand what was really happening. When the admiral put those ships in dangerous waters, they started getting shot at and the guys weren't doing their PMS and sending back their reports to San Diego anymore.* They were out trying to find VC ammunition and supplies that were infiltrating into the Delta, notwithstanding the fact that that was being articulated back to the States, not everyone understood it.

*PMS--Planned Maintenance System, a Navy-wide system whereby various preventive maintenance actions are required to be performed on weapons and other pieces of equipment at specified intervals. Obviously, when one is actively engaged in fighting a war, there is some difficulty in doing the required PMS checks on a timely basis.

Q: Well, if you're going to have stepped-up contact with the enemy, you're going to shoot a lot more. Were you able to adjust in terms of ammunition supply?

Captain Kerr: Oh, yes, yes. I don't recall that there were problems like that. There may have been. Well, it's been so many years now some of these things I just can't recall that well, Paul, but I don't recall shortages of ammunition or food. There certainly was never any shortage of beer; I can assure you of that. I can still see these giant helicopters bringing great pallets full of Schlitz and Budweiser beer out. You'd look up in the sky, and there would be this great big helicopter, and there would be about 50 cases of beer on this pallet heading out for fire stations. There was never any shortage.

Q: Moving to another staff function, do you recall any particular problems or situations regarding intelligence?

Captain Kerr: Well, I think there was concern on the intelligence, on the part of the intelligence people about the--what was really happening in the Delta, as I recall. That was one of the big issues, and how were the VC really infiltrating in the Delta, and how were they supplying them? And the admiral's intelligence officer, Captain Rectanus, had, as I recall, a thesis that they were being supplied through Sihanoukville and bringing it overland, infiltrating into the

Delta.* And I think this proved to be accurate and correct. The admiral had tremendous intelligence support in Vietnam. I'd have to say the strongest section in the NavForV staff was in the intelligence section. It was the best collection overall of talented people. It had a real simpatico, too. It was a good team; they worked well together, and they were just superbly led by a captain and now retired Vice Admiral Rectanus, who kept a real good handle on his intelligence officers, and demanded of them the most rigorous analytical standards. The admiral came to rely on them very, very much.

Q: Well, one of the big controversies of the Vietnam War is the question of body counts. Was there pressure on the Navy in that direction?

Captain Kerr: I don't know that there was any pressure of body count. It was a part of every after-action report that came in. I don't recall that there was a lot of emphasis in the Navy side put on body count. I don't think that the admiral saw it as a highly significant data point in trying to determine how well we were doing in the war effort. Certainly, killing VC was an important part of what the Navy effort was. It was just a by-product of that effort, but I don't think that all of a sudden we thought we had taken a step closer to winning the war because on Thursday the body count had gone up. It

*Captain Earl F. Rectanus, USN.

just wasn't that significant a data point.

Q: What were the measures of effectiveness that were used in assessing how well the Navy did?

Captain Kerr: One of the measures of effectiveness that we were looking for was were we halting the infiltration into the South. What the admiral wanted to do, and what he was trying to assess was the impact of putting presence there. Can you make the enemy react and expend his resources? Which he wasn't doing, wasn't having to do, because there was no Navy, no presence there, no one trying to interdict his efforts. Make him have to change his modus operandi. Make it expensive for him. These are harder things to quantify. But, when we arrived in Saigon, the things we were measuring, which were easy to quantify, didn't tell us a damned thing about how well we were doing.

Q: So this goes back to Captain Rectanus's organization, really, to see how well you're doing in terms of what they turn up.

Captain Kerr: Yes. Well, in terms of the hard data points that we were looking for, numbers of tons of supplies that were captured, uncovered, destroyed—that's really what we were trying to do, more so than how many bodies were counted as dead.

Q: How good was the relationship between intelligence and operations?

Captain Kerr: Oh, I think it was very good, and I think the operations were really driven by the intelligence assessments. The admiral, as I say, had great confidence in what he was told by Rectanus. He'd move on that very quickly, and I think it proved to be correct.

Q: How much did Admiral Zumwalt act as his own operations officer?

Captain Kerr: Quite a bit. I don't mean in a sense of implementing things, but in terms of the conceptualizing and the broad organization and, you know, putting together that calculus that is necessary to bring the thing off, bring the forces to bear at the right time with the right people, he did a lot of that. He worked very closely with the operations people. I won't say he was his own operations officer, because he had a very poor one, but if you just sat outside his office and watched who was going in and out of his office all day long, it was generally Rectanus and the operations guy.

Q: Who was the operations officer?

Captain Kerr: A fellow by the name of Dick Nicholson, who was a commander at the time and now a retired rear admiral, whom the admiral

had tremendous confidence in, great respect for, and who eventually left that job and went on down to be the commander of Market Time operations.*

Q: Had he been in the slot, or was he one like Tidd that got put in by Zumwalt?**

Captain Kerr: He was put in. The admiral's first operations officer was fired. I forget his name now, but he just wasn't on the same wavelength with the admiral. Every time the admiral asked him to do something, it either didn't get done or got done half-assed or way behind schedule. So, one night, the admiral told him he had to have something done by 10:00 o'clock that evening. He and I came back, and he told me to go over and find out if it was done. I went over and it wasn't done. I went back and told the admiral that it wasn't, and he wrote out a little note, relieved him. He handed me the note and told me to take it over and give it to him. I did. And this guy asked me when this was effective. And I said, "Immediately." I contacted Dick Nicholson right away and told him that the admiral had asked me to advise him that he was the new operations officer as of that moment.

*Commander Richard E. Nicholson, USN.

**Captain Emmett H. Tidd, USN, Zumwalt's chief of staff.

Q: Where had he been up to then?

Captain Kerr: He'd been working in the front office doing some special projects for the admiral.

Q: That's a pretty abrupt change of assignment.

Captain Kerr: Well, it's not peacetime operation. The admiral saw it in terms of not only the need to support the overall objectives, but in terms of lives and resources.

Q: Were the Vietnamized units essentially interchangeable afterwards with U.S. units in operations?

Captain Kerr: Not as long as I was in Saigon. That may have come a little bit later, but I left in the summer, August-September of 1969, and the Vietnamization problem was just beginning to roll at that time. We had integrated some operations, but in terms of replacing the Vietnamese unit with a U.S. unit, I don't think we'd arrived at that state of training in the Vietnamese Navy or integration of our efforts.

Q: What changes, if any, came about when the Nixon Administration took office?

Captain Kerr: Well, I think the big thing and most important thing was Nixon had bought time that Johnson didn't have and Humphrey wouldn't have had. In other words, the biggest change was that we saw that even if we accepted the fact of the inevitability of having to leave Vietnam and turn things over, the time frame had been changed. We were no longer under pressure to make it happen in, say, six months. We saw that we were going to have some time to do it. I guess one other way to respond to your question is to recall some discussions I overheard. It was in March when Secretary of Defense Laird made his first trip out to Saigon.* In this meeting Laird basically stated that the U.S. objective was to assure the Vietnamese of their right to self-determination, which was a continuation of policy as we had known it. Laird made the observation, as I had just previously, that the administration had bought time that the Johnson Administration would not have had. As I recall, Abrams was talking to Laird about not even commenting on troop reductions, even though there was great political pressure to do that. And, as you recall, one of the first things the Nixon Administration did was to announce a troop reduction. Now, what that really amounted to was a reduction in the authorized ceiling. Nobody went home. We just hadn't filled all the billets that were authorized. We just reduced that ceiling. But Abrams was basically taking the position that we shouldn't do that

*Melvin R. Laird became U.S. Secretary of Defense with the advent of the Nixon Administration in January 1969.

until, and that we should be using that as a lever with the North Vietnamese. Also, at that time, Abrams commented on that he'd like to go into the Laos and Cambodian sanctuaries that were being used against them. They suggested that they wait and take a look at it the following summer, and Abrams responded that we wouldn't be any better off.

General Brown, who was the commander of the Air Force, was there. He said he thought that what the North Vietnamese wanted is for us to start bombing in the North again so they could trap Nixon like they had trapped Johnson.* And General Brown said at that meeting that what we needed to do right now was to mine Haiphong.

And Abrams continued to push for permission to raid the sanctuaries of Laos and Cambodia. And I remember he specifically requested the May time frame for doing that.

Q: Which happened one year later about May.

Captain Kerr: Yes, 1970, wasn't it?

Q: And the mining of Haiphong came two years after that.

Captain Kerr: Two years after that. So you can see that's, I guess, confirmation that the military was thinking what needed to be done

*General George S. Brown, USAF, Commander Seventh Air Force.

militarily at that time to apply the maximum pressure. But politically they never got permission to do it. So they were thinking in those terms as soon as Nixon took over. I guess, to answer your question, to wrap it up was that two things, I guess, number one, the first thing we noticed was the reduction in the sense of we were going to try to scale down our presence, in the sense of turning more over to the Vietnamese, and the sense of relief that we had bought some additional time that we wouldn't have had.

Q: How much voice did Admiral Zumwalt have in the strategic considerations?

Captain Kerr: Well, at that time he still was not a key player in the circles that involved the civilian people from Washington. He was clearly growing in his influence on Abrams. But when Laird came to town and the other senior people out of Washington, Zumwalt was not called in to be a party to the discussions yet. Where he was having his influence was with General Abrams and with his continued efforts to influence decisions on the Navy side by his messages back to Washington, his trips back to Washington to brief people, and basically by the success he was having in Saigon.

Q: Did Admiral Zumwalt get back to Washington any?

Captain Kerr: Yes, he went there twice during my tour.

Q: Did you make any of the trips with him?

Captain Kerr: I never made a trip with him back to Washington. I always stayed in Saigon and was the point of contact back at headquarters.

Q: Was this Laird's first trip to Vietnam?

Captain Kerr: Yes, this was Laird's first trip to Vietnam. I think it was one of the most important events for Zumwalt. Laird did not schedule any visit to see the Navy at all, but he was visiting the Army units in the Delta that the Navy supported. And Admiral Zumwalt got permission from the Army commander who was his host to come down and brief on that aspect of it. Well, the admiral went down there. I went with him. He made his pitch. He expanded the pitch outside the planned scope. He saw it as an opportunity to put his total Navy efforts before the Secretary of Defense, which he did. I'll never forget the Army commander afterwards commenting on the fact that it's the last time he'd ever invite Zumwalt to participate in a briefing—that he had been scalped, that Zumwalt had usurped the visit of the Secretary of Defense. Zumwalt just outdid him, that's all. He did it in a friendly way, but he hadn't done nearly as good a briefing as

Zumwalt did. Zumwalt came across as a very intelligent, balanced battle commander in the field. And Laird liked it very, very much. I think from that moment on Laird always remembered Zumwalt and remembered that particular day. And I think it had a very important impact on Zumwalt's efforts in Vietnam--and his career.

Q: From the list of items you've recited, it sounds as if MACV had a shopping list of things they were trying to sell they hadn't been able to sell to the previous administration.

Captain Kerr: Yes, I think that's probably true, Paul. Johnson's political position in this country could hardly have allowed him to step up--I mean he had halted the bombing just before the election in an effort to help Humphrey. It's clear that he was in no position to politically go in and mine Haiphong. And I'm sure that General Brown didn't just come up with this idea when Laird came in. So, sure, all these things had been presented to the President as options and as recommendations from the military, and they had been denied permission to do those things.

Q: And Nixon wound up being clobbered when he did go into Cambodia.

Captain Kerr: That's right. He was clobbered politically, but militarily it made a lot of sense. But remember, at that point,

people were less interested in what was happening militarily than they were in the political fallout from a given military move. People weren't viewing this in a strictly military context. They were viewing it more in a political context. So nobody would assess whether or not anything made any military sense alone. Every time you would make a recommendation, they had to see it the context of did it make political sense. And I'm referring to domestic politics, necessarily the politics between ourselves, the North Vietnamese, the Russians, and the Chinese.

Q: How well attuned was Admiral Zumwalt to the political considerations?

Captain Kerr: Paul, I think that was one of the real strengths that Admiral Zumwalt brought to the decision-making process in Saigon. He was extremely sensitive to the political dimension.

I recall in May, I think it was, 1969 when General Abrams was asking for a reassessment from his commanders of policy options. This was probably triggered by a similar request from Washington on an assessment of things. And the admiral got us together, and we discussed these. It was generally the case after we'd discussed them, he would sit down and do the first draft himself. Then he would pass that draft out to a few members of his staff and then we would retool that, and then come back to him and go through however many iterations

it took before we finally hammered out a final position. But in this particular draft, I remember that the admiral commented on the fact that Hanoi's strategy at the time was based on their recognition of their strengths and our weaknesses, the United States weaknesses, and in exploiting both. He told General Abrams that he didn't believe that Hanoi doubted for a moment the military superiority of the U.S. forces in the field vis-a-vis Hanoi's. I think the statistics showed that militarily he was taking a hell of a beating at that time. And, in fact, as the admiral pointed out, it was the enemy's fear of military defeat that caused him to shape his field strategy for its political impact. The admiral pointed out that Hanoi could sustain critically high losses in the face of overwhelming superiority pointed to Hanoi's strengths and the U.S. weaknesses, which was basically the political stability that Hanoi maintained, and that lack of political stability which threatened the U.S. And he went on to state very clearly that there was no doubt that should the divisiveness of U.S. public opinion continue, that the results in the country were going to be very serious, and that if the popular support for the U.S. involvement in Vietnam continued to dwindle, it could have the disastrous result of reducing the President's options and forcing him to take positions that the admiral believed would be far-reaching in regards to the world order and the U.S. position in that world order. In this particular letter Admiral Zumwalt demonstrated enormous sensitivity to the political dimension and to the issues that the

political leaders were facing in the country. He commented that the military people in the field simply could not ignore the extent of the pressure on the President that was coming from the political unrest in the United States. The U.S. system and its people, its traditions he commented, had always supported its military involvements, and he felt to a great extent that support continued at this time. However, the people and the whole political process were being tested and tried and, frankly, were found strained in what was then a very unconventional environment. He believed that if we were to realize an acceptable settlement, we must provide some relief for the pressure-cooker atmosphere that the political process was straining under at that time. He didn't believe that the U.S. domestic opinion had forced the President's hand as late as '69. President Nixon still had some time before he had to take action. But he went on to conclude that one assumes that Hanoi does nothing to precipitate U.S. escalation, he now seems to have effectively foreclosed from major military initiatives such as, by foreclose I mean the President foreclosed the resumption of bombing North Vietnam, the quarantine of Cambodia, and the blockade. It seemed clear to him that the policy options were open to them were basically two at that time, and one was to negotiate a mutual withdrawal, or two was to initiate some form of unilateral reduction of forces.

I think this particular period, the admiral had been in Saigon for nine months now. He was, I think, recognizing the political situation

in the States. And of all the senior military people that I met, listened to, participated in discussions with, or just sat and listened, I never met anyone that had the political sensitivity that he had. Now, I think this particular options paper that I'm referring to, that I remember him writing, really tells us three things. One, it tells us about the political dimension that the admiral was able to bring to his judgment-making. It tells us a little bit about the relationships between Admiral Zumwalt and General Abrams, and that General Abrams sought his counsel, sought his advice. It tells us also that the admiral felt comfortable enough with General Abrams, as a military commander, to opine on political issues. And, also, I think, it tells us that there was a military commander in Vietnam who was able to put forth basically political options. In other words, can see political options while he was at the same time managing a war. So the answer to your question is, I think he had an enormous sensitivity and understanding of the political dimensions to the war in Vietnam, as well as the relationship between that and our political system and process at home and the whole situation that was evolving in the States.

Q: Were you part of the sort of mini-staff on political and strategic considerations?

Captain Kerr: Yes.

Q: Who else was on that?

Captain Kerr: Well, there was Captain "Chick" Rauch, Captain Dick Nicholson, Captain Rectanus.* That was the group. I know in this particular paper, we were the ones that worked on that. But, once again, just the fact that the admiral would sit down and draft these papers himself gives you some idea of how he worked; it tells you a little bit about himself. He found that if he did it himself the first time, he wanted to force the discipline of writing it, because it forced the intellectual processes in himself. He could think through it a lot better if he had to sit down and write it as opposed to simply talking about it and asking someone else to do it.

Q: Was that a typical pattern for him?

Captain Kerr: Yes, it was on something like this. Anything that was of this importance that was going to General Abrams and up the chain, he would generally do that.

Q: Is there anything else to say about wrapping up the Vietnam duty?

Captain Kerr: I don't think so, Paul. I think I've probably talked too much. Let me caution future readers that it's been 13, 14 years

*Captain Charles F. Rauch, Jr., USN.

and my memory isn't all that good, and I've probably shaded some things and exaggerated others. I think essentially the facts are correct. There's probably a lot more left out than has been included, and that's unfortunate, but I think basically what I've tried to do here is less tell the story about Vietnam than tell the story about Admiral Zumwalt in Vietnam. Well, anything to repeat now would just reiterate what I've already said. So, I think we can go on to another subject.

Q: When was your next contact with him after you had left Vietnam?

Captain Kerr: Well, the next time I saw him was in North Carolina in 1970 when he came back to the States following his relief as commander in Vietnam and his assignment as Chief of Naval Operations. The significance of that lies in two things that happened that day. Number one is that Admiral Zumwalt, who had led all the naval forces in Vietnam, who by every right should have returned to this country with at least some fanfare and acknowledgement, landed in Raleigh-Durham airport in North Carolina, and his entire welcoming committee was myself, my wife, and his son. So here was the returning commander from Vietnam, and he was met by no one, except his son and two old friends.

Q: Why did he happen to fly into North Carolina?

Captain Kerr: Well, he flew into North Carolina because his son was graduating from ROTC, and he was going to speak at the graduation.

Q: And why were you there?

Captain Kerr: Well, I was there because his son had contacted me up in Norfolk where I was stationed and invited me to come down to his graduation and see the admiral. And there was going to be a party that they were giving for him. We were just invited down for that.

The second significance was that night at the party, the admiral revealed to me that he had written a number of directives that he intended to put out when he became CNO. And I queried him about what these directives were. I was thinking in terms of kind of traditional Navy instructions and directives that go down. He said no, he didn't intend to do that. He thought the situation required his communicating completely up and down the chain of command. Reenlistment rates were so bad and the racial tensions and other problems in the Navy were of such a nature that he felt that things needed to be turned around quickly. He felt he needed to try a host of new initiatives to try to recapture morale in the Navy and turn enlistments around. He thought that one of the problems may be that some of the Navy skippers just couldn't relate to the young officers. And, here again, remember I mentioned earlier about his literally having been captured by these young officers in Vietnam, and he didn't

want to lose them. He saw the future of the Navy in these guys. But, yet they weren't staying in the Navy, and every indicator we had was they were very dissatisfied with the leadership in the Navy. They were unhappy in their jobs. Basically the fun and zest had gone out of going to sea. The admiral wanted to put both fun and zest back into going to sea. So he told me that one of the things he was going to attempt was to put together a special squadron that would reduce every billet one rank. And this eventually became known as the "Mod Squad," DesRon 26 in Norfolk.* He told me that evening in North Carolina that whereas he would have to turn over the assignments to the Bureau of Naval Personnel, he intended to see me as one of the skippers of those ships, and that his intention was to show that with younger commanding officers who could relate more to the crew and the junior officers, that enlistment rates would come up. Plus, he wanted to show those younger officers that they could aspire to reach command a lot sooner than was previously the case.

So I went back to my ship in Norfolk. That was in May, I guess, or June of '70, and I eventually got orders in January of '71 to command the USS Hawkins. And the squadron was formed in the summer of '71. Dick Nicholson, who had been in Vietnam with us was the squadron commander.** I had command of the Hawkins. There were six other

*Destroyer Squadron 26.

**Nicholson held the rank of captain at the time he commanded Destroyer Squadron 26. His Naval Institute oral history includes a section on his tour with the "Mod Squad."

ships and six other COs, each of whom were one rank junior to that normally assigned to that ship. For example, I had ten years in the Navy the day I relieved, and the guy I relieved had 20 years in the Navy. So that's some indication of it. I was the junior person in the squadron in terms of rank and time in service. Everybody that came into that squadron had very fine Navy records, very fine Navy careers, and they're still doing very well in the Navy. But the squadron did very, very well. We had great success in our ships, but, also within ourselves. We're still all very good friends. I attribute the fact that there wasn't a lot of bitter competition to Dick Nicholson, who was the squadron commander. He did just a super job of making everybody understand that their own personal success was tied to the success of the squadron, and not necessarily to the success of their ship.

Q: Did it achieve the objectives that Admiral Zumwalt had established?

Captain Kerr: Well, not really. I don't know that anyone's ever really tried to measure those objectives. Certainly it did within that squadron. He wasn't just trying to show that it could be done within that squadron. He wanted to show that it could be done Navy-wide. The fact is that it could not be done Navy-wide. And, so, as I say, it just proved that if you want to form a mod squad in the

Navy, you can do it. You go out and pick yourself seven number-one COs and you're going to have seven number-one ships. That's basically what happened.

Q: Were there problems involved with this?

Captain Kerr: Well, the problems--we didn't have any problems. I never had a problem on board the ship. None of the other ships had any problems. The only problem that we had was, you know, the kind of attitude throughout the Navy originally. A lot of people were bitter about it and unhappy. Some of those were displaced off their ships, and understandably so. Then there were a lot of old people--they weren't necessarily all old, but people that were just sitting around waiting for us to fall on our ass, and that never happened. And they wanted to point the finger at us, and they wanted to point the finger at Zumwalt, and they never got that opportunity. The squadron did absolutely outstanding. It held every record that a squadron could establish in the Atlantic Fleet. It was the number-one squadron in the Atlantic Fleet. But in terms of did it make people reenlist because they sensed that they could get command early? Did it make them stay in the Navy because they could relate to the COs? I don't know. I never had a very good reenlistment rate in my wardroom on the Hawkins. And I think the general feeling was, "Well, we know it's working here, but we just don't see that it can be applied Navy-wide."

Q: Did you get a chance to see the impact of Z-grams among your crew?

Captain Kerr: I sure did. Yes. The Z-grams were coming out almost daily there for a while.* It wasn't the best way to establish policy, and I think Admiral Zumwalt knew that. It's one of those things that he likes to say where he had to select the least-worst choice of doing something. He knew that if he sent the policy down to his fleet commanders and they in turn sent it on down--number one, it would never come out the way he intended it to, and it wouldn't have the impact, and would take too long. So he had to trade that off against the impact that these Z-grams had on the chain of command. He was assuming that people were going to get behind him on these things and they were going to explain it to the crew. I've often said that Zumwalt assumed a more enlightened constituency than what he had. I can remember walking aboard the ship in the morning and the XO meeting me and saying, "Captain, we've got a real problem. Z-gram 57 came in and it's already been interpreted on the mess decks before I got here this morning."** So you are always put in the situation where you read it and you saw what he meant, and the crew had already put the most liberal interpretation on it they could. So you were always sort of restraining them, and they saw your reinterpretation of it as somehow denying them something that Zumwalt had given them. So that

*Z-grams were special messages by which Admiral Zumwalt informed the Navy of dozens of policy changes during his tenure as CNO.

**XO--executive officer.

was a problem that every commanding officer had to deal with. And some dealt with it effectively. Some wrestled with it less effectively, and some just said, "Screw it, if that's what the guy wants, let him have it." So they didn't support him at all in this.

Q: Well, you're obviously not the best guy to talk to on this, because you were not a typical skipper.

Captain Kerr: Well, I was typical in the sense that I had to deal with the same kind of crew, the same pressures, the same everything, though I understood where he was coming from on these things. I think I was able to accept these in the spirit in which--well, I knew, that he'd intended it. But I'll tell you, I had some problems with the crew, because there were many things that I said, no, that's not what Admiral Zumwalt--or I would put it in the context that this is how this will be implemented on this ship, and sure as not, some kid would stand up and say, "But that's not how Admiral Zumwalt wants it."

And I'd say, "Well, how do you know?"

"Well, Charley Ravenaugh at breakfast this morning said, Captain, that this is the way it was."

So I remember calling the admiral's office one day and saying, "Look, could you do us at least a favor; don't send these things out in the middle of the night. Let the captains get their hands on them before the crew." But if the captains got their hands on them before

the crew, why shouldn't the admirals have them before the crew? You know, it really was a situation where the admiral had to have the support of the commanding officers to deal with this situation. Some of us dealt with it effectively. Some less effectively. The ones that I could never admire were those who just ignored it, and basically they used it to cover up their own poor leadership and management aboard ship.

Q: That was a time when there was a great deal of racial tension in the Navy. Was that manifested in your ship?

Captain Kerr: Oh, we all had it. First of all, let me say that I was one of those "dumb bastards" who didn't think he had a racial problem. I use that phrase because a black once told me, "If you as a commanding officer stand up today and say that you don't have a racial problem on board your ship, you're a dumb bastard."

And I stood up and said, "I don't have a racial problem on my ship." And, sure enough, I did. And I didn't know it. I didn't recognize it. I didn't know how to recognize it. I never had been trained to recognize it. I wasn't sensitive to it. And there were no institutional procedures for blacks to bring forward particular problems, the peculiar problems to them that they had. And eventually Zumwalt, in his Z-grams, institutionalized these things, and we found that method and that vehicle. And I think that if there's one thing

that Admiral Zumwalt did that I think he deserves the credit of every person in the Navy, then as well as now, and that's he led the Navy basically out of the dark ages of racial injustice. He moved us all to a higher form of interpersonal relations, to greater sensitivity, to problems that were peculiar to blacks aboard ship. He made us understand concepts like social justice and meaningful human relations. People say that blacks were in the pantry--hell, that's a little exaggerated, but the point is made that they were in the pantry. We didn't understand them and we didn't make any attempt to.

Q: Well, how did you come to the perception personally that you did have a racial problem on your ship?

Captain Kerr: I came back to the ship one night and there was a race riot on the fantail.

Q: That would enforce the idea.

Captain Kerr: Yes, yes. And, I say race riot, that's kind of an exaggerated term, but there was a fight going on on the fantail of the ship that had been precipitated by a racial incident on board the ship where a white officer had said a very unfortunate and dumb thing to a black enlisted man. That spread throughout the ship. And, as a result of that, I sat down and had a lot of sessions with blacks on

board the ship, brought together white and black groups. And I basically had to teach myself things that I had never learned before.

Q: Anything else about that tour of duty that is relevant to the Zumwalt experience?

Captain Kerr: Well, not really. I think that, as I said, the Mod Squad was a great success for those who participated in it. I think that it probably, in the long run, was something that the admiral probably shouldn't have done. It irritated too many people. It was one of those things where the payoff just wasn't that big for him, for the Navy. The negatives kind of outweighed the positives in that sense. We all benefited from it personally, not only the experience of being there, but professionally we benefited from it. But I don't think it helped that much. I guess the most important thing that I learned in that period that I was there was the issue of race relations, if you will, within the Navy. We just had to deal with the situation. It was a time bomb ready to go off. People blamed Zumwalt for it when it went off a year later. My position on that is that if Zumwalt hadn't been CNO for a year, if he hadn't already provided these safety valves, we'd have had an explosion in the Navy that was far greater than the one we had. Because at least the blacks knew there was somebody at the top that understood and was trying to do something. If they hadn't had that; if we hadn't already put in place

certain things, the explosion aboard some of our ships would have been far worse than it was.

Q: We got into the Mod Squad discussion as an item that you were discussing when you met him in North Carolina. Did he have any sense of reflection on what had been accomplished in Vietnam during those discussions?

Captain Kerr: No. No, and that's something we've never talked about to this day. I think Zumwalt came home like a lot of people did. Of course, he had been promoted to four stars and been made CNO, so there was a sense of personal achievement, but there was no sense of coming home as a successful conquering military hero. As I said, he almost snuck into the country.

Q: Was it typical of him that he would be looking forward in his discussions?

Captain Kerr: Yes, absolutely. That's a good point, Paul. He was the kind of guy that was always looking forward and very seldom reflecting on the past.

Q: That's what I was trying to draw out of you.

Captain Kerr: Well, you brought that out very well now that I think about it. Zumwalt's mind-set is always on tomorrow and not yesterday.

Q: Where then did you go after the Hawkins?

Captain Kerr: Well, I came up and worked on his personal staff for about a year, and then I went over to the White House. I was Spiro Agnew's aide until he resigned, and then stayed on with Vice President Ford.* And when Ford assumed the Presidency, I became the deputy to John Marsh, who was named counselor to President Ford. I stayed in that position until December of '75, and then I left the White House and went back to sea.

I kept in touch with Zumwalt while I was at the White House. I was a source of some information. I never violated any trust or loyalties in the White House by passing information to Zumwalt. I was not Zumwalt's man in the White House in that sense. But in terms of describing the atmosphere, the flavor of things, the pressure points, who was on the rise, who was on the fall. Really the kinds of things that a close White House watcher can pick up on his own. I would pass those things on to the admiral.

I guess the most significant thing that happened while I was there that involved Zumwalt took place in June of '74. Zumwalt had sent a

*When Spiro Agnew resigned in October 1973, he was replaced as Vice President by Gerald R. Ford.

letter to President Nixon about mid-June of '74 having to do with the SALT issues.* It was a letter that he had tried to get the support of the Joint Staff, Joint Chiefs of Staff, which they would not support him on, I understood they agreed with him generally, they felt he had taken it too far, the letter. And essentially what he did was be very critical of the President and the President's handling of the whole nuclear balance issue. He felt that the President was not getting the advice of his military chiefs, he was not seeking it, that national security policy in this area had been captured by a small group at the White House led by Kissinger. And, by implication, he basically said that the President wasn't executing his responsibilities under the Constitution, which requires the President, by law, seek the input of these people.

Nixon took this letter before the National Security Council. Ford, as Vice President, was then a member of the National Security Council. Ford had not seen the letter, but that's not unusual. The NSC staff under Kissinger never let Ford see anything. So Zumwalt had gotten a copy to me, and I sent it into the Vice President. And the Vice President called Mr. Marsh and me together and asked us if the other Joint Chiefs agreed with this. I told the Vice President what I've already said here, that essentially I understood that the chiefs, they in principle had agreed, but they felt that the letter was a little too strident, that it had too much of a cutting edge on it, and

*SALT--Strategic Arms Limitation Talks.

it overstated the situation. Put your own interpretation on that kind of language.

So Nixon's reaction to that was, as I was told, to consider firing Zumwalt. But at the time he had all the problems he needed. This was June of '74. He was just two months from resignation. The last thing he needed was another fight over firing the CNO. And Zumwalt would have had a lot of backing up on the Hill, of course. So, given the fact that Zumwalt eventually got into political life, you can speculate on your own whether or not that would have been good for him or bad. My guess is that Zumwalt probably would have dearly loved to have been fired by Richard Nixon. It's like finding your name on the enemies list; it turned into a real political plus. I think that's true, it probably would have helped him politically.

But Zumwalt was scheduled to be relieved on the 29th of June. Ford had accepted an invitation to speak at the change of command in Annapolis. I had drafted a speech, and it had been approved by the Ford staff; Ford had approved it. It was all set to go. I had complimented Zumwalt too much, so the speechwriters had scrubbed a little bit of that out of there, but essentially the speech was intact. And when it was announced that Zumwalt was going on "Meet The Press" the day after he'd been relieved, and that word had leaked out that he was going to discuss SALT.* And at that very moment Nixon

*"Meet the Press" is a weekly television program in which public figures are interviewed by a panel of news media representatives.

was in Moscow. Word came back that Zumwalt was asked not to appear on "Meet The Press." He said that he would appear on "Meet The Press." He was then asked not to discuss SALT, and he said he intended to discuss SALT. Well, as it turned out, Zumwalt turned over command of the Navy on the 29th of June, but he didn't retire until midnight the following night, and he was to go on television on Sunday when he was still on active duty. Well, finally the order came back from Moscow that Zumwalt was ordered by the President not to discuss SALT. And they went back and they found a directive that went back to the preceding March where military commanders had been told not to discuss the subject, and there was such language floating around as the threat of a court-martial. So this created some real problems for the change of command, because Schlesinger, who was then Secretary of Defense, wasn't sure whether he was going to go.* Every retiring chief since the end of the Second World War had received the Distinguished Service Medal. None had been authorized for Zumwalt. He didn't know what the hell his role was going to be there at Annapolis. The Vice President had called me in and wanted to know what he should say now in light of all--in other words, my speech was out the window. To his credit, Ford could have very easily stepped away from that change of command, but he did not do so. Ford always had great respect and admiration for Zumwalt, and he was a man that once he committed himself to something, he lived up to it. So I credit Ford tremendously with his

*James R. Schlesinger.

determination and guts to see this thing through, because there were a lot of people who were ready to desert on this one. Well, anyway, we all went up to the change of command, everybody showed up, and Ford made a rather bland speech.

Q: Did you write that second speech?

Captain Kerr: Yes. We wrote it in the helicopter going up to Annapolis. I remember I got up to Annapolis and went over to the Superintendent's house, and Moorer was there and the other Joint Chiefs.* They were all gathered around in little groups, and standing all by himself over in a corner was Zumwalt, the outsider, the guy who had ended his brilliant, spectacular Navy career with no one talking to him. I went over, and he asked me if Ford was still going to speak, and I said, "Absolutely."

He said, "Well, it's to his credit that he came."

And I said, "Yes, it is."

Schlesinger signed his Distinguished Service Medal, the only one not signed by a President since the Second World War is Zumwalt's. Schlesinger finally sent out a message that said, "If I don't hear back from you within three hours, I will go ahead and give this Distinguished Service Medal to Zumwalt." He never heard back. You go

*Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, USN, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

back and you'll note that Schlesinger's name isn't even on the program at the Naval Academy, because they couldn't get confirmation that he was coming, so they left it off when they went to the printers. Anyway, that's how Zumwalt ended his Navy career--full of controversy, a person who was challenging the establishment, a person who was, through his actions, putting himself in the limelight of the news and the vortex in the center of controversy, and it was very typical of him. To have gone out in some sort of traditional fashion, you know, and retired in Annapolis and lectured and taking spring reviews is just not the man at all. He's a brilliant, controversial high-energy guy, who's always going to be involved in controversial issues, and he will create those. But he does it because he's very committed to what he believes and feels very strongly about it. So I always see his exit from the Navy as being almost a good description of one element of the man, one characteristic, one part of his personality, which is controversy.

Q: We've talked of his political sensitivity, do you think that knowing that President Nixon was vulnerable on Watergate, that he was using that to get something in SALT?

Captain Kerr: No, no, no. No, I don't think so. I think he just felt very strongly about an issue, and he felt, well, he had gone through the procedures of trying to get the Joint Chiefs of Staff to

take a position on this. And had they, it would have just gone forward signed by Joint Chiefs. So, I think, it was only after they had failed to agree to that that Zumwalt felt he still had to do that. No, I don't think he was necessarily creating this specifically to leverage off of Nixon's position. But, as I said, I think it would have, given the fact that he eventually went into political life, I think that having been fired by Richard Nixon would have helped him politically, but I don't think he sought that.

Q: Was he already harboring the notion at that point of challenging Kissinger?

Captain Kerr: Well, I think he was already harboring political thoughts. As we know, a group of people had tried to get him to run in California when Reagan won election. So he saw himself as a political person, and I think he had hoped to be one of the first political people, successful political people since the Second World War, to have left the military a very senior rank and go into politics. It just doesn't happen. We've seen a couple of POWs do that, but basically Eisenhower, I guess, is the last. And I don't think there were any limits to Zumwalt's ambition. He always thought very big.

Q: Going back to that time just after you left the Hawkins, what were

your duties on his staff after that?

Captain Kerr: Oh, I worked on a group called the CNO Executive Panel staff. We were his alter ego.

Q: What issues did you deal with?

Captain Kerr: Well, just about all the issues that he wanted you to get involved with. Most of them were political-military issues. I can remember I got called in one Saturday and told to write a defense plank for the Republican Party platform.

Q: Any other duties that you had at that point? Were they mostly of this political nature as opposed to Navy-type business?

Captain Kerr: Well, most of the things were Navy business, but cast in a political context. Sometimes that political context was international, sometimes it was domestic. That's what I essentially did until I went over to the White House.

Q: Well, any final observations on this man you served with?

Captain Kerr: Well, I think one can see in this six hours or seven hours, however long I've been talking about him, the great admiration

I have for him and respect I have for him. I think he's clearly one of the premier military men of the post-World War II period. Certainly a man of great accomplishment, in my judgment, while at the same time great controversy. But accomplishment sometimes has its birth in controversy. I think Zumwalt is seen by the general public as the guy who got rid of the "Mickey Mouse," who put beer in the barracks and allowed the sailors to have beards. But he was far more than that. As I said, he--to me, the most significant thing Zumwalt did was he redrafted and reshaped the social contract of the Navy. He cast it in a more humane, just way and that can never be changed, you just cannot roll that back. The Navy was grossly behind the country, certainly our other services in that regard. He was, at the same time, a man of enormous intellectual powers which he brought to bear in the strategic world. But that capacity is known to a small elite of people in this country that follow those issues. I think his legacy to the Navy is the new social contract that the Navy has, that it's operating under today, and so, to me, that will be his legacy to the Navy, that which he'll be remembered for the most, and I think it is the most significant contribution that he made, and it was a contribution that probably he was uniquely capable of making at that time. And I think in that sense he was probably chosen for that reason, and so he ended up being the right choice at the right time and did what was necessary for the Navy during that period. He did a lot of other things, but essentially he had to do that. The Navy just

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had to have somebody that was going to be the facilitator of this change, and he did that. He had the courage and the strength and the morality and the leadership to lead the Navy in that regard, and also the courage and the strength to take all the heat from those who didn't want to see that contract rewritten.

Q: Thank you very much.