The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Philip Watson
Conducted by Steve Maxner
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Transcribed by Jennifer McIntyre

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Philip Watson on the 23rd of April 2001, at approximately 9:10 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Watson is in Dallas, Texas. Sir, why don't you begin by telling us when and where you were born and where you grew up?

Philip Watson: I was born May the 12th 1949, in Henderson, Texas and lived there until I was ten years old and moved to Dallas, Texas and that's where I completed high school and went into the military.

SM: When you were growing up in Texas, did you engage in any kind of work or anything?

PW: Yes, I had a paper route and worked summer jobs in construction.

SM: What did your family do, what did your father and your mother do?

PW: My mother was in banking, as a low-end type employee and my father worked for the State Comptroller's Department as an auditor.

SM: Did you enjoy school, as you were growing up or what subjects, if so what subjects did you enjoy?

PW: Just general (course work), whatever courses they had in high school. I can say I did enjoy it, I wasn't crazy about it but I did by and large enjoy school.

SM: Did you have plans on continuing once you graduated from high school?

PW: Continuing going to school?

SM: Yes, sir.

PW: Yes, I planned on going to college.

SM: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

PW: I had one brother that was two years younger than me.

SM: How about sports, did you enjoy?

PW: Yes, I participated in all sports until the latter two years of high school, which I worked jobs. But prior to (working after school,) I participated in basketball, football and baseball until like I said my junior, senior in high school; I did not continue to participate. It was pretty difficult really to play at Thomas Jefferson High School, you had to be pretty darn good and dedicated and I just simply wasn't that good.

SM: Well, what year did you graduate high school?

PW: '67.

SM: What did you understand in terms of the Vietnam War and what the United States was doing in Southeast Asia when you were graduating from high school?

PW: Well, in my junior year in high school, it was a pretty big topic amongst our age group. We knew it was going on and we knew there was a draft and it was on TV and there was a lot of conversations amongst us guys about that. By the time I was a senior we were already hearing, in fact one of the guys I went to high school with, his brother was killed already. So the civics teacher said it was a war to contain Communism and we kind of heard maybe that wasn't the case and we kind of had mixed feelings about it frankly and just didn't want to go, get drafted and be over there, that was pretty much the general consensus amongst all of us in my age group. There was always talk about what are you going to do about it, most people just were going to go college and not worry about, but that was the general consensus. There was a general anti-establishment; there just was not a good feeling about the war.

SM: Did you have these types of discussions and did you discuss these issues with your parents at all?

PW: Very little, actually. My parents were of the opinion that there was no discussion to be had, if the government thought that we ought to be over there fighting then that's what we should be doing, that they (the government) had a reason to be there and we should go along with it. My parents were very World War II generation, believed the government could do no wrong and if they wanted to participate or get involved then we should just go along with it. If it was my turn to go, I needed to go.

SM: Did your father and did you have other relatives who served in the Second World War?

PW: Yes, my father served three and a half years in Europe. He was not in combat, but he was very much involved in the air campaign, the bombing and so forth, he (provided intelligence for those that) flew B-17s. My mother actually did join the military at the very end of World War II and served time, she became a Sergeant, I know that. I had uncles on both sides of my mother and father's family that participated quite a bit in the Japanese part of it and the European campaign so there was a lot uncles and stuff. My whole family was pretty much involved in World War II.

SM: As you were growing up did they discuss the war with you and what they did?

PW: Yes, they did, they sure did. They explained it. They went and did their duty. [I remember after getting back from Vietnam asking my father if when he was in World War II if he ever thought the Allies would lose the war. He immediately and emphatically said "no". He said he was certain the U. S. would defeat Hitler and the Nazis. I told him, based on my Vietnam tour, I was fairly certain that the U. S. going to lose in Vietnam. I remember feeling envy in that my father felt he was sacrificing for something he knew to be a just cause.]

SM: Did that have an impact on you?

PW: Yes it did to some degree, and I had no problem going in the military, but I was forming a pretty much anti-Vietnam opinion, going into my senior year and as the senior year progressed I was getting more and more anti-Vietnam, I just didn't think what we were doing over there made any sense to me. I was keeping track of it, obviously I was going to have a problem at the end of my senior year because it took money to go to college and that (money for college) was exactly what I did not have at the time.

SM: What did you think the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam when you graduated from high school?

PW: I can't say I sat down and actually figured that out when I was a kid, at eighteen. I thought that they probably felt like there was some kind of a war that needed to be fought. Frankly, I was cynical. I thought they hadn't been in one in twenty years and it was time to get into one, that's kind of the way I looked at it. There were plenty of

people that were pro-Vietnam and there were plenty of people that wanted to go, but I didn't want to get involved with it.

SM: Now, did you live near a college?

PW: Well, SMU was fairly close to my house but I can't say that had an impact, even though it kind of did. I delivered pizzas over there my junior year at night to the dorms and some of the guys over there were talking about how they were studying hard saying, "we could get easily get drafted if we didn't make our grades" and I did talk to some of those SMU students about that. I could see my turn was coming pretty quick if they didn't do something about that war and it didn't look like they were going to, there was no end in sight at all.

SM: Did you know anybody from say your neighborhood who did go to Vietnam and came back or didn't come back?

PW: I did not. I have a large family on both sides, nobody went to Vietnam I knew, even in the neighborhood, relative or otherwise so I had no one to talk to about it. I did run into a guy one time and he'd been over there in '65 or '66 and he didn't talk much, but he'd been to Vietnam and he had gotten back but there was nobody else I ever talked to.

SM: Was there a junior ROTC at your high school?

PW: There was and it was very out of favor with the general population of the student body, but it was there.

SM: And you were not in the cadet corps there, with junior ROTC?

PW: No.

SM: Okay, I know as you said you didn't sit there and try to sort out or figure out exactly what we were doing, but in the grand scheme of things, did you understand or did you talk about this notion of the domino theory, anti-Communism, how did those things factor into your thoughts and discussions?

PW: That was explained to us pretty in-depth by my Civics teacher, they did go into that, (explained it) was the containment of Communism. I remember her saying that and she [teacher] talked about the domino theory and those things. We [most students] just couldn't grasp the concepts; I couldn't. That a little bitty country completely across

the world was where it was just critical that we take the measures we were taking at the time.

SM: It just wasn't a credible idea to you?

PW: That's exactly right, it was not credible. I think history proved that out, too.

SM: And this was in Civics?

PW: That's correct.

SM: Did you guys talk about the draft in Civics?

PW: Absolutely. You had to go down and register as soon as you turned eighteen which is your senior year, so throughout the senior year guys were turning eighteen, going down and registering. That itself was a pretty awakening– at least when I registered, you know it was "you will do this boy" type registration which again further galvanized our feelings against the older generation was pushing us around. There became that generation gap between the people that were making us do this, i.e. our parents and us and here we were all getting our draft cards throughout our senior year.

SM: How were you raised in the context of, I guess not in a derogatory or negative sense but the permissiveness of your family and your household, were you raised to think that you could do anything you wanted with your life?

PW: Absolutely not. Well, I was taught that, I was pretty disciplined, got up, had to go to school. If you didn't bring home halfway decent grades you were in trouble and then when you had some spare time you should be doing something, like playing sports, or working. If you weren't playing sports you were going to be working. As far as doing what you could with your life, yes, it was pretty much that was the situation, you had to go to college, there was no two ways about that. You had to get a college degree, that was a given. At some point you were going to have to go down and get a college diploma that was pretty much beat into our heads.

SM: How about just the notion of the American dream, you're only limited in what you accomplish in your life by yourself?

PW: That was pretty much preached to us, yes. American dream was the way to go and we were told that we lived in the best country and that it didn't come easy and generations ahead of us had paid some serious dues so that I could have it as easy as I

did. I was reminded of that pretty well, pretty often, by my grandparents even and my older aunts and uncles.

SM: Had your grandfather served in World War I or in the 2nd World War?

PW: No, he didn't. He was actually too old for one and too young for the other.

SM: Too old for II and too young for I.

PW: Right. I had a great grandfather, my father's grandfather, who served in the Texas cavalry and had quite a (family) legend about himself. He had some of his letters published and what not, so we (my family) went way back as far as that (war service) goes. On my mother's side we had tombstones of our great grandfather, great, great grandfather, whatever, that served in the Mississippi infantry, there was "CSA" right there on his tombstones for all the family reunions and to be seen, so military service went way back.

(I had a close uncle that was a retired major in the Marine Corps. Another uncle spent 22 months in a Nazi prison camp and never really worked the rest of his life due to the trauma that prison camp did to his health).

SM: What else factored into your decision eventually to voluntarily enlist?

PW: I was strictly running from the draft and Army, so I tried to get into the Air Force and they were full and there was a long waiting list and by the time I would have gotten into the Air Force I would have been drafted into the Army. So I went down and joined the Navy. I had to go to Longview, Texas and then I had to go to Shreveport which is no small feat back in 1967 for a kid broke, and when I finally got a slot in the Navy I felt like, well I had at least gotten away from Vietnam. I was going to have to serve in the military, but I wasn't going to have to go to Vietnam.

SM: Did you go to a recruiter there in your hometown?

PW: Well, in Dallas it was completely impossible to get in the Air Force or the Navy, it was booked up and there was a six months waiting list. But they did tell us they had a slot in Longview, Texas and maybe had a slot in Shreveport, Louisiana and so I got on the road and went to find out if those slots did in fact exist and they did. I got in by going out of town.

SM: So you could enlist in a different town, even if it wasn't your home residence?

PW: Yes, it was wherever the recruiter had a quota, and in this particular situation I think it was Longview, I can't remember, I went to both Shreveport and Longview, but I think I ended up getting in Longview, finding a slot there.

SM: How did you get there?

PW: Drove a buddy of mine's car, I borrowed a friend of mine's car.

SM: That was nice.

PW: It was a deal, everybody was scrambling or at least I was.

SM: When you arrived there and you saw the recruiter were they eager to accept you?

PW: Yes, I walked into the Air Force recruiter and they said, he's gone to lunch but we've got a two or three month waiting list. I walked right next door to the Navy recruiter and I said I'd be interested in talking to somebody about joining the Navy and he said, "you have come to the correct place" and he signed me up almost immediately.

SM: Now did you have an idea of what you wanted to do in the Navy, did he discuss options in terms of your MOS, or your specialty?

PW: He asked me if I had some mechanical aptitude which I guess I had some, but no I didn't have any idea whatsoever what I was going to do in the Navy, had no clue. In fact the Navy, I never considered in my entire life. Of all four branches I guess the Navy would have been the last one I'd have gone in, had I had a free reign of choice.

SM: Did you have to take any kind of exams, aptitude exams or anything like that?

PW: Yes, they gave me some kind of mechanical exam like pictures of a screwdriver, pair of pliers and you were supposed to circle, which one was – they were very simple tests.

SM: So that day, you signed up for the Navy?

PW: Yes, and they asked me questions like did naked males attract me, that kind of thing. It was very stupid questions; basically it took nothing to get in.

SM: Now, how long after you actually signed those papers how long did you have before you actually went to your initial training course?

PW: There was some latitude there, once I signed up I think the guy told me I could either go almost immediately or I could wait a couple months. There was some

latitude I remember. I just said well, let's just go ahead and go on in and get it over with. So I did. I went down to Dallas and there they did the processing and I was out that afternoon.

SM: So, all in the same day?

PW: No, I'm sorry, I did the processing like two or three days later and then I was gone that afternoon.

SM: Did your mom and dad know that you had gone down to Longview?

PW: No, they didn't. No, I told them once I'd already signed up. I came in and said, "hey; by the way I'm going into the Navy." At the time I was going to junior college but I had run out of money and I was just broke and miserable and at the end of the semester I had no more money so I knew something was going to happen so I just went ahead and jumped on it. And when I went back to Dallas I told them I had joined up. My mother got pretty upset and said she was going to try and get it turned around, I said, "hey, look, the draft is going on, there is a war going on and I'm at risk and I'm going to do what I've got to do here."

SM: What did your dad say?

PW: Well he just resigned himself to the fact and just said, "okay, whatever you've got to do." There was a complete change of attitude by them though. By the time that I was over there, my younger brother two years behind me, after I'd gone through it [Vietnam] they had a complete change of attitude. They thought that the war was a mistake and that we should have peace with honor, we shouldn't just pull out immediately, we should just get out of it somehow and save face. In the meantime my brother for sure was not going. They took a proactive stance with him.

SM: How so?

PW: Well, first of all they were going to make sure, there were several things. First, make sure he had money for college, to keep his student deferment going. Secondly, I don't know what they would have done. There was other ways if you really wanted to do it, I'm sure there was plenty of ways, you go to doctors, (National Guard), or whatever. But as it turned out the lottery came out, he got number 365, so he pretty much never had to worry about it.

SM: How did he feel about that, did he want to go in the military?

PW: Absolutely not.

SM: So he was open to their assistance to avoid and to stay out?

PW: Open to my parent's assistance, yes, I'm sure.

SM: Stay in school and what not.

PW: Oh sure. Actually I don't think anybody was, not that many people were anti-military, military wasn't such a bad deal. You got to go and do some things that were kind of fun I guess, but it was that Vietnam War was the problem. In fact my parents lamented that my brother should have gone in the military, but this Vietnam thing was not going to cut it, particularly after I had been back and been injured like I was.

(I distinctly remember my father saying that he thought the military experience would do my brother some good, but my father did not want my brother "to go to Vietnam and get hurt like you did.")

SM: So what was it you think, that changed your parents' minds?

PW: Well, I think my letters home helped a little bit, plus it was just dragging on and (I came back on a hospital plane and was in the hospital for 8 months with serious wounds, that had an impact on their thinking, I guess.) Then you had Johnson in the election of '68, I'm sure that had to have an effect.

SM: You mean his declaration that he was not going to seek re-election?

PW: Well, that and plus he was playing politics trying to get Humphrey elected. Nixon came in with a completely different attitude, he had a secret plan, he was going to end the war and people said okay, let's get it done, I just don't think people really thought there was really something we need to be committed too, it was dragging on, there was no end in sight. We had guys like Westmoreland that just did not come across as credible. They didn't tell me this but I'm sure they had to have gotten – I know this, when I went into Vietnam in '68, the attitude was one thing and I didn't talk to my parents for nine or ten months and when I came back, that complete absence of seeing them, I could see that their attitudes completely had changed. Now, why I don't know, they never told me that, but I could see that their attitude about it [the war] had completely changed and they were just glad that I was home and alive.

SM: Now what month and what year was it that you went to Longview and enlisted in the Navy?

PW: It was November of ’67.

SM: November ’67. Do you remember when Westmoreland made his, he came back from Vietnam, made his presentations to Congress and to the American public about the nature of the war that in his estimate the light was at the end of the tunnel, the war was almost over?

PW: Was it Westmoreland that said that?

SM: Yes it was.

PW: I don’t remember that exactly. I thought it was Nixon that said the light at the end of the tunnel.

SM: No, sir.

PW: Well, I m sure you’re right. No, I can’t say as I remember that, but I don’t doubt that I saw it because I was pretty much a news watcher and *Time* magazine reader.

SM: I say no, in terms of Nixon, he probably did say it as well, but in terms of ’67, Westmoreland had come back and said basically, the war is almost over. I don’t know if he used that exact expression.

PW: And that was prior to Tet.

SM: Right, and then Tet hit and that of course had a profound effect on American perception of the war.

PW: Yes, exactly.

SM: So, In November ’67 you enlisted, the same month you went off to the Navy, where did you go to your initial training?

PW: Great Lakes, Illinois. That was another source of just immediate consternation with me. I was told by my recruiter, in no uncertain terms I would go to San Diego for my training, there was two places to go: San Diego or Great Lakes. Well, San Diego is a nice place to be, Great Lakes in November through February is, let’s put it this way, I learned a new definition of the word “cold” because I had lived in Texas all my life and I could not believe how cold it was up there. It was a miserable experience. From the beginning, I was lied to by my Navy recruiter, of course who knows if he was lying or he didn’t have the information, but the bottom line was I did not like at all what had happened (and I did not go to San Diego like he said I would). Immediately, I took a

flight to Chicago as opposed to San Diego, right off the bat, this whole thing was going downhill.

SM: Well, after a couple of days or as you were getting into the Navy, did you then know what your specialty would be?

PW: Oh, no. We were strictly in boot camp and it was a while before we took a battery of tests and then it was late in my, I forgot how many weeks it was of training, which is a fairly long time that they told me where I would be going to [Communications/"Radio"] school. I got a pretty darn good technical school out of boot camp. I've got to tell you, getting into radio school was a good, it meant another six or seven months of electronics and other training, so they [Navy] were going to invest some time in me, no question.

SM: So you went to Great Lakes, did your boot camp, what was the most challenging aspect of boot camp for you besides the cold?

PW: Sleep deprivation. That and there was not really anything else I'd say was physically all that challenging.

SM: Okay, how about mentally challenging?

PW: No, not really.

SM: Were they still training you on knot tying and that kind of stuff?

PW: Yes, we went through a little bit of that, but not as much as you'd think. There was very little knot tying actually. There was some of that, but that was not stressed heavily at all. (The Navy has progressed much further than old-fashion ropes and knots).

SM: What kind of weapons training did you receive?

PW: We got to shoot some .22 single shot rifles one day.

SM: That's it?

PW: Yes.

SM: So, what did you spend most of your time doing there at boot camp?

PW: We went to classes, then marching and then back in classroom. We actually had no books. We took notes (in a spiral note book we folded and sheathed in our leggings) and they explained to us how to look at a different ship from horizon, tell if it's a destroyer or a cruiser, and they tell us some history about the Navy and they explain to

us all the rankings and how discipline works and it's basically learn about the uniform, which is a rather bizarre type, unorthodox piece of clothing if there ever was one. But they explained the history of it and why it was the way it was. Obviously we had to do some swimming training and some water survival training, which was fairly interesting, so we did all that. (They trained us on controlling fires and putting out fires simulated as if on a ship).

SM: How did they enforce discipline?

PW: Pretty much the old iron fist. I don't know, I never questioned what I should do, I just did it, (so I never saw any real enforcement). I saw other guys get in trouble and I didn't want to have any part of that. It looked like to me they could make your life so miserable, they already were making it miserable, they could really notch it up without any trouble at all. They could literally send you to the brig, which we heard there were beatings and that sort of thing. I never saw it and I don't even know if it happened but we heard that it was the case. I pretty much knew what they wanted me to do and I pretty much did it, they didn't have to discipline me much, I went along with the program. One thing they could do, is as opposed to disciplining you, they could discipline your fellow boot camp guys and that was to me, even worse and they did that a couple of times. They'd say, you come over here and watch this and they'd discipline the other guys and that was the last thing I ever wanted to do was make my fellow recruits suffer because of something I did. There was no problem disciplining me, or very few of us for that matter. Almost none of us had any problems and when I was in the boot camp, I was in with a bunch of guys that were just like me. They wanted out of the military and out of Vietnam, a lot of these guys had Ivy League college experience, there were some educated guys in there. I was one of the youngest; a lot of these guys were from the northeast and the east coast and they had been to college. These guys were 21, 22, years old, 23, 24.

SM: When you say that some guys got in trouble, what would they typically get in trouble for?

PW: Fighting. Most of the cases that was where the real trouble broke out. Some guys got in trouble because they just could not get their bunks done right or they'd leave their lockers open. That was a pretty bad thing to do and some guys just couldn't

get it together. You had your bell curve in this place and you had some guys that just couldn't adapt to any kind of discipline or whatever. They just simply got moved out of our company and I don't know what happened to them.

SM: What about the make up of your boot camp platoon?

PW: I was pretty impressed.

SM: Was it a pretty mixed group?

PW: It was pretty mixed but again it was skewed towards guys that had been to college and guys that were pretty smart. I bet if you had a reunion you'd find every one of those guys pretty darn successful.

SM: What about the ethnic makeup and the religious makeup?

PW: That was interesting as well. That was an education in that regard and for me that was very positive. Discrimination and all the civil rights things was very much red hot at that time. In fact while I was in Communications School, Martin Luther King was shot and in Chicago (where I was getting my Communications training) and there were huge riots and we could see outside the compound the neighborhoods burning, we could see the fires. We were of course kept inside there, inside the naval post but we knew it was going on. Inside we had several, I would say ten or eleven blacks, African-Americans, whatever, that were in our company who were very, just excellent sailors. They were doing excellent jobs and they were as good at keeping their uniform together or learning the knots or what all that stuff that you had to do. (This was good experience for me because) I graduated from the largest high school at the time, in the state of Texas, it was Thomas Jefferson and we had one African-American at that school. Now, two years later (at my high school) it was completely different but when I got into the military I was exposed to the African-American in a close proximity and I was frankly quite impressed. Later on as I went to school, to technical school, again I experienced something that I had not experienced and that was, I can't say as far as Hispanics or American Indian or anything like that I had any exposure to, but it was blacks and I did get my first really close up, get to know them, get to know the people. I had never had a (black) friend prior to that and I did get friendly with some of the ones in there. The religious makeup you just mentioned was also very interesting. I was raised Baptist and went to church regularly throughout my life and we were told, my mother told me, she

said (in the 1960 Presidential election) “if Kennedy gets elected we’ll probably have to go to Catholic schools, and Catholic churches”. I didn’t really know then what she was talking about but bottom line is my parents were not very tolerant of the Catholic beliefs, or way of doing things. I got into the Navy and after boot camp no matter how drunk we went out and got that night, I noticed the Catholics got up the next morning, went to mass and they had gotten just as drunk as the rest of us and had just as a bad a hangover as the rest of us. I’m thinking wait a minute, these Catholics my mother was telling me that are such non-Christian people, (but I am now seeing them) getting up and going to church and us Protestants are not. So in that regard I was exposed to the Catholic arena, which again I was surprised, I was starting to learn that some of the prejudices and stereotypes that I had been taught really weren’t true and I can say from that regard I can say that I really did get a good experience.

SM: How was the treatment in terms of recruits by the instructors and was there much difference in how they treated different types of recruits?

PW: No, as a matter of fact they were not. I can tell you right off the bat there was some friction, some racial friction at the very beginning, between some of the whites and some of the blacks. It was instigated strictly by the whites. They [Navy recruit trainers] gave us a sit down, and a guy we respected very much, he was a tough white guy, came in and explained to us. He says, “we’re going to explain something to you, now” now this is 1967 again, he says, “there will be no racial problems within the Navy, he said everybody is the same. He said “anybody conducting themselves in a fashion other than that, you’re in big trouble.” Well, again, I was pretty much a guy that followed the rules, that’s what they sad do, that’s what I did. The blacks themselves were selling themselves, they were doing good jobs and hey look, we’re all busy and under a lot of stress. If this guy helps me and I can help and we got through this thing a little easier that was the bottom line. You had to pretty much throw the prejudices or anything else out the window to get the job done.

SM: Was there much racial identification, probably the best way I can put it, the Black Power fist that kind of stuff?

PW: No, not in boot camp and not in (communications) training, but in Vietnam and after Vietnam, yes, very much. Then things really turned nasty. In Vietnam there

was a lot of that and there was a lot of – well first of all there was people killed in Vietnam over racial problems. (After my Vietnam tour,) I was in the hospital in Memphis, Tennessee one (Saturday) night in the summer of '69. We had a big racial fight. The next morning in the hospital we had guys that were now in the hospital because of this huge racial fight and ominously the head of the black group turned up dead in the city of Memphis about a week later. The rumor was the Navy killed him or the CIA or somebody. Of course, that's rumor and probably has no basis but that's what we heard and we weren't surprised. That wouldn't surprise me in the least that the Navy found out who had caused this problem and did him in. I know in Vietnam there was a whole segment of people that said, "hey, enough of this Vietnam stuff, I'm getting out of here and getting back to the States one way or the other." They went off deserted or whatever, but they were still in Vietnam and some of them coming up dead. I didn't see this okay, but it was going on and we were hearing about it from the other people that knew about it at night and so forth when we were sitting around. The racial thing got pretty severe later on.

SM: Just to make sure I understand you, when you heard that the Navy might have been behind that assassination or that killing, that didn't strike you as an absolutely ludicrous concept, you actually thought it was credible?

PW: I, to this day think it may be credible. Now, let me tell you something, people don't understand that in 1969 things were getting a little out of control. You look back at the demonstrations going on the streets, I didn't want to be part of that, but I could tell you inside the military, the military had a tremendous strain going on, in the hospital, in the Marines. Now, mostly in the hospital was Marines. Between the blacks and the whites in the Marine Corps, it was really stressful. Like I say we had that huge fight and that was mostly Marines by the way. People were dying, not just being killed in Vietnam, but people were dying in other ways in racial parts of it was part of that and there was also, there were some drugs going on. People were buying and selling that, using it and there was trouble, there was lots of trouble.

SM: But the drug use you're describing was not at boot camp?

PW: No, boot camp was nothing. In boot camp there was none of it, (you were controlled every minute of the day). (It was later when) we had some freedom that people got in trouble.

SM: Did you encounter racism in boot camp to any significant degree amongst your fellow trainees?

PW: No, I can't say I did. Like I said they had an iron fist about that. We were given a talk, no racial problems and there weren't any. Again, I think being busy as much as anything else mitigated that.

SM: What did you think, your introduction into the Navy, at the end of your boot camp did you think you had made the right decision?

PW: I felt a little more positive about it at the end of boot camp. I'd say at the end of boot camp I was probably as positive as any time I was in the Navy about what had happened, about what I had done. I had actually seen, I could see that all these careers were there in the Navy. There were certain things you could do, certainly travel appealed to me. I had never been on a ship and all of a sudden, the idea, the concept of being on a ship seemed somewhat appealing, even though I had heard negative things, I've also heard positive things. I was pretty upbeat going out of boot camp into the next session of training. [Plus I thought I had escaped service in Vietnam and the chance I'd get killed or severely injured over there, so I was upbeat about that].

SM: Where did you go when you finished boot camp?

PW: I went back to Great Lakes, Illinois for, I think, for six or eight weeks, I can't remember [exactly how long] and then we went from there to Bainbridge, Maryland for radioman's school and more electronics training.

SM: Were you pleased with that technical specialty that was given you?

SM: Yes, I thought it was pretty interesting. I got introduced to electronics which I had never had any exposure to and I thought it was pretty darned interesting and the radios and how they worked and the Morse code. Yes, and it was classroom training. I've always kind of enjoyed a classroom environment and I was doing well. When I got in training, I think I graduated, there were two segments and I graduated top of one of them and second in the other. In both cases where I got beat out, it was four year college degree guys who beat me out of first in my class and I had zero college hours, I was

eighteen, the (other guys in my classes) were older than me, I felt like I was doing well and the Navy was acknowledging my doing well and I was getting some accolades in that regard and I felt good about it.

SM: Now on what types of equipment were you taught to send messages in Morse code?

PW: Well, it was just a (telegraph) key (to send, a set of ear phones and a typewriter to receive the Morse Code). We'd received it on a typewriter through headsets and then we sent in on a keypad thing. As far as other equipment, we were introduced to other types of radio equipment but it was just a matter of dialing in the frequencies and learning safety procedures and that sort of thing.

SM: So it wasn't Morse code on a telegraph transmitter?

PW: No it wasn't.

SM: Or on a shudder light, one of the lights on the ship?

PW: No, we didn't do that. I've seen that in movies, but no we didn't do it that way. We did it on a (telegraph) key (like you see in the old western movies) that "didad di di da," you punched it out and somebody else on the other end picked it up with a typewriter through a headset.

SM: So you did have to learn on the transmitter portion like on a telegraph type instrument, a key that you tapped?

PW: Yes and we were ranked in the classroom as to how fast (and accurate) you were, how competent you were. The first guy was at the first seat and the worst guy was at the back seat. (And there were a few Waves, female sailors in our class.) The ranking was constantly changing depending on how well you were doing. I was first seat for almost the entire time. Again, I had no clue why I was good at this, I was as surprised as anybody else but I don't think it had anything to do with intelligence at all because I think a lot smarter guys just couldn't hear that stuff and pick it up.

SM: Well, what was the most challenging aspect of your electronics and radio training?

PW: They gave us some pretty hard tests occasionally. You had to study; it was kind of like college in a way. The instructors introduced certain concepts of electricity and radios that you had to sit down and figure it out, and there were people to go and get

help if you needed it and when you took the test it was fairly strenuous, that was it, the course itself and how radios, just a typical course really, in theory and stuff.

SM: Now, the radios on which you were trained, were these all-shipboard radios, were some of the portable, what kind of radios were you trained on?

PW: I was just trained on shipboard radios and I guess they could have been used outside of a ship but we were told they were all shipboard radios. We never got exposed to radios that were carried on our backs like I carried in Vietnam, (what they called the PC-25), that [PC-25} was too easy to learn anyway, it wasn't like it was difficult, didn't take any training really. Most of the guys in that 80 man classroom went to a ship and I just happened, me and two others got sent to land duty in Vietnam, and once we got to Vietnam we're still in big communications stations (with the same radios we saw in school). These were in pretty safe areas where you were using big radios and teletypes and that, well teletypes more than anything.

SM: Now, how much of your training was classified in terms of secure radio transmission and reception, stuff like that?

PW: Well, we were told we were going to get top-secret clearances. Now, the training itself was not classified but we were told this is going to be how you are going to do it on board (your ship), you're going to open up the booklets and pull out the crypto codes and you're going to punch them in and this type thing. We were just told that. Again, we knew we were going to get top-secret clearances. That in itself had quite a bit of prestige within the Navy.

SM: Now, you were trained on the secure radio systems, for secure transmission reception?

PW: Well, they were secure once they made them secure, now they weren't secure when I was trained on them. It's a code system and if you don't have any codes punched in or if you're not really transmitting anything of any value anyway and that's the way it was in school, then it didn't really matter. (Now, when you are out with the fleet or on a Naval base), when you started sending out messages about ship movements and things like that, you're going to have that coded and then all you have to do is just lock in the codes there in the system.

SM: Now is this an SOI system, the Army has a system where they put, they issue a different codebook every day?

PW: Yes, I don't remember what that was called actually but that was what we had, a codebook every day, I believe it was every day, I think it was.

SM: Did you enjoy this aspect of your training?

PW: For awhile in the beginning I did, then after awhile I could see that it wasn't going to be that challenging actually so I kind of got bored with it. But in the beginning I did.

SM: How much of it involved electronics repair?

PW: Very little, we mostly got (only) electronics safety. Electronics repair was another MOS and we just didn't get exposed to that, we knew the communication technicians, the electronics technicians guys were getting trained in that end and that wasn't our job. Our job was if we needed some help in that regard we called them. In the meantime, we just tried to make sure that we didn't get ourselves electrocuted. It was, after all, electrical equipment and so you could get hurt if you didn't use it correctly, or you could get somebody else hurt if you didn't do something correctly. So there was very little repair as I remember at all. But we got some theory on how resistance works and diodes and all those things in the classroom, but we never got any hands on.

SM: How many of your instructors in either boot camp or in your electronics and radio training were Vietnam veterans?

PW: Zero. They might have been on a ship in Vietnam; nobody was on land that I talked to. When I got into survival school, just before going to Vietnam, there were Vietnam veterans there. That was a relatively short period of time and that was very esoteric, that was not your typical Navy training.

SM: Where was the survival training done?

PW: Little Creek, Virginia.

SM: So none of the trainers before survival school really talked to you much about Vietnam?

PW: No, there was no talk about Vietnam hardly at all. (The plan was) we were going to a ship but they did say several times, "we know you guys are joining the Navy to

keep from going to Vietnam but in the meantime you are going to be on a ship and here's what you are going to do," and that type of thing.

SM: So they knew that some of you were, or was it all of you that joined the Navy to avoid ground combat?

PW: My guestimation, and I didn't do a poll obviously; I'm going to say 85% were there because they were running from the draft. Now, how the Navy normally gets people I don't know, but we were in there because Vietnam was hot and on everybody's mind. I had something I was going to say about that, about when I was in boot camp. The U. S. S. Pueblo was captured (by the North Koreans in January of '68 and that) sent shock waves right through, in fact all normal operations for training and our normal stuff stopped and we immediately were sent to classrooms. There were some other people came in from outside who were Navy and they, in a very sober, man-to-man type of talk told us that this was part of the grand scheme by the Communists and this was just another incident of how they were trying to divide and conquer us and that we may be going to war and "we just want you guys to know that this is very serious and they've got one of our ships and it don't get no more tense than this and we're going to get it back and we're going to get our people back and I just wanted to let you know that this is a surprise to us as well and you guys may see some serious action here pretty soon." That was of course non-Vietnam totally, that was another type of campaign and that got our minds off Vietnam, on whatever that might entail.

SM: Well, of course this larger part of the Cold War, was that heavily emphasized, for you as sailors?

PW: The Cold War was mostly what we were being trained for. We were going to be dealing with Russians, we were going to be out there making sure our transmissions didn't get picked up by Russians and the Russian fleet. We were told that when were in port we may run into the Russian sailors. We were told to avoid them, and not to cause any trouble. Don't try and trade souvenirs with them. Basically they were the enemy and that was who we were going to be dealing with was the Russians. Vietnam was the Army's and the Marines' problem, they would take care of it. In the meantime we were going to make sure our ships and planes and carriers and what not were at the peak of

readiness in case there was a war between us and Russia. The Pueblo could just be a good beginning for the war between us and Russia.

SM: Now was there much, [cell phone ringing] do you need to take that? Okay, was there much training or was there any difference in training for communications if you were going on board a surface ship versus a submarine?

PW: Submarine was totally different. That was another fraternity that was so separated from the surface it would be hard for me to describe it. With the submariners, in the biggest way to get, I even see it in movies where people call them submareeners, in a fight in the Navy was to call a submariner a submareener. It was a bizarre, in my opinion, fraternity of people and I never even considered the concept of being on submarines anything but totally insane. But as I look back on it, if I had it to do all over again, I might go the submarine route. They were a group of guys that were very tight, very, very confident. They obviously were in a much riskier day to day than say a surface guy. Those guys that were going to be in submarines after boot camp (and after communications school), they completely went away, we never saw them again and submarines were a completely different deal and we didn't even get to talk to them. You'd see them occasionally in places but they were very elite, different group of people to put it mildly.

SM: Now is that how the Navy viewed them, they were elites?

PW: Yes, I think so. Let's face it; I think they were considered elite. That was my impression. They had their own little insignia that went above on their uniform that made no mistake about it, they were submariners.

SM: Were you ever told why they took such offense to being called a submareener versus submariner?

PW: I had no clue. I thought they were weird and I thought they just further reinforced that they were weird. My whole intent was to get away from them and stay away from them. They were some kind of a bizarre weird group and anybody that would stay on a submarine for six months underneath the polar Arctic or whatever, to me was a weird person.

SM: So the communication school, that is electronics, radio and everything else for submariners was not the same that you went to?

PW: No, it was. There were guys in our class but they knew they were going to submarines, they already got it lined up, there was no question. You didn't just like one day go, “hey, I think I’ll go on submarines,” they were going to be submariners and soon as school was over they were gone. They were heading out. I think of an 80-person class, I think there were three of them.

SM: Were they treated any differently than the rest of you?

PW: Not in school, but I got a distinct impression that they were tolerating the lower class okay, when they ate dinner with us and that sort of thing.

SM: You mean the submariners acted that way?

PW: Yes, and I can say and that was fine with us. Most of us were like, that’s just fine. There was a little bit of a different attitude I thought, and they were certainly more disciplined and they seemed to be a little bit more studious. Well, let’s face it, first of all you can get kicked out of that [submarine duty] pretty fast. You had to have a right attitude or the Navy was going to get you out of the submarine program.

SM: Did anybody purposefully cause a fight by using the slur, submareener?

PW: No, nobody that did saw, it was always a (“green sailor”) mistake any time I saw it, including me, you’d say submareener and then boom, they’d get in your face about it and you say, okay and okay and everything backed off.

SM: They’d get in your face?

PW: Well, they were pretty emotional about it. I don’t know, I think you have that in all your military. I don’t know this, but I think that certain groups, let’s face it. The submarine’s guys were Special Forces and I think all the Special Forces have their own eccentricities. I don’t know.

SM: How about SEALs, did you guys train with any SEALs, or any people that were slotted to become SEALs?

PW: In Little Creek, Virginia, what was then called SEALs was underwater demolition and those guys had their heads shaved and everywhere they went they jogged and they yelled, UDT, UDT and they were completely off the scales as far as we were concerned, total weird.

SM: Weirder than the submariners?

PW: Weirder than the submariners, no question, much, much weirder than the submariners. I mean those guys didn't even wear normal Navy uniforms. Submariners wore naval uniforms but they had a little badge, okay. These guys, the UDT guys, were, and I look back on it then, I wish really I could have tried to go through that program from the standpoint of just pure discipline, see if I could have done it, but that was considered to be the ultimate in fatalism. You wanted to die, okay.

SM: You mean if you were UDT you had a suicide wish?

PW: That's the way we felt. Of course I'm one of the, kind of like a hippie that's in the military. I'm like man, this is too weird for me, get me a beer and a book to read because I have no concept of why anybody would want to do what they're doing.

SM: Was there anything else that, is there anything else that stands out in your memory about your training in electronics and radio?

PW: No, I came out of it with a pretty positive feeling. I was up against guys that were a lot older than me, I felt like, well four years back when you're eighteen is-quite a bit (of age differential). Guys had a lot of college and I was competing with them and doing well and I felt like, "hey, the Navy slotted me in something I'm good at, that I didn't know I was good at it and something's working out here positively and I was really positive actually."

SM: When did you find out that you were going to be sent to Vietnam?

PW: I knew that was going to be your next question. As a matter of fact, that was a day I'll never forget as long I live. There were eighty-three guys in our company. I think that's the number, I may be wrong about that but I think it is. First they gave us a spiel, a sale's job of why you should volunteer for Vietnam; now we're talking land duty, not ship duty. They told us about how you got the extra pay, how you got extra ribbons, none of which appealed to me. I joined the Navy to keep from going to Vietnam and I sure as hell didn't at this juncture want to get over there, because I was seeing that you [a Navy Radioman] could. Radiomen were sent to Vietnam and I didn't understand this until I got in Radioman school. Two guys volunteered, one of my best friends from Detroit volunteered to Vietnam, and I said, "are you crazy." He says; "why not?" I said, "well, you're nuts." Well, there was three of us (in the 80 man class) sent to Vietnam, two of which volunteered and I was the one that did not volunteer, but I got to go. So,

back to your questions, the day I found out about that, I literally was in shock, quite literally was in shock because I had been in the Navy, that was in April, I guess, I'm trying to think. No it was like May or June and I'd been in since November thinking I had missed it [Vietnam]. And now, seven or eight, nine months later, I'm going to Vietnam. The whole idea, my whole plan had blown apart and not only that, they were taking three out of 83 and two -of those had volunteered. I feel like that I was going to be dead, I said this is a real chance that everything that I have planned is blown up and I am going to get killed. I was really shook up. I even considered desertion. I checked into it a little bit.

SM: How so?

PW: Well, there was a publication out called the L.A. Free Press at the time, a real radical deal and inside of it, it had draft counseling and all this stuff that you could go and get in touch with people if you were feeling the draft and some guys had already done this. I just read basically, found out that once you had signed up into the military, there was no getting (help from them), they couldn't help you. They could help you before you went in but once you were in, they could not do anything for you legally. In that regard, that's how I researched it a little bit. I immediately started asking questions. I seeked out anybody that I could tell, when you could tell because you'd see these guys walking around on the base and they were older guys, higher ranked, and I'd see their Vietnam emblems on their chest, and I just ask them, "hey bud, I'm fixing to go to Vietnam, let me ask you a question," I could see what MOS [uniform insignia]he was, if was a radioman and I just immediately started polling people, saying, "hey, you were in Vietnam, okay you were radio okay, what am I expecting to get into over there." And pretty much everybody was like, "hey, man it won't so bad at all, you'll be in a com-sta [communication station] over there, pretty hard work but it's okay, you get to go on R & R and it was not told to me as being a horrible thing, even going to Vietnam at that point. So again my research indicated I had no legal outs and secondly what I was getting was not that bad according to the people I polled who had already been.

SM: But of course desertion would have been an illegal act.

PW: Very much, but getting killed is pretty bad too. As a species you (instinctively) have to think self-survival and that's exactly what I was doing.

SM: How long did you think about desertion?

PW: Not very long, I just checked into it enough just to find out the door was shut.

SM: Now, what was your overall assessment of training you had received when you left your communications and electronics school?

PW: Well, I felt like I was going to pretty qualified to go and do the job that I had to do onboard a ship. As far as going to Vietnam, I didn't know what I was into then. Even if I did a year in Vietnam I was going to go back to ship supposedly and that training would carry forward then after my service in Vietnam in theory. And it did actually, I say what training I got as I continued working as a radioman after I got back from Vietnam.

SM: Now although your overall assessment was that the training was decent, what did you think about Teletype training and what did you think about your preparation for Vietnam?

PW: Well, we just had a completely different, totally different world. I mean, we are being trained for the Cold War, for going out into the fleet using electronic equipment to some degree and then we were taught telegraph (and Morse Code) was something we were going to learn but it was not going to be used out there at all, period. They told us that was the old days, Telegraph has gone away, I mean I'm sorry Morse code has gone away. So, I'm saying why are we being trained at this if we're not going to use it, that type deal. Even though they were stressing it so very much and ranking you in class and that sort of thing, but you're not going to be using it. That kind of struck me as kind of a poor concept, but when I said poor, I think the idea that we were trained on something we weren't going to use, Morse code, and then when we got the training for Vietnam, that was poor.

SM: What did they emphasize in terms of training for Vietnam?

PW: (That was in Counterinsurgency School and Survival school which was after Communications/Radioman school and just before leaving for Vietnam.) There they trained on not to get captured, if you're ever in that situation.

SM: So this is your survival training, we're talking about now.

PW: Yes, Very much was, if you even think about getting captured by the enemy that is something we are going to teach you, you better not think about at all. They did train us in that regard. They exposed us very little to the, weapons that were used over there. There weren't that many weapons over there. It was all done pretty much the same old stuff and we were exposed to that to some degree. We were taught a lot of infantry stuff like map reading and hiding in the bushes and how to make food out of the jungle.

SM: Now this is the training you received in Virginia, how long was that?

PW: It was only about a month, I think as I remember correctly. (Three weeks in the), classroom, one week in the field, I'm going to say three weeks classroom, one week in the field.

SM: What did they tell you in terms of what was happening in Vietnam, the things that you might encounter?

PW: We saw films about Communism and how it was a bad thing and how Ho Chi Minh was a real slime-ball and how this was just the beginning and how it was all taking place and how the big picture of the deal was this and how those people were brainwashed and how poor and stupid they were. Well and to some degree I guess maybe they were correct, I don't know. There was a lot of propaganda, let's put it that way.

SM: What about culture and society and how to interact properly with Vietnamese people?

PW: Excellent, excellent. That was a big part of it. We had some old salt come in, guys that had been to Vietnam, they were older guys, and it was very interesting. They told us that over there in Vietnam we would find guys walking around holding hands and for that not to be looked upon (as bad or) anything, because in their [Vietnamese] culture that was what they did. Two boys that were friends or just buddies would hold hands walking down the street. Well, this is a very different concept for us but we said okay, all right. Then they told us, "don't be surprised," which all this by the way turned out to be absolutely true, "don't be surprised if you see a man or a woman just urinate right there in public." We're going like, "you've got to be kidding us right", and they said "no, we're very serious. They don't see a problem with that at all." Well,

immediately over there we see men and women urinating in public. We got all this ahead of time and we're like "say again, these guys are walking around holding hands and they're urinating in public and we're defending these guys." Anyway, the bottom line was it as a very interesting introduction in my young life of other cultures and frankly I think I benefited from learning it. And the Navy was telling us there was nothing wrong with it; this is just the way they live. Also they taught us that smiling in times of adversity was good. Well, that didn't work out too well sometimes in Vietnam, you just had a booby trap go off and you go over and see some Vietnamese, they're all smiling. "Well, what's so damn funny about it?" We're having this culture clash, it's not working out real well. Again they told us up front about this, it just wasn't something an eighteen or nineteen year old guy, in my case anyway, grasped right away, but the Navy was telling us these cultural problems. They told us some others, I just can't think of them right now but they said you're going to get over there and you're going to find the Vietnamese people quite a bit different than what you've experienced and they were not incorrect in that regard. They told us about it and, in Vietnam it was a different place.

SM: What about your survival training, the escape and evasion, that kind of stuff?

PW: It was one of the most intense things I've ever been through in my entire life. When you go without eating for six days and you're on the run and they literally beat us up, I came home with two black eyes and they put us in those little boxes in the ground and shut a cover over it, going without water that long period was by far the most memorable thing I've got, everybody's lips turned black. They did a good job; I have to say they did a good job. (I had an airline flight booked out of there the next day and) they completely convinced me that we were not going to be on an airplane the next day. I thought we had been selected out as a group of people to be killed by the military and this was all top secret. I'd never see my parents again. When in fact the next day we were on an airplane and it was over with. I was so shocked because it was a very brutal type of training. (They had me convinced it was real and not training). I look back on it and hey, they were doing exactly what they should have been doing because in Vietnam I did almost got captured and I never gave one moments thought to letting myself be captured, I was not going to get captured. To the point literally where I was going to die before I

got captured and the situation I got myself into, that's exactly what the problem, [the training] may have saved me, who knows.

SM: When you say you would die before being captured, you mean suicide?

PW: Well, in a way. The game plan actually the day I got hit was I had lost my rifle and I was lying there bleeding very badly and I was injured pretty badly and there was an NVA squad, I could hear them shooting because I could tell the sound of an AK-47. I could tell that they were over there very close to me, what I was going to do was, I picked up a stick and a rock and I was going to ambush the closest guy, because they couldn't see me, I was hidden pretty good in the grass. I was going to ambush the first guy and get his gun and turn it on the other ones and I just knew that would be the end of it but that was my game plan at that very second because it literally came down to (how I was going to die), you can die various ways and being bayoneted was something that I wanted to not have done and the idea of being bayoneted to death compared to being shot, you'd be surprised how that reacts in your mind at that moment. You're hurt already and you're very badly wounded, the idea of getting it over with in a hurry was much more appealing than being bayoneted to death. I say suicide, I mean it wasn't a suicide, but I guess you could say that was suicide, I just wanted to end it quickly. And the idea of appealing to a squad of enemy soldiers with my hands raised was not an option and that's one thing I picked up in training I guess.

SM: While you were going through training and before, did you ever see coverage about American POWs and some of the footage that eventually was released of captured Americans in Vietnam?

PW: Yes, I think we did as a matter of fact. Yes, we heard they were treated terribly. We saw them in their white deals being paraded through town and then pictures of them later sitting in a bunk someplace, obviously very miserable.

SM: But they were alive.

PW: That's true, they were alive. The ones I saw anyway were not very badly injured. You've got to remember at the time I was making this decision I was bleeding from every place (almost) in my body. I could tell too that the only reason I wasn't in extreme pain was this numbness, (shock okay), and that shock was going to go away and I was going to be in extreme pain. And the guy I had just been (in the truck) with was

dead, so I was pretty much, very much in a state of trauma that I felt like I was going to die pretty soon anyway, if I didn't get medical help. But you're right, that's a good point.

SM: Now, just out of curiosity, during training, in boot camp in particular, one important event in particular, Tet '68, did you hear much about that? How was it covered in your boot camp?

PW: Oh, boot camp no it wasn't covered actually. I don't remember anything about Tet in boot camp. The Tet I heard about was once we got to survival school, counterinsurgency school, (they said) we had basically missed it, that it just happened and boy things were really hot over there now. We were going into what we thought was a "light at the end of the tunnel" like you said or we thought that the thing was winding down. Now, we were going to something that was not only not winding down, it was (now even more) bad news. We were getting into it big time. War was very much ongoing and we could expect to be involved and there was not going to be any, didn't look like to us, any end of it once we got to Vietnam. The guys that had been through Tet, which I missed it, they had a little bit more of a story to tell that we didn't have. They were there during Tet and "during Tet this, during Tet that, remember back during Tet," and we were kind of like oh, gosh we're not really as good as you guys because we didn't go through Tet. [Tet was a bragging rights thing for those that had been through it.]

SM: Well, when you received your orders that you would be going to Vietnam, were you told what position and how you'd be serving in Vietnam?

PW: Yes, we were told we would probably go to a communications station and we would just do teletypes and it would be pretty much an office job. But then now there was the riverboat option.

SM: That was an option, you could choose it?

PW: No. It was an option for the Navy. That would be a bad news deal if you got on one of those things, you could be but then again some guys liked it and if you had an inclination in that regard, you might want to go try it out but that was something everybody was pretty much said "let's not do that."

SM: When you finally finished your survival training and you got on that plane to go over to Vietnam, did you feel like you were prepared?

PW: Prepared, no can't say as I really felt prepared, no. At this point I felt like that whatever I had experienced as far as training, that was going to be so small compared to what I was going to get into in some way form, or fashion that I really didn't think along those lines. I wasn't prepared to go to Vietnam.

SM: Do you think you ever would have been prepared?

PW: I don't know.

SM: Was there anything else the Navy could have done to prepare you?

PW: No, I don't think so. It was a philosophical bent, I thought the war in Vietnam was wrong and here I was going anyway and I didn't have any, I just didn't have a philosophical positiveness about this. I was going to try to go there and do my time and get the hell out of there and I just didn't see that I was going to be doing any good being over there and I just didn't see any good out of the situation.

SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Watson on April 23rd.

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Philip Watson on the 24th of April 2001 at approximately 8:35 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Watson is in Dallas, Texas. Sir, why don't you go ahead and describe the reaction of your parents when they learned that you were going to Vietnam?

PW: Well, I got my orders when I was in the latter part of the radiomen's school and I just went to the phone and called them and told them I was going to Vietnam. My parents were like in shock and I explained to them it was going to be land duty, it was not going to be on a ship and they were just like, "oh, man, this is getting bad," so that was all they did, all they could do and then of course I got to go on leave before I went and got to see them and everything. It was just a continuum of bad news basically.

SM: Now at this point had you sensed at all that your parents' opinion of the war was changing?

PW: No, not at all. I did a couple of times overhear my father then, he was in World War II and the guys he worked with were from World War II. and I remember him one time, hearing him with the conversation with some other guys going "Philip's going to Vietnam" and I remember several of them saying, "well I had friends that went over there and sat at a desk the whole time, it may not be such a bad deal" and my dad was rationalizing it in that regard, I remember him doing that once, literally overheard the

conversation. So he was giving it some heavy thought that much I could tell and maybe he was thinking it wasn't going to be so bad and that type deal. But he told me flat out when I left, he said, "Philip you're going to be, its going to be tough over there, I'm just going to tell you that right now. He said, it's going to be tough." (He was kind of talking to me like a guy who has been to war talks to another guy that's going. Like he was telling me, be ready, I guess.)

SM: Was he right?

PW: Yes, he was right. Well, it could have been tougher but it was tough enough.

SM: How about your mom?

PW: She was just like, I don't know, I don't really know what she felt about it. She didn't like it but she didn't intone to me her thoughts or whatever.

SM: She was kind of stoic about it.

PW: Stoic, yes I guess that would be a good way of saying it.

SM: All right, why don't you go ahead and describe the trip over, what was that like?

PW: Well, it was kind of a process, I first went home for leave for thirty days and that was nice, I had thirty days off and then I was sent to Little Creek, which was four weeks, and from there I had five days off which is a lot of time because they gave me five days to go from the east coast to west coast, so literally had another five days home after the survival training and I'd got a taste of the toughness if you will in the training. I knew that I was getting ready to do something so that five days was real important to me. Then I made it to California and immediately got on a flight out of San Francisco, and it was a long, arduous flight, I mean it was twenty-four hours on the plane and then we got two stops, one in Japan. It was Flying Tiger Airlines, civilian aircraft and it was just a long time on the plane. Then when we got to Vietnam, I remember we stopped off in Japan. It was a terrible place, it stunk, it was horrible and I remember the guys were demoralized and as we got off to go to the restroom or what not, we didn't stay very long. We stopped in Guam and again we got off, it was a bad place, smelled bad and we got off just to stretch our legs and go to the restroom. We got back, we flew into Vietnam at night, and I literally was afraid to look out the window, thinking I'd get shot and I could see fires burning below in the night. I could just see these fires down below burning and

it just looked ominous, it looked surreal, it looked like Apocalypse Now. Of course it wasn't that way once we landed, it was just a busy airport really.

SM: What were your first impressions when you got off the aircraft?

PW: I think the smell of diesel fuel; sound of military aircraft was quite intense. You could just hear helicopters all the time, you could hear jet engines revving up, you could hear the sound of diesel trucks. The colors were all drab, it was dirty. There was no, there was no civilian life, it was all a military operation. It was just devoid of any frivolity.

SM: When you got off the aircraft, what happened, what did you do?

PW: We got on, I think we got on like deuce and a half, bobtail trucks and we got in the back of those and were just transported over to a base, Camp Tiensha and were assigned bunks that night.

SM: What did you do for the next few days?

PW: The next three days I can tell you exactly what we did. We got extremely drunk every opportunity we could and what we did was went to hear speeches during the day and they tried to teach us, instructed us that we were going to be, and everybody was in the Navy but we were all be going completely different ways. I was going to be a radioman, other guys were going to be, who knows, Seabees, cooks, whatever. But they told us more about the [Vietnamese] culture, what was going on, we had an Admiral come in and tell us how many gooks had been killed, "we killed 234 yesterday morning, we killed another 414 this morning." I remember them using the numbers like that. Then half the speeches deal was threatening us that if we used or smoked pot, or used any kind of drug, that was half of the orientation was threatening us about the use of drugs. I had no intentions of using any drugs. Again, I thought they were just preaching the wrong sermon, anyway they told us again, just that type deal, we'd go to lunch, come back and then every night everybody would just go to the club and just drink. The last hour of the third day, the Chief Master at Arms, who's the police, okay. He comes in and says, "okay, I want to talk to you guys about the fact that you might be wanting to smoke pot, do some drugs over here," and everybody just moaned because we'd heard that so many times. Here's the police officer, chief Master at Arms and then you know what he says, he says, "well I just want to let you know that we caught some guys down here at so and

so," and he named some little ville and he goes, "we caught them last night and that stuff [the dope] was not any good at all, it was just terrible." And I swear he said that. This is at the end of the three days, the speech by the guy that's the cop and he joked about smoking pot himself. It was surreal and nobody is going to believe that that happened and it did happen. So anyway, that was the first three days of the orientation and then we got assigned to where we were going to go and that was it, it went pretty fast.

SM: Now, in what month and year was this that you arrived in Vietnam?

PW: That was September 15 – September 18 of 1968.

SM: 1968. Now, did they tell you in terms of the drug use policy and the prosecution policy that you'd be tested, urinalysis at all?

PW: No, there was none of that, interestingly no, there was none of that at that time. They could have done that so easily had there been that [drug testing] and I never heard about a drug tests until fifteen years ago or twenty years ago, whatever. It was certainly not the situation in Vietnam, the drug testing.

SM: Not yet, okay.

PW: No, not at all.

SM: In terms of the culture and the other aspects of learning about Vietnamese life in Vietnam itself, how much do you remember from that briefing and was there anything new that you hadn't heard yet?

PW: No, not in that three days, no, there really was not. I can't remember anything if there was.

SM: After your initial processing, did you feel again like you had been aptly briefed so that you could do your job?

PW: No, I immediately got sent to riverboats, a place called Lighterage and I went in there, that was another surreal experience. We went in there and it was a small office right there on the river and we went in, an officer came in and said, there just happened to be two of us (new guys that were to be assigned to a river boat), me and another guy and he was higher ranked than I was, I think he was a 2nd class, of course I was an E-3 and this officer said, "okay, you're going to be on the river." He said, "we've been experiencing" and I can't remember the number, I've tried to think of it, it was either ten or twenty percent, I believe it was twenty percent casualties. He said, "over the

last six months we've experienced twenty percent casualties," I'm pretty sure it was twenty percent. He said, "so therefore you will be wearing your helmet and flak jacket at all times". He said even though, its hot, he said you keep it on. He said, "we have two boats available, each of you will be assigned to one of the two boats, one of them is a very old boat, one of them is a very new boats, living conditions on the old boat is going to be quite challenging," he said, "but the new boat's going to be one of the best, state-of-the-art, [air-conditioned]" and so I knew I was going to get the old boat. However, the guy I was standing there with said, "Sir I'd like to take the old boat," and I was like in shock, and so was the officer. He [the officer] said, "well why?" He said, "I just would like that if you don't mind, if I could have the request." and they guy [officer] said, "well, sure if that's what you want." Because they were going to give the new boat this guy so as we were walking out to the pier to get on our boat, I asked the guy I said, "what did you do that for." He goes, "well I'm going to write a book about Vietnam and I want to make sure that I get experience, I want to pick up as many experiences as possible." and I said "you've got to be kidding," and he said "no, that's true." So he got the old boat and I got the new one for that reason. Now, while we were there in the room being briefed by this one officer, there was a guy, a military career guy and I'm going to guess his rank was high enlisted, maybe a chief petty officer or something, (and he right there in the office) went nuts and started yelling, screaming, banging against the walls and he was having a conversation with somebody else and they called the shore patrol and picked the guy up. That was right there while we were standing there being briefed about going on our boats. I could see this place was not going to be a lot of fun.

SM: What was your first impression of the unit in terms of morale and what not?

PW: It wasn't that bad at first. Really the guys were, interestingly, a lot of guys and I did too, really got caught up in it. You had a job to do, people were relying on you, tremendous teamwork, you need to do your part or you're going to let someone down or get somebody killed and so as a consequence you valued your own worth at that point really. All your political beliefs really kind of had to go away because you just had to survive and it was a tough job and people needed to work together and by and large the morale was pretty good at that point.

SM: How many people, you said this was a river supply boat, is that correct?

PW: Right.

SM: What size boat is that, and how many people served on it?

PW: It was twelve people on it and that can vary and also, I was on one of the newer ones, I think there was thirteen on it actually and, let's see now what was the question?

SM: What size is this?

PW: I don't know how many feet it was and actually I looked up on the internet a year ago or something and there was a lot of information about those YFUs also called "skeelac" boats and I don't remember exactly how many feet it was, I'm not a boat person, I don't own boats and I don't sail or anything so I don't, I couldn't tell you off the bat, I'm going to guess it was fifty feet long. It had a big front, it looked like one of those that carry supplies. And then in the back you had your living quarters and your place to steer the thing and up front was just a big cargo area. It was like those things that landed at Normandy, you've seen pictures, only instead of just people they had boxes up in front and it was just bigger.

SM: What kind of weapons systems were on board for protection?

PW: The biggest gun on ours was the 50 caliber machine gun but some of them had what they called twenty millimeter guns which were the twin barreled, shoots one barrel at a time, they go back and forth as they shoot. We didn't have one of those, those 20 millimeters were envied, those provided real good firepower but we had a fifty caliber, a couple M-60 machine guns and everybody else had an M-16. We had an M-79 grenade launcher somebody was going to use if we ever got into it, but I never did.

SM: But you had your own personal M-16?

PW: Right.

SM: Had you used the M-16 prior to this?

PW: I had fired it in training just a little bit and I had been pretty proficient with guns as a kid. I did a lot of hunting with parents and stuff and I'd shot a large number of twenty-twos and other shotguns and rifles and things like that, so I was pretty proficient quickly with it. I didn't like the M-16 but I could use it and I did study it and take it apart and keep it is good shape, I know that. I shot it a lot more when I got to Sa Huynh but in the riverboats I never fired it once.

SM: You never fired it once on the riverboat?

PW: No, never did.

SM: Did you ever fire any weapon on the riverboats?

PW: Never did. Actually, we were just mostly worried about mines. They took sniper fire here and there if we heard. I was only on the boat two weeks.

SM: Where is Port Literage?

PW: It was in Da Nang, but it was outside a little bit and I don't remember exactly, but I looked it up on the Internet recently and they spelled it Lighterage, L-I-G-H-T-E-R-A-G-E, and I'm almost positive it was L-I-T and not a GH, but, again we're going back but it was there in Da Nang, pretty close, it was on the Da Nang River. But it wasn't right in on the river, right where they call the white elephant was located. It was in what they call I think the deep-water port area. To tell you the truth, I just never consulted a map of that area, but it was right in Da Nang or close to it.

SM: Most of your river activity was on the Da Nang River?

PW: That's right.

SM: And what were your duties?

PW: Well, here I came in right out of radioman's school and I thought I was going to be working the radio and I was told in no uncertain terms that I was not going to be sitting around working any radio because that was considered to be kind of a comfy job, that I'd be out there just doing whatever I needed to do, a deckhand if you will, just doing whatever manual labor needed to be done on that boat. The radio would be conducted by somebody with a little higher rank, and that was pretty much the case. Again, not everybody went to school out of boot camp, most guys just went to the fleet and did some kind of what they call deck ape type job and managed maybe to get some schooling later on or whatever, and here I was, I was somewhat fortunate, I had gone to school right out of boot camp and here I was as a radioman and they said if you think you're just going to walk in out of radio school and start working this radio, while we sit down here and do all the manual work you're crazy and that was true. I didn't get to do that.

SM: Now I meant to ask you, in your training, did you receive any kind of improvised radio training, that is field improvisation, if something happens to your radio, how to configure a system so that you can still communicate, that kind of stuff?

PW: No, I didn't get anything, if I did I don't remember it. Now, and the radio we used in Vietnam was what's called the PRC-25. We used the same thing that the Army and the Marines and everybody else used. Now, we had radios on board that were just boxes, they were all different, there might have been four radios and they were all different. We used each one for was maybe for more power or for different frequencies, or let one rest while the other one used, only thing we were told was if we were going to get captured we had to destroy the radio. That came back, I was watching the TV the other day and this U. S. spy plane that went down in China, and when I was in the service, we had real serious training on how to destroy the equipment and I thought surely they've [U. S. spy plane] got that to this day and apparently they did. But we were taught to destroy, they had thermal blankets and we could just unwrap those and lay it on top of the radio, pull the plug and it was just going to melt everything. As far as configuring it to use in anyway, somebody might have known that but they didn't teach it to me.

SM: So you said you only spent a couple of weeks on the riverboat?

PW: Yes, one day all of a sudden chief comes over and says, "Watson, you've been pulled over to the White Elephant" and gave me some basic instructions how to get there and I packed up and left.

SM: What did you think of your couple of weeks on board that boat?

PW: I was glad to get off of it, real glad to get off of it. Well, our sister boat hit a mine, radioman named Worrell from Georgia was killed, another fresh radioman out of school, now he went to Coronado and I went to Bainbridge but this guy was killed. Another radioman just like me, it could have happened, just glad to get off of it, it was very dangerous duty.

SM: While you were serving on the boats did the boat ever make contact, anybody ever ambush or try to get you guys?

PW: Yes, we took sniper fire I guess. I think the bullet, yes we were, we were shot at a couple of times they said but nothing major. No air support was called in.

SM: No one got hit?

PW: No, nobody got hit, no.

SM: Did you actually avoid mines by detecting them, seeing them?

PW: We threw concussion grenades out, which were supposed to blow up the mine before we could ever get to it, that's the only thing I know of, that we did. Maybe they had people sweeping those rivers ahead of us, I don't know. I know we threw out concussion grenades which were supposed to set the mine off ahead of time so we did that.

SM: Did you ever get any secondary explosions from mines?

PW: No, never did.

SM: About how frequently would they throw out concussion grenades?

PW: Pretty often, I mean I'd say they had X number per watch and I'm trying to remember how many that was but it was probably about three or four an hour, two or three, somewhere in that area.

SM: How fast would the supply boat typically move down or upriver?

PW: I think they said twelve knots or something, they're pretty slow really. They moved, but they just weren't speedy.

SM: But at the same time, you're traveling where three or four an hour, you're not going to hit necessarily every mine with the percussion grenade.

PW: That's true.

SM: Now, did they use concussion grenades when you were, what did you do at night, did you stay out, did you come back?

PW: Well, you had watch, yes. Well you just stayed on lookout if you could or you slept if you didn't have watch and if you slept you were awake and take your post up there at the front where the guy was driving the boat.

SM: But at nighttime.

PW: Most of the time we were in someplace at night, we came in and got secured, we didn't just cruise up and down at night, it was a daytime operation. We'd pull in some place at night on the river. Now if you were going down to Sa Huynh or whatever, you pulled out, you didn't hang around the harbor in Da Nang up at night. You'd got out on the ocean twenty miles and sit out there.

SM: Now and when you did that, did they use concussion grenades during that?

PW: If you traveled up and down the coast you didn't use concussion grenades because you were out far enough you didn't really have to worry about it, it was out in the ocean. The river itself was where the danger was and you didn't go up and down the river at night. Now you traveled up and down the coast at night, in fact you traveled all night long, but not on the river.

SM: What kind of supplies typically did you guys shuttle around, was it just a whole mixture of stuff?

PW: Yes, just a mix and it was in crates so I don't know, but I think it was a little bit of everything. I guess, everything, it was in crates and I really don't know, forklifts would come in and take it up and take it off and it was labeled in some kind of supply labeling that I never really picked up on.

SM: While you were on the boats, the first time you guys received any kind of sniper fire whatever, what went through your mind?

PW: I didn't actually know we were even getting it. I'm trying to remember, we got shot at I was told, and we got hit. I think one time we supposedly got hit and some guy pointed it out but it never was, we were always on what they call general quarters where we had flak jackets on our helmets and we were ready to go unless you were out doing some kind of a job and so and I don't think anybody returned fire when I was on it.

SM: And was there anything else particularly memorable about your time on the supply boat?

PW: No, not at all. We went up and down the river, I was scared. I remember one time they came out with some glossy eight by ten pictures, photos of our boat on the river and I remember they said would you like to buy one and I said, "where did those come from." He said it, "well it was taken from some kind of aircraft or helicopter somewhere that was down low." I never knew that was even happening, when that was done, it was just kind of bizarre deal and the old man, the chief that ran it, he looked grandfatherly, he was unfriendly. Everybody on the boat was unfriendly and I think that was I was a new guy, I wasn't a part of the team really, I was just kind of a hey, do this Watson, hey do that. You're relieved, get up, go do that. I wasn't a part of the

camaraderie at that point. I was in a, I felt like a hostile group of people and I never made friends with them.

SM: Now, were you the lowest ranking sailor on board?

PW: Yes, very much so. Well, there might have been another E-3 or two but I was the lowest ranking. I had no skills for the boat either. You know until you make a contribution, until you picked up the skills to make a contribution towards the whole thing you really, and I never even got to that point so, I never even worked a radio on the boat.

SM: Did they train you, or did you just what kind of work did you do?

PW: I just stood watch and watched the other guys and then went out and I think I did some painting and then did some chipping of paint and I did, just manual labor there on the boat. They had guys one there that were really good. They had a guy that was in the machinist's mate room which I only saw every now and then when the door opened and he obviously was very good. They thought a lot of him, and he was a quiet guy but apparently was a very good technician. I kind of envied him in a way. They had a dog on board, a small dog. I just was not apart of it, I was ostracized I felt like and I was glad to get off of it.

SM: When you say they had a dog on board, this was just like a mascot?

PW: Yes, I guess you could say that. It was a puppy. I don't know if he was a mascot, I can't say but he was just a dog. I remember they'd feed him and so forth, he just ran around the boat.

SM: What would you guys do for recreation?

PW: There wasn't much. I guess I would read, some guys play cards, some guys read, listen to music, listen to tapes on radios, that type of thing.

SM: Did you have a radio yourself?

PW: Not at that time, I got one later. The other guys did have them though.

SM: What kind of radio stations did you listen to?

PW: Well, they had that Armed Forces Vietnam network which was pretty good and listened to that. A lot of, you know, most of it I think was cassette, I think people just had a lot of good Jimmi Hendrix tapes and rock and roll, old time Cream and the

psychedelic stuff and what not. That was mostly what we listened to, some people listened to country and western but most of it was rock and roll.

SM: Did anybody ever tune into Hanoi Hannah?

PW: Yes, and it was kind of considered to be frowned upon. I didn't see that on the riverboat I saw that in Da Nang. It was kind of considered to be frowned upon but then some people would do it as a laugh. Now it [Hanoi Hanna] came in on Sunday night as I remember and some guys would be tuning their radio, what they [Hanoi Hanna] would do is they would start out with some really good music, Hanoi Hannah or whatever and then you'd get to listening to it and then they'd stop and start in with the propaganda. I never really actually sat and listened to it but I talked to other people that said they did and it wasn't very good. It wasn't a very good selling tool that they were using to make any swaying of opinion from us. It was interesting, they started out with good music to get your attention.

SM: Were there any, underground type of radio stations that you ever heard of or listened to?

PW: Not in Vietnam that I heard off.

SM: Now when you left the boat and you went to the, as you put it, the White Elephant, that's the headquarters in Da Nang?

PW: Well, it was a communications station, it was were there number one Navy guy had his headquarters. It was an old French hotel and why they call it the white elephant I don't know but it was an old French hotel to my understanding, a high quality a five star if you will at one time in downtown Da Nang. We had to go across the river to get to it and it was where the main Admiral was and where the highest, most sophisticated equipment was as far as communications. And I don't know what else was in there but it was heavily guarded, surrounded by on top and all around by Marines, so just to work in there I had to punch in a code just to walk in the door which I thought was pretty ridiculous but that's where I worked and it was twelve hours on, twelve hours off, seven days a week. Again I was pretty low ranking, started out the lowest job on the deal.

SM: This is basically, you were sending and receiving messages via Teletype?

PW: Yes, and there were numerous teletype machines plus we had a section in there that had a voice communication and I never did work that, I just could hear them inside there but we were mostly coming in with teletypes. Every now and then a bell would go off which meant a flash message was coming in which is urgent message and there was different procedures for that. We had different colored paper for the type of classification of the message and if white paper was unclassified green paper was confidential, yellow paper was secret, red paper was top secret and we saw mostly white and green, some yellow and red but not much. These messages would come through. Those were interesting because they gave us an insight, first of all that's when we first found out about Vietnamization on the messages that were secret but we were learning that the government did plan on turning this whole thing over to the Vietnamese and boy we got all excited about it. In fact I remember a guy came in, said, "hey Watson, look at this, man they're talking about getting us out of here." I read it and I said, "what does this mean." He said, "well, they're going to turn it over to the gooks, they 're going to turn it over to the dinks– we're going to get out of here." Of course that was our interpretation, we thought we were going to leave next week. We saw messages come in that I remember reading that were pretty, they were talking about interrogations. The message was that they were interrogating this prisoner and he was exhausted and passed out and the person interrogating him a Vietnamese considered excellent at getting information, who knows what they were doing to this guy. That was coming in, we were reading this stuff. We were reading messages saying that we were very much over in Laos and Cambodia, stuff that they're [the government] saying that was not the case over in the general media. The government knows, we were seeing the truth whereas the government was telling something else totally.

SM: What did you think about that?

PW: I was pissed off about it. The government was lying, we knew it. All of a sudden, my attitude is being changed and what are you going to do.

SM: Did you ever consider that well, sometimes the government had to lie?

PW: Sure, absolutely, there is no question about that. We knew that. I vacillated back and forth between was it the right thing to do. You can't fight a war and expect to win and be truthful up front, so sure I did.

SM: Now I meant to ask you earlier, when was your first interaction with Vietnamese people?

PW: I know when it was. It was when I was at Literage and we had a barracks there and there was a lady there, a Vietnamese lady that did the cleaning up and did some laundry or what not or did some housekeeping type work in that area. There were several ladies in fact and that's where they were and we liked them. We'd been nice to them, they couldn't speak English, I couldn't speak Vietnamese, but all of the guys pretty much liked them, and felt good about buying them a carton of Salem cigarettes or Kools, I can't remember which it was, it was one of the Menthol cigarettes and I didn't smoke so I just remember going and getting them and giving it too them. They liked it, they were thankful. I just generally found them to be pleasant people, very different than me. That was at first but I had other encounters later on down the road.

SM: Now, were they like hooch maids and they cleaned up the barracks and shined shoes?

PW: Yes, hooch maids I guess you could, they didn't shine any shoes. I heard about that but they didn't shine any of our shoes, they just kind of came in and cleaned up the place. At the same time we would go into Da Nang and catch military transportation, like a bus or something. and I remember kids would come up to us and this was very early on had their hands out. We learned later not to give them anything. New guys would give them some money maybe or something, but then I remember one day we were boarding the bus and we said, "No, you kids go away." We were getting on the bus and this kid came up and just took a rock, very close range, just hit me in the back and it hurt and he did the same thing to another guy and the other guy was higher ranking then I was and we turned around and the guys (on the bus saw it and are telling) "it's that one, it's that one" and they started pointing to a couple of the kids in the group. Boy this higher-ranking guy ran over and grabbed this kid, just knocked the hell out of him, it was that type thing. I know one guy got his watch stolen the guy, (a Vietnamese) on the motor scooter that came by real fast and stole it. There was that kind of thing going on. There was ambivalence. Some of the people we liked, some of the people we didn't like. You could tell some of the people liked us there, a lot of people did not like us there. We were getting an interaction, again a guy hits you with a rock in the back, you're getting an

opinion formed. But at the same time the Vietnamese people were very, very oppressed poor people and it was pathetic really. We felt sorry for them.

SM: What did you hear about the government of Vietnam?

PW: Corrupt, totally corrupt. Later on when I was in a place called An Hoi, just for a couple of days, there is this private plane, little single engine Cessna flying around out there and this guy would land on the field, he would come out he was in his mid-40s probably, Vietnamese. They said that he was totally into graft and corruption and I don't know that he was or not but I suspect he probably was and that was the rumor. That was what the word was within the military. He flew around in this Cessna and he was a rich guy and he was making all kinds of money off the war. The war was just chewing up the Vietnamese people. Americans were dying over there, but the Vietnamese were dying wholesale, I mean just more than wholesale, they were just being chewed up. We felt it was corrupt.

SM: Were you given any instructions on your interactions with Vietnamese people in terms of restrictions or whatever?

PW: Absolutely. When I first got to the White Elephant we were told, and the guy in charge there, the commander who happened to be from Texas, I remember from San Antonio, he came in, a guy named Musgrave. He came in he said, "I'm not making any idle threat," he said, "If you get caught over in the ville, I will . . . " and I forget what the punishment was, it was severe. We were not to go off, he said, now listen the reason for this is he actually explained the reason, I was pretty impressed. He said if they catch you over there, they can torture you and send pictures of you back to your families, they can just do a lot of things that are bad for you, the country, the family, the effort. He said, "You just can't go over into the ville." He said, "people are doing it, I know they're doing it and we catch them they're going to be in very big trouble." He said, "I'm just telling you that," so we were told not to go into the ville. Now obviously with interaction with the people we were told not to give them money if they were begging or not to, basically be careful because they could kill you. It might be somebody out to fast lane an American, just kind of keep your distance basically.

SM: While you were there, did that ever happen to your knowledge?

PW: No, I'm not aware of it. We had a guy that was cutting our hair and somebody said he was for sure a VC but who knows.

SM: A VC barber?

PW: Yes, really. Well, you know it was interesting. He was a draft age guy and he wasn't in the military but I didn't pursue that, that's what somebody said. We bought those rubber sandals from them, that now today, the popular Teva sandal, I remember the first time I saw those Teva sandals in a hiking magazine, I went, "man look that's what the VC sold us in Nam" and they were made out of car tires and they had rubber straps on top. Those things were fantastic and we were told, "go ahead and buy those and you're funding the VC when you do," but everybody did or I did. They were great shoes, and they were just perfect for being over there, but we were told well you buy a pair of them you just bought bullets for the VC but I didn't know if that was true or not and didn't really care. They were good shoes so I bought them from them. They had black market stands all over the place. That was another interesting thing, you could go over to the military supply place and not be able to get something, but then turn around and go right out on the street and buy it from the black market stand in broad daylight, that you needed, a pair of boots or a belt or whatever. It was open, easy to do. In fact I did it. I bought some, what they called tiger camouflage clothes right there off the street from the guy. It was kind of Special Forces camouflage uniform. I bought it black market.

SM: Now were you supposed to wear a particular uniform when you were on the boat or when you were working at the White Elephant?

PW: Yes, we just wore Army fatigues, green fatigues, but if you wanted to go buy some camouflage stuff and wear it you could do it and I did.

SM: Okay, so there was flexibility?

PW: There was some flexibility but you couldn't wear civilian clothes. Let's put it this way, Da Nang you could not, now down south in Saigon I understand they wore civilian clothes all the time. I did not have any civilian clothes at all and all the dress whites and blues we just took those and put them away. They told us to put something in there to keep it from mildewing and rotting but we wore military green t-shirts, green underwear, boots, those jungle boots which were a good shoe and then green fatigues and

if you wanted to go pay some money and get some camouflage tiger stripes then you could do that if you wanted to.

SM: Now when you say, you were told not to go in the ville, you're talking about Da Nang, probably?

PW: That's correct, Da Nang and they have what's, a suburb of Da Nang, up and down the road there was just villages and yes, and you went in there for prostitution purposes, for girls, so that's the reason you went into the ville, you were going to go into the ville. (It was quite common). One time I put on, actually found some aftershave and I put it on, I hadn't used the aftershave in a long time, and this guy came up to me, he goes, "oh you're going into the ville tonight." (He assumed if you had on aftershave there was romance on your mind I guess.) "I went no, I'm not" and I wasn't. I only went into the ville one time and I did it one time just to say I had done it. But guys were in and out of the ville all the time. What I heard was you get caught by the shore patrol and you told the MPs, look they're going to fine me X number of dollars, therefore I'll give you X number of dollars and why don't we just call this thing even and the shore patrol was going for that.

SM: Whoa, guys would pay their way out of getting caught by shore patrol?

PW: Right, you just pay the shore patrol. Does that surprise you? I'm not saying it was the case every time, but it certainly was going on a lot.

SM: Now what about the Vietnamese police, were they around?

PW: Yes, what do they call them the White Mice, the QCs or whatever they were. Yes, they were there but I didn't deal with them at all. I just saw them. I could see them and I knew the uniform when I saw it but I never had any dealings with them whatsoever.

SM: Were there many fights when sailors would go into town?

PW: Fights?

SM: Yes, they are in bars and stuff getting drunk, so.

PW: Well, now if you go into town in Da Nang again you were off limits so as far as I know, no, there were not any fights or whatever. I never heard of anybody going over there and not coming back. Now, if you wanted to go legitimately have a beer, get drunk at a bar or listen to some music, you did on base and there was no fighting that I

ever saw. I'm not saying it didn't happen. There was a lot of stuff that went on in the shadows.

SM: What do you mean?

PW: Well, I'm not saying somebody didn't jump somebody, that type deal and I'm sure it probably did. I didn't see that much of it, I didn't see any of that. We worked, again we were a little bit of a higher subculture. We all had top-secret clearances and if we got in trouble we lost them and that meant we were out on the fleet doing some kind of terrible job. You could go to riverboats, riverboats was the worst thing that could happen to you I suppose, it was always a threat over your head. You didn't keep your act together, you were going to leave this nice, air-conditioned twelve hour on, twelve hour off seven day a week job and you were going to go out on riverboats. (Our officers would say), "If you think this is bad, you try it out there, talk to Watson, he's been out there two weeks," that's what they do, that kind of stuff. And Watson would confirm, "Yes, you don't want to go to riverboats," me being Watson, okay. Because I went there at the very beginning, Worrell got killed out there, we knew Worrell, Worrell was a guy went to school with, and too you had the threat of always losing that top secret clearance so our group was by and large pretty disciplined, managed group.

SM: Now did your base get mortared, rocketed, artillery strikes?

PW: Yes, as a matter of fact our base, Camp Tiensha got hit by rockets actually, the time I was there, I'd say three or four times, mortars a few times. It [Tiensha] was so big that your chances of getting hit by one of those things is pretty small. One officer was killed I think and it hit his barracks and somebody else was killed but it was so far away you didn't know who it was anyway. Hitting Camp Tiensha, they did get it, I guess, for morale purposes, I don't know what their goal was because we were just a bunch of people working in an office somewhere else but it did get rocketed. We'd hear them coming over and we got underneath our bunks or went in the bunker or whatever, but Camp Tiensha was a real safe place, which by the way I hear is still there. I got on the Internet the other day and a guy said he went over there and saw it. Da Nang was safe, Da Nang and the White Elephant were safe. We could hear things going off, we heard machine gun fire, this and that but it was a safe place.

SM: Well, of the radio traffic that you saw, the Teletype traffic you saw, you already mentioned the Vietnamization and some of the stuff going on in Laos and Cambodia, was there anything else that struck you as interesting or odd concerning that traffic that you were privy to?

PW: No, I can't really say. I remember those particularly and I guess there might have been other stuff but no, not really, it was just mostly mundane operations stuff.-- Occasionally we would get some information about somebody got in trouble, we all would read that. Maybe some officer, I remember one time we talked about an officer that we read a deal, that he was trading currency back and forth and making money doing it, somehow going from Piasters to greenbacks. Greenbacks over there, American money was very valuable, we were supposed to use either the military type money they gave us, we were not supposed to use greenbacks. But if you wanted to black market back and forth, the option was there if you understood arbitrage or however they were doing it, you could do it. We got messages that people were doing that, military people and they were getting caught and we'd read those, that type deal.

SM: What would happen to those who got caught?

PW: I don't know, they were officers, they probably got kicked out of the military, I don't know what happened to them, I really don't.

SM: Did you get any traffic about My Lai or similar incidents?

PW: You know My Lai happened in March of '68 and I was in radioman's school then and we heard about it. I could tell you that, when we heard about My Lai I just heard about it as I would stateside, as any body else would and I got to Vietnam though, I distinctly remember them talking about things have changed now. They say, "We don't got around just blowing people away, we don't just pull a bunch of people out there and shoot their father trying to get information out of them because My Lai changed all that." Now, we heard that, I don't know if in fact that was really what was going on or not. We heard, after My Lai, you had to be a little bit more kinder, gentle. Tactics had changed, the press had found out there was some stuff going on that shouldn't be and the military was there for calming people down if you will. That's kind of what we heard, I personally never saw any of that.

SM: What about while you were there did you hear about anything that happened in Hue during Tet of ’68?

PW: No, now that stuff about the North Vietnamese coming in and doing their assassinations and everything, was not, I can remember it being heard of at all. I didn’t hear about it and again I’m a low ranking guy, they’re not necessarily going to fill me in but no, we didn't hear any about that. It was all, no that was news, I think I remember hearing that after I got out of the military, when I was discharged and I kept up with it pretty good, I followed all the news. I read the paper and I was interested in how this things was going to play itself out because I had been there and I’d seen it and I had some emotional involvement and I was wondering—that NVA atrocity thing was on the news, that was news to everybody I think, that the North Vietnamese actually came in and committed those atrocities during Hue and during Tet.

SM: Now, what else did you do, I should ask you first, how long did you work at the White Elephant?

PW: I worked at the White Elephant, I would have gotten there, I know it was in the fall, I think it was about November through February ’68 and then ’69. I was there during the ’68 presidential election, I remember being very involved with that and we would go and some of us would get together after work and talk about that election coming up. That [’68 election] was the big deal. So I left there and went to what they call Teletype repair at the Triangle about February, January, February of ’69, which was down the road and not across the river. It was still a big part of the NSA Da Nang communications and there were two basic Naval places, the Triangle or the White Elephant inside Da Nang. I went over to the other compound sort of place, still stayed in Tiensha, just worked at the Triangle and there I worked at Teletype repair which is a pretty good deal, I was lucky to get into that really.

SM: How long did you do that?

PW: Did that, I don’t know, about a month and a half and then I went from there down to Sa Huynh, from teletype repair, in fact I went down to Sa Huynh as a teletype repair person only to find out there was no teletypes down there. I started working radios and doing the crypto work down there actually.

SM: Now you mentioned just a moment ago that this was a joint military, Navy/NSA communications plain.

PW: Well, it was all Navy.

SM: All Navy?

PW: Yes, NSA, naval support activity.

SM: Oh, I apologize, I thought you meant the.

PW: I'm sorry, NSA was "naval support activity" and it was all the Navy. NSA Da Nang was where the Navy was in Da Nang. (NSA Da Nang was the main base for the Navy.) Then we had NSA Da Nang detachments [called "NSADs"]. (NSA detachment Sa Huynh, NSA detachment CuaViet, NSA detachment Dong Ha, NSA detachment Chu Lai.) But the main one was the hub was NSA Da Nang. [I think there were seven "detachments" out of Da Nang. Being stationed at one of the detachments was called "detached duty" and the term usually created raised eyebrows, meaning detached duty often meant one was getting close to the real war zone. There was even dark humor. If you went to detached duty the phrase "you ain't dead yet" would sometimes be stated to the person. When guys heard I was going to Sa Huynh, some said, "Hey Watson, goin' to Sa Huynh, huh. You ain't dead yet?"]

SM: Different NSA. Well, but were there any civilians that worked in that area with you?

PW: Yes, there were. There were some highly trained, I understand, highly paid and well paid civilians that came in occasionally and did some high-end technical work on the equipment and that was in Vietnam plus when I was stateside down in Naval Air Station Beeville, Texas, same thing. They have civilians that occasionally came in and worked on the equipment and I heard those guys made good money, especially over in Vietnam.

SM: And how about civilians working in other capacities that were a little bit less obvious or more obscure?

PW: Well, now I saw a lot of reporters but they weren't actually working with the Navy and I saw a lot of reporters from various parts of the world. I talked to guys that obviously had British accents or Australian accents, that type thing but I didn't really work with them, I just saw them occasionally here and there. A lot of times they'd come

over to military personnel and say do you know where such and such is, or do you know how this or that whatever, but that was the other civilians I saw really, that were non-Vietnamese civilians.

SM: Let's see here. Well, was there anything else that you wanted to talk about with regard to your time at the White Elephant?

PW: No, it was very mundane work and it was not a good experience. I can't remember coming away with it with anything I'm proud to say happened there, was just a paper shuffling mill, there was a lot of agitation, I felt like and I know there was, there wasn't any question about it, between the officers and the enlisted. We felt officers, of course they had a good deal, we called them "pricks". Just every now and then, just to make themselves feel good, by making us feel bad. When I was there one enlisted guy just flat left, he just didn't show up for work for like two or three weeks, just decided he wasn't going to and he didn't really run away, he just kind of went out and hung out by the pool. They had a big pool there that was built above ground. We had another guy that came in one day said, "I want to go out into the field, I want to see the most action," this guy from Pittsburgh, he came in, he said, "I want to go into the field, I want to go out and see with Marines, I want to be on helicopters, I want the most dangerous duty I can get in Vietnam." [This could have been a way to get in the officer's face since they were always threatening us with riverboat duty, which they knew we were scared of] He went to the officers and told them that and they said, "well, you're crazy, go back to your job." People were showing signs of stress, bottom line is people were just maxed out, it was stressful. That many hours, that long period of time, nothing to do off duty and it was just a stressful place.

SM: So he wasn't sent out?

PW: No, he was not sent. They were threatening you all the time with the riverboats and what not, this guy came out and says flat out I want to go, send me, quit talking about it, lets do it and they didn't do it. Well, they may not have had a slot for him. First of all, they weren't going to send him out into the field with the Marines. They might send him over to the riverboats like he wanted, but they may not have had a slot right then or whatever, or they might have just realized he was under stress.

SM: Well, do you think he was sincere in his offer?

PW: Yes, I do. Peter Zakel was a really good guy, was one of the buddies of mine. He was German, his father fought for the Germans in World War II, but a super guy, I really liked him and I think he was sincere as he could be. He just had enough of this place, and he was saying give me some place else.

SM: Well, besides the conflict between the officers and the enlisted men, what was the atmosphere like at the White Elephant?

PW: It was just, it just was an unpleasant place. You just went in and did your job, conversed a little bit with a few people, mail call was an uplift and some people would get packages with candy, what not and that was nice but I can't really say there was anything going on there, that was anything but just a grind, just a day in, day out grind. Actually it was interesting, one day, here I am a low-ranking guy, this lifer enlisted guy comes over to me and says, "Watson there's a grunt here to see you," and I went up to the front and there was a buddy I went to high school with here in Vietnam, he was a Marine. They said, "here go on outside and talk to him." I was surprised they even let me do that, and I did. That was a sign of compassion on their part which I didn't think they had any but in that case I guess there was a little compassion here, they're going to let Watson talk to a hometown buddy of his. No, there wasn't much there at the White Elephant, I was on the internet and somebody sent me pictures, said here's some pictures of the White Elephant from the river and I was looking at it. This was about three or four months ago, and "I thought is that the White Elephant?" it just didn't look like at all what I remembered. The picture, it had a lot of radio antennas off the top of it, I remember that.

SM: How far could you receive communications, from how far?

PW: On the radio we could go I know a hundred miles, or a couple hundred miles, but teletypes are pretty much how we were getting all our stuff and the voice communications was to the other NSA Da Nang detachments and they were a hundred, hundred fifty miles away, mainly and a lot of the voice communication was to the USS Repose which was the hospital ship right across the river from us, there was a lot of communication on voice with that. I want to say a hundred, hundred fifty miles would be the furthest on the radio. I could be wrong about that, I think that's right because I was down in Sa Huynh we talked to them and I think that's how far we were then, we were

talking to NSA Da Nang there in the White Elephant and I think we were about a hundred and fifty miles away.

SM: What about the teletype, what was the range for that typically?

PW: I don't know, but I think they were like around the world somehow. We were getting messages in from all over the world. We were going on what they call Zulu time, which is Greenwich mean time, and we got messages all the time from all over the world. We'd get a message from a ship that was on the other side of the planet. Now, I don't know how it got there and I don't really know how it was relayed, they probably explained to me at one time, I don't remember but teletypes were everywhere, there was no distance factor. Occasionally if an emergency arose, you'd get a teletype in from the Unites States, where some guy's parents dying or something like that.

SM: So you would get those types of notifications?

PW: Yes.

SM: Well, I'm curious about your attitude or the overall attitude of the personnel at the White Elephant, was it different from the riverboat? You mentioned previously that it wasn't very friendly, you were treated like the stereotypical Vietnam slang, FNG, was it different at the White Elephant at all?

PW: Well, there was more FNGs at the White Elephant, so us FNGs could get together and form our own little social group. Whereas on the riverboat I was my own by myself, but everybody was a FNG no matter where you went. When I went down to Sa Huynh, I was again an FNG, even though I'd been in country this time about six, or seven or eight months, seven months I guess. But I was still an FNG because I was new to those guys but I had some skills at that point, radio skills and what not, so it didn't last very long, I wasn't FNG very long and once you worked there awhile and you made rank, pretty soon a guy will go from E-3 to E-4, and you just naturally worked yourself into the organization that way. Yes, in the beginning you were kind of ostracized and I think that's natural in all of the elements, all the groups, the military groups.

SM: What about race relations?

PW: Now, you know in the White Elephant, we didn't have any, that was a white elephant I guess, and it sure as hell was a white people, I don't remember any blacks being there at all. I don't remember any Hispanics, I don't remember any Native

Americans. I don't remember any Asians that were military, all I remember is white guys. All I ever remember seeing, there was one, I take that back. Okay, now when I got to the Triangle in teletype repair there was a guy from Detroit there and there was another guy, there was two black guys, one of them was from Detroit and one was from someplace else and the Detroit black guy was a radical. He was an E-5 and he hated white people, he was pretty much, that was his opinion. He didn't get along well and he would go up to us low ranking white guys, I saw him do this to other people, he didn't do it to me and say, "hey, man can I have a drink out of your Coke," or "your soda," whatever? The white guy would kind of like, this guy outranked him, he would usually give it to him and then not take it back, was the way they worked that deal. I remember distinctly, the guys name was Ward, he was a very clean guy, spit-shined his boots and he brushed his teeth all the time, he was a clean, squared away, uniform was always in good shape. And so one day he was drinking a Coke and I went over to him and I said, "hey, Ward, how about a drink of your Coke." And he looked at me like, kind of weird, I said, "hey, you're doing it to everybody else so what about when it happens to you, so give me a sip of it." He handed me the can and I took a big, long gulp out of it and gave it back to him, about halfway irritated him I think, which of course was my goal.

SM: I'm curious, was there something else you were going to add?

PW: No, Ward later and I really got sideways, later, he and I just hated each other's guts. I found out later that he supposedly one of the biggest drug dealers there on the base. I don't know that for a fact, I heard it later though.

SM: Well, was there a prevalence of drugs there, that you witnessed?

PW: If you wanted drugs and you wanted to hang in that area, it was always there. Now, I did not particularly want to do that. I was a guy that went across the road and drank beer at the club and that's the kind of guys I hung around with. If you wanted to hang around people that did drugs, they were there. You could get in with that group if you wanted to. Personally I didn't like that group, I thought they were seedy, I thought they were underachievers, they didn't like to me either. They were not going in the direction I wanted to go, but I did a couple of times go over and say, "okay, now what's this marijuana thing because I had heard about it, I had never experienced it in the United States. Here it was in Vietnam, so lets go over here and try it out." So one night we went

over and we smoked some pot and I never did feel anything from it, anything enjoyable one way or the other, but I could say at that point that I had smoked pot in Vietnam. So I'd done it, just like I went over to the ville. I went over and did it one time to say that I had been to ville, yes I had been to the ville, I wasn't going to say, sitting around with a bunch of guys I had never been to the ville and they were doing it a lot so I just did it one time, tried it one time, that was it. But, yes the drugs were there if you wanted them and a lot of guys got into them and a lot of guys I think got themselves screwed up with them.

SM: Did you ever hear of any body getting in trouble for using drugs?

PW: No, actually in Vietnam never did. Now, in Stateside when we got back, yes, I heard about guys getting in trouble. They got caught doing drugs at [Naval Air Station] Beeville, Texas, had a radioman that got caught and he was kicked out and put out of the radio shack and his [secret] clearance was pulled. They moved him to working on cars or doing to motor pool servicing or whatever. He got his secret clearance sure enough taken away. I don't know what ever happened to him, but it didn't seem like it was too terribly bad. They put him in another area.

SM: And did you ever receive any briefings about drugs while you were at the White Elephant?

PW: Occasionally there would be a meeting and they would talk about drugs and you need to stay away from them. There was a, I know one time we had a meeting and this was not in Vietnam, this is later, they talked about how, well they said okay, they say marijuana is not physically addicting but you can get psychologically addicted to it just like you can get psychologically addicted to beer. They were getting tamer, I guess now they were going to philosophize about it. Okay, the words coming out, it's not really a heroin, but marijuana, but they were trying to say, look it's just bad, just be careful, it's just like too much debt, too much whatever, just over excess. It is illegal by the way and if you get caught doing it, you're going to lose your [secret] clearance and here is an example of some guy that did and that sort of thing. It was becoming less of a threat, more of, less of an iron fisted threat and more of a rational type approach. There was another time they talked about LSD and they talked about how, you might go out and smoke some pot and you might not be such a bad deal and you might go out and drink beer and have a bad hangover but if you've got LSD, they were talking about you could

have a recurring flashback and it wouldn't just be a Saturday night deal, you could have that flashback while you were on watch. Now, this was very serious, of course who in the hell was doing LSD, I don't know, but they were telling us that LSD had the potential for a flashback later, it could stay in your system and then while you are on watch, in a very critical time doing your job, this thing could come back. Whereas marijuana, they told you flat out that was not going to happen and booze obviously that was not going to happen. I remember them stressing the fact that doing LSD could really carry over into your duties, which made sense if that's true, you could get a flashback, you certainly wouldn't want to do LSD. I remember them talking about that, I remember listening to it.

SM: But nobody you knew was actually using acid or LSD?

PW: No, I can't say, now when I went to boot camp and when I went to radioman's school and when I went to Vietnam, there was a guy I was always stationed with in all those places, name was, I don't guess I ought to say his name but he was from Detroit, he and I were good buddies. He was one of the guys that volunteered for Vietnam, that's the one I was telling earlier, where I asked him "are you crazy, you volunteered for Vietnam." Of course, I ended up going too, but we got over there and he really, we met up with another guy from Los Angeles, and us three were kind of running buddies and we all were just beer drinkers, philosophers type deal, didn't like the war, didn't like this sort of thing. We just got together and talked, but those two guys went off and really started doing a lot of drugs and the other guy from L.A. was getting it in, supposedly I was hearing this from a guy, from my buddy from Detroit, they were getting it in from the States and they were getting a shipment in, this and that and I just broke it off. I stayed in touch with the guy from Detroit, I said how's it going. Well, it turns out the guy from L.A. really got himself physically in bad shape, it's my understanding, he did not finish out his tour in Vietnam due to drugs and he was a very capable, intelligent person and the guy from Detroit told me that later he was having a problem with drugs and when I got Stateside he called me up one day. He came over to my house in Dallas, Texas and said, "I need to get some drugs, do you know where I can go?". I said, "well there is Mexico, about 300 miles" and literally he hitchhiked to Mexico from my house and said he went down there and got a bunch of amphetamines and drugs and the guy had

never been to Texas before in his life, much less Mexico. He called me from down there and said, "I'm on my way back, I'm on a bus and I've been busted," and this is the guy I'd been to Vietnam with. He came back and he was in bad shape and he said that the border patrol found him down there, found out he was a Vietnam veteran, took all the money out of his pockets, bought him a bus ticket and gave him the rest of the money back and shipped him back to my house, literally. I then took him out to Love field put him on the airplane to Detroit. I haven't seen or heard from him since. The guy got messed up on drugs and he was a buddy of mine. I literally saw him at my own hometown.

SM: Well, so when you left the White Elephant, went to teletype repair, was there anything else in particular that occurred there at the Triangle?

PW: No, not really.

SM: You were only there for about a month and a half.

PW: Yes, about a month and a half. That was again more agitation. There was starting to get some racial tensions there, starting to get a little of that there. No, I was becoming one of the group there, I was starting to get some skills. I was starting to debate if you will with the career people about the pros and cons of the war, pros and cons of the military. I was being accepted by some of them, not accepted by others. I can't really say there was anything in particular I remember, I'm trying to think, I'll probably think of some after I get off the phone but nothing that was of real relevance. The work was somewhat interesting. I found out when I'd take a teletype repair and how to put it back together, I had to admit I enjoyed the work somewhat and getting it to work correctly was kind of fun.

SM: So you left in April of '69 and went to Sa Huynh?

PW: It must have been March, I guess mid-March of '69, I'm guessing. I sent all these letters back home and I don't know what ever happened to them, mom apparently didn't hang onto them. I'm going to say its March of '69.

SM: Did you receive many from your family?

PW: Yes, from girlfriends, family, sure did.

SM: Would they talk about what was happening at home?

PW: My mother made the comment that she saw on TV the rocket attack that I just mentioned a minute ago, we got an officer killed at Camp Tiensha or something, they saw that on TV. She said, we saw y'all attacked on TV. I guess they got the footage, I'm sure it wasn't live but the footage came in, Walter Cronkite there had it on CBS I guess. There was a lot going on TV about Vietnam, I found that out when I got back everybody's attitude was different than when I left, my friends, everything. It was like, wow, man. They knew stuff, it was like yes, that's right. That did happen, from between the time I went there, from September '68 until I got back in May of '69, a huge amount of Vietnam had happened. They'd write letters and say we read about that in the paper, we heard about this, saw it on the news. I don't know if you're old enough to remember that but they had a body count every night. Walter Cronkite would have little stick men that said this many Vietnamese got killed and this many Americans got killed, one of them was in red, one of them was in blue and our numbers were always much less than their numbers. It was a disgusting thing. Here it was a body count every night on TV, a report on how many soldiers we killed on each side. That was going on every weeknight of the world.

SM: While we are on the subject, did you ever talk to your folks about that?

PW: About what?

SM: The fact that every night they'd watch TV and there would be combat footage of what was happening and sometimes it would be very close to where you were and every night they emphasized this is how many Americans were killed, this is how many Vietnamese were killed?

PW: I can't say that I talked about that particular thing. Now, when I got back from Vietnam I talked about it quite a bit and we had differences of opinion. I was going to do some protests and I joined the VVAW, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and I was going to go to Houston, do a big protest march and he [my father] said flat out, "you're not going to live in this house or to be in this house or whatever." I said, "well wait a minute, now I've been over there . . . " and we got in this big argument, so in the election of ' 72 it was McGovern versus Nixon and this was when we had the opportunity at the ballot box to end the Vietnam War and I was very much for ending the Vietnam War. I thought it was wrong and what I had seen over there just galvanized that feeling

and here we had McGovern that said flat out on Inauguration Day I'm going to end the war. Well, Nixon had drug it on over four years, I saw it as the purest form of good versus evil that I had ever seen in my life. My parents were for Nixon as was everybody else because McGovern didn't even win his home state, it was a complete landslide. I didn't care what McGovern's domestic economic opinions were, which were crazy as I look back on it, but he was going to end that war. My family and me, my brother, and my mother were against me politically and I was going, "you guys haven't been there, I have." I've seen these body counts that they're showing you on TV to some degree. They were just like, "hey we're not going to just up and pull out of that thing. Nixon's get a plan, we're going to get us out of there . . ." and there was a lot of rancor between me and my family, unfortunately.

SM: Now, at that point had it become public knowledge that the war had expanded into Laos and Cambodia?

PW: '72, yes absolutely. We went into Cambodia in what, May of '70 and that was when Kent State and all that shooting went on. Then the election between McGovern and Nixon was '72. I was in college actually and out of the military when the election between McGovern and Nixon came out. Of course I was still in the military when the Cambodian deal was going on in Kent State and that was in May of '70. Yes, we knew when it expanded and Nixon had expanded going into the election of '72. Come to think of it, I guess that's one of the more reasons I was so, had such passion and fervor about it at that point because I felt like Nixon was absolutely the worst case scenario as a leader. Here, McGovern was going to end the war, but people trusted the government still. I guess they should have, I don't know. I know that there was a lot of animosity within my family itself about that election of '72.

SM: Now, I'm glad you brought up the election because of course you had also mentioned the election of '68 and I was wondering what impact, because this happened before you left for Vietnam, what impact did Johnson's decision not to seek re-election have on you and the people you were serving with but also maybe in your parents' perspective.

PW: Wait a minute now, did Johnson, I thought Johnson did that while I was in Vietnam.

SM: No, that would have been early in ’68, just after Tet Offensive?

PW: Okay, well it was close to when I got to Vietnam, because I can tell you this, when I was in Vietnam, Humphrey, the VP for Johnson was going to run for pres. which he did against Nixon. So it was the Humphrey and somebody [Humphrey’s VP candidate] ticket against Nixon and who was Nixon’s VP, Agnew isn’t that right? Okay, Humphrey’s running in ’68 against Nixon, right. Humphrey was the vice president under Johnson, now Johnson declined to run but Humphrey now was going to run, right?

SM: Yes, sir.

PW: I’m just trying, I’m pretty sure I’m right about that. This is going on while I am in Vietnam. Now there was a thing going on called the bombing of the DMZ, which our B-52s were doing round the clock. Da Nang is very close to the DMZ or pretty close, and some of our detachments like Quo Viet are right on it. Now Johnson goes in, and in order to help Humphrey in that presidential campaign of ’68, to help him get votes, Johnson stops the bombing of the DMZ. Now, what is that going to do~~?~~ We were told that if that bombing stopped we could be overrun. The North Vietnamese Army was the fourth largest Army in the world. We could have been literally overwhelmed by hordes of North Vietnamese if that bombing stopped and we were told we could be wiped out within twenty-four hours. Now, I don’t know if that’s true or not, but it sure as heck happened in ’73, just about, North Vietnamese just crushed the South Vietnamese all the way down to Saigon to where we saw the tank coming in to the U.S. embassy. Now, we didn’t know what was going to happen, but we were told that without that bombing at the DMZ we could be killed within twenty-four hours. Johnson stops that bombing of the DMZ in order to help Humphrey get elected. Now, there was a political cartoon, I’ll never forget it, where there’s a stove and there’s pots on the stove and the guy stirring the pots is Johnson and right behind Johnson is Humphrey. One of the pots he's stirring says “stop the bombing of the DMZ” and Humphrey is behind Johnson saying, “I knew you’d cook something up for me.” The interpretation, and I think it’s a fair interpretation, was we were being put at risk, our lives, in order for Johnson to get Humphrey elected. Now to me, where’s the outrage? And to this day I see those people as war criminals. I just cannot imagine, now maybe that wasn’t true, but that’s what we were told. Now maybe that wasn’t really the case and in fact it did not happen, the bombing stopped and we did

not get overrun, but that's what we were told and bottom line is there was a lot of emotion attached to stopping the bombing, even though I was against the war I sure wasn't against them doing it that way and putting us at risk in order to get Humphrey elected. Now in '68, at the Democratic convention in Chicago, I don't think this country has ever seen anything since that like that since and I hope they never do again. There was a lot of people doing a lot of bad things in the street, on both sides. Can I ask how old you are?

SM: How old I am, sure, I'm 35.

PW: That was some bad times, and seems that Johnson going to stop the bombing of the DMZ in order to get Humphrey elected. I've got to tell you too, I'm from Texas, I don't know where you are from but when I got into the military there was an anti-Texas attitude amongst the people that were against the war and there was a lot of us because Johnson was considered to be the orchestrator of this war to a large degree. On campuses throughout the United States, at Berkeley and out on the east coast, all the campuses, all the Ivy League schools on the east and west coast were doing these violent protests. There was a lot of that, but there was none of that at the University of Texas. And so I'm writing home, I'm going hey, how come there is no protesting down at UT? I mean you guys won the '69 football conference, number one or whatever, you guys down there and I was being told this by other people, they're watching, you guys from Texas. You're down there playing football and you've got the guy that started this whole campaign, this war. What is it with you people down there. I'm thinking what is the problem, how come University of Texas doesn't have these protests? How come they're just going to football games? I mean Johnson is from there and I was asking the same questions and these people were pretty disillusioned with the state of Texas. People from the State of Texas do not realize that to this day and being from Texas was really another ostracization factor. If you were amongst the people that were against the war and I was kind of ashamed of my own home state. I was going, we sent this president down there and then here there's nobody protesting, you never heard about any students and I'm not so sure that's what they should have done, but at the time there needed to be something spoken about their anti-war, because it was going on at all the other schools, why wasn't it going on down in Texas?

SM: And this was a subject that was brought up while you are in Vietnam?

PW: Sure. We sat around, talked about it, and a lot of guys would tell me, say, "you know Watson, you guys are Neanderthals down there [in Texas] and here's why" and what can I do to dispute it? Here I was being slandered literally because I was from Texas and I still held my own, but still that was something I had to work against. I can remember reading a book called the *Strawberry Connection*, I read that in Vietnam, which was about, it was the anti-Vietnam movement, the hippie movement, the culture, the whole bit and the guy made the comment, says three things he didn't like and I forget what one of them was, but one of them was [the state of] Texas. Texas was not a pleasant place philosophically or environmentally or anything else, it was considered to be the problem. Texas was a big part of the Vietnam War, Texas was a huge part of the Vietnam War. Texas was benefiting from it and the people down there didn't seem to have problem with that at all. They seemed to be focused on football and not getting that war stopped and what could you say, the facts held that out. I came home and I said, "hey, where you were you guys?" [They'd say] "Oh, yes we were protesting, I said, "no, you weren't because it wasn't in the media." They said, "oh, yes we was a power keg down here [Texas]. I said, "well I don't think so because it never got out . . . " but what are you going to do, bottom line is, there should have been more coming from Texas I felt like from the standpoint, I'm that way today. I've never voted Democrat except one time in my life and that was'72, I've voted Republican every time since. But there should have been, in my opinion, the editorialists and the newspapers and what not. Dallas Morning News couldn't have been more pro-Vietnam. They were just totally conservative, yes, we're doing the right thing all the way. Sorry about that, I'm sorry Steve.

SM: No, that was good, I'm curious you mentioned something very interesting. In what ways did you think Texas was benefiting from the war, again this is back in '68 and '69 when you are there?

PW: Well, let me just tell you, I used to work on those ships, those riverboats. We were unloading things that, Texas Instruments, Collins Radio, which is right up there on Central Expressway, Route 635, I can throw a rock from where I'm sitting and hit it. Well, it's not there any more, but that's what it was then. Collins Radio, Texas

Instruments, Bell Helicopter, Ling Tim Co Vought, what's the other ones, hey come on there is a bunch of them in this area. My cousins were working, making fighter airplane parts at LTV. This economy here was booming because of Vietnam and there was no question about it, jobs, here was doing great because of Vietnam. Look at all these corporations, there was more than that. Come one, there was Chance Rockwall, there was another one of Texas corporations who were making big bucks off the Vietnam war.

SM: Texas wasn't the only state benefiting.

PW: No, sir it wasn't, but I will guarantee you Texas got the lion's share.

SM: Okay, and then that was discussed and talked about while you were over there.

PW: Yes, sir.

SM: The fact that Texas had so much industry that was benefiting.

PW: That's right, it's hard to ignore the names on the crates. I had had my skateboard in 1965 and '66, skating down through the Collins radio parking lot late on Saturday nights and here a year and a half later I'm unloading their boxes off those YFU. I knew where this stuff was coming from, there was no doubt in my mind. I'd already skinned my knees in that [corporation's] parking lot. There was just a lot of industry in this area that benefited tremendously from that, not to mention the military bases. They had Killeen [Texas] that was just supplying all that tank warfare, of course we didn't have a lot of tanks in Vietnam, but there was the helicopter training in Mineral Wells, huge base.

SM: Fort Walters.

PW: Okay, was that it, so all those places were booming and those economies were doing great because of the Vietnam War.

SM: Reese Air Force base.

PW: Yes, where was that one?

SM: Here, In Lubbock.

PW: Oh, in Lubbock, okay, there you go. Yes, so Texas was doing great because of Vietnam and the people were focusing on football. [phone button hit].

SM: Hello?

PW: Yes, can you hear me?

SM: Yes, sure can.

PW: I'm on a radiophone, I'm probably losing my battery, I'm going to go over hear and pick up on this hard line.

SM: Yes, sir.

PW: Anyway that was my take on it, I felt like Texas wasn't upholding their responsibility for getting this thing stopped.

SM: Okay, so this will end the first CD of the interview with Philip Watson.

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Philip Watson on the 24th of April, 2001. This is CD #2. Why don't we go ahead and discuss your time at Sa Huynh and the transition from being in teletype repair to, describe what you did there.

Philip Watson: Okay, I was in teletype repair in the Triangle and there was about eight guys there that worked in that department next to a big huge department of guys working on teletypes and what not. Basically I got sideways with the chief [petty officer] there and the chief there was an evil person I thought. He had already sent one guy on riverboats and had lamented in front of everybody that one of the riverboats that blew up the other day didn't have the guy on it that he had sent over there. So, if you got sideways with the higher ups you could get yourself killed in the politics and that's always been the case in the military is my understanding because they can just, if a guy doesn't like you and he's higher ranking he can send you out into harm's way. I was therefore sent out in harm's way, I'm pretty sure because this chief did not like me. I was sent down, even though I am teletype repair, there is no teletypes in Sa Huynh but it [Sa Huynh] was very small. On the internet you can find almost nobody, you can find occasionally somebody that was there, or heard about it. I actually ran across one guy that's been there, and it was a small place, and it was very hot at the time. When I say hot I mean it was being attacked, it was getting mortared, it was a dangerous place. Down there it was just, Sa Huynh was a ville, a Vietnamese village and next to it was a very nice natural port and that's no coincidence as to why the Navy had a stopping off place there. The riverboats would come down the shoreline, not down the river, but down the shoreline and then would pull in and we would unload. There were eighty Navy guys on Sa Huynh and there were four radiomen. Sailors at Sa Huynh would send

the material (shipped by Navy YFUs) out into the field for the Army. When I got down there it was very different than what I had been so far, seven months in Vietnam and Da Nang, this was very different. We carried a rifle at all times with us, and a .45. You could hear sounds of shooting at night, a lot, bombs going up, mortars going off, artillery rounds. The Army was getting it on quite often over next to us on the hill above us, (Army compound called Charlie Brown). In fact we interacted with the Army quite a bit. I made friends with some of those guys. I was much more involved with the war at this point, I wasn't on Tiensha, this [Sa Huynh] was getting close to it and I got there because I think the chief didn't like me.

SM: Did you yourself get fired at quite a bit at that base?

PW: We took mortar rounds and the two months that I was there, I mean this doesn't sound like a lot, but believe me we got hit once a week. I don't know, maybe we'd go two weeks without getting hit, then all of a sudden we'd get an attack. Now, the commanding officer would pull us all out and say, "now look, here's what intelligence tells us, we're ripe to get hit he says. We understand there is an offensive building up," which there was. And we expected to a big brunt of that because this area [Sa Huynh] was where a lot of materials were coming in, and if they could knock us out, they could cut the supply of materials going to the Army. We were strategically something that the enemy would like to take out of action.

SM: When you say you were mortared, how accurate typically was that fire?

PW: Now mortars well, we didn't get rocketed, so rockets weren't that accurate, they were more powerful, but the mortars were feared more even though they were less powerful, you [the enemy] could "walk" them in with more accuracy. They [mortars] were considered to be a problem than rockets. Now, once we got inside a bunker, we had sandbag bunkers, we weren't worried too much. They could hit a bunker, and probably, unless they hit a real solid direct hit probably nobody inside would get killed because we were pretty protected. Now, when we had to go out into the trenches around there and fire back and what not, well, the whole time I was there we never had a guy killed. Now, we had had guys killed prior. I guess probably I was one of the closer ones to getting killed, but still their stuff [mortars] was coming in, it was raining in. If it hit one of those

floating fuel barges we could have died of some kind of gas because of the smoke it would let out. In fact we had gas masks for that reason. What was your question?

SM: No, I was your curious the accuracy when they would fire mortars into your compound, had they obviously staked out or?

PW: They weren't very accurate actually I guess because they never did while I was there because they never did while I was there hit anything of any strategic consequence. They hit right in the front door of our hooch, but that's not a place I'm sure they were aiming. They went off in various places but they never did hit the floating fuel barges, they never did hit the CO's headquarters, bottom line is they would hit and run, they would send some mortars in and by that time we would have a helicopter come in or we'd shoot back or whatever and they'd be scurried away.

SM: Were you ever probed by sappers or anything like that?

PW: They said on Christmas Day '68 that they were and I wasn't there but they said that that happened. Some sappers came in on low tide or whatever.

SM: What about the compositions of the enemy in that area, who was firing the mortars at you?

PW: We were told it was the NVA and I'm sure that's true. I never saw one, I never saw an NVA guy. But the Army, and again I was communicating with the communication guys at the Army, who knew more than we did really. I'd go over and talk to those guys even when I was off duty one night and they said it's NVA, that the NVA was very strong in our area. The NVA was considered to be a really well trained force of people, good uniforms and everything.

SM: Now where in relation to Da Nang was Sa Huynh?

PW: Well, Sa Huynh is right on the line between II Corps and I Corps and I have looked this up before and I don't remember the number, I'm guessing one hundred fifty miles south of Da Nang, on the coastline. Again, wherever II Corps and I Corps meet, that could be researched real fast and I could get you that answer, just off the top of my head. That's where it is, the A Shau Valley where Hamburger Hill and a lot of stuff went on is right where it's at as well. Matter of fact, the movie *Hamburger Hill* took place exactly the same time that I got wounded. In fact, I was watching that movie one time as they were doing it, they would put up a date and they would go May 9, 1969, May 10,

1969. I was hit on May 12, 1969, then they would go to May 11, 1969 so I said they're going to show my date next, they skipped over it and went to May 13. There was a lot going on right then, that was that Ho Chi Minh birthday offensive which was considered to be I think the second Tet and it started that night of May 12 as I understand it. That's when we started getting hit, I know that. It was on going there for quite a while. If you look at the date, down at the fair park Texas has a Vietnam veteran's wall, not like the one in Washington, DC and they have dates on the Texas wall and if you'll look, there is a huge number of May 12, 1969, people that got killed that day.

SM: Now, prior to that engagement where you were injured though, in terms of the overall scheme of things, you were providing support to the Army units and they were doing patrolling in that area?

PW: Yes, they were. We were listening to them on the radio as the patrols would go at night and what not.

SM: Did they make a lot of heavy contact?

PW: I don't know about a lot, they made contact. There was a bridge and for some reason, it wasn't a very big bridge, it was almost nothing. It was like a few boards over a low area, but for some reason the Vietnamese really wanted that. The Army would send patrols out and that is where a lot of fighting took place over that so-called bridge. We would hear them in firefights and it would just sound like rain. You'd hear rain, it would be kind of light rain, you hear heavy rain, well that's just how the firing would be. Then we would hear them on the radios, again I'm listening on the radio. That's one thing about a radioman, you get to hear it. I'd be listening to those guys talk to each other and I remember hearing all the firing stopped one night and we'd hear no shooting and I heard an Army guy on the radio go, "they are throwing rocks at us." And he said, "are you serious?" and he said, "yes, those guys are throwing rocks at us." We could hear this kind of thing [talk on the Army platoon's radio]. We'd also hear the helicopters talking to each other, one helicopter guy, they were working in tandem, they would be called in and of course those rockets off those pods were loud and they were shooting down this one guy in the helicopter was saying, "I'm afraid to go into that spot you just shot into, I saw some fire come out of there and blah, blah this." A lot of action,

quite a bit, I remember seeing it from a distance at night and then hearing them talk on the radios both on the ground and in the air.

SM: Now, that incident where they were throwing rocks, this was at night?

PW: Yes.

SM: Did anybody put forward the possibility that they were apes, because I understand the apes used to do that a lot?

PW: Yes, I've heard that too, rock apes. Those were up on monkey mountain, but I don't think that was the case this particular night. I don't know that to be the case, I remember this, I remember the guys on the ground said they're throwing rocks at us and I can remember the Lieutenant or whoever is back at headquarters commenting, "well boy they must be hurting," quote, unquote. Obviously, that was a pretty good comeback, I thought. But they went back to shooting. But there was a little bit of that interplay between ground troops. They might get into stop fighting for a while and play around with each other a little bit, I don't think that was rock apes that night. I have heard that too and I'd forgotten all about that, but I never saw that myself, I just heard that from other people.

SM: While we are on the subject of wildlife, did you have many other tangles with Vietnamese wildlife, animals, insects, what was it like?

PW: Well, snakes were an issue, they had water snakes that were supposedly poisonous so we couldn't throw guys in on their birthday any more in the water down in Sa Huynh because supposedly they'd get bit by a snake and a guy, we had this tradition of going, throwing guys in the water off the bridge on their birthdays. They stopped that because the snakes, I don't know if anybody ever got bit or not, they just stopped it. There were supposedly some Cobras in the bunker one night with some guys. I wasn't there, but they said there was a couple of Cobras in the bunker when the rockets went off. But let me tell you something, if you've got a choice between tangling with a Cobra snake or an incoming rocket or mortar round, you will tangle with a Cobra every time. Nobody got bit or anything. I was in Graves Registration, the little bit of time I was there, they had talked about, they brought a guy in just recently, he had been killed by a tiger while he was on watch one night. Insects were bad over there. It was a tropical

place. I heard ants could be a real problem but I never ran into any of them, again I was a perimeter guy and I just wasn't out in the bush like those other guys.

SM: How about leeches?

PW: Heard about them but I never was stomping through the rice paddies.

SM: Well I didn't know if in your river work?

PW: No, never had a problem then.

SM: Now, the radio traffic and the teletype traffic that you were privy to earlier, you mentioned that once in a while you would hear that someone was being interrogated, someone captured, when you were, did they differentiate what military organization the captured person belonged to, whether it was Vietcong, NVA or whatever?

PW: I got the impression it was Vietcong and not NVA, but I don't know that to be the case. Now you know an NVA soldier is just a soldier, whereas the Vietcong probably is some kind of guy with some intelligence as a general rule I think and the interrogator, the actual person is who is actually hurting the person was a Vietnamese. I'm sure our guys were there on the sidelines but it was my understanding, now I know this, when I was at An Hoa for those few days, they had a guy come by, saw him with his hands tied behind his back. He only had on a pair of shorts and he was bloodied on his buttocks and had a wound there and it wasn't real bad, but he was hurt and he was going to interrogation. We watched him go by, they said he is going to interrogation and I'm sure he didn't have a very good time but he was, they said, a Vietcong guy, but that's all I saw.

SM: That's the only prisoner you saw firsthand?

PW: Yes, and I did see him.

SM: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to discuss about your time in Sa Huynh prior to getting injured?

PW: No, not really, there was one very disturbing thing. Well, one day I was called duty to go to it, there was a dump truck, one of our guys ran over some Vietnamese children. The guy that ran over them was a guy I played poker with on a regular basis, a guy from Chicago and he had backed down into this low area to dump trash, and our trash was often Vietnamese treasures. And when he opened up the lid the kids ran over there and started picking up what was falling out of the truck and his brakes failed and he

backed up over them. So I was sent down there real fast. We had a riot on our hands right away. We had the Vietnamese come out of the rice farming field and all the civilians came up and were just screaming and yelling, and sure they were, I mean all these kids are hurt. We were doing everything we could, I say we, I was just standing around, the Chief Corpsman, he had called in a helicopter immediately and we were trying to quite this riot down, actually it was going to get out of hand if we weren't careful. These people were very angry, (carrying sharp farm tools), and they were screaming, crying, it was very emotional. I mean I'm emotional thinking about it right now. So this guy said, "well get .45s, get two of them and we'll fire in the air, we'll fire over their heads." Well, we did that and they backed off but I could just see the hate in those people's eyes. It was just unbelievable, they were looking at me, I was nineteen years old and they hated me, you could see it. Anyway, we got a chopper in and we loaded the kids up and they were going to send them to Duc Pho and I know that the one I carried, I took a litter and carried this one fifteen year old girl, I know that because I watched the radios message come in that night, over to the teletype. Well, when we're carrying her over there, she flops off of it, right there on the ground and she's got internal injuries and here we couldn't even carry her to the helicopter for crying out loud. So I get her back on the stretcher and the helicopter comes in and its blowing dust. If you've ever been around a helicopter, they are miserable when they land next to you, those things blow dirt unbelievably. They are very, very brutal wind cranking machines and I look down and her eyes were open and there were dust just hitting her eyeballs so I could tell she was dead or close to it and she ended up dying. That was a very emotional thing and the guy that ran over them I felt so sorry for him. He was a tough kid and that affected him tremendously, I could see he was very shook up. Well, we all were. There was a kid, little smallest kid, like a three year old boy and I remember one of our guys went over and picked him up and he just had a huge chuck out of his head. The kid did not appear to be in any kind of shock or anything, he was just kind of looking around, kind of a little dazed maybe was all. I think that right there was, that was a lot of emotion. I felt like we needed to get out of Vietnam. We weren't doing anybody any good over there, we needed to get out of there. We were just causing trouble.

SM: How close was this to the engagement where you were injured?

PW: You mean time wise?

SM: Yes.

PW: I don't know, three weeks, a month maybe.

SM: Any other incidents stand out in your mind or any other activities?

PW: No, there was a lot of shooting and everything that I heard on the radios and that stuff, I remember it but I can't say as it really stands out.

SM: About the support you provided for the Army, you mostly brought in supplies and got them to them I assume, was there ever any shortages of stuff that you remember?

PW: Yes, now there was a talk of shortages all the time. I heard, I never had a shortage myself, but I heard a lot of people say that they did and I remember some Marines talking about how they had to go out in the field with their dress shoes on. Again, if you had a shortage you could go to the black market and get whatever you wanted. I never saw any shortages. There was "good food" shortages, we ate out of cans all the time in Sa Huynh and there was a shortage of decent food and every now and then some decent stuff would come in, but I heard a lot of shortages, I can't say I was affected by any of them. We had plenty of beer. I remember when they talked about, in the very first we went to Vietnam, to the orientation, the Admiral came out and talked about all the body counts. He said, this [the war] was pretty much supported by Anheuser Busch. He said it used to be we had a six-pack per day per man, but now we can honestly say that per man, there is two cases per day and there was some absurd number like that. Anyway, there was never a shortage of beer, keep everybody drunk over there.

SM: Was that an important outlet for you?

PW: Yes, to get drunk was something to escape. Of course now in Sa Huynh it was different, you didn't want to get too drunk in Sa Huynh because you may have to get up in the middle of the night and fight your way out of this deal. (Sa Huynh was what they called "Indian Country" meaning you could get into a fight at any time.) In Camp Tiensha and all that, get some time off, just go get bombed.

SM: What about other mechanisms of distraction, USO shows, services, stuff like that?

PW: Yes, they had bands that came in and would play occasionally. They were nice. They had bands at the clubs that you could go to. In Sa Huynh, we had one time we had some kind of band came in, small Australian band, they played and yes that was great. There wasn't much of that though. It was very rare and few between.

SM: You didn't see any major USO shows?

PW: They had Bob Hope while I was there but I remember them saying, "Watson you've got stand watch today and everything but he went and that was the same chief that sent to me to Sa Huynh. I went down there and I ended up standing watch that day, didn't get to go. I don't really regret it either.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and discuss the events leading up to you being injured?

PW: Well, it was just every now and then we'd have to go to Duc Pho to pick up the mail or supplies or what not. I was just going to go in the convoy that day, Army convoy, tag along, go down there and pick up the mail or take and get photos developed or whatever. Just to pick up stuff and bring back and so the convoys went every day or went most days and somebody in our group would just go down there and come back with whatever we needed to do, so I went that day. We'd been hit with mortars all that night, we had been mortared heavier that night than anytime I'd been there and then they'd quit during the day and then that afternoon at five o'clock is when our convoy got hit as we got three miles outside of Sa Huynh going towards Duc Pho and they just ambushed us. We had about like a fifteen vehicle convoy, mostly carrying, well carrying large JP-4 fuel tankers, jet fuel which is what I was in, a tanker and then they had flatbed trucks carrying artillery shells, and in between each one was either a track, someone that was protecting it with a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on a gun jeep and they hit us and that was it.

SM: What size enemy force was it, do you think?

PW: I don't know, they said it must have been pretty good NVA operation but I don't know, I really don't know if it was just a company or a couple of squads or anything. I don't know, I never saw any of them. Well, I saw some dead ones but I didn't see any live ones really.

SM: About how many men were involved in the conflict?

PW: I'm going to guess fifty.

SM: About how many vehicles?

PW: Well, I'd say fifteen to twenty I guess. Does that make sense, three in each one? Yes, I guess that's about right. And again I mean, I don't think anybody knows. This thing probably started out with so many and at the last minute they changed it, (took some vehicle and brought other ones in), I don't know but I know there was a good long convoy I know that. We had guys in each vehicle, well, two, three, four guys in each vehicle.

SM: How long did the ambush last?

PW: I'm going to guess it lasted thirty, forty-five minutes really. They immediately took us out of commission. That was one thing they talked about, we were going through this place called Ambush pass and it was known for sniper fire but it [sniper fire] very rarely stopped a convoy, quote, unquote "stopped the convoy." Normally, the convoy kept going, it would take the fire, return fire but keep going. It rarely got stopped on the road. (Keep moving was the key.) This particular day not only did we get stopped, we were just obliterated. The trucks were crashed off the side of the road burning, never to be used again type thing. There was a big mess so they really hit us hard that day. I know the truck I was in was completely destroyed and on the way out of there I saw other trucks that were burning, that there was no way they were ever going to roll again.

SM: About how many vehicles were destroyed?

PW: I don't know, but I heard the first truck and the middle truck and our truck, which is at the very end got destroyed and I saw other trucks that were looked like to me in pretty bad shape so I'm going to say five or six at least. I think I heard the report, and I'm pretty sure they said there were seven guys killed.

SM: How many injured?

PW: A bunch, I don't know how many injured, but a lot, there was a bunch of us hit. I talked to one guy later, he said he was driving a truck by himself which is pretty rare, he was driving a deuce and a half. He said he was just driving along, and he said he saw some stuff hitting on the side of the road which turned out the be RPG rounds which is what I got hit by. He said all of a sudden a bullet just went right through his arm, the

one he was holding on the steering wheel. So, he was injured but he survived it, said he opened up the truck door and jumped out. He said the truck just went on down, it was a very curvy road, says went off the road.

SM: Now, how did the men, especially the security element of the convoy react?

PW: Very well. They were cranking it [M-60 machine guns], they were doing a good job. In fact, I immediately heard those M-60 machine guns which were on those jeeps open up and then when I, my truck went off the road and I could hear the AK-47s, well AK-47 rifle makes a much different sound than an M-60 or M-16 so you can hear and discern the sound of an AK-47 and I could hear those AK-47s shooting over there where my truck was. I was told later there was like a hundred rounds shot into that cab of that truck I was in. Now, why they went over there and shot up that truck is beyond me because it was burning, it was out of commission, but that's what I was told. Now, they were over there shooting the truck up because I could hear that AK-47 so I knew they were in the area and we were the last guys in the convoy. So, there was nobody behind us but a gun Jeep, security guy, there were two guys and a gun Jeep hung around to see if there was anybody going to come out of that smoke which I did and they picked me up. In fact one guy went into harm's way to come out and get me. Would I like to talk to that guy today? But who knows who he was, he was an Army guy, never saw him again, I never learned his name or anything. He put himself at risk to go out and pull me back, pull me next to the Jeep and we got in the Jeep and we took on off. (It was a crazy scene). There was a motorcycle that came up as we were leaving, there was a motorcycle that was coming towards us on this curvy road, L-shaped road and I could see it before it made the curve, so in other words it was running almost perpendicular and I could see this thing coming, I said, "what in the hell is that?" I could see it was like a Honda 90 or something and this guy was on a motorcycle and he turned the corner in the road, now he's coming straight at us and I went "whoa", all of a sudden I looked over and there was some 50 caliber tracers I could have just reached out literally and touched. They went right by us and just hit that guy on that bike and that turned out to be the track that was behind us (who was shooting the motorcycle and rider) that we just passed right by the downed motorcycle and rider, and they just blew that guy to the pieces.

SM: Oh, this was an enemy soldier on a bike?

PW: Well, I don't know who it was. I'm assuming it was, but whoever it was, was in the wrong place. He shouldn't have been out there riding that motorcycle, but I'm assuming he's enemy and they assumed he was enemy and they killed him.

SM: You didn't notice if he was in uniform?

PW: He was not in a uniform because I noticed him distinctly as we drove by, he was on my side of the Jeep and we went by him and he was just very dead. He had been alive just a few seconds earlier and he was definitely not in uniform, he was civilian attired individual on a civilian type motorcycle. Why he was in the middle of all that firefight I don't know, it's almost one of those things, am I sure I really saw that or not, but I'm pretty sure I did.

SM: Now, you say your truck got hit by an RPG, is that correct?

PW: Right.

SM: And you got injured in that first blast?

PW: Right.

SM: Did it throw you from the vehicle, did you jump out of the vehicle?

PW: Yes, the RPG hit the vehicle and again the road was curvy and then we started getting hit by automatic weapons fire and I laid down and the weapons fire was coming right above me and it was hitting the fuel tanker, I could see the bullet holes going into the fuel tanker and I could see fuel spilling out. And Baxter, who was driving had been killed and I was laying on top of his body. I reached over then at that point, because I was dazed, in fact I was flat out knocked out at first and I came to pretty quick and I reached over to get the steering wheel and it was right when that happened that I realized that we were going off the cliff and when we did we had a canvas top in that cab and it hit about fifteen, twenty feet down and jackknifed and I was thrown out through the canvas top of that cab. (We went down a steep incline), and when I went out of that cab and I looked up into a blue sky and I was just falling and I remember just wondered how long am I going to fall before I hit ground because it was a long time it felt like and I finally hit the ground. Then somebody shot at me again with an RPG because I heard it go over my head and explode and I heard that Boomp-schh and I hit the ground and then I made it away from the truck because I thought it was going to blow up. It never did but I got over, got behind a big rock and lay on the other side of it. I'd lost my rifle and I'd

even lost my knife, I couldn't even find it. I'd taken a pretty big spill if you will. I'd lost my wallet, I'd lost my ID Card, I'd lost my dog tags. My clothes were literally in tatters from that fall and landing and what not.

SM: You said earlier in our interview yesterday, you mentioned that you were close to being captured?

PW: Well, I mean I could hear them shooting the place up over on the other side and they were getting closer, I could tell that too. So it was just a matter of time before I felt like I was going to look over and see a squad walking towards me. Yes, and I wanted to get up and run but I was afraid to come (out of my spot where I was hidden in the grass). As a matter of fact, when I did get up and head for the road I heard AKs open up again, but I got into the smoke and laid down on the road and they were lower than me so they couldn't just lay their rifles along the road and get me laying out there on the road. They were at an angle disadvantage so I was laying in smoke, they couldn't see me inside the smoke and they couldn't put their rifles right along the road and fire at me but I assume they were shooting at me. Because I heard them open up as soon as I got up on the road. When I got in the smoke, I went on the other side of the smoke, I saw our gun Jeep. I held up my hands because I was afraid they were going to turn around and shoot me, but they signaled me to come to them and I tried to but I was hurting pretty bad, my legs were just full of shrapnel and I fell twice and that second time the guy ran out and pulled me back.

SM: What happened after that?

PW: Well, we got in the gun Jeep, I told them, I said, "I had lost my rifle" I said," I need a rifle." And he said, "we're out of ammo, we've got to go, we've got to go pick up some ammo" and I said well, "I'd really like a rifle" but I was hurting real bad and I think, they were looking at me with grimaces and I could tell by their expressions they thought I was somebody they needed to get to a Medevac. So they said, "let's get in the Jeep." We got in the Jeep and this guy had .45 in one hand that he was shifting gears with a .45 in one hand, steering wheel in the other. I mean literally we were going so fast and then we went by the guy with the motorcycle and we're going by burning trucks that are on fire literally with ammunition on them and I thought that thing was going to blow up. He was driving so fast and dodging bodies and chunks of burning stuff on the road, I

thought we were going to get killed in a Jeep wreck and the guy working the M-60 machine gun was standing up back just firing as fast as he could, the hot, empty rounds were falling all over me. It was quite a ride and we went through all of that and got away from it down the road and someplace we pulled up next to a, what they called a track, those M-119s or whatever they are. They're a track but they're an armored personnel carrier. But this one didn't have any personnel in it, it had a guy on top with a machine gun and they stopped and opened up the back door and put me in it, which there was a medic in there. Then they went and pulled out a whole bunch of boxes of ammunition and got back in the Jeep and headed back right into it. Those are some incredible guys, I'll tell you. To answer your question about the security guys, that was who were doing it and boy they unloaded me, one guy put himself at risk to get me, unloaded me, loaded back up with ammunition, took off and got right back into it, tremendous display of courage and duty. I was in awe. With those in the track though, the medic started kind of looking me over and said basically they were going to get me to a dust off [medevac helicopter] and get me out of there and I said "okay."

SM: How long did that take?

PW: I'm going to guess thirty minutes. We were riding in the APC and I remember kind of dozing in and out. I think the guy gave me some morphine but I cannot remember that exactly, I don't know why I would have dozed in and out had I not had morphine. I don't remember him giving me a shot or anything. I remember the guy, I remember being very thirsty and there was beer cans all over that track and rolling around, empty beer cans and the guy shooting the machine gun up in the turret above me had a beer can between his legs. He had about half the teeth he should have had in his head and he had tattoos all up and down his arm. He was just shooting that machine gun like he was having the most fun he ever had in his life. They took me to a helicopter landing zone and then they [medevac helicopter] got me out of it and I saw some guys running with all four parts of the litter and next thing I knew the helicopter blades were spinning above me and the next thing I knew I was lifted out of there.

SM: And this was May of '69, correct?

PW: Correct, just before dark.

SM: Now, where were you taken in terms of the hospital?

PW: I was taken to Duc Pho first, which was just like a MASH unit only a modern day one. They landed and pulled me off of it, took me inside, tore all my clothes off in a very quick fashion, inserted a catheter in my penis because I had a wound in my penis, a lot of other places too. They had one there, so he put a catheter in, they put an IV in me, cleaned off the wound as best as possible, on the bigger wounds they put some bandages, took me out, put me down and waited for the next helicopter that was going to Chu Lai. So, from there on out we didn't have any clothes, they just had a blanket over me. Well, then I went to Chu Lai and they started taking the shrapnel out at there. I underwent kind of surgery there. I've heard this before and it's true. I was wounded pretty badly, I felt like I was going to live but I knew I had been hurt. I didn't know how bad internally but as it turned out I had not been hurt that bad but I was bleeding very badly, but, like I've heard about being wounded in war, there is always somebody worse off. I'd heard that and that was true. We had a black guy and he was somewhere in the convoy, I don't know where, but he and I rode together in every way. They loaded us up the first helicopter, they put us on the second helicopter together at Chu Lai. He had a head wound and he had also some wounds that were real close to his abdomen, in his hip area. When they had our clothes off when we were at Chu Lai and this is after quite a bit of helicopter riding and after quite a bit of stuff, I mean this took an hour. I looked over and they were literally cutting just a little bit of flesh (that still attached his leg to his upper body), to his left, up and around his hip, his entire leg. One guy was holding his entire leg up, the other guy was just literally cutting away what little flesh was left. This wounded guy was looking up and just watching them do this and then immediately started moaning. When the doctor saw that this guy was awake and was watching this, just grabbed his forehead, pulled his head down. It made my wounds feel pretty insignificant at that point. So anyway that guy, I don't know if he made it or not, but they put us together again for another helicopter flight. I remember the medic on board that flight kept reaching over and touching his jugular vein, I guess to see if he was still alive. I just wonder if that guy ever made it. I remember that, kind of humorous I guess, before we actually got picked up by the first helicopter I was laying out next to this track and they'd stopped and there was a squad of guys near where all, pulling out their cigarette packs and offering me a cigarette. Of course I didn't smoke, which was a rarity. I heard

the Sergeant, whoever was in charge going, “we need to get a chopper, we need to get a dust off in here right now. I’ve got one that may die on me.” I didn’t know then, I thought maybe he wasn’t’ talking about me, but he was talking about that black guy.

SM: How long was your convalescence?

PW: Well, I ended up leaving Vietnam as soon as I could walk, which was three days later, May 15. I couldn’t walk very good, but I could walk. I could literally get up and go to the bathroom, but I left May 15 of ’69 and then I went to Japan, Yakuska, Japan and I was there and there was another hospital, I was in three hospitals in Japan. I got home and I went to a hospital in Alaska for a couple of days and I went to a hospital in Memphis, which I stayed for awhile, at that point though I was home, I guess three weeks later.

SM: So you never went back to Vietnam?

PW: No, I was out of there. In fact that night when they took me to the hospital in Chu Lai they got me in bed like at midnight and the guy came over and he said, “we’re going to put you in this bed, because you know what’s about this bed?” and I said, “what’s about this bed.” He said, “anybody that gets in this bed goes home,” so I knew I was out of Vietnam. In fact the medic when I first got picked up and was inside the track, the guy that gave me morphine, said, “you’re out of here buddy, he says you’re going home.” I guess they could just tell the severity of my wounds was, there was no way I was going to be back to Vietnam. I had four months left to go in Vietnam and all of a sudden, boom, I’m out of there. I never did have that countdown like everybody else did, all of a sudden one day I’m just, I’m out of Vietnam.

SM: How did you feel about that?

PW: Well, I was glad to be back. I kind of regret to this day, not having the countdown though, that would have been fun to have gotten on that plane at the last day of your tour. No, I was glad to get out of Vietnam, glad to see my folks, get home, see my girlfriend.

SM: How long was it until you were back to normal, completely recovered from your injuries?

PW: Well, I never did really fully recovered, when you consider my hearing because I can’t hear in my left ear today. I wear a hearing aid the VA gave me. I limped

for a long time. Later I had a major knee surgery because they say, some doctors say, some doctors say no, because of that injury and to this day I can't bend that knee as far as I should be able to bend it, even though it doesn't hurt me, it doesn't cause me a problem. I can ride a bicycle and everything. I was on permanent limited duty for the rest of the time I was in the Navy. I didn't have to stand inspections where we stood up a long time, I was precluded from high intensity noises, that type thing.

SM: Now, were you discharged from the military once you got back home?

PW: No, I went ahead and spent the next two years in the Navy under what they call limited duty. I was doing a desk job there in the radio station so I could do that work but I was not qualified for re-enlistment though as I remember it.

SM: Because of your injuries?

PW: Yes.

SM: So, basically you didn't get out of the Navy until '71.

PW: That's correct.

SM: The time that you were in, did you have a lot of interaction with another Vietnam veterans who were in the Navy?

PW: No, not at all. When I got into the, actually, what is it, I'd been in the Navy two and half years or whatever and all of a sudden I'm in where I should have been the very beginning, if everything had gone according to Hoyle, at this Naval Air Station in Beeville, Texas. All of a sudden the chief there where I was stationed was kind of disgusted. He says, "you mean they sent me somebody that doesn't know anything about naval communications." I said, "hey man I've been in Vietnam, I didn't want to go over there." He says, "well you're not going to do us any good. You don't know anything about this stuff" and I said, "no, I haven't been on a ship chief, I've been over in Vietnam. And the reason I'm here is because there's a naval hospital just down the road, I'm going to continue having surgery," which I did. I had to periodically go down there and get some more surgery done on my ear and what not. These guys, the ones I was now stationed with in the radio shack, they'd been two and a half years out in the fleet and they knew all about naval communications. I didn't know anything so I had to kind of get up to speed and I remember the chief being a little bit irritated by that but I was back into what I should have been doing all along I guess. As far as any Vietnam

veterans, no. There were a couple of guys that had spent some time what they call Yankee Station which was the air craft carrier fleet right outside of Vietnam but they were on ships. I was pretty decorated to this point, most of these guys just had one or two ribbons, I had a bunch. I got some accolades for that, I got some esteem from that, in its own right. The CO was from Dallas and I would take messages up there because he was in the same building I was and I'd converse with him occasionally and if anybody got an outstanding in an inspection, which I didn't have to stand inspections, but if anybody got an outstanding in inspection they got a day off. Well, the CO from Dallas would come up to me in the inspection ranks because I would go ahead and go, and he'd look at me and go, "Watson, outstanding," which was basically giving me a day off. Of course that was a little bit of an irritant to my chief but he knew what politics were going on, but anyway, bottom line is I did get some. I was going back and forth to the hospital getting my wounds treated at the naval hospital. I even had to go and stay for three weeks or whatever and I was decorated and that meant something in the Navy.

SM: Now, I'm curious. I didn't ask you this earlier and I should have, what was the difference between the communications work you did say at the White Elephant and what not, versus the crypto teletype communication that you did down at Sa Huynh?

PW: Well, the crypto communication at Sa Huynh was, it probably wasn't that much difference. Now, I didn't, when I was at the White Elephant, they didn't let me go in and change up the wires on the crypto, I didn't get to open the envelope. Down at Sa Huynh I made a third class, I was E-4, now they were letting me do stuff like that. So the difference was basically I guess, was number one, there was just the one radio, the one crypto unit down at Sa Huynh and it was by the way the only air conditioned place on that place [Sa Huynh] because it had to be kept cool, so it was a little van type place, just sitting off to the side. You open and went inside, it was cool and that was where you did the crypto stuff. Now, they had the same thing at the White Elephant except that they didn't let me do that at the White Elephant. Now, down at Sa Huynh , I was one of the group of radiomen and they let me do it. So I had a job, every now and then I had to go in and change the wires up because I remember we pulled out little pegs and put them in holes based on this thing you pull out of the envelope and that's how you set the code for that day. Now, the transmission, I'm sitting here thinking to myself, I don't remember

we had a teletype but then again, yes we must have had a teletype in there. Most of what we did was voice because now I remember reading off print about that incident with that truck running over those kids, I remember that night getting the deal, I remember reading the names of those people and they were all Vietnamese. Also I remember them saying they were going to pay some remuneration to the next of kin. So I was reading that, not hearing that, so we had a van with a teletype and the crypto stuff there at Sa Huynh. It was probably the same system they had at White Elephant, just smaller and only one hovel.

SM: Not to be morbid, but in that incident with the truck, how many kids were killed?

PW: One, as I remember there was one kid killed, but boy there was some of them messed up. Who knows how many of them are in a wheelchair today. It went over them, it just crushed them. There was one as far as I know killed, that fifteen year old girl.

SM: How many were injured?

PW: I'm going to guess six or seven or eight.

SM: Let's go ahead and continue with the discussion of your time back in the United States, when you got back were you at all surprised at what was going on in the U.S. in late '69 and early '70?

PW: Well, what happened was I came back and I had a lot of friends and I was pretty popular in school so when I came back, immediately my buddies got together and their girlfriends who I had not met yet because all my guy friends had new girl friends it seemed since I'd left, and these new girl friends of theirs' were getting me dates. I was very popular (just because I was hit in Nam, that got me some dating currency for sure). So on the standpoint of a social life I had a great one when I got back. "Phil's back from Vietnam here, what's her name will get you a date with me." They would get me dates with girls that would never go out with me otherwise. Their girlfriends were getting me the dates. So I was enjoying a real nice social life but I was also at the same time a little upset that they weren't more outraged about the Vietnam War. They had been to some protests they said and this and that, but still they were more concerned with their parties and drag racing, and other things that I considered quite trivial. (I had changed and they had not, was the way I saw it). I was thinking, hey guys there is a war going on over

here, people getting killed and why aren't you all involved. Immediately, I think, I was told later that I was considered to be a little bit of a head case, so I guess I fit right in with the old stereotypical mold of a crazy Vietnam veteran, which I don't think I was a head case, I thought I was pretty serious about getting this stupid war stopped. Well, I got an early out of the Navy like three months just to get into college so I went over there and got enrolled at North Texas and I was going to spend one semester there and go down to UT. But all my friends were at North Texas and had all gone to Tech and UT and wherever else and flunked out and wasted a lot of time were now all congregated at North Texas and were juniors and trying to get the time wasted that they had made mistakes, even though they hadn't gone into military. So we're all kind of got back together up there, but I was still a little irritated so I got in with a little bit more of the political oriented group there in school which was the VVAW and some of the other protest groups and didn't get real radical but I did get involved enough to where I thought like we ought to so dome protesting, we ought to write some letters and carry on trying to get the war stopped. But it [the war] was winding down and the fervor and the passion just wasn't there. We could tell we [the U.S.] were moving out of that war and so at this point it was just going to wind itself down no matter what we did. As a consequence nobody, it just wasn't there as far as pushing it and going down and doing a lot of protesting or what not, so I just wrote letters and did stuff like that, tried to get my life back in order but I was surprised when I got back that people weren't more outraged about it. My brother was very involved with bussing at the time, bussing was a big deal, that seemed to really have a lot of people's attention, this bussing thing, they were all upset about that. That seemed to be the political issue of the moment, not Vietnam.

SM: Now what do you mean bussing?

PW: Bussing came out, it was an integration thing, if you have all white people in one neighborhood, you're not going to have any blacks in this neighborhood. So what they did was people [school kids] would get on a bus, kids would get on a bus thirty miles away and white kids would go down to south Dallas, and south Dallas kids would go to north Dallas and it was called bussing. It had a lot of emotional content to it because people didn't want to put their kids on a bus to go thirty miles to go in a school to be with blacks when they can go two blocks over and go to school with their

neighborhood kids. Well, you can see where that was an emotional issue, that was going on, busing was a big deal. I guess it's making me feel really old to hear you go, now what's with this busing.

SM: I was asking for clarification. I knew what it was, I just wanted to make sure that we got it on the record. The integration issue is an interesting one from the standpoint of just what was going in the nation generally, what did you think about that personally?

PW: Bussing?

SM: Yes, did you think that integration was necessary?

PW: Yes. I felt like that was going to work itself out, I didn't see that as something that was killing people. Obviously there had been some bombings in '64, whatever and all that kind of stuff. People had been hurt but I felt like that was pretty much the worst was over and it was going to work itself out. I saw that as just a social issue that was going to have its good outcome at the end. I saw Vietnam as totally different. I saw that Vietnam was something we needed to beat it to death, it needed to end. It was just a waste of human life. I'll tell you something right now; a dead teenage boy is a very ugly thing. I'm going to tell you right now, it is a very ugly thing. I told them I said, we can stop this war tonight. All we have to do is parade people through Graves Registration and see the dead American kids and it will stop. The problem is, people hadn't seen what I had seen. I was again, against the war going in and boy now I was really emotional about it.

SM: When did you become involved with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War?

PW: Well, I was at North Texas State and they had a chapter up there and right there next to all the fraternities was the table for Vietnam Veterans Against the War. So I just went over and I could tell these guys were a little older than the other students and there was a lot of veterans going to school because GI Bill and guys would come back and in fact there was a lot of veterans on campus. They were wearing their greens, they were wearing their insignias that they had when they were in the military, they were wearing their flop hats, their rain hats, (plus they had wild mustaches and long hair), it was just a lot of it there. So I went over to their table and said, "hey, guys how do I get

going on this deal". They said, "well, we've got a protest coming up in Houston this weekend if you want to go to that." I just kind of touched base with those guys, but again the fervor and the passion was not there any more.

SM: For?

PW: For really getting out and making your voice heard. The protests were dwindling because the war was in fact winding down, you could see it happening.

SM: And of course, at this point, the draft issue.

PW: Yes, Nixon's what stopped it in '73, but also I think in '71, '72, you didn't have as many, I don't think people were being drafted like they were. I think it was more of a professional slant towards the war, there was less of the populace being forced into it. It was being taken on by the career, I think that's what happened. I know that nobody, I can tell you that being my age, I am one of the youngest to get processed through on that system through the draft, one of the very youngest. Most of the people I've talked before and they say, well you're too young to be a Vietnam vet and I said yes, but I was, but I was one of the last ones.

SM: Now, when you became involved with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, did your family know you were becoming active?

PW: Yes, as a matter of fact, that's an interesting point. I was going to go to Houston one weekend for a big demonstration, there was supposed to be a big one going on. And my dad, somebody called over to my house, one of the VVAW guys and said, "hey, this is so and so at the VVAW and we're just trying to get in touch with Phil, he's supposed to go to Houston with us this weekend." Well, my dad said well, I'll take your name and number and he did and then he told me flat out, he said, "you're not going down there, you're not going down there and doing that protest." I said, "well, you know . . . ." and that was the beginning of the agitation. I said, "hey, I've been to Vietnam." He said, "I don't give a damn if you have or not, you're not living in this house and going down there protesting against the war." It was that type deal and all of a sudden there was a lot of – my brother was like, "hey, the war is coming to an end, we got this bussing issue . . . " so they were saying look, you need to rearrange your priorities here. Your efforts need to be put into better use, or whatever. There was some irritation, my parents didn't like it one bit.

SM: Did you go anyway?

PW: I was going to go, that was another thing, I was going to go that weekend. There was a few of use that were going to go in one car and the rest of them went on ahead and was one of the ones that were going to go later in this other car, all of a sudden the guy that has the car [that I'm going in], at the last minutes the guy that owns the car starts having these reservations and there was almost a bad fist fight between a couple of the guys in the group because the guy with the car was now backing out at the last minute when everybody else had already gone. So we did not go that weekend, but there was a lot of ill feeling between us and that element of Vietnam veterans. Those were all Army guys too, again, myself being Navy, I was the only Navy Vietnam veteran, all of them were Army, all of them were draftees. I remember not going that weekend and I remember just being very angry at that guy that had the car. So that next Monday I was talking to some guy in class. I said," how did it go down there [at the protest] this weekend." The guy says, "well you didn't really miss anything because we went down there and there wasn't much going on." He said," there was nobody yelling at us, there was no cops even around to stop us from doing anything, nobody was flipping us off." He said, "basically it was pretty much a bust," he said, "you really didn't miss anything." I can remember then going, well I guess this thing has gone away.

SM: Did you go to any anti-war demonstrations?

PW: During the campaign of '72, there were politicians that showed up on campus and in Dallas and places and spoke and I'd go to those and in that group. I would jeer at the people that were pro-Nixon and I'd carry a sign here too, maybe. We would just yell at the people, it didn't amount to much, let's put it that way. Even though I did, I would go to these speeches and get their opinions and that type deal.

SM: Now, the election of '72, which again you had a clash with your family about?

PW: Right, as a matter of fact, my wife voted for Nixon in '72. I've told people, if you voted for Nixon for '72 then you've got blood on your hands because Nixon was for killing, McGovern was for stopping the killing, bottom line. There's no rationalizing, its cut and dried, its black and white and I said, "if you voted for Nixon in '72 you have killed people, you have done it through your vote." Well, they disagreed with me, but my

father died in December of ’72, somewhat unexpectedly, he was in somewhat bad health. But he died of a heart attack and I can tell you, this is crazy to say this, but my suffering for his death was somewhat mitigated due to the fact that he had voted for Nixon in ’72. I felt that strongly. That he and I gotten so sideways and he was somewhat of a, I guess he was political, he talked about it a lot, he was political. He wasn’t involved but he kept up with it, had opinions about it. He and I, I remember him dying and I remember thinking I could be a lot sadder if my dad hadn’t voted for Nixon in ’72. When my wife and I first got married it was a source of contention then, I said, “how could you vote for Nixon? I mean look at the facts, look at this, look at that.”

SM: And she stayed with you anyway?

PW: Yes. We don’t have those arguments much any more. I just couldn’t believe it, I mean Nixon was going to continue the war, he had continued the war, he was going into Cambodia, he was going into Laos, and here was McGovern saying he was going to stop the war, stop it the day he got inaugurated and there was a landslide, it was fifty to zero, from the States. McGovern didn’t even carry South Dakota. I think that’s where he’s from.

SM: At the same time, Nixon was re-elected in ’72, you have the Christmas bombing campaign in 1972 and the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January of ’73, U.S. has pulled out.

PW: Okay, well you can’t see that going into the election. I agree with you, okay but you’ve got the hindsight.

SM: Absolutely, but after the fact, now.

PW: Yes, but Nixon has said he was going to do that in ’68 and he drug it on for four years and that was the argument. He has drug this thing on for four years when he said he was going to do that back in ’68, so who’s to say he’s going to do it again?

SM: Well, what did you think in January of ’73 when the Paris Peace Accords were signed and the U.S. was officially out?

PW: Well, I was glad and then when it [South Vietnam government] finally fell, I knew that was inevitable. There was never a doubt in my mind, we weren’t going to achieve what we were trying to do over there. There was no doubt in my mind whatsoever once I got over there and saw it. So I just knew that that was not going to

come to any good end, I just knew that was a big mistake. I can honestly say it, that's the way it turned out. Now, then Watergate happened and let me tell you, you are talking about reveling in it or wallowing in it. That was the terminology I think one of the elderly Roosevelt women said to Nixon. I literally wallowed in that. I watched Watergate and I didn't even have time to watch it. I watched it during the day and I watched the reruns at night whenever I could. I saw Nixon going down, it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life, was when Nixon got effectively impeached or kicked out of office, on another topic. But he deserved it and then when Nixon died, which is not too long ago, I took the headlines and I framed it, of the Dallas Morning News, because I am one sick puppy, but I'll tell you I thought Nixon was evil and I still do to this day. I wrote him letters, he never wrote back but I did because that guy, he killed a lot of people, let's face it. Now, again with hindsight, you're exactly right. The things did end and people have told me too, and compassionate people, people that I know and trust and care for me, they've told me, they said, "Philip they didn't want to just pull the plug like McGovern was talking, because that would have disgraced what you did in Vietnam and all your buddies." They said, "that would have been wrong towards you more than what Nixon did." I believe (they were sincere in) what they're saying. I couldn't see anything but the stopping of the killing and that's one thing I can agree with Jane Fonda. She said the same thing, she said, "I just wanted the killing stopped," and that's what I did. I wanted the killing stopped. It was ugly, (tragic and heartbreaking: the killing of good and innocent people).

SM: Well, what did you think when the U.S., now we're not talking about U.S. men being in harm's way, we're just talking about the U.S. government providing material support to the South Vietnamese government, that was yanked and of course April '75, South Vietnam fell, what did you think when that happened and the decision not to provide just material support?

PW: Well, civil wars are part of the human experience, of civilization. That was a civil war. We had a civil war over here. There have been civil wars everywhere. Civil wars, they wanted to reunite their country and the people that wanted to reunite were stronger and more focused in their efforts than the people that did not want to unite it. Now, democracy versus Communism, we've got a philosophical argument there. I

believe democracy would be better than Communism, but bottom line that was a civil war. Yes, they say domino theory and all that crap and I think it has some merit but civil wars happen. We had our Civil War, it was horribly bloody but it settled itself and the country's better afterwards. I think that's just what they were going through, a civil war. We should have stayed out of it.

SM: What do you think about deployments of American forces today?

PW: Well, I think we need to do it occasionally, strategically. There are times when you have to do things like that but you've got to be careful in this nation building thing. Obviously those atrocities that were going on over in Bosnia, they were very wrenching, just terrible things were going on over there, but I think it can be done correctly, let's put it that way. I think it was done incorrectly and I think they probably learned from it in Vietnam. We're a great country and we've got a lot of technology and we've got a lot of firepower. If you make the world a better place, you can help out, then go for it, but you're going to have to go in with your eyes open and not just come out with some macho stuff like Westmoreland was trying to do with his air cavalry. Those guys miscalculated.

SM: How do you feel about your service in Vietnam today?

PW: Actually, I'm proud of the way I handled myself and I did go through some tough stuff and I did handle it pretty well and I'm proud of the people I served with but I fell like I was involved in an illegal activity. I feel like I was over there doing a wrong thing. I just don't think we should have been there and I think I probably, I feel like that the government will never sneak up on me again. They fooled me once, they won't fool me twice. I feel like that was just a – again, on the micro level, I'm real happy, on the macro level I'm unhappy.

SM: What did you take away personally from your experience that was important to you, maybe as a life's lesson?

PW: Oh well, I learned that things can go wrong very quickly and you better pay attention, quickly things can change. Well, if you don't watch and not getting all the information you can get and you're not prepared, if you're not listening, if you're not paying, things can happen very quickly to your detriment so you better pay attention. I did come out of that with that opinion. I also learned that some people are more capable

than others, its just a fact of life. I don't know, that's a very mixed, I can't, I'm proud in some ways, in some ways I'm disarmed.

SM: What do you think we should take away from the war as a nation?

PW: Well, I think we should never just [blindly] trust our leaders (like mine and many of their generation did). I think our leaders need to be taken to task when they're going to make big decisions, they need to be told, let them know, we're watching you. You better be making the correct decision as best as you can and not lying to us. I think that lesson was learned, we were lied to in Vietnam, just flat lied to. Starting from the Gulf of Tonkin experience on forward. They got away with it for a long time, people trusted them too much is just what it comes right down to. I'm irritated on how cavalier people are today about how (it was easy to avoid service in Vietnam, so many people have said to me), "well if I'd have been of your age I wouldn't have gone to Vietnam, I'd have done this, I would have done that." Well, you know Bill Clinton had all the corruption of Arkansas to get him out of the draft and he had a tough time doing it. He managed to do it, but I followed the history of him and his ability to get out of the draft. He had a tough time. He was right there in that age group that was really getting drafted, he was like three years ahead of me. He had to really intimidate the draft board through his politics and do a lot of stuff, so it wasn't even easy for him so how easy would it have been for somebody else. But I heard all these people all the time go, "if I had been a guy that age there is no way I would have gone. I would have gone to Canada, I'd have done this." Well, those are all easy things for you to say, but Canada, it takes money to live there. You have to get a job, you have to have skills to get a job. It's not that easy from Texas, just to go to Canada and I don't know anybody that did. People were going to Canada lived up there in northeast. What bothers me is people are so cavalier, such an easy thing to do, to get out of it. Well, that might have been but I didn't see other people find that easy. I didn't answer your question did I?

SM: Yes, you did. Well, is there anything else you'd like to talk about today?

PW: No, sir I don't think so. I enjoyed it very much, I appreciate you providing the forum.

SM: Well, let me go ahead and put an official ending on the interview real quick. This will end the interview with Mr. Philip Watson. Thank you very much sir.

(The following is post-interview and inserted as a tribute to LARRY LEE BAXTER, written by the interviewee, this was not done orally and then transcribed.)

On May 12, 1969 I was assigned to ride shotgun in an Army fuel tanker that was driven by Larry Lee Baxter. The tanker carried 5,000 gallons of JP-4 aviation fuel and was to be one of approximately 15 to 20 vehicles in a convoy from Sa Huynh to Duc Pho.

The night prior, Sa Huynh island had received a heavy mortar attack by the enemy. The mortar incoming started about mid-night and it was only until just before dawn that most of the 75 or so navy personnel finally managed to get some sleep. As was typical, the daylight time was absent of enemy activity, but we knew the enemy was in the area and wanted another chance to attack.

I was assigned to Baxter's truck at about 8:00 am. The convoy finally pulled out at 5:00 that afternoon. The entire day was spent waiting to get clearance to leave. Enemy was in the area, and the Army was not letting the convoy leave until they thought the road secure. So, for over eight hours, Larry Lee Baxter and I sat in and around the fuel tanker, waiting for the convoy to roll, and conversing on many topics. There was no lack of conversation between the two of us that day. I had not met Baxter before, but we got along well and I enjoyed his company.

Finally, the order was given for the convoy to move out. Word also spread that we would likely get some sniper fire. The convoy would travel through an area called "ambush pass" and that particular stretch of road was always worrisome.

Larry Lee Baxter and I were in the next to the last vehicle in the convoy, followed only by a gun jeep (a jeep with a M-60 machine gun mounted on a metal pole). Five miles into the twenty-two mile journey, both Baxter and I noted the large clouds of thick, black smoke roiling skyward in the distance ahead. Because the road ran along hills and had many curves, we could not see exactly what was going on. Next we noted many tracer rounds flying through the air. And then it was obvious the convoy was under attack, trucks were ablaze, and we would soon be entering the firefight. I looked over to Baxter and yelled, "What do you think?" Baxter skillfully maneuvered the big rig, constantly stabbing the floor shift while muscling the steering wheel. He yelled back, "Get ready." I jacked a round into the M-16, clicked the trigger to full auto, and held the rifle outside the window. Within moments, we were hit by a rocket-propelled grenade that set the

5,000 gallons of JP-4 ablaze. Baxter turned the truck off the road and drove it directly into the enemy's fire. Before he died of multiple small arm wounds, Larry Lee Baxter successfully moved the truck off the road so as not block the other vehicles with 5,000 gallons of burning aviation fuel. For his self-less devotion to duty, Larry Lee Baxter earned the Silver Star.

On Veterans Day 1982, the opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., I visited the Wall Memorial. The Memorial was newly constructed and the muddy grass at the base had not yet taken root. Before approaching the Wall up close, I observed it from a distance. While I viewed the Wall, a Vietnam Veteran approached me, offered me some literature, and briefly explained what was going on. I could tell he did not think I was a Vietnam Veteran, and I did not tell him otherwise.

Later that day I approached the Wall up close. My wife, Susan, and I received information from a volunteer about where to find Larry Lee Baxter's name. His name was not quickly found, because there are so many names, but Susan was first to locate it. I moved closer, looked at his name, saw it written across my face then reflected in the black-mirrored image that the Wall produces.

Based on the Wall's records, I then knew where Baxter was from. I went back to our hotel room and began calling in Larry Lee Baxter's hometown of Pierce City, Missouri. I first located a cousin who gave me the number of Larry's parents. I called and spoke with Larry's mom, I told her I was with Larry when he was killed, that I had been seriously injured, and I had come to Washington D.C. in part to learn more about the Army PFC that I had met on May 12, 1969. The next day I wrote a letter to Larry Lee Baxter, bought a flower and went back to the Wall to place both there. In my mind, I felt certain I was the only person with a letter and a flower meant for someone on the Wall. But to my utter amazement there were a multitude of letters and flowers, so very much like the ones I'd brought for Larry Lee Baxter.

You can find LARRY LEE BAXTER honored on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Panel 25W, Row 61.