VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

John F. Costello

Conducted by Deb Barrett

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This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, August 21, 2012 with Mr. John Costello at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Costello was born on August 8, 1945 in Omaha, Nebraska. He retired from the Veterans Administration, working in human resources and working as a vocation rehab specialist. He learned of the Veterans History Project through the Indian Prairie Library newsletter. Mr. Costello has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Life Before Entering Military Service

John, where were you living when you entered the service? What was your life like just before you entered?

Well, I grew up in Omaha in a family of nine children. Actually, I spent two-and-a-half years in the seminary studying to become a Catholic priest in high school – this is called minor seminary. Anyway, I left the seminary because I could come back in five or ten years, and I thought I was missing out on things. I was in seminary in Illinois and Nebraska. After high school I immediately joined the U.S. Navy, in September of the year I graduated – 1964.

So you enlisted?

Yes. And I picked the Navy for a couple of reasons. Coming from a family of nine children I knew it would be almost impossible to go to college and I didn't know how I was going to do it. I knew many of my classmates were going to college.

I talked to my Uncle John and my Uncle Bob who were U.S. Navy World War II veterans. My Uncle John, who is a hero to me, graduated electrical engineering at the University of Nebraska Class of 1951 with Johnny Carson. Anyway, I asked how he paid for the University of Nebraska. He said he had served in the Navy and there was a thing called the G.I. Bill. I didn't know what that meant, but he said they paid for his school – a great portion of it. So I said to myself I would just copy and do what he did.

I never thought about Marines, Army – none of that. I said I would do the Navy just like he did, get the G.I. Bill and go to school. I had no intention of being a hero or fighting and shooting and killing people. I just wanted to go to college.

And this was 1964?

Yes.

So Vietnam was already …

Well, it was a conversation but it wasn't a full-fledged war yet. We had what we called 'military advisors.' So it was talked about but it wasn't really a full-fledged war at that time. So it wasn't really a concern. However, my Dad warned me. We went to the recruiter together, and the recruiter told me I'd get this wonderful radio school, which I wanted. And my Dad said he was lying – they would send me to Vietnam. He said it in

front of the recruiter. My Dad was outspoken. He was an 'Archie Bunker,' but smarter.

I told him not to talk to the recruiter that way. I was kind of embarrassed. Anyway …

Had your Dad been in the military?

He'd never been.

But his brothers had been.

Yes. But he never did.

Anyway, I had it set in my mind to enlist in the Navy. They wanted to send me to Great Lakes because it was closer to Omaha. And I said I would not join unless they sent me to San Diego. I'd always been attracted to California. My grandparents lived in San Diego, there isDisneyland and all that stuff, and the beaches and so on. So they made a special exception, he said.

They sent me to San Diego boot camp. I arrived there in September of 1964 for eleven weeks.

Is that where you were inducted?

Yes. San Diego.

And you just flew over there and were inducted once you got there.

Exactly.

Induction and Basic Training

What do you remember of your induction? Were you surprised by it?

Yes, I was. You're on a bus from the airport to boot camp and it's pretty scary and intimidating. You kind of feel right away like all your rights are stripped away. The company commander on the bus uses a lot of 'f' words – 'f' this and that – and right away you wonder what you got yourself into! It's like you are on your way to jail or prison.

How many young men were on the bus?

There were 40, 60 or 80 of us.

So they met the plane at the airport and herded you onto the bus, and you started right then.

Yes, right away.

Anyway, the company commander I had was an E6 – Campbell was his name; Petty Officer Campbell, First Class. I found out as time went by that he was a sadist. He liked to torture us mentally and physically, and he got a lot of enjoyment out of that.

So you took the bus and you're in shock already on the bus from the way they were handling you.

Yes.

How long a ride was it?

It wasn't far. Actually, it's only like a mile or two – not long.

And then they got you off the bus – very gently, I'm sure!

No: "Get your ass off the bus." And I think they said we had thirty seconds or something like that, then to stand at attention keep our mouths shut and so on. That was our welcome to San Diego!

You got off the bus, had to stand at attention and then they processed you.

Yes.

What did they do?

Well, that first week they issued clothing. Of course there was the haircut – the shaved head and all that. That's pretty much it. Oh, spread your cheeks and all this stuff. And you're naked doing a lot of these things and it's pretty embarrassing. But I was in high school sports and in the locker rooms, so it conditions you to some of that. But you got your uniforms, got your head shaved and got assigned to a company.

What happened to your civilian belongings?

You put that in a bag. I think we had to store it or ship it home – a lot of that. You could only have a small amount of stuff.

What did they allow you to keep?

I think you could keep a few pictures and things like that. Not much.

So the first week was basically getting everything you needed for your time.

Right.

Shots, medical?

Yes – plenty of shots! The other thing – I'm glad you brought that up. They take you to the dentist and that was scary because I'd see other guys come back – they pulled teeth in those days! Most people might not agree with that, but you are intimidated and just go along with what they want to do. So I'd see some of these guys ahead of me come back with missing teeth they'd pulled out. I said, "My God! Are they going to do that to me?" Luckily they didn't, but, anyway, it was pretty scary; pretty intimidating.

Were you able to contact anyone at home during this time?

No; no phone calls or anything.

Were you able to give a phone call home just to say you got there – thirty seconds or something?

Yes. Because you got a line of twenty or forty people at the phone waiting for you to get your rear-end out of there so they could make the call. So you were under pressure. But you're right – you do make a phone call.

And it's basically to say you were there.

Right.

So you had that first week of getting used to it. Tell us what your living conditions were like. What were your barracks like?

Well, like I said, I believe there were seventy or eighty of us in a company. I was Company 505, September 1964. They start from Company 1 in January and throughout the year they form different companies.

Let's see. I believe they were bunk beds. There's no privacy. The first few weeks you could hear guys crying at night. The company commander was pretty foul-mouthed. Coming from the seminary and studying to be a priest, that was quite a shock. Basically, seminary to the Navy was like from heaven to hell! Every other sentence from this petty officer was 'f this' and 'blankity-blank that' and 'get your ass over here.'

They would wake you up with some foul expression – 'Let go of your this and grab that.' And it was revile, revile, revile blaring over this loudspeaker…and also the voice, and 'Get your ass out of bed.' And I think sometimes they'd say you had five minutes to get dressed and be standing outside the barracks.

And that was to get dressed, have your bunk made …

Right.

Did they do inspections?

Yes! Inspections every week; sometimes every day – inspecting your locker and also you, personally. The Navy is very clean. If you had one little piece of lint or dirt under your tee-shirt you could get fifty push-ups or a number of different things.

As I said, our company commander was sadistic and he liked to watch us get tortured. I'll tell you briefly – I didn't want to get into trouble; I just wanted to get through. One time he got me and about eight or nine other guys. He said my sock was out of alignment by half an inch. I don't know if he made that up or it really was, but he pulled me and these nine other guys out to the parking lot and had us do 505 jumping jacks – 505 was the number of our company. And we had to do the jumping jacks with an M-1 rifle. Anyway, he said to us, "I want your rifles to go up and down synchronized, and if I see any that are not you'll get 500 more."

Anyway, we finished 400 and some and he said, "I see one rifle coming down before the other ones, so it looks like you're going to get 500 more. You could be here all day!" And he's walking in front of us with a coffee cup and just enjoying himself. Then after about 200 more he said we were going to get 500 more. Anyway, a lot of us did 1,500+. But we started hitting the ground because we weren't used to it – you'd fall to the ground because you couldn't move your legs anymore. We had one guy who was like an Arnold Schwarzenegger – he probably could have done 3,000! He kept baiting the company commander because it didn't bother him at all. The rest of us are just dying and falling and passing out. Anyway, the next day after that – remember, I'm 19-20 years old and I'm athletic and I played sports in high school. But the next day I felt like a ninety-year-old man. It took me five minutes to get out of bed. And I had to use my arms to lift my legs. I had to walk in a shuffle because my legs were so sore and burned up. But eventually I got over that.

I want to mention briefly to show you how sadistic he was. Another time he caught me with some infraction. My sock was out of alignment by a quarter inch or something – it was always trouble with the sock; everything else was perfect. So he picked me and nine or ten other guys – that was his favorite number – and he had us go into the bathroom. You call it the latrine or the head in the Navy. They had open stalls. That's why I thought many times that Navy boot camp could not be worse than prison or jail. They don't torture you physically like that in prison or jail, and for 24 hours and so on.

But he had us kneel with our item from inspection that didn't pass in front of the toilet on our knees with a scrub brush and bar of soap. And we had to scrub this item, and while we were scrubbing we had to say this together: "We're little pigs. Oink-oink; oink-oink." And we had to say that over and over again. And he would sit above us looking out the window, tormenting us. He says, "If I can't hear you we're going to be here together until I can." So we had to do this for….. or forty-five or sixty minute or something. And you're getting madder and madder, but what are you going to do. Anyway, we finally got through that. And that's why I say he was sadistic.

Now I want to mention this to you. Sometimes he would get us up at 2:00 in the morning, randomly, for no reason and tell us to put our clothes in our sea-bag and on our shoulder. And he would have us walk around for thirty minutes or an hour out on the parking lot. He called it 'extra military instruction' or something. The reason I mention that, the night before we graduated from boot camp he did that to us. And he said "If you're wondering why I'm doing this, this is just so you don't forget me when you leave

here." I'm telling you this guy was sadistic because I've talked to other guys in other boot companies and they didn't do any of that. Like I say, this guy was a sadist.

So besides dealing with this guy and providing amusement for him, what else did you do in boot camp?

We had to learn military history and how to fire weapons, and ship nomenclature. We had to study the Blue Jackets manual. We had written tests and we had classroom training. We had fire-fighting training. We had chemical weapons training, and we'd go into a gas chamber with and without masks. And the normal training onboard ship, which is called the 'USS Recruit,' which is still in San Diego to this day even though they closed the base. It's walking distance to a sports bar, now. I go to Point Loma – that's where the USS Recruit is in San Diego – I go there once or twice a year because my daughter lives in San Diego – her name is Laura. Because I'm retired military I can stay at the base at Point Loma, which is about a four block walk to the USS Recruit where I started in September of 1964. So that's the full circle.

You said you had classes. What do you remember of the classes?

They were interesting and fun – a lot of Navy history, how to wear your uniform, how to fire weapons.

Had you ever fired a weapon before?

Never! My Dad was not a hunter. … I don't remember ever holding a gun in my life. And that was a challenge because I didn't know how to do it and didn't know what I was doing. And, of course, they chew you out if you're not doing a good job. So that was intimidating because you want to do a good job. But never having fired a weapon it's hard to go from scratch to become a marksman or sharpshooter.

Some of the guys I served with, they'd been hunting since they were five years old – a lot of farm kids who went out with their dads. So they had a big advantage over me.

Also, we had to clean the weapons, strip them and put them back together and so on.

But the Navy is not like the Marines and Army – we're not just focused on the weaponry. We do a lot of other things. Navy and Air Force are more technical oriented.

So you had these classes, and you had exercises for building up your body. A lot of marching?

A lot of marching. Yes. And a lot of exercises – push-ups, jumping jacks, running, walking and whatever.

Did you get any free time?

No! Well, not off the base but I believe Saturday and Sunday were free.

But you had to stay on base.

Right. You don't go anywhere.

What did you do with the free time?

You couldn't go to a club or anything. You don't have those kinds of privileges. You'd stay around the barracks and write letters and that sort of thing; maybe do some reading.

When were you able to start sending mail to your family?

Right away.

You couldn't call.

Right, but you could send mail – and get mail. And mail call, every day at 12:00 Noon, whether it was at boot camp or wherever you are, was, like I said earlier, it's like your birthday, Christmas, Fourth of July [all rolled into one] every day. Mail call. And a lot of the guys called it 'female call.'

Your family wrote to you.

My family wrote to me, but I had a girlfriend. We thought we were going to get married. Her name was Pat – a beautiful Italian girl. We wrote every day to each other for about eighteen months: in Navy boot camp, later at Naval Air Station Point Mugu, California, and about my first six or eight months in Vietnam. We wrote every day for eighteen months or longer.

And then she sent you a 'Dear John' letter.

Then she sent me a 'Dear John.' I watched my fellow guys get those and I always felt secure. I didn't think I'd get one, but I finally did. She dated the boyfriend next door.

So you were writing to her, your parents were writing …

My parents, my brothers and sisters and some of the guys I went to school with. And I wanted to tell you this – a special treat. This happened later in Vietnam. I had two fifth grade classes, one from St. Philip Neri grade school and one from St. Pius X in Omaha – thirty letters from each; 60 letters all together. I just treasured those letters and read them over and over. It was good because I got there in Vietnam in 1965-1966, when the war started. They wrote to me like I was some kind of hero: "We're glad you're fighting the Communists," and all this.

At that stage people were not anti-war. They thought it was a good thing to do. And these were the minds of fifth graders – 8, 9, 10 years old. And they were just darling letters. I've kept those letters to this day.

So you were in boot camp in California. How long did your boot camp last?

It was eleven weeks. It's supposed to be eight or nine weeks. But when you get your haircut and clothing and all that, that's added to it, so in those days it was eleven weeks.

You had your graduation for boot camp.

You're proud! You have that blue uniform on with the white leggings and hat you feel like an Olympic champion.

Was your family able to come for your graduation?

Sadly, no. Like I said, I'm from a family of nine kids and we'd never been more than a fifty mile radius from that home. I was in a whole different universe.

I have to tell you, listening to the drums and the pomp and ceremony, the marching – that whole thing – it just sends a big charge through you. It's a very proud day, and a happy day.

Additional Training

After your boot camp you went for further training.

Fortunately, I was sent to Naval Air Station Point Mugu, near Oxnard …and Ventura.

Did you have any time between?

Yes. I had about two weeks to go back home for vacation.

How did you get there?

I flew from San Diego to Omaha. Of course I spent every day with Pat – the girl I loved so much and who supported me through my service time.

I brought my sea bag home, and her mother washed all the clothes! I went to see my parents the day I got there, but I spent 90% of those two weeks with Pat who lived on the other side of town. And the day before I left I went back to see my parents and so on. I didn't stay at her home, but I spent a lot of time visiting her.

Did you see any of your uncles who had been in the service?

No. I did not.

Did they write to you at all?

Well, what happened, one of my uncles I told you about committed suicide – Bob. He was PTSD – he saw a lot of death and suffering in World War II. And the other one had already moved to California. So they were out of the picture.

So you were home for two weeks.

I had a wonderful time. A happy time.

And you spent most of the time with your girlfriend.

Right, and some buddies, brothers and sisters and so on.

Then you flew back to California.

I flew back to California – not to San Diego, but to my new duty station at Point Mugu Naval Air Station, California.

And what was your duty there?

They had me in kind of a holding situation. They had me wait for a radioman school. But they can't send people every week. They have to wait until they get 'X' number of people for another class to start. So I was at Point Mugu for, I believe, about nine months.

What did you do during that time?

They had me do OJT – on-the-job-training – in the radio shack at the Naval Air Station.

What did you do?

They taught me a little bit of Morse Code. Mainly I was a 'go-for.' But I did have to send some messages from shore to ship, etc. It's transmission of messages from the Naval radio station to land and sea and so on – radioman. But I was in training. I hadn't completed school yet.

So when it comes up close to the time to go to school they said, "Well, since you've been at Point Mugu these nine months, the Navy, in order get it's moneys-worth out of you, you're going to have to extend another year of so." I wanted to get in and get out! I had no desire to extend for even one day. So when they gave me that I had to make a hard choice. I wanted to go to the school because you could advance in rank faster and get a promotion faster and learn your job. And I said, "All right. What happens if I turn down this school?" They said, "Well, you could end up in Vietnam."

Now, Vietnam was starting to escalate by this time. We're in 1965 now – I finished boot camp at the end of November, 1964, and went to Point Mugu basically from December, 1964 to…September 1965. So about a month before they gave me this ultimatum – I either go to school or they were going to cut me orders for something else. I asked, "What is the something else?" They said, "You could be a 'deck ape' on a destroyer, or you could end up in Vietnam."

Were your Dad's words ringing in your head?

He said, "They're not going to send you to radio school, they're going to send you to Vietnam." They came to be true.

Anyway, they gave me an ultimatum about a month before I was supposed to go to school. I said, "I'll take my chances." I had no desire to extend for a year. Plus, one of the reasons that influenced me not to extend, I served with Navy reservists. I joined with a three-year obligation. Most people join with four; I joined with three because I wanted to get in and go to the University of Nebraska. A lot of the guys I went to boot camp with only had to serve two years because they were reservists. The contract for reservists is two years. And I found out some of them went to this radio school without having to extend even though they were only two years. I said this didn't seem fair to me at all. I was serving longer than they are anyway, so I said I'd take my chances. I turned down the school. This is after training for eight or nine months to be a radioman.

So I wait a week or two, and the next thing I get is a package – 8 X 10 – with orders for my next assignment: DaNang, Vietnam. And that sent a scare through me because we were already getting a few Army and Marines killed over there. So, anyway …

<u>Deployment</u>

What did they say your job was going to be there?

They said I would be assigned to Naval Support Activity in DaNang. I had really no idea what I was going to do or be involved in, but it was logistics – supply.

The next thing that happened – they don't just send you over there. We had to go to weapons training at CampPendleton with the Marines, because you have to know how to handle a weapon. They trained us on the rifle, the pistol, the shotgun, throwing grenades and different things. So we went through that, and following that they sent us to El Toro Marine Air Station to get on an Air Force C130 military plane to fly to Vietnam.

Did you have any opportunity to go home before you left for Vietnam?

That's a good question. I think I did. That's kind of funny – I'm kind of foggy about that. I think I did go home for one or two weeks.

We were all scared. I had a friend named Ben who said he'd be willing to swap with me. He was in the Marine Reserves. He was more gung-ho and combat oriented. I

was not. He was in the Marine Reserves, but he was in college, one weekend a month. But you can't swap. You just do what you're going to do. I had the orders.

I spent a lot of time with Pat. As a matter of fact, I think she spent a week in California before I went, and we stayed with my Aunt Barbara in San Diego. We had a very special … When she flew to California, my Uncle John and Aunt Barbara met her and me at LAX. Pat and I – we hadn't seen each other for a while. We were so choked up, [we could not talk]. We sat in the back seat for twenty or thirty minutes because of emotion. Anyway, my Uncle Jon, who looked and acted like Hoss from the Cartwright's – 6'3"-6'4" and big shoulders – he picked up my sea bag with one hand like it was a small sports bag, and put it on his shoulder like it was nothing. He was just a beautiful and amazing guy – a good sense of humor and so on.

Anyway, they drove us from LAX to their home in San Diego to spend a week with them. That was part of my vacation – leave – before going. Every day was wonderful. We went to the beach – MissionBeach. We went to Disneyland, as I recall, and just spent a lot of time with Barb and "Jay".

I don't remember, but I think we flew back together to Omaha where we spent a week.

Here's something very touching that happened. My whole family goes to the airport with me in Omaha where I thought I was going to my demise in Vietnam – this is my last day, like I'm on death row. And we go to the airport in Omaha and I'm so absent-minded that I left my orders back at home. You can't get on a plane without your orders – you're UA, or AWOL – you can't do that. So we had to make a trip back and get that.

Was this a commercial flight or a military flight?

It was commercial – United or something. Anyway, the thing I wanted to share with you that I'll always treasure: I had my seven or eight brothers and sisters; my Mom and Dad were there and Pat was there in the airport. I'm sitting on the plane and looking out the window, and I could see all of them waving to me. Something very touching – she had polio.

Who did?

Pat, my girlfriend. So she had braces and crutches all of her life from the time she was a child. And she would wave her crutch at me. I could look out the window and see my family, and see Pat waving her crutch. It really touched my heart. Then the plane took off and goes to California.

So it was a commercial jet – it wasn't just military people on there. But you were in uniform.

Correct.

What was the reaction of people seeing you in uniform? Did anyone say anything to you?

I think the stewardesses were very bright and friendly, and complimentary. But I don't think most people could care less.

There was no reaction, positive or negative.

There was no fanfare. Right.

So from Omaha it's a little less than a four hour flight.

Yes, three or four hours.

So you got to California.

At that point, that may have been when I started at CampPendleton with the weapons training and all that.

When was this?

This is – we're looking at the first week of September, 1965. So I'm at CampPendleton for a week – I don't know the exact amount of time – and from there to El Toro Marine Corps Air Station to take the C130 to Vietnam.

The C130 is not … Have you ever been on a C130?

I've seen pictures. It's a no-frills flight!

Yes. As a matter of fact, you sit with your back against the bulkhead – the bulkhead is the wall. And in the middle they could have luggage or sea bags or whatever they have; supplies. So it's like a room we're sitting in with this table –an open area – and these chairs are up against the wall; our seats. So you're sitting up against facing other guys.

What did you see as you flew?

Well, God! You feel pretty gruesome. There's no movie or anything. You just sit like that for a lot of hours.

How many men were on this flight?

I think there were probably 80 or 100 of us, maybe more. The thing I'll never forget: When you're up there, because of the type of plane it is, you're ears hurt. Your ears hurt, awful. I couldn't wait for the flight to get over with because there is constant pain from your ears.

You flew to …

Let's see. Hawaii was our first stop. We spent a day or two in Hawaii, I guess to refuel or something.

Where did you stay in Hawaii – a Naval base?

Yes. We stayed at a Naval barracks over there for one night. You're not there on vacation – it's part of the flight.

From there we went to Wake, Guam and the Philippines. At each place you stop for refueling and stay there for half a day or one day, overnight, and stay in a local barracks or something.

But we stayed in the Philippines for several days. And we stayed at Clark Air Force Base. And the Air Force is like the country club compared to the rest of us – the Navy, Marines and Army. And I want to tell you, the Air Force base we stayed at is two-man rooms and like staying in a Holiday Inn with carpeting and everything clean and nice. I think they had a beer machine, televisions and whatever, a place to play pool and ping-pong, a pool, and on and on.

So we checked into these rooms at the Air Force base at Clark. And after we were there for four, five or six hours the NCO Navy guy, first class, comes in and says, "Pack your gear. We're not staying here. We're leaving. Get your rear-ends in the parking lot. You've got twenty minutes," or something. So the next thing, we're leaving this cushy country club, Holiday Inn Air Force base at Clark. We go out to the parking lot and get on these old Navy buses – they look like school buses – and we ride thirty minutes or an hour down the road. We get to these old World War II Navy Quonset huts – no air conditioning. They had a screen door and every time you opened it mosquitoes came in. Like I said, this was left over from World War II. The mattresses, I'll never forget, were about an inch thick and you could feel the springs in your back which makes it difficult to sleep. We didn't have mosquito nets or anything. I found out that day the difference between the Air Force and the rest of us. Even though you can be the same rank – E3, E4, E6 –they're the same pay grade, but it was a different experience.

What rank were you at that point?

I was a Seaman – that's E3. I got that at Point Mugu. I wanted to go up as fast as I could, but because I hadn't been to school it's tough. In the Army and Marines, from what I found out later, they just give you a stripe if you behave yourself and do a good job – be a good soldier. But, unfortunately, in the Navy and the Coast Guard you have to take a test, and you have to know this technical material – whether it's an electrician, radioman, electronics tech. Like I said, the Navy and Coast Guard are technically oriented. But even if you're a Boson's Mate, you have to take a test. And they don't automatically pass you. They have quotas and so on, and some of the ranks are frozen. So you can be first of about eighty people, or you could be second, and not get promoted because they only promote one person. So there's a lot of factors like that.

So I was a Seaman, E3.

So they took you to this old World War II barracks …

Quonset huts that the Seabees used. And we stayed there for several days. Then, from there, we flew. We may have stopped in Okinawa, I'm not sure, for a couple of days. And from there to DaNang, Vietnam – on military, not commercial. Again, the C130.

What was it like on that plane when you flew into DaNang?

Scary! I thought we were going to prison and we could be going to our demise. All these ideas were flooding through your mind. It was quiet. There was some small chit-chat, but a lot of it was just quiet time.

I did leave out a very important part, which I mentioned to you earlier.

When I was at El Toro, at the Marine Corps Air Station, sitting in the C130, since I was five-years-old my Dad, James Costello, always got me interested in baseball and sports. I'm a lifelong Yankee and I actually met Mickey Mantle at one time. Anyway, growing up in Omaha we don't have major leagues. So most of us, as kids, picked either the St. Louis Cardinals or the Yankees; nobody picked Kansas City because they were losers! Plus, I'd read books on Babe Ruth when I was in the seventh and eighth grades, collected baseball cards and so on. I always had a transistor radio with me, listening to baseball games wherever I went. And so, it just happened by chance – most people don't remember what they did on September 9, 1965. That was the day I was at El Toro on a C130 en route to Vietnam, and I'm listening to this Sandy Koufax, who's pitching for the Dodgers against the Chicago Cubs. I'm listening to every minute of this. These are my last moments of joy before I'm going to my demise in Vietnam – my last pleasure. I'm in the eighth inning and he's got a perfect game going – the Dodgers over the Cubs. I'm afraid the plane is going to take off and I'm not going to hear the end of this perfect game. Then I get fuzzy because you get scared – the plane's engines start roaring and so on. Anyway, he did get his perfect game. I'll always remember what I did that September 9th! Whenever I hear Sandy Koufax mentioned – and I'm not a Dodger fan, but I am a Koufax fan – it always takes me back to that September 9 of 1965. That was, I thought, my last day on this earth as we flew to Vietnam.

So you did hear the end of the game.

I did hear the end. He did get his perfect game – one to zero. And that's another story in itself, because he got no hits. I mean, nobody on his team supported him with hits. This one player walked and then stole a base, and then there was a wild pitch and the guy scored from home. So the game was one to zero for the Dodgers. And that guy, I read later, became homeless – that player who scored the winning run. Anyway, that was it.

So you flew into DaNang. Where did you land?

We arrived at the Air Force base, airport, DaNang Vietnam. This is like the last week of September. And after we arrived at the airport, very shortly, they put about 40 of us on a bus that had no seats. I called it a 'cattle car;' it's a bus with no seats.

So you just stand.

You stand. And they have a rail or something that you can hold on to. Then they herd us through Vietnam. By this time it's nighttime. It's about 9:00 at night and it's dark. And they take us through the streets of DaNang. And the bus, from what I recall – they had some kind of steel mesh. And I don't think it had glass windows. And I thought somebody was going to shoot us or throw a grenade and we were going to die on that bus, or the bus was going to blow up. And we're going through town with all these things going through your mind. We go through the town, and because there were no windows we could hear the people yelling at us – some good things, some cheering and some not cheering; adults and children and so on.

We go from there to the 'dirty 30,' the APL30 – which was a floating barracks which was tied to the pier. It wasn't a ship that sails out to sea. It was just a place where you could sleep and they had a galley for your food. That sort of thing.

What was your first impression of what you saw of Vietnam?

Well, it was interesting and exciting and also scary. It was interesting and exciting because growing up in Omaha, the schools I went to we didn't have any minorities of any kind whatsoever – no black, Mexican, Asian; nothing. Just pure white. The closest we came to minority was a few Italians, if you consider that minority. Anyway, we only had one Chinese group that I was familiar with in Omaha. We had one Chinese restaurant downtown. Other than that I never saw any Asians or anything.

Now you're the minority.

Now I look out these windows and it's all Asians: men, women and children. And you could smell a stench through the air. They have fresh markets with fish and all kinds of stuff, and there's kind of a stench in the air. I don't think they have the best sewer [sanitation] conditions and so on. So the smell would hit you right away.

And of course the people and their clothing. We went through downtown so we sawshops and all the clothing, and we saw the Vietnamese with their ao dai Vietnamese dress, which is very stylish. And they also have those cone hats. All of that was interesting and I enjoyed that because it was an adventure to me.

But at the same time you were scared wondering if somebody was going to shoot at us or throw a grenade, which is probably exaggerated but that's what you're thinking. We're not combat Marines and Army – we're sailors.

So you went through the town to your barracks, your new home.

The floating barracks.

Is this going to be your home for the whole time you're there?

That's it for the whole year you're there. That's where you live.

So you were there for one year.

Yes. The standard time for most military people is twelve months, except the Marines. They thought they were better than everybody so they had thirteen months – so there you go!

What was the 'dirty 30' like? What were the living conditions?

Well, you didn't have a lot of privacy. It was pretty much like being on a Navy destroyer. You had, from what I can recall, about eight guys sleep in a space about half the size of this room. So you had bunk beds on either wall – we called it bulkhead. But we had four or five bunk beds on one wall and four or five on the other with maybe four feet between the two, the area in between.

So these were bunks hung on the wall.

Hung on the ceiling, with chain – just like you'd find on a destroyer or most Navy ships.

Did they rock?

Yes, they rocked because this APL 30 – that's the name of the ship – was on the water, not on land. So it would rock from time to time, but it was not like heavy seas because you're tied to the pier. But the thing about that was you had no privacy whatsoever. You're in this area with eight or ten other guys, and you don't all necessarily have the same personalities.

There is one little thing I wanted to mention – going back to Navy boot camp. Going from the seminary to Navy boot camp, like I said earlier, is like going from heaven to hell. Some of the guys I met were common thugs. They'd been in reformatory school, maybe even jail. These aren't the kind of people you meet in the seminary. We had some guys who were college educated and I tried to pal around with that type. Because being in the seminary was college prep – you do a lot of reading and studying and Latin and so on. So I palled around with the college geared guys, but you're forced to work and interact with these thugs. And I asked several of them – we had about five or eight or ten of them in this 80 company boot camp. I asked how in the world they got into the Navy, because I found out some of them had been arrested and so on. Several of them told me, "I was given a choice: I could either go to jail or join the Navy or the Army. So I took the lesser of the two evils and joined the Navy."

And I have to tell you, just briefly, in the Navy they sometimes have 'blanket parties.' Have you ever heard of them? A blanket party is where you get two, three or four of your fellow sailors in boot camp. At night they'll throw a blanket over you with no warning and just beat you with their fists and kick you – beat you up.

And there is one other little story. I kept telling you that our company commander was sadistic, he was a sadist. One of the guys I worked with had an oily skin problem. Because of that he failed the personnel inspections on a regular basis because his tee-shirt would have oil or something. So this company commander… first class,

Campbell, one time he took five or ten of these thugs that I was telling you about – these are street guys; toughs with tattoos and so on; street hardened. Anyway, he took five or ten of them and he took this guy who had the skin problem and put him naked in a trash can. They filled it with water. And he had these five or ten toughs scrub this guy with scrub brushes and soap until he bled. That's why when I say 'sadist' it's not just a term. He really was a sadist. He enjoyed watching us suffer.

Anyway, back in Vietnam you serve with some of those same guys. You'd sleep in some of the same areas with them and even at Point Mugu we'd have guys come in at 10:00, 11:00, 12:00 at night and you were asleep. They were drunk. And even in Vietnam as people drank over there, they'd come in and just come up to your rack for no reason and try to pick a fight. Now, you're sleeping and have had a hard day's work and so on, and they're drunk. They'd shake your rack and start saying obscenities to you and try to pick a fight with you for no reason. So that wasn't one of the pleasant things about being in the military. This is on the APL30.

Did you make some friends there?

Yes, of course. I made some friends and they became lifelong friends to this day. One of them – his name is Carl – and we're friends to this day. I just saw him two weeks ago – I stayed in his home in Cleveland. We correspond and have phone calls. We send each other books and magazines and so on. He gave me a guided tour of a place I've always wanted to see all my life – for the past fifteen years. He took me to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland two weeks ago, which is five floors. We spent seven hours there, and I saw the videos from the 50's and 60's of all the big singers, their clothing and personal letters. It was just wonderful.

Also, he's got a hundred books on Vietnam. And he's got 50 DVD's. So we spent many hours looking at some of the DVD's and just had a great time together. His name is Carl, from Ohio.

Let's go back to Vietnam. You're on the APL30 and you told us about the sleeping conditions. What about eating?

Eating – I enjoyed it because it introduced me to a lot of foods that I never had before – SOS, you've probably heard of that, which I thought was delicious. Some guys who grew up in upper middle-class families couldn't stand it. I thought it was delicious. It's beef and gravy on a biscuit or toast or something, or bacon and gravy. I thought the food was delicious and great. The Navy, more so than the Marines and Army, we had hot meals for breakfast, lunch and dinner. But, sometimes when we were in the field, or out on the ship working – I mean a cargo ship, not a Navy ship – or when we were working on a pier unloading ships, we had C-rations.

Now, because we were the first 100,000 troops who went to Vietnam, when President Johnson and Secretary McNamara escalated the troops, nobody remembers this but October of 1965 President Johnson and McNamara had this wonderful plan. It was 100,000 troops and six months to win the war. Well, I was part of that 100,000. Ninety percent of them were Marines and Army, but they had a handful of us sailors who were

on shore duty. Anyway, we were part of that 100,000 that started in October of 1965. Sadly, it didn't take six months. It took the next ten years.

What was your job while you were in Vietnam?

I was assigned to Naval Support Activity along with the rest of us.

Oh, I started to tell you about what we ate. We worked as longshoremen – logistics and supply – for Naval support activity in DaNang Vietnam. The Naval Support Activity operated in DaNang from 1965 to 1972. There were at least 30,000 men and women who were assigned to this command. Anyway, our job was logistics. We unloaded cargo ships – everything from beans to beer to bombs.

And you said this wasn't necessarily Navy ships.

No. We didn't unload Navy ships. These were all civilian cargo ships.

Where were the ships coming from?

From foreign countries – Europe and some Asian countries.

Were these supplies for the military?

They were supplies for the U.S. military. There was food – some were 'refer' ships; refrigerated – so it could be 20^{0} or 30^{0} in that thing. Bombs, including napalm, 'Agent Orange'; 500 pound bombs, 1,000 pound bombs. We had to roll those things and hook them up. It was heavy, dirty, dangerous work.

That particular job, there wasn't a lot of danger from being shot at, but it was dangerous, dirty work. As a longshoreman cargo handler, which is what I did, we could be working on a ship that was a five-story building as far as the height. Imagine yourself, Deb, if you're in a hotel that's five stories high where there's an open area where you can look from the first floor up to the ceiling. That's what it was like being at the bottom of these ships.

We would have pallets of cement or bombs or whatever the material – even candy bars and beer and beans and food; canned goods – but occasionally a pallet would break. You could have these 150 pound cement bags, and you could have ten or twenty of them on a pallet. Sometimes they would break and you could have this pallet with these tons of cement coming down. They could smash you like a fly. So you had to be careful with that.

A lot of these cement bags broke open, and in the cargo hold there's no windows so all the cement dust just stays there. We had to wear these surgical masks. But that didn't help completely, only partially. So your eyes would burn from this airborne cement powder; also your lungs. And of course it rained in the monsoon season. And you're outdoors. So I'd go back to the APL at night and my hair was caked with cement powder and dust. Then the rain would kind of mix it in and so on. And your clothes and so on are covered with this stuff. You had to shower, and to shower I'd have handfuls of hair coming out as I cleaned myself. I often wonder if that affected me later, because out

of my family of nine, I'm the only one who's bald. But maybe it's hereditary – who knows. But Carl, who did the same work, he's bald. So who knows. I guess it was better than dodging bullets.

But we did get shot at a few times. And there was some rocket fire and we had to hit the deck. So we did have some of that. But, like I said, we're not combat infantry so it's not the same.

There is one other thing I wanted to mention to you.

We had to stand watch every four days on the pier. That meant you had to walk an area of about two or three blocks. And the first week we had to start doing this. This is in addition to the longshoreman duties – cargo handling – but separate. And we would stand a four hour watch. It could be a 24-hour watch, but you'd relieve somebody every four hours. And I'll never forget this. This is the first week, October of 1965. We were instructed that at all times we were going to have our weapons unloaded.

Unloaded.

Unloaded. At all times. They call it 'rules of engagement,' or something like that. I told my first class petty officer that seemed dumb to have it unloaded. He said, "You will only load it and fire it at somebody if you're fired upon first." And I said, "That doesn't make any sense to me at all." He said, "Yours is not to reason why. Yours is to do or die and keep your mouth shut. Don't worry about it." He said the idea was that we were the good guys with the white hats. We were not the aggressor, so we were to do as we were told, shut up and not worry about it.

So it was a matter of perception.

Right. So the whole year we were there – not just me, but all of us – had to stand watch with empty rifles. Now, occasionally they put one of us – they had a tower, a platform, so you could look over a bigger area. And that tower, it was made out of wood or bamboo or something, and it's like being on a three or four-story building. You're standing up there like a sitting duck with your empty rifle. A sniper or anybody could pick you off. I thought that was dumb.

Did you ever have to fire your gun?

No. I did not. I never did.

Were there any incidents on the ship when you were unloading it when you were fired upon?

Yes. We were fired at by rifle and we had to hit the deck.

I wanted to mention this to you. On Saturdays we had an outdoor movie on the APL30. We would sit on the pier in folding chairs watching this outdoor movie. They had a lot of John Wayne's and westerns and so on. I'll never forget, I was really into one of these John Wayne movies where something important was coming up and we were fired at – rifle fire. And I could feel the bullet go right past my ear and they said, "Hit the

deck! We're being fired at." 'Hit the deck,' meaning 'hit the ground.' And that was the end of the movie! And I was disappointed because I was really getting into this thing and I wanted to find out what was going to happen next. It just ruined the whole thing!

Everybody hit the deck and we had some kind of alert.

There were times, by the way, when we couldn't go into town because there was suspected VC and enemy and so on. So there were situations like that.

So when you did have free time and you could go into town, what did you do?

Well, I found out as soon as I could where the local Catholic church was because my parents raised me to be a strict Catholic and I was in the seminary and so on. So I didn't want to miss Mass on Sunday. So quickly, Carl, who also was Catholic, and I found this wonderful place which was a big diversion from being in the military which was Sacred Heart Catholic Church and Orphanage and School in DaNang, Vietnam. So every week we went over there. And starting with the first times we went, we would walk into the courtyard and stop to buy cookies or candy and the next thing we knew we had 50 kids surrounding us. We met these wonderful nuns.

The place, Sacred Heart, was directed by Sister Marie Magdalena. This was a Philippine nun who had studied in France. She was probably in her 50's or 60's. I was amazed and impressed because she was college educated. I believe she could speak four languages. She spoke Tagalog, fluently. She also spoke fluent Vietnamese. She spoke French because she studied in France. And she spoke English. Now get this – I had a Catholic nun from France who also taught music – Sister Casmir was her name – and I pray to her and for her to this day. She passed away – she'd be 90 if she were still alive. But she taught us French phrases and how to count and say the Hail Mary, 'open the window,' 'merci bo coup,' and ['shut your mouth''ferme la bouch' 'How are you?' 'Como Tallez Vous']. And I remembered this even though I never took French in high school.

The Vietnamese, the educated ones, speak two or three languages. French is one of them because the French were there in the 50's. So I used some of this French. And it gave me an immediate connection with these nuns and also the Vietnamese people. A lot of Americans could have cared less and this was a whole different world.

One of the things I want to share – and this is very important. I think the first or second week I was there, Sister Marie Magdalena said to Carl and me, "I'm so glad you're here. I don't trust our own Vietnamese National Guard. They run away. At least you Americans stay and fight the VC and North Vietnamese." And I'm thinking to myself – isn't that nice! She doesn't respect or trust her own Vietnamese countrymen – her own National Guard – to stay and fight. Her own Vietnamese army! She said at least we Americans could stay and fight the Viet Cong. So that started putting some doubt into me as to why we were there. And this was very early. This was October-November of 1965 when the war escalated.

And along that same thought, I had one of my shipmates whose name is Ralph Rippen, from Pennsylvania – he, Carl and I used to hang out together. Ralph Rippen, very early in the war, he was very perceptive, said this was wrong: we didn't belong here and we shouldn't be here. At the time I didn't embrace what he said, but I listened to

him. And it made me think and I put that together with what Sister Magdalena said. And I was observing all these things.

So there were several times I went into town with Ralph and we went to the DaNangCivilianairport. He would go up to the counter and I would stay back waiting for him to finish his conversation. He was making plans to get a plane ticket to fly on a civilian plane from DaNang Bangkok, to leave Vietnam, AWOL. Now, I would never do anything like that. I would be scared to death. But anyway, I didn't think he was serious. So a week or two or three weeks go by. We go to work every day and go into town sometimes. And one day after a couple of weeks he said, "Tell the petty officer that I went to sick bay tomorrow." Anyway, people asked me where was Ralph and I said he was going to sick bay at the White Elephant in DaNang which is one of the administrative buildings of Dannay for the Navy – the White Elephant, they called it.

Anyway, I found out later he got on a commercial plane from DaNang flew to Bangkok and then I found out later I think he got on a cargo ship – the story I heard – rode that cargo ship to San Francisco and hitchhiked to his home in Pennsylvania, across the country. He had said to me many times that it was wrong and we didn't belong here and it was nuts, along with the orders we had about the empty rifle. In other words, he saw already some of the politics of some of this. So when he went to his home in Pennsylvania, I found out later, his dad was kind of an 'Archie Bunker' type who was pro-military and pro-war. His dad called the FBI. They sent military police and arrested him, and he was court-martialed. Then I lost touch and don't know what happened after that.

Another thing I wanted to mention about the politics of the thing. One of the glamorous jobs I had in Vietnam, about once every two weeks I had to ride shotgun on a trash truck to take trash from the APL to the dumpster. But you had to ride a couple of miles through town. Literally, I had to ride with a rifle – empty – with the driver to haul this trash to the dump. And I asked "Why do you have to have a driver with a rifle?" And they said, "Because some of the trucks had been attacked and fired on. People were wounded and maybe even killed" by Vietnamese, not Viet Cong. And I put that together with what Sister Magdalenasaid about we would stand and fight the enemy even though the National Guard doesn't – Vietnamese National Guard. And I put it together with Ralph and the empty rifle and so on. Now this is still October-November of 1965. This isn't 1968 when there were protests. This was still when everyone was gung-ho and it was a great idea.

Now, on the positive side I'm getting letters from fifth graders telling me they were proud of me …

Tell us about that.

Okay. The positive side: Every day I got letters, especially from Pat. And this really sustained me, because, like I said, getting letters was like your birthday, Fourth of July, Christmas all in one. But I have to tell you, when you don't get a letter it was like a knife in the heart. Because we didn't have cell phones, we didn't have computers, there wasn't Facebook in those days. There wasn't a pay phone on the corner. You couldn't call anybody. And sometimes I wouldn't get a letter – not because she didn't write, but because on Saturday-Sunday there's no delivery. So then you'd get three in one day. But

I have to tell you it was very hurtful and painful when they don't call your name. Because we had some guys get three, four, even seven letters in one day. Also, they got boxes of cookies and whatever. So, anyway, the letters were so important. A lot of times what I'd do, and other guys, we'd have to go right back to work after mail call – some people called it 'female call' – many of us couldn't read it then because we'd have to go back to work or duty. We would wait until we got to our sleeping area at night, put it beneath the pillow and read it before we went to sleep at night. You'd read those things two, three or five times over and just cherish ever word.

But also there were pictures in there and sometimes newspaper clippings of baseball games, local news.

And you said you got some from kids – classrooms.

Oh, yes. And I had these two – this was such a treat and a joy – I had these two fifth grade classes from Omaha. One was from St. Philip Neri school, which is the school I went to as a child – thirty kids from the fifth grade class; nine and ten year-olds. Then there was another school – St. Pius X; thirty kids, fifth graders. So I had 60 to 70 letters. I read every one of those things, some of them several times. What was neat about the letters at that time – this was October-November-December of 1965-1966. These kids write to me telling me what a big hero I am for fighting the communists – misspelling 'communist.' And just a real treat and a joy.

How did the students get your name?

A very good question. Well, because I grew up in St. Philip Neri, small town Omaha. Everybody in the parish knew I was over there. So the principal, or the priest – probably the teacher – "Why don't we write to Mr. Costello who's in Vietnam right now." As far as St. Pius X, I had a neighborhood friend who became Sister Ruth Kelly, a professed nun, who became a teacher at St. Pius X. And it was she who advised her fifth graders to send me these letters. So there was a personal family connection.

It was such a treat to get those things. It really picks up your spirits.

You also said you had an opportunity to meet other types of people and other types of entertainment.

Yes. Well, everybody who was in Vietnam remembers the Bob Hope shows.

Had you ever seen it?

Well, Bob Hope was there and unfortunately I didn't get to see him, but I heard about it. But, I did meet some other celebrities and attended events that they did. One of them was Johnny Rivers. And to this day when I hear songs from him, it's just a lifelong treat to me: "On the Poor Side of Town."

I mentioned earlier that Charlton Heston came and had dinner on the 'dirty 30.' And he sat directly across from me – fortunately for me. And in those days I was kind of shy. But I thought I couldn't be shy because I might never have the chance again. So I

talked to him like I would talk to anybody. But he sat directly across from me, face-to-face. And I think he was 6'3" or 6'4", and he had these two-inch cowboy boots. So it made him look huge compared to me. But we had regular chit-chat.

We had some other singers and entertainers come whom I listened to. I have to tell you that the music and singers of the 50's and 60's sustained me, because many of us – we had Armed Forces Radio on little transistors – and some of had tape recordings of songs. So I had a lot of favorite songs: the Beatles, of course. But one of them was, "I Fought the Law and the Law Won." Do you remember that song – Bobby Fuller? He died the year that came out in 1966, in California. One of my all-time favorite Vietnam songs that sends a chill through me to this day – and I've said I probably would like this played at my memorial service – is Marvin Gay, "What's Going On." And I found out recently that came about because his brother served active duty Army in Vietnam and wrote Marvin Gay letters about how horrible it was over there. And Marvin Gay eventually came up with that song.

So you were there for a year. So you were there over Christmas. What was Christmas like?

I'm glad you brought that up. I started to say earlier about the food. Because we were the first people there in October, 1965, we had World War II K-rations. This is food from 1945-1948 in canned form. And I wondered how hygienic that was!

Anyway, we upgraded to C-rations, which was canned meat and spaghetti, eggs and what-have-you. That was a little better. But Christmas was wonderful. We had hot turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy. We also had shrimp cocktail. It was just very nicely done hot meals. There was a cease-fire. I thought that was kind of nuts that you could stop the war to do this, but you can't stop the war otherwise. That didn't make sense.

I almost forgot a very important thing about Christmas. By this time, Carl and I every week had been to the orphanage at Sacred Heart. That was our escape. And Sister Marie Magdalena invited us into the classrooms to teach English to the students because we didn't have the heavy Vietnamese accent. Coming from the Midwest we had just pure English. So we spent a lot of time in the classrooms reading a lot of their lessons and talking in English so they could hear real American English.

But, anyway, regarding Christmas – this was Carl's idea, not mine, but I was his helper. He had this idea on his own. He wanted to give a Christmas gift to Sister Marie Magdalena. So about four or five weeks – right after Thanksgiving – he and I went around to our shipmates, whether they be Navy, Marine, Army; even when we'd be in town in a bar somewhere. We'd say, "We want to give a cash gift to Sister Magdalena at the orphanage. Could you give us a dollar or five dollars – whatever you can give?" Some guys gave $20, which was a lot of money 46 years ago. Anyway, after three, four or five weeks of this he ended with $550 in cash. He put it in an envelope with a Christmas greeting, and he and I went a few days before Christmas to the orphanage. He handed it to her and said, "Merry Christmas." She had tears coming down her face.

This is 46, 47 years ago – Christmas, December of 1965; almost 47 years. So, anyway, she was just overjoyed and choked up and very grateful.

Another neat thing that Carl did. He asked Sister Magdalena one time what she needed for the orphanage. She said, "We need toothbrushes for the kids." So Carl wrote

a letter to his mother in Ohio and she went to the local corner drugstore and bought every toothbrush in that drugstore. She put them in several boxes and shipped them to DaNang Vietnam. And he brought those boxes and gave them to Sister Magdalena. The reason I mention that is because I saw Carl two weeks ago and stayed at his home in Cleveland. He told me his mother died a year ago. She was 94 or 95. And he said, "They were looking out the window – he and his younger brother – and they could see the drugstore where she bought those toothbrushes. And his younger brother made the comment, "That's where mother got all those toothbrushes, from that drugstore over there." So the memory lives on, even all these years afterward. But what a thoughtful thing to do, along with that Christmas gift.

You said you were in Vietnam for one year.

Right. Basically, the last week of September, we'll say October 1, until October 1966. So 1965-1966 – basically, October to October.

Did you have to earn points to leave or what it strictly time there?

It was strictly time.

I'm glad you mentioned that because it reminds me of something.

The first month I was there – October, November, December – I met a few Marines, Army and sailors. They'd have a number on their helmet that said '26,' or '12,' and I didn't know what that meant. So I asked and they said, "That means I've got 26 days, sucker, until I go home." I didn't know what it meant. So, when they told me that, I had 360 days to go and it depressed me. Some of the guys marked a calendar, but I didn't want to do that. It depressed me! You had 300 and so many days. That was like forever! It might as well be thirty years. And I didn't want to think about how much time. Plus, you could hear some guys got killed a week before they were supposed to go home and so on. So I didn't want to think about the time until I got about thirty days away. Then I started. But I'll never forget some of the guys had numbers on their helmets.

So when you had those thirty days to go, it must have been …

Exciting!

Exciting and challenging, and hard to concentrate.

Yes. But, like I said, we weren't in hand-to-hand combat – that was the Marines and the Army. But still, I want to tell you, we were warned and told in DaNang you could be hit. You didn't have to be on duty. Carl and I, or just me by myself …

You're Americans …

Yes. And we were in uniform. And you'd walk down the street and sometimes I'd be by myself. Somebody could shoot you. But also we were warned that we could

buy a coke, for example, and it could have pieces of cut razor blades in it. And I would go to the local barber sometimes – a Vietnamese barber – and be in the chair. They had straight razors; they didn't have electric and all that. And sometimes I thought, "Gee, this guy could just slit my throat! How do I know if he's Viet Cong?" And then I found out later some of these were Vietnamese civilians by day and VC at night!

There's another thing I was going to mention.

Also, because I grew up in Omaha, never being more than fifty miles away except for my eighth grade class when we went to Chicago by train. But other than that, we never went anywhere. So when I was in Vietnam I said, "I don't know if I'll ever be here again." So I was adventurous, and probably dumb and stupid. I went by myself walking into neighborhoods, sometimes a mile or a half-mile out of town. I went to where the locals lived and where there was no military. I would go up and introduce myself. Sometimes they spoke little or no English, but I knew French. And they would serve me lunch or dinner. I stayed overnight. And as an example – I wanted to go 'native,' in other words – the mamasan, or mother of the house, she would say, "I sleep on the floor; you sleep on the bed." I'd say I couldn't do that. But she said it was not polite and I would hurt her feelings. So she would sleep on the floor, I would sleep in the bed. And I wasn't there to have sex. I was just there to stay. And I would get the mosquito net and the whole bit. So they're very loving and caring people.

They would serve me chicken, for example, and I'd ask what it was because it didn't look like … It wasn't pumped with steroids and hormones. It looked more like a pheasant or something. And dark meat – delicious! And Vietnamese egg rolls and so on. And I'd say to them, "This is delicious homemade food! Are you sure this is a chicken?" It didn't look like American chicken – like Foster Farm. They assured me it was. Anyway, it was delicious – dark meat and so on. They know French type cooking and so on and just love that.

The other thing was, I always wanted to be polite. They have about 20 different kinds of tea. They have tea before the meal, during the meal. They have a sweet tea, a dessert tea. And to be courteous I'd drink it and then I'd get 'Montezuma's revenge' later.

This even happened to me working on the pier. I worked in town, so they would come by and there would be a ship next to us unloading rice or something for the Vietnamese. So I'd go over and talk to some of them and they'd offer me tea. And then I was afraid to drink it because I knew I would pay for it later. But I didn't want to be rude. I think I poured it out when nobody was looking.

So I went native. I also went into town where only the Vietnamese go to restaurants, where there's no Americans and they don't speak English. And I'm in one of these restaurants and I had to use the restroom. I asked where was the bathroom and they indicated to open a door and go through. And it's like a closet but there was no toilet or anything. I thought they misunderstood me, so they came with me and pointed to the floor – there's a hole in the floor and that was your bathroom!

Now, the other thing I wanted to tell you about walking up and down the streets. Sometimes I'd see Vietnamese go to the bathroom on the street. And they're in black pajamas and whatever. I wanted to tell you, some of the Marines and Army I wanted to walk in town with them, go to the bar and have a drink. They would be disrespectful. They'd say, "Look at those damn gooks. They're like a damn dog taking a dump." That

turned my stomach, because in the seminary you're not trained to think like that. And growing up in Omaha in a Catholic community. But, like I said, some of these guys had been in jail and so forth, and they'd been trained to hate all Vietnamese whether they were enemy or ally. But I never looked at it that way.

Also, I was embarrassed by many of the Americans who were drunk, and they'd say all kinds of obscenities. Then you'd have some of the Americans in a pedicab being [driven] by this guy who's ninety pounds and 5'3". And he's hauling this 200# American to a prostitution house. They were drunk and saying all kinds of insults: "You damn gook, get going," and so on. And I'm thinking – What in the world do these Vietnamese think of us? I'd heard by that time the term, "ugly American," and I'm wondering what in the world is their image of us. So I wondered about that.

So when your time came to go home, how were you notified that you were actually going home?

We were all given, I think, within two or three weeks that we would be leaving on ["R&R"] on October 10 or 13, or whatever it was.

But there is one important thing I'm leaving out. I don't want to forget to mention R&R – rest and recreation. Some guys called it "I & I." One of the 'I's' stands for intoxication.

But something neat happened me – something lucky. Our senior NCO said, "I need 20 volunteers. We're going to have a 20-day R&R, not by plane. Most people went by plane. We have a special thing where we have a Navy attack cargo ship – an AKA – that's going to take 100 or 200 of you guys on an R&R." I said, "I'll do that. I can do that." So I volunteered and got accepted. Now, this is June of 1966. I still had several months to go. Most people had a 5-day R&R. I had a 20-day, but that included travel. Anyway, this cargo ship had 100 to 200 not just Navy; we had Army, Marines, Air Force – all branches. And, instead of being on a plane we rode this attack cargo ship through the South China Sea. We didn't have duty.

We rode this ship from DaNang. I think one of our first stops was Subic Bay in the Philippines, and we stayed there for two or three days, including going into town to Olongapo – the bars, girls and all that. And you walk down the street and the girl would grab your hat, so you'd have to go into the bar because if the military police saw you without a hat they could haul you back to the ship.

So the girls knew about that.

Right. So you had to go. And after being with guys for sixth months or so, these Vietnamese women all looked like Miss Universe. They wore these very feminine dresses and so on.

Anyway, you'd go in the bar and you don't get your hat back until you buy them a drink. And the drink is like a shot glass, but it's tea or something and they charge you $3 or $5 or something – because it's a money-making thing. In the meantime you buy drinks for yourself, and the next thing you know you've spent $10 or $20, which was a lot of money in those days. Some of them tease you that they can be your girlfriend and

you could have sex later. But they taunt you, and they try to get you to spend as much money as you can. Then they get rid of you – they disappear. You had a lot of that.

I heard that there were some American military NCO's who were killed over there. Some of the guys I met, they hated their NCO for different reasons. Luckily I wasn't in such a situation, but I heard about it.,

Anyway, we go by cargo ship from the Philippines to Okinawa for two or three days. And you're on leave in each of these places. And we go from Okinawa to Taiwan and were there for a couple of days. Then we went to the final, real destination which was Hong Kong and we spent five days there.

I want to share this briefly. Coming from Omaha I said, "I don't know if I'll ever be… [In Hong Kong] again. I'm going to experience every minute I can." So I'd be up until 3:00 in the morning, including going to bars and meeting women and so on. And then I'd get up at 6:00 in the morning – so I could see everything I could. And by the time I went back to Vietnam I was exhausted because I only had about three hours of sleep every night.

One of the highlights that I do not want to forget to mention of my whole experience – I read there were probably two to three million Americans who had served in Vietnam. I think there's very few – and I may be the only one who did this. My Dad was a big fan of the Trappist monks and Thomas Merton and Bishop Sheen and other people – very devout. He read when he got home at night from being a butcher, he read theology, philosophy and a lot of Catholic literature. One of his favorite Catholic groups, orders, was the Trappist monks. They have monasteries in Gethsemane and around the world. Anyway, because of my Dad I found out there was a Trappist monastery on a little island near Hong Kong called "Long Island." I made it a point – I was in my white Navy uniform with the sailor hat – I had to do a lot of talking and research, and I took a fishing boat by myself from the pier in Hong Kong to this island about a 20 or 30-minute ride away where there was a Trappist monastery. And I spent all day there. They have a farm, a dairy and they're self-sustaining. They also sell their products to the local community to generate money.

I went into this monastery. And the Trappists, as you may know, take a vow of silence and they are cloistered, which means they don't talk to anyone in the community. They don't even talk to each other because of the vow of silence, except when they're in prayer in the monastery or at Mass.

However, they have one guy – and he happened to be an American – who is a public relations guy who helps sell their products to the community. Anyway, he is a priest – a Trappist. So I meet him and to start the conversation I asked him where he was from. He said, "Milwaukee, Wisconsin." But he'd been there ten or twenty years, and they didn't have television or computers in those days – well, there was television, but they didn't watch it or listen to the radio or anything. They're cut off from so-called civilization. Anyway, I've been a baseball fan all my life, so to start I said, "You're from Milwaukee, Wisconsin." And this is 1966. I said, "What did you think of the Braves moving from Milwaukee to Atlanta." And he said something to me that didn't make sense. He said, "The Braves in Milwaukee! I never heard of that. I thought they were in Boston." Now, I was ignorant about the Braves history. I didn't know that they were in Boston. So there was a disconnect. He didn't know they were in Milwaukee because he'd been cut off from the world for ten or twenty years. So there was a little confusion

there. Anyway, we moved on from that and chit-chatted a little about the monastery and who was there. As it turns out they had Europeans, some of them were Americans; they had some Asians in there. He gave me a guided tour through the monastery and showed me some of the dairy and farm and whatever. I bought a couple of the milk bottles and emptied them and shipped them back to my Dad, because it had the Trappist insignia. And I bought a few prayer cards and a rosary and whatever.

Anyway, he took me through the monastery where I saw the monks in prayer with the shaved heads and all that. I like to mention that because out of the two million Americans, I don't think there were many who went to spend eight hours in a Trappist monastery.

There's a little follow-up to that. In 2004 I spent four days visiting at the headquarters of the Dominican nuns I had in school back in the 1950's. This was eight years ago. I saw my second grade teacher, Sister Josetta; my fifth grade teacher, Sister David Marie; I saw Sister Pauletta, the principal; Sister Mary Pius Worland, who sponsored me. And we set this up over a couple of years with e-mails and phone calls. And when I got there, they had a room where visiting priests stay, and at the end of the hall there's a couch, refrigerator, television. I opened the refrigerator and she had a six-pack of Bud waiting for me! Anyway, I went to chapel with them four to six times a day. But it wasn't just praying. They took me on sight-seeing trips. I went to Churchill Downs. And one of the highlights of that visit was when she took me to the Trappist monastery in Gethsemane where Thomas Merton lived. And I went to his grave. So there's the connection with that Trappist thing. And I have a letter here from my Dad, dated June 19, 1966. And I'll read part of it:

"June 19, 1966; Omaha, Nebraska.

"Hi, John.

"It was 5:45 here when you called here from Hong Kong and your call came through perfectly clear. It was such a surprise, but good to hear your voice when you called from Hong Kong. They claim it is one of the most colorful cities in the world, and I hope you enjoyed it as much as possible. As for the Trappists over there, Father Raymond wrote quite a bit in one of his books about Trappist life in all different parts of the world, including China, as I remember. However, their life is pretty much the same all over the world. About 18 hours daily of service, exhausting both physical and mental. Surprisingly though, according to Father Raymond, they out-live the average man by 15 to 20 years. Father Burke said he spent six weeks at Gethsemane, Kentucky monastery one time studying and observing the way of life as a religious order, and I asked him if he considered joining them, and he said, "No. Being a parish priest with all its cares was enough for him." He said, "That's the place where they separate the men from the boys in the religious world, and it takes a very special and particular type of man to be a Trappist monk."

So it was very special to your Dad, too, that you did this.

Oh, yes. Right. Like I said, out of the two million Americans I'm curious. I'd like to know how many spent a day on R&R at a Trappist monastery, taking a fishing boat to get there.

And there is one other little thing I want to mention. Years after Vietnam … I lived in California for around thirty years. Around 1995 I used to visit a Benedictine monastery outside of Los Angeles. It's about fifty miles out. They have a fund-raiser every year, September-October, and it's hotter than blazes out there. They raise a lot of money. And I went to this several years. One year I went, I go around to meet the monks and they're Benedictine and some are former Trappists. And I told them the story about my visit in 1966 to this Trappist monastery near Hong Kong. As it turns out, one of the monks – I think he was about ninety years old – he said, "I was there!" He said, "We had to leave. The reason I'm here now – I would have stayed there." Maybe this was in early 2000 or something. Anyway, he said, "The communist Chinese kicked us out and we had to leave." So that's how he ended up in California. The point being, I had that connection with the Trappists in California and Kentucky years later.

Now, that trip that you made to Hong Kong was part of this special 20-day …

Twenty-day R&R trip. And very few people did that.

Why did they offer that?

That's a good question. I'm not sure why or how it came about.

Were they trying to exercise the ships?

Yes, part of it.

But I want to tell you this. My friend Carl … See, I was in the right place at the right time. He wasn't with me. He never knew about this. He applied for the regular R&R where you fly for five days and go home, and he signed up for Hong Kong but they didn't have space available – not on a ship, but on a plane. So he had to go to Taiwan or somewhere instead – some other place. So he missed that. So I was in the right place at the right time. And they didn't force you. They asked for volunteers. I could do that. Why wouldn't you!

And this was not long before …

I had about three or four months left to go home.

You were talking earlier about being about a month out from returning home.

Then they start notifying you. And you go as a group. Well, kind of as a person. It's based on the day you get there, and your 365 days, etc. And for some reason I think we went a week or two longer because they were disorganized and so on.

I do want to mention this to you. As far as the DD214, which they give you when you leave the military …

That's your discharge.

Right. Because we were the first unit in Vietnam, I was a plank holder; an NSA [-DaNang] plank holder they give you when you're on the first crew of the ship or whatever. You're a chartered member. They gave us a certificate saying we were a chartered plank owner of the station.

Anyway, one thing I didn't like very much. I heard about the same month we were leaving, they were giving some people battlefield promotions like they do in the Army and Marines, without a test. And because I was going home I missed out on that. They were bringing that in. That's number one.

Number two, I heard that there were probably maybe three, four or five other medals or ribbons that should have been on my DD214, including a Meritorious Unit Presidential Citation, a meritorious ribbon of some kind. And I got three or four basic ones – Vietnam Campaign, Service and National Defense. But I didn't get those others because they were disorganized. They said, "Don't worry about it. You can straighten that out at your next station or some time. Just go. Next."

The other thing I wanted to mention to you: On pay days, before you got in the pay line – I think they paid you cash in those days – you had to get in the shot line. So every month we were getting shots.

What were your shots for?

All the various illnesses that you could get in Asian countries. I can't remember the names of all of them. But I regretted that because you wanted to go in the pay line, then you go into town a lot of times and get wasted and do a little drinking and so on, or go to the orphanage or whatever you're going to do and so on. I really hated this because you had to get in the shot line first before you got in the pay line.

They wanted to make sure you got your shots.

Right. They didn't want you just taking off.

Returning to the States and Discharge

Tell me about your trip home. What was that last day or two like in Vietnam?

It was exciting, happy and wonderful. Like I said, you don't go with a group of thirty or fifty guys altogether. It's based on your day in and your day out. But there are other guys leaving with you. It was exciting and fun; get on the plane. And I think we stopped at the Philippines again and spent a couple of days there, then back to Guam and Hawaii and back to California.

I want to tell you, it was happy and sad because I'd already had the 'dear John' letter. But I was hoping I could keep that thing alive and go back and maybe patch things up or something. But she'd already been dating this next door neighbor for several months. They actually grew up together, so chances weren't good. So there were kind of mixed feelings there.

Now here's something that was hard. There was no orientation where you go from military …

No debriefing.

There's no debriefing. I was in Vietnam one day where there was a chance to be killed any day – not just in combat, but walking down the street. So you're there every day with that in the back of your mind. And then a couple of days later I'm walking the street in California. I stayed with my Aunt Barbara and Jay for a couple of days in San Diego, then took a plane from there to Omaha. And the next thing I know, in less than a week I'm from a combat area – and I did get combat pay in Vietnam; I wasn't stationed on a ship a mile from shore, I was in country. Anyway, one week I'm in a combat zone in DaNang, Vietnam and a week later I'm in my backyard in Omaha. And there's no debriefing or anything, and your head's kind of spinning, "Jeez! Where am I?"

I did want to tell you. The first or second day back in San Diego from Vietnam I ordered a large pizza and a pitcher of beer all by myself. I just enjoyed that. I was in heaven.

That was the first real meal you had back here.

Right. And, also, I bought a banana split. I don't recall having ice cream, period, over there. I don't think in those days they had any ice cream or any kind of cream because of refrigeration and so on. So that was a treat.

Then seeing my Uncle Jon and Aunt Barbara – this is the guy who looked like Hoss Cartwrght; a big guy. That was nice.

Is this where you were formally discharged?

No. Here's one neat thing. In Vietnam, in those days, they said you could pick. If you served in Vietnam and survived it you had a choice of duty station after that. So I said I had never been on the east coast – like I said, my family never went more than fifty miles from Omaha. So I said, "All right. I've seen the western part of the world – California to Hong Kong. I've never been to the east coast." So I picked a guided missile destroyer out of Norfolk, Virginia.

So after a week or two leave in Omaha, my time wasn't up. I still had time left.

How much time did you have left?

I had a year to go.

So I end up on a guided missile destroyer – the USS Sampson – out of Norfolk, Virginia.

Now this is interesting, Deb, because I believe I was one of the first Vietnam troops on that ship. Remember, this is the east coast, this is early Vietnam – 1966. This is a whole new thing.

I enjoyed some of the adventure. We did a Caribbean cruise. We went to Bermuda, Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico. We even went to places like Delaware and

Charleston, South Carolina. And on the weekends you could bring your family and friends on board, and they could go to the galley and have a meal with you. I didn't have family, but still.

I wanted to share this briefly with you. I did a couple of interesting things. I went to Delaware on this ship. I go in town and go to confession and go to Mass. And in confession I'm telling the priest I'm a sailor just there for a couple of days, and telling my confession. And he said, "I'm doing a Baptism later today with a Puerto Rican family. Would you like to join me?" So I did! I told you I was an adventurer.

So I go there in my white Navy uniform with these thirty to fifty Puerto Rican people, some of whom spoke little or no English. And they treated me like I was a celebrity or something. And the priest is there, of course, and that was neat.

The other thing I wanted to share with you, I'd never been to a major league baseball game, even in California. And I took myself to a Washington Senators game.

The other thing I wanted to share is I went at Christmas – this is December, 1966; my last year in the Navy. This is after Vietnam.

So you were in Norfolk at this time.

Yes. I didn't want to stay on the ship because it was depressing – it's like staying in jail or prison. And the guys were going home and so on. So I got on a bus and went from Norfolk to WashingtonD.C. by myself. And they have a place called the Old Soldiers and Sailors Home. And they have these women who are 70 to 90 years old who serve coffee, hot chocolate, donuts, cookies and what-have-you. And it's a house where you have four guys in bunk beds in rooms.

Anyway, I went into town and visited some of the important – like the Jefferson Memorial and some of those places. I walked down the street, and I'm in Georgetown in my Navy uniform that has USS Sampson. This guy comes by me and said he was on a ship – he was out of the service – and he invited me to have a drink with him. So I did that. And I met a Georgetown professor and had some drinks with him.

Then, from there, I didn't want to go back to the Old Soldiers and Sailors Home. I stayed out at night. And I'm sitting like at a Denny's or somewhere by myself and there's two stewardesses from United Airlines with this other guy sitting at a table. And one of them walked up to me – this is Christmas Eve – she said, "How would you like to join us? I see you're by yourself." So I said, "Sure." So they drove me all over town. Then they invited me to stay at their home, but I still had some of that seminary thing in me and didn't know if that was the right thing to do. And they took me and dropped me off at the Old Soldiers and Sailors Home and took off, and I thought I should have gone with them but it was too late.

Then I went to the Basilica of the National Shrine in D.C. with another guy I met at a bar. And you know that's the largest Catholic church in North America. Have you seen it or been there?

Yes.

You've been there? Wow.

And that was pretty amazing.

And this guy I met was pretty sophisticated. I think he was a business man. He was in a nice suit and drove me around and took me to church. And he started to tell me some things about Kennedy that shocked me, because I'd always looked at him as a saint and a super-hero. He told me he had dated different women – Kennedy – and I'd never heard any of this stuff before. And I thought he was making it up or exaggerating.

So, WashingtonD.C. Then after that I got back on the bus and went back to the destroyer. So that was Christmas of 1966. I was there for several days.

So I go back to the destroyer.

And I want to tell you, something interesting happened. I'm scheduled to be discharged in September, 1967. But, as I said, my goal was always not to be a hero, not to fight communists or anything, but to go to the military, get the G.I. Bill and go to school. So, October-November-December I'm writing letters to the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. And around October-November I get a letter that I'm accepted by the University of Nebraska. And in those days they had what they called an 'early out.' You could get out as much as ninety days early. And I said, "I'll do that." And they approved me for that. So instead of September I got out three months early – June 10, 1967.

But I had a hard decision to make, because this ship was scheduled to go on a Mediterranean cruise. Now, what that meant was they go to Spain, they go to Greece, they go to Italy. And I thought I would love to do that. But did I want to stay in the Navy three months longer or go to the University of Nebraska. So instead I went to Nebraska and the ship went to the Mediterranean without me.

Returning to Civilian Life

So did you use that G.I. Bill?

Yes. And I got off this guided missile destroyer on June 9. They next day, June 10, I'm on the sidewalk outside of Love Library at the University of Nebraska. I got down on my knees and said a prayer, and said, "Thank God I'm here!" After a thousand days. And I used every penny of that G.I. Bill. And four years later I graduated with the Class of 1971 with a Bachelors in Political Science and Sociology.

I wanted to tell you, because of the Navy, because of Vietnam, I walked into the Post Office and asked if they had any jobs open. They asked if I was a veteran and I said, yes. That asked if I had served in Vietnam and I said, yes. They said, "Well, we have a special program that's open now. We waive the test. You don't have to take any test. If you have some Vietnam ribbons on your DD214, you can apply direct to the Post Office." So I gave them that. I applied and got hired. And it's a good thing I did. Because the G.I. Bill at that time – this is June-July-August-September of 1967; my first classes were English, political science and history. Anyway, at that time the G.I. Bill was $100 a month. I lived in the dorm as a place to live. The dorm was $90 a month. That left $10. I had a used car that breaks down all the time, tuition and books. And the Post Office saved me. I don't know how I would have done it. Most students – they lived at home with their parents, or their parents paid the tuition. A lot of students had student jobs, but they paid minimum wage, which was $1.65 or some ridiculous amount of

money. I made $6 to $9 an hour because the Post Office pays better. Also, we got night differential pay, so I got paid …

A little bump.

Yes. And for Christmas we worked extra hours.

I worked with thirty or forty other students. There was a dental student working with me. There was a guy working on a Masters in Political Science, architecture majors – everything from A to Z. A lot of us worked swing and graveyard – we'd work 6:00 at night until whatever and go to class in the daytime. It was actually a student-work program. So they would let you off for exams, where other employers may not. So Vietnam got that for me. I did that for four years.

So you got back home. Your parents must have been thrilled.

They were very happy to have me back because they thought I could be killed at any time. As a matter of fact, you didn't hear this in that letter, but when I called from Hong Kong, for some reason the Red Cross – they intercept or help with the phone call – they thought it was a phone call about my demise!

Have you joined any veterans organizations?

Yes! I was a charter member – and I'm glad you asked – I was a charter member of the first Vietnam Americans group in Canoga Park, California. We'd just started from scratch. And because we were just starting we didn't have our own building. We had to use the local VFW hall in CanogaPark, which is part of Los Angeles. They gave us a room we could use. And after our meetings we'd go to the bar and have a beer and so on.

I want to share this with you. After meetings we'd go to the bar, and a lot of the guys I was with – this is Vietnam Veterans of America, not VFW. And we'd go to the bar and most of the guys there were World War II or Korean. Now this is in the late 1980's. And some of the World War II and Korean veterans are older than us by ten or twenty years. They said, "Who are you guys?" And we said, "We're with the Vietnam Veterans of America. We're not members of the VFW. We just use one of your rooms." And a couple of the Korean veterans said, "That wasn't even a war. Why are you here?" Now, a lot of the guys I was with in this Vietnam group were combat Army and Marines. They got mad. They said, "Oh. You don't think that was a war. Let's go out in the parking lot and find out if you think this was a war or not. I'll kick your ass!" So they went out in the parking lot and some of them got into fist fights or verbal fights. We eventually got thrown out of there. They kicked us out. So there you have it.

Anyway, that group went on for a couple of years. They moved to a school instead of the VFW hall, where nobody harasses and gives us a hard time. But eventually it dissolved.

But, to answer your question, within the past ten or fifteen years or so I'm an active member of the American Legion in California, and a member of the Darien VFW.

And I want to share this with you. You've probably interviewed the post commander. He was post commander for five years. This guy joined the Navy in 1940.

And I moved here over a year ago from California and go to my first Darien VFW meeting, and I told this group of forty members at the meeting – including the post commander – that I'd just moved to Darien after thirty years in Los Angeles. And, as you remember, in February of 2011 it was like the worst winter in 100 years in terms of snow, cold and so on. And he's kind of a very funny comedian guy, and very outspoken. He could be a stand-up comedian. He said, "You just moved to Darien – Chicago – from California. Have you seen a psychiatrist yet?"

Even though you weren't in combat, you did experience …

Yes. I'm glad you mentioned this because I forgot to say something. Even though I wasn't in direct combat, I almost left out a critical piece of information. This is from the first weeks and months I was there. When I walked down the street I used to see men, women and children with their faces and arms and their skin melted like candle wax – just like looking at candle wax, only it's their skin. And I saw a number of children and adults missing limbs. Some were laying on the sidewalk or whatever. So that had a big impact. That's not something you see in Omaha or Darien every day when you walk down the street. It's just there.

The other thing I want to share with you that's kind of different and sometimes shocking. I'd be talking to these beautiful Vietnamese women. They looked like Miss Universe with their outfits and so on. And they'd smile and you'd see red or black teeth from chewing betel nut. And the other thing I want to share, we had a Baptist missionary come to the dirty-30 one day, and he showed a video that he had taped himself of mountain Vietnamese people who, as part of their religion or custom, they have their first four teeth, when they're teenagers – girls and boys – they have their teeth filed down with a file, with no anesthesia, to the gums. So sometimes these people you meet on the street, when they talk or smile – and they could be young: 15, 20, 30 – these four teeth in front are missing. And you're carrying on this conversation like it's an every day thing. Anyway, what we found out from this Baptist missionary – this was a 60 or 90-minute tape he had – he said for some reason, in this particular group of Vietnamese, it made them superior to animals. Because an animal is not smart enough to do this. If you're an animal you're not going to file out your teeth. But this shows superiority of some of these mountain Vietnamese people over animals. But it also had religious. Had you heard that before?

I had not heard that before.

This isn't local people. These are rural people, in the mountains. Have you heard of Montagnard Vietnamese? So, that was different.

Lasting Impressions

How did all these military experiences you had affect the way you think about war, about the military, or even about the world in general – what's happening today.

I'm glad you said that. Especially recently, after watching one of these DVD's with Carl. It's called *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, which is a great DVD. It's ninety minutes. It's got the great music of the 1960's – Marvin Gay with *What's Going On*. These are veterans serving in country, writing to their mothers and other people.

Over the years I have a lot of mixed feelings. And the thing I always resent – after the military I worked for the VA for about thirty years in five different states. So I've talked to literally all the wars, especially Vietnam. And in California I met a lot of combat [veterans]. I even did some group therapy – not as a patient, but as a vocational staff person. I talked to a lot of combat Army and Marines. And some of these guys come up to me at the VA when I was in direct patient care, and they're black or Mexican. And I'd ask, "Did you serve in Vietnam?" They'd say, "Yes." And I found out there was a huge percentage of black and minorities.

One of the things I do not like – and they mention in this in the book *Boom!* by Tom Brokaw, and you can get it audio or regular – the privileged class, and you can look at all of our presidents from Kennedy down to Obama, they all have children, every one of them. Not one of them ever had a child in Vietnam. And if you think about it, if you could send your child to Stanford or Harvard or Yale, why would you send them to … You wouldn't. But. We don't mind sending somebody else. And then you have war hawks. People like Dick Cheney: five deferments. And you even have President George W. Bush who said, "Stay the course. I'm a war president. I'm the great decider," who was AWOL for fourteen months with no consequence of that. Anyway, the thing about it is, it seems to be a political thing. And looking back we find, now, that McNamara – this is something that always bothered me – he would never apologize for the dumb decisions that cost thousands of lives. And it's not just 58,000. I met thousands of veterans affected mentally and physically. I met veterans with 'agent orange' with cancer and their children also have it. And you may have heard it also, with the current Iraq and Afghanistan wars there are two 25-year-old students from Harvard and Columbia who did a study for Congress. They said there are over 40,000 disabled veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. And for the next forty years it's going to cost over a trillion dollars for them, for their compensation and health care.

Anyway, my point being, even if you look at our present Senators and Congress, there's a smaller percentage than ever in history. Back in the 40's, 50's and 60's there was a sizable number of Senators and Congressmen who wore the uniform. Today there's fewer than ever. The other thing is, today, in 2012, only one percent of the United States are in the military. And the other thing, they don't even put the casualties anymore on the first page. You really have to hunt and look for it. So I resent the fact that the privileged get a pass. They don't have to do it. They go for the low income and middle class, and the minorities. That doesn't seem right. So I have very mixed feelings.

But at the same time, I am retired military because after the Navy I went to the Coast Guard Reserve. It's one of the best decisions I ever made. I started out doing boating safety, which is like the highway patrol on the water. We inspect boats for registration, life preservers, etc. Occasionally we'd tow people in because they'd been drinking a bit and so on.

Then I went from that to doing foreign vessel inspections in California with the Coast Guard. And that was a great job. I went on hundreds of ships from China, from

Europe, from Korea, from South America, whatever, doing dangerous cargo inspections. We did emergency steering tests, firehose tests and whatever. It's called a 'safety and security inspection.' Anyway, the thing about the Coast Guard, they are unlike the Navy, Army, Marines, etc. They are not combat oriented. They have a full-time peace mission. So you could almost be a pacifist. Now, they have some Coast Guard in Afghanistan. But those are people that want to be there, and they're special units. But the Coast Guard is a very great choice that I made.

So I did twenty years with them and retired back in 1995 as a Reserve, not a regular. But as long as you get 20 years you're considered to have the same benefits. So I can go around the country now, which I do, and stay at military bases for $27 to $52 a night. And they're as good as any four-star hotel. I've been to the Hyatt in WashingtonD.C., where I go for the March for Life in January every year. I also go to the Smithsonian and so on afterward. I also go to some of the local bars, and I've been to the Phoenix Park Hotel on Capital Hill. And I can tell you these Navy base facilities, and the Marine, at Point Loma and Miramar are as good or better than any four-star hotel I've ever stayed at. They're clean and nice and so on.

But I have very mixed feelings about even the current war in Iraq and Afghanistan. I look back at Vietnam and I've met many people whose lives have been destroyed. I've had veterans tell me they were going suicidal in Vietnam.

I met a Vietnam veteran in the late 1970's or 80's. I think he had 'agent orange,' but they didn't know what it was in those days. This was a guy in his 30's or something. He was bald from cancer. He was out of a job – he lost his job because of the cancer. They didn't have fire Obama care. He didn't have insurance. Maybe he could have got Medicaid but didn't know about it. He had a seven-year-old daughter – he was a single father, divorced. His daughter had leukemia. So he racked up $50,000[in medical bills]. This is in the mid to late 1970's when I'm working as a social worker for the University of Nebraska. He racked $50,000 and they wanted me to help him find a job and resolve some of his problems. So there's a consequence of war that nobody knows or cares about. And his daughter eventually died. And I think he did as well.

I've met Vietnam veterans within the past five or ten years while I'm working in direct patient care for the VA and as a volunteer. I met one guy. He was 6'4"-6'5" and was a basketball player in college in New York. He had leukemia and went from 240-25-pounds to – this is while he's in his 60's – and I didn't see him for six months. He went down to 170 pounds.

I met another guy from Texas. Now, these guys don't have cancer in their families. I met another guy from Texas, 6'4", good looking. He comes down with some kind of cancer. I met a number of guys with prostate and colon cancer and diabetes. So we're still paying the price today.

Meanwhile, now we have open trade. And if you look at our hats and what have you, instead of China they're made in Vietnam because the labor's cheaper in Vietnam.

This is from my LA March for Life, which we do in March of every year, which I helped co-found. I do a lot of volunteer work with pro-life, and a lot of work with the Knights of Columbus for the past twenty years, which you can see in this shirt I'm wearing. I've done youth activities and a lot of pro-life work.

And also I do federal job search seminars, even in the local area here. I did one at St. Mary of Gostyn and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, and the KellerGraduateSchool. And I also do one-to-one counseling of not just veterans, but anyone looking for federal jobs.

Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to add before we finish the interview?

Here's a little thing. After Vietnam, because of my service over there it gave me a special knowledge and connection with Vietnamese people. So when I worked as a medical social worker and instructor at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, family practice residency program – this is in the 1970's, because I was the only Vietnam veteran working at the Nebraska Med Center they assigned me to be the liaison with Vietnamese doctors. Because Nebraska had a shortage of doctors in the rural areas. And one of our senators who was a Vietnam veteran, flew to Camp Pendleton and brought fifty or 100 doctors with him, and they made me the liaison to meet with the staff faculty doctors at Nebraska, and to meet with the Vietnamese people and their families. So I became good friends and went to some of their homes and had meals with them in Omaha. And many of them later ended up in Grand Island – Broken Bow and Scottsbluff; small town Nebraska towns to do family-practice medicine. And they also had to take some tests through NebraskaMedicalCenter.

The other thing that happened, in the parish, the Catholic Church I was in, in Omaha – this is in the 1970's or 80's – they had an ad in the church bulletin. They had a Vietnamese math professor who came from Vietnam to Omaha, of all places, and he didn't have a job or anything. And they wanted people to help this family with their English and transition to society in Omaha. So I volunteered and became friends of theirs. I went to their home, and they came to my home for Thanksgiving and so on. And they gave this guy – this is a college math professor, a prestigious job in Vietnam – they gave him a job as a grave digger at a cemetery in Omaha, common labor.

One quick thing – my Dad was an 'Archie Bunker' type person, kind of outspoken. But he was also educated. And I introduced my Dad to this Vietnamese family. We had a nice Thanksgiving dinner at my home. His name is Phuoc. I think he was about 5'1"-5'3" and about ninety pounds. And my Dad was 220 pounds or something and was a butcher who looked like a weight-lifter. So they looked different standing next to each other. So my Dad says to me without Phuoc being around. He said, Phuoc, fuck. What kind of name is that?" He says, "Where would you get a name like that?" This wasn't your common Omaha name.

Anyway, that was one of the nice things. I became friends with a number of Vietnamese families in OrangeCounty. I worked there one day a week at a campus at SantaAnnaCollege recruiting people to work for the federal government and went to some of their homes. So I still have a Vietnamese connection after all these years.

Looking back, I have a very positive attitude about the Vietnamese. When I was going on some of these visits on my own, I meant to say earlier, they didn't have washers and dryers, they didn't have color television, they didn't have computers. They would play music out on the porch and I'd go up and listen with them on their little radios. I found out they were happy with no money. Some of them had dirt floors.

And one other thing, in closing, it occurred to me while I was there that they really didn't care if it was communist, Viet Cong, American or what. They were just living day-to-day like all of us do, and they didn't know or care about the war.

And the blessing of God got me through all of this. Daily prayer. I wore an Immaculate Conception medal. Pat and I exchanged these with each other, and I wore that every day of my life in the military. That got me through, and daily prayer. And I gave a medal just like that to my daughter. My Dad gave me a little prayer that got me through boot camp and Vietnam: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph we love you. Save souls." I would say that out loud and often to myself when times were tough or scary. So that got me through.

Anything else?

That pretty much ends it, except that I came from a loving family who got me through Vietnam – the letters and prayer support. I currently have four children. I have a son in Texas named John Jr., and he just had a child so I'm a grandfather for the first time in May of this year – baby Magdalena. I have a daughter named Laura who's a living saint in San Diego who's also a caregiver. Her mother has cancer. And I have a son, James Jr. in LA, and a daughter, Angela, in LA. So that's it!

Thank you!