

Donald Combs

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History 307

James Johnson Oral History Interview Side 1

Interviewer: The following is an oral history interview with James Johnson. It's being conducted in Louisville Kentucky on May 30, 1997.

Interviewer: I read through your questionnaire that I appreciate you returning and I guess to start off is you enlisted. I'm curious what prompted you to enlist and what the year was.

Johnson: I graduated from high school, Arron Strait High School here in Louisville Kentucky in June of 1964. Me and a close friend of mine and we knew that a lot of guys were being drafted into the army. Me and him decided that wasn't going to happen to us, we didn't want to go dig foxhole and crawl in the mud and that. So we went down to the old federal building here in Louisville and were going to join the airforce. That is the easiest branch of service to be in.

We looked on the directory in the federal building. It said Airforce, Army, Marine Corps, Coast Guard. We found the Airforce. Everybody was on the same floor and as we walked away I said wait a minute. I said "where's the Navy at". At that time we went back and looked at the directory. Well, the Navy was down in the basement for some reason. So, me and him went down to the basement and stuck our heads in the door and this chief petty officer was sitting in there and he hollered come on in boys. So, that was the last we knew about that.

We both signed up for four years. We wanted to get our military service out of the way. Uh, and my father had served in the Army in World War II. So, when I went home, I'd signed up and everything and the day before I left I notified my parent I was leaving for Great Lakes. My mother did everything she could to stop me. Everything to writing my congressmen, telling him I was the only child. I got two brothers and a sister but she didn't want me to go into the service.

I went in and we both went in on what they called the buddy plan at that time. We both got sent to Great Lakes for boot camp and we stayed together in the same company, company 333 in boot camp, all the way through boot camp.

During boot camp and as you're training, they give you all kinds of tests as to what type of school you can go to. Well, I looked at some of the schools that was offered and one of the school I scored high on was radio and electronics skill. So, I signed up to be a radiomen in what they called radio A school.

I left there, that's where we split up. I was sent to Davis Field, Rhode Island and he went to Memphis Tennessee for aviation structural mechanic school.

Well, I was on a radar picket ship at the time, the USS Guardian, AGR 1. It was stationed out of Davis Field, Rhode Island and we were what was called the D-Line. There were four ship that would go out to sea and they would rotate, they'd go up to the North Atlantic and eventually get to the south. You spend thirty days at sea and come back in port. We were under NORAD, North Atlantic Radar Air Defense.

I did that for nine months, left there and was sent to Bainbridge, Maryland to their radio school. That's was also boot camp recruiters school and fire control technician school. I did twenty six there, became a radiomen. I left there as a seamen, what the call a RMSN, radiomen seamen.

I was sent to a fleet oilier out of Long Beach, California. In between times I got married. The oilier I was assigned to was the USS Cacapon, AO 52. Fleet oilier were all named for a particular reason. The fleet oilier were all named after rivers in the United States with Indian names. There is a river somewhere in Virginia that has the name Cacapon, so that's how it got its name.

So, we went over seas, I made third class petty officer, which is E-4 and went to Hawaii and from Hawaii went to the Philippines our normal jump point. The purpose was to be in to Gulf of Tonkin and just refuel the other ships that were there at that time.

I thought this was good place to be, on a tanker out at sea. Nobody doing nothing to me, good food, and didn't work that hard. I was a radiomen and we worked what we called port and starboard shift, you were twelve on and twelve off in the radio room. I had a top secret crypto clearance.

We had been there about a week and a half in the Gulf of Tonkin and the Communications Officer came down and said, at this time we need a third class radiomen we're sending into Saigon to put on river boats. Well, my comment was "we got a chief petty officer, a first class, two second class, and five seamen and I'm the only the only third class." He said "you just volunteered." River boats are all voluntary, or that's what it was supposed to be but a lot of it wasn't voluntary. The books you read or what you hear on a lot of documentaries that say they were volunteers. It's not all voluntary, it wasn't.

I got off the ship, what they call a swift boat. It's about, I'm guessing a fifty-two foot boat, came out and picked me up and took me back into the Saigon area and tied up in there. At which time, I went through a complete medical again. This is all within a twenty-four hour period. Then a Marine Corporal, a lance corporal, came over to me he says "I'm your training officer." I said "OK." So, he took me over to the side and trained me on the M-16, the 45, how to throw a grenade, and hand to hand combat. Then we started getting incoming. So, my training was over and it lasted two hours and forty minutes.

I was then sent to the boat pier and assigned to a river boat, PBR. We were riveron two or river squadron two. As you probably know from all this, everything in the military is abbreviated,

PBR meaning patrol boat river. This is a twenty-eight foot fiberglass hull boat that has no props at all. It's all jet propelled. It can do anywhere from thirty to forty knots, depending on how loaded down she was.

I was on my first tour. I'd got on the boat and we were leaving that evening to go on patrol. Normal patrols were twelve hours out then back. We tied up a lot of times at the big ship, at tenders, repair tenders.

They were working on getting us hootches where we could tie up at a dock. Other runs we made were our long runs. We would run from Saigon up to Phnom Penh. Phnom Penh is in Cambodia, but according to all the newspapers I read, President Nixon said we weren't in Cambodia.

We had a four man boat. There was either a first class petty officer an E-6 or a chief petty officer in charge of the boat an E-7. You had an enginemen and a lot of times you had a gunners mate, or a [inaudible]. I was one of the technicians.

Being a radiomen, I came under what they call a VRB4, that was called a variable reenlistment bonus. Your reenlistment bonus went according to your rating, one being the lowest and four being the highest. Otherwise, if I'd reenlisted I would have got \$10,000 full cash for reenlistment for six years because we were a critical rating.

I found out over there, you wore your insignia on your sleeve and the insignia for radiomen was sparks, like four sets of lightning sparks. You tore those off your sleeve because you didn't want people to know you were the radiomen. You were the communications man.

When I was put on the boat, they told me you're assigned to the sixty. Never seen one before in my life. It was a M-60. We had twin fifties forward and we had a fifty aft. So, I said "guys show me how to load it and where the trigger is." We were out four hours when we got hit by a firefight. Right after, that's when I learned you don't fire a sixty automatic, you fire it in bursts because it heated up and locked up on me and I didn't have a gun. Most everything was OJT, it was on the job training.

While you're out on the river, they taught you each weapon. Then you went on the helm of the boat and how to handle the boat, what the boat would do and then a lot of times repairing parts of the boat.

Sometimes you get in a firefight and the AKs would come from shore and they'd hit the hull. You could hear it, like somebody throwing rocks at the boat, just thump. We had what we called quick dope and it's a can of putty. Someone would go below and start rubbing the holes. You weren't going to sink because we could go in nine inches of water and it didn't draw that much water. [sentence in audible].

Like I said, we were jet propelled, sucked water in and blew out water. All the prop boats that were on the river, they used to take old barb wire and the new concertina wire and make balls of it and put it in the water with sticks so it would float about a foot or so below the water. So, when the prop boats came over the wire would tie up the props. We would go over and they couldn't do nothing to us.

So, what they started doing to us was throwing what they called reef balls. They'd take rice balls and throw it in the water and we would suck it up in the engines. The purpose was to stop the boat in the middle of the river. We got stopped a couple of times and what you had to do was jump over the side and take a probe and clean out your jets. The purpose of doing that was to catch us dead in the water. We had several boats that got caught that way.

As far as living, there was no below decks, it was all on the deck. Your bathroom, you hung your butt over the side. If you took a shower or took a bath, you'd pull to the side somewhere jump over the side, get naked, get wet, while other people manned a watch. Climb out soap down real good, jump over the side, rinse off, climb out, get the leeches off of you, and get dressed. Then it was somebody else's turn to do it. The Navy instilled into you cleanliness a lot because on a boat, there's so much can happen from dirt. We tried to do that as often as we could. Sometimes you'd go maybe a week before you'd get that first bath, you didn't have time. Sometimes your socks would rot in your boots.

Firefights plenty of them. I did nine months and my big ship was going back. So, I got sent back to the tanker I was on and I went back to the States. I thought it was great. I'm done. I did nine months in Nam and like everybody else I bitched and raised hell. I said "hey wait a minute." The Army only does twelve months and their out right. I said "I only got three more months to do." I said the Marine Corps, the do thirteen months and their home. The told me no! You're in the Navy we don't have a limit. There is no twelve or thirteen months in the Navy. You're here until we tell you different.

Interviewer: I was curious why you had two tours?

Johnson: The second tour, I went back to the States and I came back over and made second class radiomen. I though OK, it's a third class billing that's what it calls for, I'm second class. This is where Uncle Sam plays with the words because I volunteered, ED the first time. Well, the second time the new Communications Officer came down. He said "we're sending you back over to river boats." I said no! I argued with them. They said no, you have prior experience and your already previous trained. You don't have to retrain somebody. I said that's supposed to be all voluntary. He said yea, "we're volunteering you."

So, I already had a seabag of greens. Me and the seabag went over to another swift boat. Went in, and in fact I hooked up with my same squadron again. I knew two or three guys and that's about it.

After a few months over there, it's the old cliché, you don't make friends. Your friends are those guys on the boat with you. Outside your boat, anybody new you don't make friends with them. You went ashore as a boat, the four of you together. You get drunk together. You run together. You stay together, your a family the four of you are.

The boats usually ran in pairs up river. Now, that was the order, to run in pairs but it didn't always happen. You ran alone a lot or if you ran in pairs, you ran in what they called sucker runs. Each boat would go in on one engine. One boat would shut down in the woods or in some place up river. While the other boat would kick in its second engine and take off and it would sound like two boats leaving and you would sit there and wait for Charlie to come out of the woods thinking the boat was gone. Those boats had a lot of firepower and Charlie was afraid of those boats.

Another thing because we were fiberglass mines didn't bother us. Mines are magnetic, they're drawn to metal. It didn't get us. So, what they did, they would set booby traps out on the river and you have somebody up on shore to explode the mines.

My second tour, I lost a boat. Three of us did OK, but one of the guys, the gunners mate was hurt real bad and we couldn't get picked up because it was too hot. So, we were in the water, probably about thirty-six hours or longer. You could feel your clothes rotting on you. You felt things biting at you, nipping at you but you held on to the bow of the boat. The rest of the boat was underwater and that was what you hid behind out in the water and you kept your M-16 on your head and fired from your head. You only fired short bursts because you knew you couldn't reload. When the chopper finally got in to us. They aired out the whole jungle before they brought them in. They picked us up. We sent our buddy up and put him in a chopper. Then the enginemen went up. I went up third. One thing I remember, when I was going up and my feet were coming out of the water. I remember the soles of my boots just coming off and a layer of skin went with them. The gunners mate didn't make it. We were just holding onto a dead body, I think. but, we got back.

We went to med-evac for a week. I had come down with malaria. I thought I'd died because I woke up in a hospital and there was all these guys in there. The first thing I wanted to do was check. I thought I had been hit. I had to check and make sure everything was there. After that I got R&R in Hong Kong. I got a week's R&R in Hong Kong. I was there two days and got in trouble and got sent back to Saigon.

Interviewer: You want to talk about that?

Johnson: No. So, I went back to Saigon and got reassigned to a new boat. The three of us did and they gave us some young kid. I say young kid, I was eighteen when I went in and I got out when I was twenty-two. I was on those boats when I was twenty years old and I was the old man. The kid we got was seventeen years old. In a way, now that I look back on it, I feel sorry

for him because nobody talked to him. We didn't have anything to do with him really, other than training.

I finished out my tour there, that nine month tour. I was going to be a lifer in the Navy. I was going to make the Navy my career but when I got off there and went back on my big ship, that gave me a couple of months.

I was there for Tet too. Tet, I think was the final decision for me. We sent I don't know how many boats up river that were already on the river when Tet hit. Tet, I'm guessing off the top of my head was late February early March 1968. I was getting out in July 1968. I was a short timer. Short timers don't get in firefights. I was scared to death and I knew that I wasn't going to make it, but I did. I got lucky. We lost a bunch of boats. We lost a bunch of guys.

Interviewer: During Tet.

Johnson: During Tet. Actually the Navy lost 2,636 men in Nam and seven Coast Guard. A lot of people don't see the Navy as in country but riverine. We worked under what they called Operation Game Warden. What we did was check all the boat traffic going up and down for weapons. We collected a lot of weapons. We stopped a lot of traffic but we couldn't stop it all. We were catching a lot of Chinese stuff that was coming down river, Chinese AKs.

We were in the stickups in the delta, where we were fighting Charlie. We weren't fighting the regulars like the guys up north were. They were fighting regular uniform people.

Like I said, after that I got out and I came back in 1968 on the tanker. I've talked to other people about this. We tied up in Long Beach. We had to tie up at a public pier because there was so many ships in. We couldn't go into the Naval Yard. We were in dressed whites, the jumper, white hat, and white pants. There was a crowd on the pier. We thought this was great. Here's all these people greeting us coming back but they started throwing things at the ship.

There was only like maybe two police cars down there to stop this crowd. So, the captain got on the bull horn and told the police to clear the pier or he was going to send the shore patrol over there and let all his men loose to clear the pier. I didn't want to go over there. My family was living in Long Beach but they didn't come down to meet me because they knew that was there, my wife and my kids. They did clear the pier but, I think there was two or three fights broke out.

Second time back in 1968, was when I realized... Well, I tried to figure out what I was doing wrong. What did I do wrong? I didn't earn any big medals, no stars, I didn't want any. I definitely didn't want a heart but you had to get you butt shot off to get a heart and I didn't want anything to do with that. I just wanted to do what I signed up to do. My dad he got a star in World War II, a Bronze Star and he was just proud that I went in.

I guess I was out about fifteen years before I talked to anybody other than another Nam vet about anything I did. Back then, if you talked to anybody, first you found out if he was one of you. If

we wasn't you just didn't talk about it because you couldn't explain it and they didn't understand.

I had thirty-seven confirmed kills by myself on my first tour. Its not something your proud of but its something I felt I had to do. It was either me or them. Do I die or do I kill them? I went on a guilt trip for a while after I got out and I guess I started believing all that bull that was floating around that what we were doing was wrong.

I came on the police department right after I got out. I got out in July of 1968, and I came on the department in September 1968. As my wife said, wasn't it enough in Nam for you.

To this day now, I feel like I did the right thing. Eventhough somebody in Washington made a bad decision or bad call. I did what I felt my country wanted me to do. I was doing something for my country. If I didn't feel that way, then I believe a lot of guys lost their lives for nothing. They did something for that flag and their country.

They weren't all heroes. The young boy I was telling you about. We lost him four months later. Stupid! We didn't even pick him up. He got blown off the boat and we couldn't stop to get him. We had to hope somebody later, picked him up in the water. He got hit hard, it tore his flak off and everything.

Interviewer: It sounds like you guys got hit a lot. The action was...

Johnson: It was come and go. We could go out sometimes twelve hours, do nothing. Come back in, refuel, resupply, go out twelve hours do nothing. Come back in, refuel, resupply, go out and all of a sudden all hell'd break loose. Then go out another time routine boat stops. There was nothing consistent about it.

Every now and then, during the monsoon season when it really came down. The next thing you knew there's new tributaries everywhere and those boats would go in twelve to nine inches of water. So, we would go up in rice patties. We'd go up to Phnom Penh.

We couldn't sit on a firefight. We would hit and run. You kick down thirty-six knots or so and you're gone, you're firing as you run.

Now, a lot of times somebody would be breaking the shore. We may have some grunts coming from shore and they need some pickup or some back up. We'd ground our boat and you had all that firepower on that boat and we'd give them some back up, for them to get on the boat. Then we'd push off. Sometimes, we picked up bodies. We had as many as ten to fifteen body bags on our boat that we'd be taking back up river. They used us for everything. They used us for guinea pigs, targets, back up. You name it we were used for it. The Seals used us. We'd take the Seals up river and drop them off somewhere. We didn't know where we were dropping them and didn't know why. We didn't ask. We never went into the shore. We always stayed about ten or twelve feet from shore, they'd get off there and go in. We never saw them again. We

never picked up Seals. We always took them in but we never picked them up. We always said, we were the utility boats of the Navy. We were well used.

We felt good about backing up a lot of people, when something got hot and they'd call for you to come up and get some help in there. Especially, the guys out in the jungle. The guys in the jungle hated to get on our boats. They said, "leave me in the jungle, let me fight there, I know that."

They called us the bear in the machine. That's that big bear in the machine you shoot with a rifle as he walks back and forth and as you hit him he turns and goes back the other way. Well, that's what we were, the bear in the machine.

They would sometimes say, don't take us on that river. Then I'm just the opposite. I wouldn't go in that jungle for nothing, leave me out on the river. The jungle was more scary than anything to me. Sometimes, you'd tie up for a night and have to stay out. You'd go into the brush. You had to know what snakes to kill or how to kill them without shooting up your boat. A lot of times, you grabbed a machete that was hooked to the side and chop them up and tossed them over the side. Basically, that's about it.

interviewer: Did you feel vulnerable out there, when you were talking about the bear in the machine.

Johnson: They thought we were vulnerable. We lost a lot of boats but then again, we did one heck of a job, I always thought. No, didn't feel that vulnerable. I felt safer out there. A couple of times we went into the jungle for different things and I was probably more scared in that jungle than I was ever on that boat.

The first time I went on that boat and like I said, we were in a firefight right away. I had a medical problem, I thought. I went almost a week or week and a half maybe, without a bowel movement. I went back to the corpsmen, I said "I got a problem here and I told him." He said ninety percent of the guys that come over here have that problem. He said, "have you ever heard the term scared shitless?" He said that's what's wrong, you are so scared and your nerves do that to you. He also said "you're not eating." I said "no, I haven't been eating." He said, eventually it's all going to break loose in you. You'll be all right and he was right, it did. He said I could give you something but they don't want you on some type of medication for that and you got used to it. You got used to eating whatever was there.

interviewer: What kind of stuff was there, I mean what did you eat?

Johnson: The grunts had K-Rats we had C-Rats. C-Rations were about a half a step better than K-Rations. You know, you always got your little can of peaches and some dried meat that wasn't worth a darn. It was more beef jerky type stuff. Mostly peanut butter and cracker is what

you got because there wasn't a whole lot of meat and the only protein they could give you was peanut butter. A pack of cigarettes, usually it was Camels or Luckies.

If you had beer over there, we got Schlitz. Unless, you were in the Airforce and then you got the good stuff, you got Budweiser. There was an airbase, Tan Son Nhut. We'd chopper up there to get up parts and we'd sneak over to the officer's mess and the enlistment's mess over in the airforce base and steal food. We'd steal good booze. They tried to court martial us one time but they said no go ahead and take it. We'd come back, I remember we had a T-bone steak the four of us split. We thought we were in seventh heaven but it happened. I ate on the beach a few times in Saigon. I've eaten dog, stringy meat. Probably the worst I ever had was when I went to CAWSHUNG Taiwan and I ate fish eye soup. I didn't know I was eating it but it's a delicacy over there. You learned to survive and eat what they ate.

There was a difference, according to Uncle Sam. Person A had American food and person B had Vietnamese food they could tell the difference by their bowel movement who was there. Which surprised me, I never thought of it that way and didn't care.

We used to get what we called our care packages from home and my mother learned to make popcorn and used it as packing and we'd eat all the packing. We couldn't wait to get the salt out so we could eat the packing. One Easter, she sent me all kinds of chocolate candy. I had this one ball of chocolate about the size of a basketball. So, we cut it up and ate it and salted down the packing and ate the packing.

My high school class of 1964, at that time they told me we lost more guys from my class in Nam than any other high school class. I think there was thirty two guys and most of them were Army and you had the hardcore that went to the Corps.

I know I say this a lot, but a lot of people said they went to the airforce to hide. There was a lot of airforce guys over there I ran into. A lot of Airedales.

interviewer: When you went in 1964, Vietnam wasn't really hot yet.

Johnson: Well, I didn't actually go to Nam till 1966. I was in the North Atlantic in 1964. When I hit Nam it was in 1966. I was there 1966 through 1967 and back again in 1967 through 1968.

I would say the hottest point was 1967 and 1968. Tet was probably the worst I'd ever seen. I don't know where all those people were coming from. They were coming out of the woodwork, coming out of the trees. We got into Tet and we lost so much ammunition. We were down to bare minimum out on the river and trying to fight to get back to reload up just to go back out.

interviewer: Where were you at that time?

Johnson: I was down in what they call the stickups. We were out on patrol and our radio just seemed to go crazy. People screaming on it, you know, every channel that I hit. We went to the closest backup.

I talked to guys that were on boats that said they hardly did anything during Tet. They said we didn't see nothing, didn't hear nothing and there's guys that was over there the same exact time I was over. They were probably there seven or eight months that had only been in two firefights. I guess it depended on who you were, where you were, and when it happened. You talked to somebody that was south and talk to somebody else that was up north. It's like two different wars. That was a conflict wasn't it. That wasn't a war.

Like I said, I was only TAD over there, according to Uncle Sam and according to the Navy, temporary assigned duty but it was enough for me to not sign up for anymore. Get my GI Bill and get out. I was married and had two kids, it was time for me to leave Uncle Sam and his shit and I did. I watched a lot of it on television when I was home.

Interviewer: Was that difficult?

Johnson: Well, mostly what they showed on television was you ground troops. You know, your real in country, in the jungle and the city type group. You didn't see to much of the Navy, to much of the river people.

Our lodge, we go to Washington every year for police memorial with all other policemen through out the country. Being a lodge trustee, they've asked me to go. I haven't been. I think the wall is fantastic up there but I don't want to go up there and read about guys I left over there. They were OK. I want to know when I left they were OK, they were alive.

These were guys you eat with, you sleep with, you bathe with. These guys are closer than you brothers. These are guys that held in the other guys guts that got blown out. These are guys that got burnt up real bad to help other guys and I don't want to know that they didn't come back. I could care less about the names on that wall. That's great that they got them. Some guys want to go look at that, I don't. I do not have that first desire to find out what happened to some of those guys. They were too close.

I've got one friend now, he was on a tin can over there. I met him in radio school. He was a fire control technician. He stayed in and come out an E-9. He is now living down in South Carolina and I haven't seen him for thirty years but every Christmas we send a card. This year I'm gonna go see him. I talked to him on the phone, I said we got to meet each other before one of us dies and we won't get to see each other again. This year I'm going down there to see him. He did twenty eight years in the Navy and retired as an E-9 and he's never seen the wall.

Interviewer: For the same reason?

Johnson: I think so. I think so but I've never asked him about it.

I'm sure when we meet, we'll sit down and open a bunch of beer and relive and talk. Usually that's when it happens, I can run across a few Marines and I'm always teasing the Marines or ex-Marines and they're always teasing me about being ex-Navy. But, we can sit down and start drinking a few beers and tongues loosen up, minds loosen up and you watch the people that weren't there sit there and just stare.

I don't believe I had it that bad. I believe some of those guys over there I've talked to had it worse than I ever had it. I believe I was lucky. I talked to guys that laid in holes for a long time or just stuck somewhere on a hill someplace. Something, I wouldn't want.

Probably some of the worst ones I've ever talked to were the tunnel rats. Those guys weren't right. Anybody crawl down in a hole and there was booby traps, there were snakes they tied in those holes. Why would they want to do that.

Like I said, I just did what I had to do and no more. I wasn't going to do no more. I didn't plan on going that far. I was planning on staying on that big ship and enjoying myself and being a good sailor. Uncle Sam didn't see it that way.

Interviewer: Have you been to see the Kentucky Memorial, Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Frankfort?

Johnson: No, haven't been there either. Like I said, I think its great to have these memorials. I think its great to recognize it but I think this country waited a little late for that.

I think because of the Gulf War, they really did a heck of a job on those guys. I think everything was fantastic and I know why. I think they did so much for those guys going over there, and so much for those guys while they were there, and so much for them coming back is because of the Nam Vets. They didn't want to treat their people again like they did the Nam Vets and I believe if we did anything we taught this country, you can't treat your own people that way, that's dying for you. So, I think the guy that were over in Saudi that came back. They got their parade and everything and they got all the billing they should get. But, I think they should say yea, the Nam Vet got this for us but they got treated like a piece of crap. Like, I said you didn't talk to nobody about this.

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Interviewer: She was from a small town and she was indicating that in small town, rural areas it was better. But that the problem was that most Vietnam vets, they did 365 days, they came home alone, and they would come into the major cities and ports like California, San Diego, San Francisco, and they were treated badly there, but when they returned home it was a much different scenario, just more welcoming.

Johnson: Well a lot of guys did more than one tour. They volunteered for 2nd and 3rd tours, and their answer was "There's nothing back there for me. It's not there anymore, home is not t His favorite one was "Shit don't stink unless you stir it up, boy." When I was in 'Nam, I used to use all his sayings on the boat all the time, and they'd say, "Where you get all that stuff from?" "My dad." That's what he always said, it has to be right. But yeah, he said the same thing. He said, "You've grown up. You got older. I knew where you were. It changes you.

Interviewer: Is there any particular event that stands out in your mind, or incident? You were saying that some things were coming back to you?

Johnson: Lots of things popped out and...

Interviewer: I mean if you want to...

Johnson: I'd say of all the events, I'd say getting on that airplane and seeing my dad. I went through two tours over there, and that little incident there jarred me more than the two tours. For some reason. My dad was a guy's guy, a man's man. Now being on the police department, I still have that pet peeve of kids. I never could stand seeing the kids hurt. And sometimes we found that some of the people we were fighting were 12,13,14 year old kids. How they trained you, you didn't look at them as if they were kids, you look at them as people trying to kill you. You wanna stay alive, you look at them that way. I mean but the little ones, they didn't do nothing to nobody, I mean the little ones. Sometimes you'd have to nape(napalm) a jungle or something and you didn't want to. Do you want to call it in? Cause you knew there was families in there. I know a few times we ran like hell just so we wouldn't have to nape a jungle, to avoid the kids getting hurt. The little ones, I'm not talking 7 or 8 years, I'm talking 3,4 year olds, 5 year olds, they didn't know any better. You never thought anything about the stuff you got from home, you'd save some for the kids, the little ones. You'd give them chocolate chip cookies, boy they thought that was the greatest thing since sliced bread, a chocolate chip, cause they'd never seen one you know. I'm talking about the ones out in the jungles, not the ones near the city and Saigon where it's really rough. If I had to pick an incident I'd say between the time I left with my dad, and the kids, cause it wasn't their fault. And there's many a time we've picked those kids up.

I'll tell you, I remember our sister boat, I remember the guys delivering a baby on our sister boat, and they didn't do nothing. The baby came out on its own, the woman wasn't in no pain, it just [popping noise]. They were talking about it, how they...well anyway the woman named the baby...

James Johnson, side 2

Interviewer: She was from a small town and she was indicating that in small town, rural areas it was better. But that the problem was that most Vietnam vets, they did 365 days, they came home alone, and they would come into the major cities and ports like California, San Diego, San Francisco, and they were treated badly there, but when they returned home it was a much different scenario, just more welcoming.

Johnson: Well a lot of guys did more than one tour. They volunteered for 2nd and 3rd tours, and their answer was "There's nothing back there for me. It's not there anymore, home is not there anymore." And I think you're right, I think it's because of most of them came from big cities.

When I was over there, '66,'67,'68, there was no discrimination. Everybody was the same, I don't care what color your skin was. You mentioned the American Indian, we had one. And like everybody else, they called me hillbilly cause I was from Kentucky. We called him "Chief" cause he was an Indian. Usually you got called by where you were from or something like that. We had a black guy from Louisiana, had a funny name, his name was Chip, and we called him "Chipshit". So it ended up we shortened it down to "C.S.", and a lot of the time it got on official documents that "C.S." did this or "C.S." did that, but we never did have to explain what "C.S." meant. Nobody meant anything by it, it wasn't nothing serious. By doing these things you knew that this man was your friend. You'd say "Well where's it at?" "The Chief's got it, check with him." They knew right away we weren't talking about our boat captain, we were talking about the one Indian on our boat.

Well the Chief went home and C.S. got to go home. The boat captain, now he was one of the repeaters. He went home and then came back...twice, cause I saw him a second time over there. I seen him on another boat when I went back for my 2nd tour, and he must've did three and a half years over there. And he said he wanted to retire from over there. That's another thing, when I left he was still there. And like I said, I would hate to go to the Wall and find out that he didn't make what he wanted to make, cause he didn't have that much longer to do before he was authorized (?) to retire.

Good people, real good people. Everybody got treated good. If we had any problems it was every now and then breaking in a new ensign (?) that would come over there that was all gung ho and everything and was gonna try run it just so. But we'd tell the commander about him and he'd back him down and straighten him out. Every once in a while an officer would go out on a boat with you just to get a taste of it. Cause these boats were all enlisted men. It was run

that what you were gonna do, where you were gonna go by then, and when you were coming back.

One time we went up river and we got too deep, went too far for...the boats would run twelve hours on a tank of gas. We went too far, too deep, ran out of fuel, it was dead in the water and had to wait for a bladder call (?). And that was a big chopper would come and drop a fuel line down to us, a diesel line. And well we thought, "Boy, one AK in that thing and there would be such an explosion." And that was scary, just refueling that thing out on that water. And that thing had twin big props on it and boy that made some noise, I mean it shook the boat while we were right refueling. And when you'd shut down it didn't get all the fuel out of the hose, so when he pulled up that stuff just sprayed all over you and all over the boat and everything, so needless to say the smoking light was out. So that's what you'd do after you refueled, you started bucketing down the water, or the boat with water.

The fifties would get hot. We had barrels you could replace. One barrel would get too hot. Well, as the sixty man, my job was to watch the fifty barrels. [unintelligible sentence] Everybody around here hollers at me for being hard of hearing, I just barely passed the hearing test to get on the police department. But I had a fifty about six feet to my right and another one about twelve feet forward, twin fifties. Well a lot of times, you didn't have time to grab your muffs. And with that racket going on, plus your sixties, you're lucky you're not totally deaf from it. But I had a fifty-f(?) one time, and I went to pop the barrel, and you had a couple wrenches you'd put on there and then you'd twist it and take it off and you'd drop it in what you called a hot box and you'd grab the other barrel in the cold box. I spun around and I dropped that thing on the deck, and when it hit the deck, that deck was fiberglass, it just melted into the deck. I said "We got one barrel to use now and that's it." So we couldn't rotate barrels on that half empty(?).

Sometimes eating (?). We weren't supposed to, but we did a lot of things we weren't supposed to. We would grenade a river. Take a grenade and toss it out in the river, and then cruise back over there. We had a book, everything goes by a book in the military, there's a book for everything, and the book showed us what fish we could eat and what we couldn't eat out of the river. We'd say, "We'll have one of those and one of those, and you can't have that, and we'll have two of those." And a lot of times that's how we ate. You couldn't kill a water buffalo, you'd get court-martialed for those, although we were tempted to a few times to get some steaks. The water buffalo over there is their horse, their means of transportation, their work, that's everything is around that water buffalo. Every now and then you'd get a chicken or two. We got some fresh eggs one time, I think we paid fifteen bucks apiece for those from some grunts, and we swapped C-rations and fifteen bucks and got three or four eggs that time. We thought we really had something.

I remember we swapped and they gave us a movie. Every now and then we'd run into grunts and we'd swap with them on the shore. "What do you all got to eat?" and "What do you all got to eat?" and "Hey we'll give you this movie for a six pack of Schlitz." "OK we'll take that

plus you throw in a ration of candy bars." "OK well you throw in..." and we'd swap back and forth. Some of those guys on the shore, they cheated man, they'd sell you phony stuff. They used to figure out how to seal up a bottle of Jim Beam back and make it look like Jim Beam, it was tea, we thought we were getting a good bottle of Jim Beam.

And everybody had their own...you had morphine. Morphine was common over there. Everybody had morphine. It was like in a tube about two inches long with about a two inch needle on it, and everybody had three. It was nothing to get morphine, you could pull in and say "We used all our morphine on guys." and they'd give it out like it was candy. You had to watch, you'd shoot somebody with morphine, they'd take that morphine tube and wrap it around his tags, so somebody knew he'd got shot up with morphine. That way they'd ask when was the last time they got shot up so you wouldn't overdose him. That was just amazing. Back then I didn't think nothing of it, like I said it was like toothpaste. You talk about morphine now, it's just unbelievable.

Basically that's just about everything I can think of unless you've got...

Interviewer: Yeah, I would like to if I can, if you don't want to answer me it's up to you.

Johnson: Go ahead.

Interviewer: I'm just curious, you got married during this period, was that difficult having your family, and did you write home much?

Johnson: I got married between leaving Davisville, Rhode Island and going to radio school, and I took her with me to Baybridge(?), Maryland, drove up there. I came back when I got transferred to the big ship, she stayed here in Louisville, she was pregnant. I went to Long Beach looking for her a place to stay. Well the ship left right away, so I didn't have a chance to do that, and I wrote probably once a week when we'd tie up, and I'd say, "OK, this is my writing time." And you would get your mail sometimes in bulk. I mean sometimes you'd have a big bunch of mail, so I'd organize my mail according to the date on the envelope, and I'd read it. And as I wrote(read?) it I'd write my one letter, my one big letter. Sometimes I'd write a 20, 23 page letter, answering everything that she'd wrote to me, and I'd do the same thing when I got something from my parents, I'd write them back. My mother sent the newspapers. Somehow she signed up for it and I always got a newspaper. That's what I was talking about. When we were up in Cam Ranh Bay and we picked up our mail, that's Cam Ranh Bay [unintelligible] We were up at Phnom Penh and I looked at the paper, and right there on the front page I said, "Hey Chief, where we at?" and he said "Phnom Penh." and I said "Uh-uh, look right here in the newspaper. Our leader says that we're not in Cambodia and there's no military in Cambodia. He says Phnom Penh has been annexed by Vietnam." I said, "Oh, so that leaves us in Vietnam."

So when I went home to the States after my first tour...I never told my wife I went in-country. As far as she knew I stayed on a tanker, I never wrote home. All my mail went to the

tanker, cause I was still only TAD, went to the tanker, and then went home. My reason at that time was I didn't want them to be scared. That they felt better knowing I was on a big ship out at sea. So I never told them. So when I went back to the States after the first tour I went and got my wife in Louisville and drove a 1960 Pontiac Ventura two-door from Louisville, Kentucky to Long Beach, California. We had my one son at the time and we got an apartment there. Well we were still in the states and the next thing I know, Portland, Oregon was opening up their shipping yard for Naval vessels, and this was bringing all kinds of income into Portland, Oregon. So our ship was going up there for an overhaul. So I took the leave, and I packed my family up, and I drove them to Portland, Oregon. So we lived up there for about a month and a half. The ship was going back to Long Beach, I packed my family up and drove them back to Long Beach and met my ship. At that time, my wife was pregnant with our second child. Both times, when each of my two older boys, when they were born, I was on my tour. When my first one was born I was on my tour, when my second one was born I was on my tour. There was only eleven month's difference between the two boys. I would get these notes and letters from the Red Cross, "Wife doing fine" and everything, blah, blah, blah. And I even tried to use those for an excuse. "Well get me out of here, I've got a kid I want to see." Well I get these pictures of these little ugly things that were born, just right after they were born, and it was, "Ooh, who does he look like? Looks like a slug."

And then after my second tour, like I said, everything went to my ship, that's why my mail, everybody's mail that was TAD down there was delayed because it had to go to their ship or their station first, and then to them, their ship would transfer it on. So my mail was way, not normally late, it was late late. And like I said, I never did tell her, I got back to the States in June, our ship did, and I was getting out in July. She said, "Well, where we gonna be assigned next?" Cause I told her, you know, that I was going to make a career out of it, I said, "No, I've changed my mind, I think it's time for us to go home." And she said, "Well I thought we were staying in the Navy." and all this and that and I said, "No, I just don't like being at sea and being away. I want to stay with my family." Cause there was no guarantee. I would've signed up for six years. I made E6(?) but I didn't get my stripes cause I didn't have enough time. If I would've re-enlisted, they would've been able to give me my stripes, they would've give me the \$10,000 BRB(?) bonus, in a combat zone, which was tax free, and plus I would've had Radioman B School(?) which was 32 weeks, and two years shore duty anywhere I wanted. The catch to that, there's still three and a half years to do after that, where do I go from there? And I knew that, and I said, "No, I'm out."

So I got out and packed up everybody and drove, at that time I had two kids, drove that old '60 Pontiac back across country to Louisville, Kentucky, and I got here and I had enough money saved up just to get me started, to get me a rental place and that. And I went to Brown and Williamson(?), I worked there for about a month and I saw a little ad in the paper about joining the police department and I said, "I'll give them a try." I came down and signed up.

Go ahead.

Interviewer: Once again, it's a personal question, so if you don't want to answer it it's fine. I'm going to preface this. One of my students, a non-traditional student, her husband served two tours, and I was worried about her taking the class, the Vietnam class, and she took it and she and her husband started talking and they've talked about things now they've never talked about before. Apparently it's been positive for them, which really relieved me, but I'm just curious if you ever talked to your wife about it years later, or if you just closed it out, or...

Johnson: We were twelve years, yeah, about twelve years later I came home one night and got a beer out of the refrigerator, I got off early or something, and I was thinking about it, I'd just talked to some guy about it, and finally I took my wife and said, "Honey let's go outside and talk." And we sat out on the patio, I sat there drinking my beer and talking. And I must have talked endlessly I think, cause the sun was just starting to set and it was pitch dark when we finally went in. She cried, I cried, and I apologized. And she got mad, got happy, got sad, got mad, got scared. Said, "How can I ever trust you again?" The whole thing. Finally after she realized that, the next night she, this is funny, how this happened, when she said, "Let's go back out". My wife, she's my ex-wife now, she's a real bad diabetic, found out she had diabetes while I was in the service. Uncle Sam took care of her at the time. Well that next evening she said, "Come on." And she grabbed a beer and we went out on the patio and we sat there and she said, "I want to apologize to you now. The Navy wives and the wives know more about what's going on than what you think. I knew what you were doing, I just didn't know how long it would take you to tell me." So her little diabetic body got drunk, I had to watch her so she wouldn't whatever she does, but she knew all the time and never told me, never said anything about it. She was waiting to see if I would ever break honest with her I guess. After that, she said we need to meet with your parents and sit down and talk to them, so we did, I talked to them.

And my dad, when I went in the service, I've got an older brother, he got married so he wouldn't get drafted, cause if you were married at that time they wouldn't take you. Well when I told him, we used to sit at the supper table, at that time it was just me and him and me and my brother, and you weren't allowed to talk at our supper table. The only one that could talk would be my mother or my father. That's where my father ruled things. And when I said, "I've got something to say." Dad put his fork and knife down and looked at me. I said, "Now before you hit me, let me finish. I enlisted in the Navy, I signed up for four years, and I'm leaving day after tomorrow." My mother screamed and yelled, my dad picked up his fork and knife and never said a thing. I went to boot camp, came home, my dad still never said anything. I went to Davisville, Rhode Island, went on a ship for nine months, came home, my dad still never said anything. My dad was in North Africa, fought [unintelligible], and like I said, he was a well decorated man. I went to Baybridge(?), Maryland, for radio school, came home, he never said anything. I made my first tour, like I said, nobody knew, I went on a tanker and made my first tour and I came home. I don't know if he'd been watching on TV, but I had to fly back out to Long Beach at that time, and then come back and get my wife, but I had to fly back out. And I remember my dad, who is probably...I used to think was the toughest guy in the world. I was getting ready to get on

the plane and I was in uniform. He hugged me and kissed me. My dad's never kissed me. Said as I walked away, pointed to about five people and said, "That's my son." I'd forgot about that.

But we explained to them what happened and where I was and everything.

Interviewer: Was he surprised or did he ever...

Johnson: He said, "I know, I was there." Whatever that means. He said, "I knew all the time. You changed, that's when I knew." I guess, being a WWII veteran, he probably could tell a difference in me.

Interviewer: You had mentioned something like that too and I'm curious, you said you returned home a little older, more mature. Did you notice a change in yourself, or were you too close to it I guess?

Johnson: Well, you had to grow up fast. Shit, I had a wife, two kids, just got back from two tours in 'Nam, I held buddies in my arms that died. Had one buddy [unintelligible]. Portland, Maine. I held his guts in. I don't know what ever happened to him. They Medivaced him out, but it got hot, and he was on a back gun, and it must've been a cut shot(?) came across him and went in, and his whole insides started rolling out and he went down and I just poured water on him and tried to pack him back and tie him down. And I had to get back to my gun. I held my foot on his stomach, to hold his guts in. And we got done and got him Medivaced out. We wrapped him up and tied it all down and soaked it with water. I remember one of the main things was to keep the guts wet, so we did that, and...wow, the way things pop back to you.

I think part of that, and stuff like that, and seeing that, doing those things, I came back and I felt like an old man at first. I felt like I grew up so quick so fast. I had so many responsibilities. I had to take care of a family and I knew I had to do something. It was expected of me I felt, because as my dad said, "You're a Vet now." He used to throw clichés, I don't know where, I think he made stuff up, but he would say things to me, and I used to quote him all the time.hey name the boat after the baby. We were known as "River Rats". "Brown Water Sailors" they called us. We used to have what we called a house flag we'd fly, with a picture of a rat with a cigar in its mouth, kinda fit the...Well you did stuff like that for morale purposes, you needed to...That baby had more godfathers than it knew what to do with. They brought that boat in there and we were all gathered around it. Everybody chipped in and took care of Mama and everything. We had our own nursery. The guys on our sister boat loved that baby.

Interviewer: Did you often stop at villages, or...

Johnson: We would once in a great while. A lot of times you avoided villages for setups. As our commander said it once, our job wasn't the villages, your job's the rivers, stay on the river, and avoid the shore, we did. We tied up to a tinder, sometimes you'd have ten or twelve boats tied up to a tinder. You bring that boat back they'd take it on and work on the engine, whatever

needed to be done, redo the hull, change the gun on her, you don't want this gun. We had a grenade launcher that wasn't worth a damn until we had it taken off and had a fifty put in its place, different things, you know, you're constantly modifying your boat to make it better, make it more efficient to use, cause you were out there and you knew what you needed when, what you needed changed. I asked for a second sixty in case something happened to the sixty I had, in case there wasn't time to repair one, so I could just drop it in the sinker pod(?) and reload it. When I left over there, I left everything, I left a whole sea bag(?) of [unintelligible]. I Said, "I ain't coming back guys, I don't need these." and left them on the boat. Said, "They're yours." I've got my dress blues is the only thing I have left, with my ribbons on it. I don't have any undress blues, I don't have any whites, I don't have any dungarees, I don't have a sea bag, I don't have anything. It all just slowly disappeared and I didn't care. I mean I took care of my dress blues and my white hat, I think it's brown now, it's been sitting in the closet so long. I got my medals, my first wife put them in a shadow box and stuff with my ribbons and my dog tags. Probably I wouldn't have done that if it wasn't for her. I'd have kept them in a box. A cardboard box.

Interviewer: Do your sons ever ask you about Vietnam?

Johnson: My oldest boy. He's a sergeant on the fire department. He used to all the time. He's got all of the foreign money that I had over there. I gave it to him cause he's a little packrat, saves everything. And what I did was I duplicated all the medals I had and gave them to him. Every medal I've got he's got. And I told him you know, "Anything happens to me, all my military stuff is yours." And he's proud of that.

Anything else?

Interviewer: I guess that's it unless you have anything you want to add.

Johnson: No, I've covered everything I can think of right off the top of my head. Like you said, probably you get more open or you think more when you talk to another 'Nam vet, cause they'll say things that'll jar your memory. "You remember so and so, or this happening, or doing this or doing that?"

Interviewer: Let me ask you this, was most of the interaction you had with the South Vietnamese people on the water, did they just come up to your boat?

Johnson: Yeah, other than going on liberty in Saigon that was the only interaction we had with them. Villagers, we would drop troops off in villages and let them handle the villagers. We had the power of arrest, we found guns we took them into custody, and we'd take them back and turn them over to somebody else to handle them. But other than that, that's the only contact we had.

Interviewer: I was just curious, you were talking about the pregnant woman...

Johnson: That happened every now and then, sometimes somebody would be injured or hurt and you'd pull over and administer first aid cause they had no nothing no way of administering first aid or anything.

Interviewer: So your primary job was to search for weapons, or...

Johnson: Your primary job was to patrol the rivers, like I said we were what they called Operation Game Warden. To patrol the rivers, check all the river traffic. Check the papers, check the boats. A lot of times when you checked the papers you didn't know what you was looking at, you didn't have the faintest idea what you were looking at. You just hoped they were right. I couldn't read Vietnamese. Every now and then we'd have an interpreter with us and he'd look at it and say, "Yeah, it's OK." And then we'd have to guess he wasn't on the wrong side.

Interviewer: And you all'd just look at it and say I guess it's OK...

Johnson: Yeah, looks OK to me. As long as they didn't have any weapons on the boat we was OK. Every now and then you'd find something. I've only known of one or two incidents where it got hot right there on the river, when they went for the weapons they had, but other than that, you found a weapon, "No big deal, then we'll go get more." That's about it.

Interviewer: I appreciate it.

Johnson: OK