

**James W. Schaller
Veteran**

**Interviewed by
Wayne Clarke & Mark Russert
New York State Military Museum**

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Q: This is an interview at the New York State Military Museum, Saratoga Springs, New York. It is the 1st of February, 2005 approximately 11:00am. The interviewers are Wayne Clarke and Mike Russert. Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth please?

JWS: My name is James Schaller and I was born in Albany, New York, July 31st, 1947.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

JWS: I went through parochial school in Albany and Vincentian Institute High School in Albany and the two-year program at Paul Smith's College in the Adirondacks Forestry Division. It was immediately after I got out of Paul Smith's that, of course, I got the letter from the Selective Service and that led to the experiences I had in the military (laughs).

Q: You were drafted?

JWS: No, I wasn't drafted. That's part of my interesting story I think. Shall I just go on then?

Q: Sure. Go on.

JWS: as with probably hundreds of thousands of guys who went to college back in those days, they were just waiting for you to get out. When the letter came and I have to go to downtown Albany to the draft board and take my physical. You can't tell it by seeing me sitting down but I'm six foot six. I went through all of the rigmarole and they finally said we can't take you today because you're too tall but that's no guarantee that we won't be asking you to come back in the next few months or the next year.

I'm thinking to myself that's just great. I am going to be in limbo. They may or may not call me. What am I going to do? I talked to some people and they said why don't you try joining the reserves? I said ok so I went down to the Washington Ave. Albany Naval Reserve Center and they said sure we'll take you. So, that's where I wound up going in the Navy rather than the Army and I wound up volunteering instead of being drafted. They said you may be six-six but we have a uniform that will fit you.

So, anyway I ended up signing up and getting my uniform and going to drills at the reserve center. Then time came for the boot camp. I wound up going out to Great Lakes, Illinois for boot camp which at that time was only two weeks. A lot of people said you were lucky it was two weeks, any sort of boot camp for two weeks. Then, a few months later I had to go out on a Reserve training cruise out of the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

We went on a destroyer went up to Boston and went on the Cape Cod Canal. Now in '68, Labor Day, I think it was, in '68, they were having anti-war demonstrations in Boston as they were in those days in many cities. We were advised that if we were going to have liberty. Because it was a holiday weekend, we actually got liberty - we pulled into the Boston Navy yard - we shouldn't wear our uniforms. So, we didn't. We actually wandered all over Boston in civilian clothes although we had close cut haircuts and they could probably tell that we were sailors or army men anyway or military people but we had no trouble. Back on the ship, back out to sea and back down to Jersey, then back to New York. It was two weeks. That was, believe it or not, my only experience assigned to a ship in the whole time I was in the US Navy.

When the time came finally to go on active duty, we had to all report again to Brooklyn. They had what they called the Brooklyn Naval Receiving Station on Flushing Avenue in downtown Brooklyn. One of my old neighbors came down with me. He was in the reserves. There was probably, as I remember, forty, maybe forty-five guys in our class. I say class because we went in there as a group and then we had to go through all of the processing and the paperwork and getting the shots. Finally, they got around to saying where you are going to go. This was active duty.

Anyway, we were sitting in the classroom. Two guys, me and one other guy pulled what they called "West Coast Duty". My friend who was my neighbor wound up being assigned to a submarine tender in Newport, Rhode Island for two years. Me- "West Coast Duty" and I got my paperwork which said NIOTC, Mare Island, California. A couple of guys said you know what that means don't you. You're going to the west coast alright, you're going to keep on going. NIOTC was Naval Inshore Operations Training Center which is another word for "in country" meaning Vietnam. So, only two of us out of forty or more guys wound up going to Vietnam or even to the west coast.

The time came. I had to fly out to San Francisco, make my way to Mare Island which was the Naval Base just at the north end of San Francisco Bay. There was a school there called NIOTC. We were going to train in sensor warfare. This was a new term to me and it was a top secret operation. We had three classes and we were going to have what they called "vans" which were actually trailers and the trailers setup up with, what was at that time, the latest electronic equipment, radios, sensor monitoring equipment.

They were air conditioned. There were actually two vans. One was like a living quarters and the other one was working quarters at that time. Like I said, there were three classes. I was in #3. There were about twelve people in our class. There were two officers and the rest enlisted. I got to know the guys. It was a curious mixture, officers who were out of Annapolis, just out of Annapolis, fresh out of there. There were some lifers, guys who were probably in their forties or fifties at that time who just happened to draw a year in Vietnam as part of their career. I know that one guy came from Saratoga in fact. He was with the nuclear school over in Milton here. He just got out of there. Another guy came from Oregon. Then I met a guy named Tom who came from Michigan. He was also a reservist just like me. There were some other guys who were reservists and a few

other guys who were fairly new – as the lifers they called them, Navy career people but young guys like me too. So, it was a mix.

We wound up what was supposed to be a ten-week program out there in California. It wound up being quite a bit more than that because they had production problems with the vans. As part of our training we had to go to a place called Camp Roberts in Paso Robles, California where we had weapons training. That was an army base. Then we had to fly down to Camp Pendleton outside of San Diego, a Marine base where we actually worked with electronic sensors with the Marines because they had already been working with them. So, we were there for a few days.

Then around August, I believe it was, we had to go through SERE – Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape – survival training. That took place in a unit outside of San Diego run by the Navy and we had to start out on the beach by the Hotel Coronado. We had classes, classroom work interspersed with field experience. It's hard for me to explain this. This only took maybe five or six days but it was like a lifetime squeezed into six days. A simulated prisoner of war camp, scrounging around out in the California desert looking for rattlesnakes or rabbits or something that you could eat. Because so many classes had been pushed through here one after the other constantly, there wasn't anything around to eat (laughs). So, they did break down and give us an apple or something every once and awhile but there was no food for like three or four days. They did give us plenty of water and in the beginning, black coffee, because you can't mess with a guy's hydration or he won't make it in that kind of environment.

Anyway, it was survival, evasion which most of us managed to get through pretty good but then we were captured and put in a POW camp run by Americans, obviously, who were playing the role but it was all very realistic everything from spending time in the little black box to getting pushed around and not seriously injured by them. But, it was meant to be realistic and stretched to your limit of your endurance, basically, until they finally one morning when they raised the American flag and then we knew it was over.

So, that was a very interesting experience. Some of the guys actually had to go up to a place called Whidbey Island in Washington and go through their survival training. That place where we went out in the chaparral country was called Warner Springs. A couple of guys were saying Whidbey Island, Warner Springs, they sound like a resort area, don't they? They weren't. (laughs)

I was able to come home. Like I said that training program lasted a bit longer than they thought it would. We had every weekend off actually. We were able to hop a bus to San Francisco. We had a lot of time to wander around and see the sites. Then, they gave us leave. I was able to fly back home to Albany and be with my family for about eight or ten days.

Q: On these occasions did you wear your uniform?

JWS: No. Any time we travelled, we got to wear civilian clothes.

Q: When you were on leave, you wore civilian clothes.

JWS: Yes. At the very end of my story, if I get to it, even when I came home, I was able to wear civilian clothes so I had no hassles in the airports or anything. Some did.

So, anyway, it was October, I think, 13th when we finally went to Vietnam. We went to Travis Air Base, hopped on a plane and did the usual route from Hawaii to Guam to Wake to Clark to Saigon. I wound up in a place called the Hotel Annapolis in Saigon, bachelor officer's quarters, bachelor enlisted man's quarters and the place for guys coming in the country and guys leaving the country processed in and processed out. It was just like a huge old style French hotel with barbed wire and anti-rocket cages all across the front of it because it had been hit by terrorists a few months earlier. They had two or three casualties there.

They actually took us on a bus tour of Saigon in busses. Of course, it was hotter than anything and they had to leave the windows open but all the windows had these big barred cages so nobody could throw a grenade in. That's when it began to hit me that anything could happen where we were. Living in Albany and living where I had out in the country like where I lived in Auriesville and New Scotland like that, it was a new experience to be in a city like Saigon. It was constant bustle. The traffic was unbelievable. Yet, I think it was nine o'clock, it was a curfew. Everything stopped, completely stopped. That was spooky. We had to be back in the hotel by nine o'clock at night too.

Anyway, we were there for a few days. We got our uniforms. We drew our weapons, then we got our assignments. I was in a program called Operation DUFFLEBAG. That was the codename given to these electronics sensors. There were various DUFFLEBAG sites scattered all through mostly southern South Vietnam but the vans that I mentioned before which were the trailers there were only three of those. There was SEALORDS Van 1, 2 & 3. Now, Operations SEALORDS which started around 1970 or so stood for South East Asia Lake, Ocean, River & Delta Strategy. That encompassed not only our sensor program but the swift boats and the river boats and the mobile riverine force and all different components and locations all kind of tied in together. At the time, basically around 1970 when they had the Cambodia incursion, the interdiction and counterinsurgency efforts of the Navy in the rivers and canals in the Delta.

Anyway, SEALORDS Van 1 was in a place called Thuyen Nhon near the Parrot's Beak. SEALORDS Van 2 went to a place called Ba Xoai in the Seven Mountains. They were located inside a Green Beret Special Forces A Camp. Our van which was the last one to go over, was going to be in a place called Thuong Thoi on the Bassac River three kilometers down from Cambodia inside a Green Beret A Camp also right on the river.

Since our van wasn't there yet and we really needed some practice, some on the job training as it were, they sent our crew was all split up and sent to different places. We first drew Ba Xoai. About four or five of us took a helicopter down to Ba Xoai a little 900-foot mountain right in the middle of five or six huge mountains which surrounded us which were all controlled by the Viet Cong.

It was an old French fort, mostly stone. The Navy had a huge bunker that had been built big enough to put two almost of these vans which were the size of a tractor-trailer trailer backed in. Soon, as we wound up doing, took a piece of this bunker that had been built and boxed it off and made like a recreation room. There was a weapons area and in the back was a fortified area for the fuel like the POL and the fuel we needed to run the generators. Right outside that was their mortar pits and 105mm pits and the team house for the Green Berets. In all these camps that we got to go to, the Navy shared the team house with the Green Berets as far as having meals. It was a mutual security type of thing.

The Navy basically had these sensors and we had to go out and actually put the sensors out in the field. There were maybe ten or twelve different kinds of sensors that operated anything from magnetic to infrared to acoustic to picking up ground vibrations. Most of them had to be physically buried in the ground, jammed in the mud on the bottom of a canal or placed in brush or grass out of sight. There were at least two that were air deployed. They would come down and jam into the ground and the antenna was camouflaged to look like a bush.

Another one in the heavy jungle areas would snag with a parachute in a trees and it was made to look like the fruit of a common tree that grew over there but it was camouflaged that had acoustic, not acoustic, it had a microphone on it that clicked on automatically. It was automatically activated as soon as it hit the ground. It would automatically pick up any sounds in the area which were above and beyond the normal sound range. Naturally, it would pick up the sounds of birds or thunder but it also picked up the sounds of someone walking under talking which would be a Viet Cong patrol.

All of these sensors whether they were a string of sensors in the ground picking up vibrations of someone walking along in a particular direction or in the mud of the canal which would pick up a sampan which had rifles hidden under the floorboards. We would know the coordinates of those sensors or that string of sensors. Almost all of the locations of the sensors were free fire zones.

So, as we sat back in our little bunkers or our little vans and we watched all these little rows of lights and the lights came on, the red lights came on in a row, we'd know that there was an activation on a certain string of the sensors.

Q: Can I ask you some questions about the sensors?

JWS: Sure

Q: How large were these sensors? I imagine they were different sizes.

JWS: Most of the type that either picked up vibrations or infrared were only about a foot long maybe eight inches high. Some of them were as small as three inches high which had a very weak little radio transmitter on them. Those were actually camouflaged. They called them "dog turds". They were supposed to look like a piece of crap laying in the trail. If they were stepped on, they would send back a signal that would be picked up by our equipment.

The ones that dangled from the trees and the ones that jammed in the ground were anywhere from a foot and a half to three feet long. The little infrared guy looked like a cat tail. It stuck up about maybe a foot high and had a little top on it that looked like a cat tail but actually had a hole in it that shot an electric beam across the trail to another one that was the receiver. If that beam was broken, it would send back a signal.

Q: Did you find them to be pretty effective or was there a lot of ones that broke easily or were defective?

JWS: Well, the one thing about it is that they all ran on batteries. Because of the security concerns, the top secret concerns and everything, we never went back to retrieve one after the battery died. We just left them and had to go and put new ones out in different places basically. Another thing is that they could have been found and booby-trapped.

Let me just finish what I was saying. Once we got an activation, we had a number of things we could do. One, we could call the people running the artillery right in our own camp. They would have a list of coordinates and they would fire on the appropriate area.

We were constantly being called by the Sea Wolves, the helicopters, which were the Navy helicopter gunships or the OV10A Broncos which we nicknamed the “black ponies”. They would call us asking if we had any targets for them to check out or, if we had an activation, we would try to call them. We would try to raise them to see if they were in the area. If it was one near a canal or the river, we’d call one the boats, the river patrol boats or the Swift boats that happened to be in the area.

I cannot say that we had a single case of a confirmed kill or anything because nobody ever had a chance to go out and see if anything happened. They only had one that wasn’t from our camp. They actually had a microphone click on and they heard the Vietnamese, the Viet Cong talking. They could actually hear them speaking and understand what they were saying. Then you could hear the sound of the artillery round coming in on the microphone. They had recorded that. That was a classic example of this how it worked.

That always got me, you know, you’re sitting there day after day after day doing your watch on that thing and it was only occasionally you got an activation. You managed to get somebody to fire on it and you never knew what happened. Unfortunately, there was a couple of times when they mixed up the coordinates and wound up firing on a village or near a village and there were some civilian casualties a couple of times.

At Ba Xoai, we wound up, after Ba Xoai I should say, we finally wound up going to our camp. They finished it. It was brand new, I guess you could say. It was pretty nice. There was a team house again. They Green Berets had a nice place. Our big Navy bunker was off to the side. There was a floating helicopter pad in the river. It was a triangular shaped camp. Off to the side was the Vietnamese village. There was a CIDG – Civilian Irregular Defense Group – unit there and what they called the LLDB. I don’t know exactly what that stood for. That was the Vietnamese Special Forces. The equivalent of the American Special Forces. A Vietnamese Ranger unit and we had our own 105. On

top of our bunker, we had 50 caliber machine guns and Honeywell grenade launchers. We had our own M60s and M16s.

We began a series of sensor implants by helicopter, by boat. That was when we had, unfortunately, our first casualty. Unfortunately, again, it was friendly fire that did it, the so-called friendly fire where a helicopter mistakenly fired a rocket into our position thinking that he was firing at the enemy position which was actually only about a click away from where we were but you know. One of our men was severely injured and later passed away. That was our first casualty.

That was the way it started. They were saying that we had to get out of there just as fast as we could because we couldn't jeopardize the secrecy of our operation. If there was any chance that we were going to get overrun or something and they captured the sensors we had, that would put the whole thing on jeopardy. Then they'd take them back and study them, then they'd know what we were dealing with.

Because our program was top secret, we – meaning the Navy – had to avoid contact as much as possible. Every time we went out, we either had a company of the Green Berets or the Vietnamese or someone came along for security.

So that brought us up to about December. Another one of our men was injured on another implant mission when he stepped on a boobytrap. He survived but he was sent all the way back to the states to have operations on his legs and everything. Another guy took some shrapnel in the shoulder.

So, then let's see what happened next. We had an outpost on the top of a mountain called Nui Sam. That was a very interesting experience. There were two navy men stationed up there full time. They decided to put up some portable sensor monitoring equipment up there. We had to take two guys from our Navy unit and we took turns spending six weeks on top of Nui Sam. What Nui Sam was, was a 900-foot mountain that was pretty much all by itself, completely flat land around it. Probably not more than a mile, maybe a click or two to the north was the Cambodian border. There was a major canal called the Vinh Te Canal which ran parallel to the Cambodian border all the way from the Gulf of Thailand over to the Bassac River. So, it was a major not only transportation route but it was also a major infiltration route across the canal from Cambodia into Vietnam by the Viet Cong.

The river patrol boats patrolled the canal. We started putting out sensors along the canal to try to detect enemy movement coming across. We sat up there. We had a jeep and there was a road that went to the top. We were able to drive down into –It was about maybe it was a ten-mile trip – down to Chau Doc. We had to go down to get our food and get water, get kerosene and various things like that probably every couple of days because we didn't have anything else up there and no other way of getting supplies.

A couple of the funny things that happened up there. They had these centipedes up there they called...I'm trying to remember what they called them. Something (unclear). Anyway, the centipedes would grow to be like a foot long and they were very poisonous.

At this particular time of year which was the dry season, the centipedes were just hatching out. We had a little dog up there. The centipede came along and the dog was playful and didn't know any difference. It found one of these centipedes and it stung the dog right on the nose. Before we knew it, the dog was rolling on the ground, foaming at the mouth. We thought it was gone. We thought it was a goner. One of the Vietnamese came over and said, "No, no, he's ok". "What do you mean?" He said, "Dog be ok." I said, "Really?" We were going to shoot the dog thinking it was dying anyway and put it out of its misery. Sure enough, the dog recovered after a period of time. They were saying that if you ever come across one of those foot-long ones and that bites you in the leg, you better get to the doctor quick or you might lose your leg. They were that poisonous.

Then we had Claymore mines, one of the common plastic curve shaped mines that were control detonated. We had several of those around our summit in a defensive position. One night we had a terrific rain, thunder and lightning storm. All of the sudden, the summit rocked with explosions and everything. We were actually thinking how could they be hitting us in the middle of such a thunder and lightning storm? Why would the enemy be doing that? They'd be nuts.

We had a little cellar we had to crawl down into when there was an attack like that. One of the Vietnamese comes in like usual and says, "Its ok, ok." The lightening had hit the lines and detonated the Claymores (laughs).

We did have some close calls being 900 feet up. We had one night when we heard a terrific explosion just below us. We all got up to look around and everything and just as we were getting outside, we had like they called it a port-a- camp up there, kind of a metal camp with a tin roof. We built an extension on the side of it made out of wood for our portable monitoring equipment.

We ran outside and, just as we did, a rocket tore right across over our heads. It's just missed us by a matter of feet. It went right over the top of the mountain, down the other side and exploded someplace down below. We figured they were 122mm rockets because those were the only thing that would go from the flatland below to that altitude over the top of the mountain. Whoever fired it misjudged the first shot. It went too short and overjudged the second shot too high. By the skin of our teeth, we avoided being blown off the top of the mountain that time.

Another time they fired what we thought were 82mm rockets from mortars because all of the shots they fired at us all hit below us on the side of the mountain. They couldn't get the altitude to get up to where we were. As far as I know, neither we nor any of the other guys that took turns were ever attacked by anybody climbing up the mountain. For some reason, they didn't think we were important enough. We could call up because we had good radio communication from the mountain top. We could call up helicopter gunships or anybody and they'd be there in a matter of minutes if we needed them.

Then one night, this was around April of 1970. One night it was pitch black and we heard an airplane coming. Normally up there during the daytime you would hear a

helicopter or something go by once and awhile or some type of plane but in the middle of the night nothing because it wasn't on a fixed flyway or anything. So, here's this plane coming. It sounded like a prop, a decent size one, coming out of the sky from the Vietnam side going towards Cambodia. As soon as it got right over our mountain, they clicked on a big flood light and shone it right down on our summit as they went by. Just as they got past, they clicked it back off again and flew off into Cambodia. It was one of the spookiest things because we had no idea who it was or what they were doing or where they were going but they obviously knew where we were (laughs).

So, anyway, the Cambodian incursion happened in April. All of the sudden, we were a beehive of activity up on the top of the mountain. We had all kinds of officers. We had people from the different services. There was some guy there from some other NATO country. I never even did find out what country he was from or what army he was with. He looked like he was with Poland or Yugoslavia or someplace. Then, from time to time, they would allow a reporter to come up. We had guys there from the New York Times and Time magazine and that sort of thing every once and awhile. We just carried on with our work though.

We got to watch the fireworks in the distance. There was an Army base called Chi Lang not too far away. Every once in a awhile, they'd get hit and we'd get to see the red tracers going down from the helicopters and the green tracers going up from the Viet Cong. Then their fuel dump blew up. We're all watching this from a distance but glad we're a ways away from it.

We put in our time on Nui Sam then went back to our camp and basically from then April, from May, it was around the 1st of May that we went back down there and it was fairly quiet from then until June. June is when I went on my R&R. I chose to go to Japan. They were having an expo there that year. I think it was like a world's fair. As it turned out I never did go to that. They had a full range of activities to choose from. I went to Mount Fuji and I went to a couple of the national parks. We toured Tokyo and went to a couple of Japanese restaurants. They had things going on every day if we wanted to do them. I did that. I think that was about maybe almost a week or so, about a week. I had to go to Saigon, fly to Japan, back to Saigon and back to the base.

From June to July to August....oh, one thing that happened was that they decided all the sudden our vans were obsolete. They'd only been there for a few months. We had to tear down one of whole back walls of this huge bunker that had been built and get these two vans out into the open where a big sky crane helicopter could come and pick them up. Then we had to completely reconstruct the inside of the bunker with partitions and walls and everything so we could put shelves in so we could put our portable equipment in instead of the equipment that was in the van.

I have to back up a few minutes, a few months actually. It was about a month or so after we left Ba Xoai. They were attacked in a major ground assault and hundreds of mortar rounds and everything. Now, the Navy had a plan where they would go to an alert position that was outside of their bunker – like a defensive position. In really the last

case scenario, if the place was overrun they were supposed to climb up to the top of the hill where they would be extracted by a helicopter.

This was a major attack. The bunker had been, as ours was, was rigged with C4 explosive. Just in case it was captured, it could be fired upon and blown up so all this equipment wouldn't fall into enemy hands. A mortar round landed into one of our mortar pits which was close to the bunker. Their ammo blew up. That spread to the fuel depot right in the back of the bunker. That blew up and blew out the back of the bunker. Luckily all of the guys were out of there by then. That caught fire, caught the C4 on fire. That blew up and the whole bunker just blew up and collapsed into a pile of rubble. They said it was like three quarters of a million dollar's worth of vans were completely destroyed.

The Navy guys actually did have to go to the top of the mountain and be extracted. Two or three of the Green Berets were killed and a number of the Vietnamese. As was usually the case, they called in everything from B-52s to helicopter gunships and the spooky gunships and everything to try to cut off the attack. They finally did. They drove them back but three quarters of the camp was destroyed. The Navy bunker was destroyed. The Navy's role at Bo Xoai ended at that particular point. So, that ended SLV2 and all the guys who were in it were dispersed between other camps, various other places.

Our vans were pulled out and airlifted to a place called Binh Thuy which was the big Navy base on the Mekong River near Can To and shipped back to the states as were the vans in SLV1 in the other place. Now we were all working with all of the portable units as were the other Duffle Bag units.

There's a rainy season in Viet Nam and there's a dry season. As the rainy season progressed, as it got into basically the summer, the river comes up. The river had been down quite a bit in the dry season. It was actually fairly clear. As it started to come back up again, it turned that muddy brown. It came up and up and up. There was an earthen sea wall along the side of our camp along the river side. It started to break off and collapse from the constant churning of the water coming down along the river there.

So, they brought in a US Army Engineer's barge. They started to build a sea wall along the river side of the berm driving in these big steel pilings to make a steel wall alongside the berm. It was a very slow time consuming operation and noisy (laughs).

It got to be up around September and apparently that was like the height, because when we got there a year before in October it was the very end of the rainy season. It was just starting to go into the dry season. This was like the height of it. The river was the highest it was going to be. It has actually flooded the village but the village knew that because every year it happens. They had all their...their buildings were up on piers, like on stilts. As soon as the water came up they just started traveling around on sampans between the buildings instead of walking between the buildings.

We had an airfield out in the back of our camp which became useless because it was underwater. We had to rely on just our floating helipad to get in and out plus the boats.

Anyway, one day sometime around the end of September, all of the sudden all this whole section of the steel wall that they had built up to that point just tipped over and right into the river. All for naught. The berm started to leak. That was the beginning of the end for our camp not just the Navy but the whole camp.

The Green Berets were the first ones to decide to evacuate it. They pulled out all of their equipment. They pulled out their 105 Howitzer. The Vietnamese left. The Army Engineers left. We had an Army "retrans" unit, a radio unit. They packed up and left. We couldn't get anyone to say whether we should leave or not.

It just so happened that the far end of the camp was (unclear). It sloped down to the far end of the camp which was the farthest away from the river. As the berm started leaking, the far end of the camp started to fill up with water. It got to the point where it was first five feet deep then ten feet deep down at the far end. It was gradually creeping back up towards to river itself where our bunker was.

We started to pull our stuff out of the bunker and put it in the roof. The roof of the bunker was covered with PSP which was perforated steel platform. We had our little mini bunkers on top of the big bunker where we had our machine guns and stuff like that.

Here we were now. We were actually sleeping up there, had our guns up there, rigged our little ponchos, sleeping bags and stuff. We were like sitting ducks sitting out on top of this thing. They finally said ok we've finally got to start hauling stuff out of here and getting it down to one of the ships. They had some ships stationed in the river the USS Benewah and the YRBMs were the big Navy support ships for the riverine operations.

We started going back and forth with one of our small boats bringing stuff down to the boats. Some of the guys got orders to go someplace else. The last day I left, I wound up spending the night on one of the boats. They said the water was eight feet deep inside of our bunker and there were cobras, bamboo vipers and scorpions inside the bunker (laughs).

The camp was abandoned. The Vietnamese, some of them lived right there anyway, were going to take it over. By the way, there was a big brand new base being built just up on the other side of the river by the Seabee's which was going to be handed over to the Vietnamese Navy as soon as it was finished. We were in the midst of what they called the Vietnamization program and what they called ACTOV which was Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese were learning to run the Swift boats and the PBRs because we were giving them to them. As the units ended their tour of duty, I guess you could say, there was the riverine units. As they ended up going home, they wound up just giving up the boats to the Vietnamese and build new bases for them.

Anyway, I wound up going down to the base at Binh Thuy, the big Navy base there. Spending a few days there and back to Saigon. October 12th, which was exactly one year to the day that I got there, we left. Some of the guys had left before I did for one reason or another. I guess there was only like four of us from the original twelve. They wound up going back on the same plane we came over on.

I wound up going back to Travis. Then they took us down to Treasure Island this time which is the big Navy base right in San Francisco Bay. We stayed there for a little while. During that day we got our orders to go where we were going. Then we took a bus down to San Francisco International Airport and flew all the way across the country to Brooklyn, New York back to the Navy Receiving Station. Except for a few hour break in the middle, I flew all the way from Saigon to Brooklyn almost non-stop in two days (laughs).

Then, another thing, I started to go back to Washington Avenue Armory in Albany. Nobody told me that the guys who came back from Vietnam didn't have to go back for any reserve meetings or anything until I had gone to like two or three of them. Then they finally told me because I had all these ribbons and things on there, a whole stack of ribbons from Vietnam. A couple of them questioned me and said where did you get them? Vietnam. You don't have to come to these meetings they said. I don't (laughs).

Q: So, you were discharged at that point?

JWS: No, if you're in the reserves you're in for six years or eight years or whatever it was but I got out of active duty early. You were supposed to be in for two years active duty. I wound up in there for like seventeen months. Then when I got back to Albany, I should have stayed on active duty actually but I didn't even have to go back to meetings. Then I was on inactive reserve status right up until 1974 when I finally got my honorable discharge. So, that's about it in a nutshell.

Q: Did you have many relations with the Vietnamese people themselves?

JWS: The only places where we had relatively close contact with them was on these little outposts like on the mountaintop. There was a family, maybe like two families of Vietnamese and Cambodians who were stationed on Nui Sam. They would sometimes share our meals with us if we had an outdoor picnic or something. We'd string up Japanese lanterns. Of course, they were astounded that we were able to get steak and hamburgers and hot dogs and everything – absolutely astounded. They couldn't get over it. They were scrounging for whatever they could eat constantly going out in the fields and bringing back the rats and the toads. If they had a chicken, they'd eat every single part of it except the bones, I think.

Also, in Ba Xoai and when we went out on some of our implant missions, they'd come with us. We visited a couple of the small outposts. Each of the bigger units like our camp, like Thuong Thoi would have three or four satellite camps that would be spread around on the different canals. We'd sometime go and visit them before we went out on a mission.

I can back up and give just one other instance of the many of the close calls I had. I often think about how many close calls I had between sniper bullets just whizzing by and missing you by a few inches.

We were on an implant patrol. There was two or three Vietnamese and one of our officers. I was the third one in line on this particular path. We were following a path up through the woods. We hadn't go to our objective yet. All of the sudden, I heard "boing" like a wire breaking making that noise like a heavy guitar wire just snapping. All three of us stopped dead in our tracks. The Vietnamese was on point. The officer was in front of me. I was next. By the time we all took a step and stopped and looked to our right, there was a grenade in the crotch of a tree about my chest high. The wire had been strung across the trail right to the grenade pin but it had been there so long that the grenade pin had rusted into grenade and didn't pull out when the wire was snapped (laughs).

Q: What were race relationships like within your unit. Did you have any blacks serving with you?

JWS: We had no blacks. I don't think we had blacks in any of our three Navy units. We did have a Hawaiian, an American Indian, Navajo and a Puerto Rican. We got along with those guys quite well and not to be a racist and not to make a racist remark but it's absolutely true those guys cannot hold their firewater. We all drank a lot but those guys would absolutely lose it. They would develop some kind of a different personality after they started drinking. Sometimes you would have to subdue them or they'd get themselves in trouble. The Hawaiian, the Indian and maybe not so much the Puerto Rican but that's an old stereotype. They say they can't hold their firewater but it was true.

There was one black guy, a sergeant in the Green Berets, but he was the nicest guy. Those guys were all professionals, the Green Berets very much so.

Q: You got along very well with them?

JWS: Yes. There was one officer who came in actually probably towards the end of the time I was there who came in. He was one of those guys who was very upset that they Navy guys were intermingling with the Army guys and using their dining room. He was just of the old mindset. Services should be separated. He was the only one that I ran into like that that had that idea. Of course, it was just talk.

One of the Green Berets, a sergeant, what we called "DEROS". Remember hearing that? Date of Estimated Return to the States or something like that. His tour ended right in about the middle of about when we were there. He wound up going back to the states. We got the Stars and Stripes newspaper – the Pacific Stars and Stripes. There's a story in there with his picture in it back in Washington a picture of him in his uniform, Green Beret, sergeants. It says "Judge throws out flag burning case" or something like that.

I reading this and it turns out there was a "pro-war" rally in Washington D.C like "win the war" patriotic type parade but there were the usual anti-war demonstrators alongside. One of the anti-war demonstrators was waving a VC flag. Well, the sergeant,

the sergeant's name was Kerns, Sergeant Kerns goes over and grabs the VC flag and tears it to shreds. Who gets arrested but Sergeant Kerns for causing a disturbance and citing to riot. When it got right down to the judge and the decision, the case was thrown out (laughs).

Q: So, you were aware of the anti-war movement. How did you feel about it?

JWS: Well, one kind of funny thing that happened was I had a cousin of mine who is a girl was really the only one of my family who wrote to me regularly – more so than even my parents. She wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote.

When Kent State happened, when the incident at Kent State happened, I made some kind of remark in there like to her like I just thought was like a normal remark from the military viewpoint like you can't just say it was the student's fault because maybe those soldiers felt threatened. You don't know how they felt. I don't know if they ever interviewed those guys who fired the shots. She didn't like that because she was 100% on the side of the students.

I was glad that they let us wear "civvies" on the trip home because even when we went to San Francisco airport, nobody bothered us. I had no trouble at all. Of course, like they said, when you got home you didn't go around bragging about it. I wasn't married at the time. I didn't have a wife to come home to.

You didn't volunteer to your girlfriend where you'd been. You didn't try get a job because you were a veteran. It took a lot of years before things started to turn around in that respect when you could actually talk about it. It was the veterans who got together by the late 70's and early 80's like when they built the wall in Washington DC and everything.

Q: Did you join any veterans organizations at all?

JWS: Yes. I'm a life member of the Vietnam Veterans of America. I belong to the American Legion. I did belong to what they called the Tri-County Council of Vietnam Era Veterans which is headquartered right down in Albany.

Q: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone who was over there with you?

JWS: For a while but not anymore. We kind of lost touch.

Q: Any reunions?

JWS: No, because all of them, there wasn't a single one of them who was from around here. The closest one was from southern New Jersey, over near Boston. The rest were from Indiana, California. They were just too far away.

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

JWS: It hasn't affected...well, first of all, I run into guys at different times who were Vietnam and sometimes the subject would come up. This was especially back in the early days when I first came back. The first thing you know they're over crying on your shoulder. They're crying. Oh, you're a Vietnam veteran. They didn't care if you were in the Army, Navy, Air Force, where you were or what you did or anything. You were a

Vietnam veteran, a fellow vet and they could talk to you about it. They were so desperate to talk to somebody about it. I was happy to talk to them about it but I'm glad I don't feel like that.

I was not in a combat situation. We had our tough times. We had two or three guys who were killed and wounded. I had close calls all over the place. I saw people get killed. I saw a lot of things you shouldn't see but I left it there. I said I'm going back to my life.

Another funny thing was, I belong to other groups. I'm into like interested in classic cars, antiques and things like that. I've been in these groups twenty, thirty years now. I've known people and it wasn't until like years later that they'd come out and say I'm a Vietnam veteran too. Really? I've known you for twenty years and I never knew it, never knew it. Oh yeah, I flew a helicopter in a hunter-killer team or something like that.

Then they'd start taking about it. I'd say well I was in the Navy in the Delta. Then they'd start talking about...they wouldn't go overboard because you already knew the guy. Then you could talk a little about it you know.

I've been to the legion halls and I've been to those places. It's a mixed bag. You've got the older guys who were the WWII vets. They were a long time accepting the Vietnam guys. The best group was the Tri-County Council because they were almost all Vietnam veterans. They have the annual get together down at the fairgrounds. I don't focus on it. I'm into a lot of different things that occupy my time.

Q: I'm going to stop this for a minute and we'll change tapes. You sent us this photograph. Can you hold it in front of you and tell us when and where it was taken?

JWS: If I can remember (laughs).

Q: It doesn't have to be exact.

JWS: What does it say on the back?

Q: It gives your name and phone number.

JWS: Nothing about let me know when you're on.

Q: Yes. Tell us what's going on.

JWS: This is a picture of me in what I guess you would call my dress "cammy's" because we had two different styles of uniforms.

Q: Hold it just like that.

JWS: Two different styles of uniforms. The "dress camouflage" and the "tiger stripes" which was the standard uniform in Vietnam in the field. The black beret was used by the Riverine force in Vietnam – they guys on the boats and also our units. We only wore it for special occasions or for photographs basically.

Q: Do you still have it?

JWS: No, it disintegrated (laughs)

Q: In the field you wore helmets?

JWS: A lot of us just wore what we called "boonie" hats. Some guys wanted to wear

helmets but most of us didn't on the theory that we weren't going to run into trouble (laughs).

This was probably taken about early...it might have even been taken in California. I'm not sure. Early in the program.

Q: You can start showing us...

JWS: Is this going to be in the program?

Q: Yes. If you can just face it towards the camera, I can zoom right in on it.

JWS: I have some patches here. I had this broken up into several different periods. I have this memorial here I did. There was a guy named Tom Stafford. He designed this patch which was SEALORDS Van – South East Asia River Ocean Delta Strategy and a “3” and a picture of Snoopy standing on a PORTATALE. A PORTATALE was the portable backpack sensor monitor that we had. He put “Only God Knows More. Super Snoopers”. Tom was the guy who was killed by the friendly fire the first month we were there.

Q: Do you have those patches made overseas or were they made in the states?

JWS: I believe they had them made up while we were still in California, just before we went.

Then I've got some pages from Great Lakes and the USS Bristol which was the reserve training cruise. That ship was sold to Nationalist China later on.

Some pictures from Mare Island, San Francisco Navy Shipyard. If you want to take three or four hours, I can read this whole thing to you. (laughs)

Q: No.

JWS: San Francisco. My narrative of my experience in Camp Pendleton and Camp Roberts. We took a weekend and went up to Lake Berryessa State Park in California. Survival, evasion, resistance and escape. This is my diploma for having survived it.

Muir Woods. This was called our final battle project up in swamps near Sacramento, the backwaters of the Sacramento River. We went up there two different times working with the sensors and the river boat people.

Q: How do you think your training in the United States prepared you for what you actually encountered when you were out in Vietnam?

JWS: It helped us very much. We had an extensive period of training, three or four times actually out in the field.

This was our party we had in Vallejo which was the town across the bridge from Mare Island.

My diploma, I guess you'd call it from NYOTS. Travis Air Base. My actual baggage tag.

This is a map of Vietnam. I don't know if you can pick it out there. I actually highlighted them in dark green. It came out a little too dark. These were where the various camps

that I was from Tra Cu by the Parrot's Beak. Thuong Thoi right here by the river. Ba Xoai in the mountains. Binh Thuy and Can Tho down on the river. Of course, Saigon over here.

Q: So, you actually were right on the border with Cambodia, weren't you?

JWS: Oh yes.

Q: Did you ever go into Cambodia?

JWS: I was going to say the border in this one spot there was like a little tiny canal only about ten feet wide. We had to go up it in what we called a "whale boat" to this little outpost. We veered over to the side and took one step out (laughs) into Cambodia and back in the boat again just to say we were there (laughs).

I don't know if you ever followed Doonesbury, the cartoon in the paper? He started in the early '70s. Doonesbury. It was so tongue and cheek. I had to cut a couple of them out here. Let me get my glasses here. Doonesbury and actually its BD. It's the same character if you read the paper today he just came back from Iraq. He lost a leg in Iraq.

He says "Hi there, my name's BD and I volunteered"

"My name's George, I was drafted".

"Well, don't feel bad. The important thing is that you're on your way to Vietnam."

"Boy, am I excited. I haven't been this excited about a trip since last year when I flew to Fort Lauderdale"

"Look, rice paddies" and George is going (puts his hand over his mouth)

Here's the...we went to Hawaii, Wake Island. This is the Annapolis. That was the damage that was caused in July '69. These are all from the Pacific Stars and Stripes, various newspaper clippings I cut out, scenes from around Saigon.

Here's the story about the Black Beret, the River Patrol Force.

This is my checking account at the American Express International Banking Corporation Military Banking Office, Binh Thuy, Republic of Vietnam but I got a kick out of my address at that time. It's got "Schaller, James W., SN, RIVER PATrol FLOtilla 5, C/O Lieut. Cmdr. Darling, FPO 96627, In Country" Anybody looking at that today would say "what country, in country, what country"

I drew these up years ago, this little maps of the way the bases were laid out at Binh Thuy.

These are the patches from the Sea Wolves Binh Thuy. US Forces Naval Vietnam, 1st SEALORDS, 3rd Patrol Force, Naval Advisory.

These are some sketched I did of what the sensors looked like. The MINISID-Seismic. GSID Ground seismic intrusion, the MAGID – magnetic intrusion, PIRID – Passive infrared intrusion. The ACOUBUOY, the SHAID, the ADSID which was obviously air

deployed, Modified Magnetic Intrusion Detector, a PSID, the Dog Turds and the SONARBUOY which actually floated on water.

Q: Maybe if you wouldn't mind if we could take that sheet and just photocopy it and put that in your album or put that in your folder.

JWS: Sure, anything you want to.

Q: That's pretty interesting.

JWS: Somebody actually took a photo. This is actually SLV-1 guys wading through a swamp – the “wading warriors of the navy's mobile strike force” they called it but we never referred to us as that.

That's Ba Xoai. That hill was surrounded by these larger mountains.

This was actually our first casualty. I didn't mention that. Lt. Patrick Donovan was killed by a sniper when he was out with the Green Berets out of Ba Xoai the second month we were there.

More clippings. This was SLV2's patch, Duffle Bag Monitor Team 1. This was “better killing through electronics” Duffle Bag Thuyen Nhon patch. They managed to get an OV10 Bronco, a Seawolf helicopter, a howitzer and a PBR all shooting at the sensor (laughs).

Q: Did you collect those patches over there...

JWS: Yes.

Q: Or once you were back.

JWS: Oh no, these came from over there while I was there. They actually had Chinese tailor shops up and down the roads and you could go and have any patch you wanted made. That's why there were hundreds of what they called unofficial patches made for all of the different units - -Vietnam Hunting Club. Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club. I noticed you had this pin in your gift shop – River Rats Vietnam

That's the layout of the Dufflebag sites at Tra Cu, Thuyen Nhon by the Parrot's Peak.

That's a couple of pictures of me down in (unclear) and Tra Cu. A story about our bunker being built. An aerial view of our camp at Thuong Thoi.

Green Beret patches. Here's a shot of the bunker from the other roof. We had this 50 foot “commo” antenna tower.

That's the layout of the camp, me on a telephone.

Then I did these cartoons. The red line or the candy stripe was the Cambodian border and got those names from the red lines on the maps. This led to jokes about there actually being a red line out there in the rice paddies. The Cambodian border was the limit of our as well as all allied activities officially until the incursion of 1970. So, I put “Well boys, this is as far as we go, here's the red line. “

Q: How did you feel about the rules of engagement?

JWS: I think every single person who was over there at that time couldn't figure out why we couldn't go into Laos and do something about the trail what they called the Hi Chi Minh trail that came all the way down. It was like off limits to us for so long.

This referred to an actual incident when one of our units was pinned down by friendly fire again from a Vietnamese river boat. There was, you know what "terrain masking" is, when radio signals can't get over a mountain.

Q: Right.

JWS: Or blocked by the terrain.

This unit, we were on top of Nui Sam and one of our units was out in the field and they were being fired on. They're trying like crazy to contact the home base and they can't because the signals are going back to Thuong Thoi because of the mountains. We monitored their radio transmission, signaled the headquarters of where the boat was from so they could signal the boat and tell them to stop shooting. Luckily it all worked and nobody got hurt.

I just wrote on here, "New at the game. First helo implant, Tra Cu, November '69. What do you mean jump? Oh"

Vietnamese Christmas cards.

Then I did this one here. "In the beginning phase of the sensor program, Victor Charlie was caught by surprise on a number of occasions".

"Comrade what you think this funny little box is for?" Just as everything is coming at them. (laughs)

Those are the Chu Hoi leaflets and a Cambodian leaflet explaining what a PBR was.

A VC wanted poster.

The reason everybody got drunk so easy because we had these books of tickets for two dollars. Beer was five cents and mixed drinks were a quarter. That was the Alamo Lounge. That was in our camp. Excuse me, the Delta Den was in our camp. The Alamo Lounge was down in Binh Thuy.

Some appropriate cartoons I threw in there.

We had one of these on Nui Sam. It's a night observation device, NOD, a high powered one. You could look down probably two miles away and pick out people walking and they'd look about an inch high.

This was a story they did on sensors. This was a guy getting ready to drop one of those ones from the air with the antenna which looks like a vegetable.

This was a guy who was transferred to our unit from ASPB – Assault Support Patrol Boat. That took a rocket propelled grenade that went right through the boat and out the

other side. A lot of these, sometimes these boats were made of fiberglass. This one was made of metal so it kind of blew it up as it went through. The ones that were made of fiberglass, sometimes the RPG would go right through and out the other side without exploding because it wouldn't hit any metal.

That's, what do you call them, tracers. Taken from the mountaintop.

Our officer, Lt. Barre, was funny. He drank so much he developed a big pot belly, shaved his head. Then everybody called him Buddha. Then they called him "Trung Wi". "Everybody knows Trung Wi Buddha beaucoup kilo". "Trung Wi" meant "one bar" because he was Lt. Junior Grade and "Buddha" because of his shaved head and belly and "beaucoup kilo" because he drank a lot.

Nui Sam. "Did you ever think they Navy was trying to get rid of us? Yep". Four US Sailors on a remote mountaintop on the Cambodian frontier. Who'd ever thought.

That's the "Porta-camp" we had on the top of the mountain. March 1970. We made a...we actually built this building with a hammer, a saw and a screwdriver. We had no ruler or measuring device of any kind. So, we made one and called it the "Nui Sam foot". We just took a piece of paper, divided it in half and divided in into quarters and as long as we used that same homemade ruler for everything in that building, it came out ok.

A diagram of the mountain top. I dressed up in my "cammy's" for a shot on the top.

We had to go down and past this spot in Chau Dac every time we went in the jeep down to get our water and our supplies. Then all of the sudden it showed up in the Washington Post." Drainage canal is the garbage dump for the stilted homes in Chau Dac, the South Vietnamese provincial capital", UPI. They were so impressed by that. We had to look at it every day.

This is one of the support ships, the USS Benewah. They had these barges and docks that were tied out to it for the small boats to tie up to.

I just put in a bunch of newspaper clippings about the Seawolf helicopters, the boats, A37 Dragonflys which flew out of Binh Thuy Air Base. These are the different types of monitor boats and ASPBs and everything they used in the riverine force.

This was operation Sea Float which was a completely in the river, completely away from the land. All these barges which were connected, everything from barracks to places where they ate. Here's a ship tied up to it.

Black Ponies.

Strike Assault Boats – STAB boats.

I don't think I have any pictures but we also went out on the air boats two or three times. They were run by the Green Berets and mercenary forces that they hired.

Hunter killer team.

There's the Sky Crane.

We saw these a couple of times, the big air cushioned vehicles.

More cartoons.

That was February '70, some sailors accidentally crossed the border and got caught by the Cambodians. We had to negotiate to get them back.

History of the USS Benewah.

VC Victory money.

That was all the Green Berets plus our commanding officer.

There's the (unclear) to the ones you have, pictures.

Mostly newspaper pictures there. Then, my R&R stuff. 360 Yen to a Dollar US. I think it's the other way around now. All the restaurants and places we went. Hakone. The Giant Buddha, Tokyo, Fuji. Mount Fuji as far as you could go up the mountain, at least, by vehicle at that time.

Here's the MPCs that I have. Ten cents and a dollar. They were telling me at the show there that if you can find any five or ten dollar ones or higher they are worth a lot more money. They said hardly anybody brought them home because they wanted to cash them in for the greenbacks.

Those were all various Vietnamese bills – Dong.

Here is the story of the Sergeant I told you about. He got arrested. "GI VC Flag Case: Judge Tears It Up".

Then I was getting down to be a "short timer" – DEROS - Saigon, Okinawa, Wake Island, Hawaii, Travis, Treasure Island, San Francisco, New York. One long trip.

Then a few postscript type of things. This is from the Vietnam Veterans National Memorial in Angel Fire, New Mexico. I've been there a couple of times. It's a really nice place.

Q: Did you ever watch any of the Vietnam era movies?

JWS: That's me after I got home. I got my PC3 rating finally just in time to get out of the Navy.

POW and that's it.

Q: Did you ever watch any of the Vietnam....

JWS: Yes. I've probably seen them all at least once. I got the biggest kick out of Apocalypse Now because that, of course, was supposed to be one of the rivers which doesn't exist I think. There was so much about it which was absolutely ridiculous. Of course, the ones like Hamburger Hill and Platoon and everything, I am sure they were somewhat accurate but I wasn't in a position or situations like that.

Q: OK. Thank you very much for your interview. That was a very good interview.

JWS: OK