

**Patrick Lee Johnson  
Veteran**

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Interviewers**

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**Q:** Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth, please?

**PJ:** Patrick Johnson. Place of birth is Buffalo, New York, October fourth, 1955.

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

**PJ:** High School. Kenmore West. As we discussed earlier here, in western New York.

**Q:** Did you enlist or were you drafted?

**PJ:** I enlisted in January 1973.

**Q:** Why did you decide to enlist?

**PJ:** Well, it's a long story, but I'll make it a short story, but it was a long story. My senior year, my dad and I were talking about the five colleges that I had applied to and we sat down for a serious discussion about which one to select and he told me I had four choices. But I said I applied to five colleges. And he said your choices are the army, the navy, the air force, or the marines, so pick one of those colleges and I'll be glad to support it. So, I picked the navy and the next day I went down to the naval building downtown and enlisted in the navy. I enlisted in January of that year because the navy, at the time, was offering a promotion where if you joined the navy earlier, although you wouldn't actually go into the service and be active until later in the summer, so you could have your summer home after your senior year. They did it for pay purposes, where you would get pay eight months earlier than had you just enlisted. And as a result, to answer your question earlier about Vietnam Era veterans, that evidently had put me into the Vietnam Era veteran category, which was rewarded at the end, I believe, of February 1973. I just found that out recently through the Veteran's Organization.

**Q:** Where did you go for your basic training?

**PJ:** To Orlando. Which at the time, was one of the three in the country. One was in San Diego, one was at The Great Lakes. Naturally, where you stay in Orlando, is the only co-ed navy recruiting station in the country.

**Q:** Was this the first time you were ever really away from home?

**PJ:** When I was a kid, when I was fifteen, I went around the country with my father's nurse, her husband, and her brother for a month. Never away from home alone amongst people that I'd never met prior to that time.

**Q:** What was it like?

**PJ:** Scary at first, for anybody that has ever joined the military, the first day at boot camp would be a little harrowing because of the tactics they use to indoctrinate you into the military versus where everyone came from. I missed my family, I have a rather large family, I have five sisters and brothers. My mom and dad left me at the airport that day, said goodbye for seven weeks.

**Q:** How long were you in Orlando?

**PJ:** I was in Orlando from August 1973 until October.

**Q:** What was your basic training like?

**PJ:** It was interesting. At the time, I had many folks before me in high school who were in the military, some of which came back to tell their stories. Everyone would try to get stories to scare the next guy. But, Orlando was kind of unique, in that it was a brand new recruiting station. We did not have to do our laundry. Our laundry came back warm every day, and I heard of other areas like the Great Lakes, to this day, who still have to do their own laundry. I was a little easier of an environment than I ever expected. We had a company commander who was half-spirited in the way he wanted to get eighty guys to rally together. We had certain tests we would take as a part of a syllabus for boot camp. And if you worked your grade out with a four-o score he would hide you in the back of his El Camino vehicle and take you off base and water ski. The water, which was knee-level. And one of the guys got caught with a sunburn from water skiing that afternoon. One of the inspectors, they inspected you at least once a week out on the grinder, noticed it, his tan was a little darker than most people, but I guess Jack, the gentleman's name, was a friend of this guy so nobody got in trouble. He was a comic, this guy when we were at attention, getting inspected he would get on the inspector's bike, they would come around on bikes to inspect the different teams and different companies in front of the building. And he would ride backward sitting on the handlebars on this guy's bike just to get some of us to laugh and naturally when you laughed you got in trouble and did pushups or ran. He was kind of a spirited company commander.

**Q:** After Orlando, where did you go? Any specialized training?

**PJ:** Yes, I came home initially for a week or two, then I went out to the national training center in San Diego, which at the time was where all of the enlistees who were going on to higher education in electronics, in specialized fields, which therefore they call basic electricity and electronic program, or BEEP school. It was the core course you had to take before you went on to an A school, wherever that may be. My dad went to Treasure Island, California. I was in San Diego for no more than six weeks. I recall leaving there in a November-December time frame of 1973. Do you want to know my next duty station?

**Q:** And what was that?

**PJ:** Treasure Island, California. Treasure Island was the receiving depot on the west coast for Vietnam veterans who came back with particular issues, mostly mental related issues, but it also housed the only electronic warfare school for the U.S Navy, which has since moved to Pensacola, Florida. Treasure Island was a very nice place, I lived on the third floor of the barracks with a view of the city of San Francisco. I had three roommates, and we would look out our window, at San Francisco, the right side of the

window was the Golden Gate Bridge, and the left side was the Oakland Bay Bridge. So, the whole view of San Francisco was in our window every day. You can imagine with the sun setting in the west, behind the city, just an incredible view every night. People would pay millions, in fact they do now, and I believe the city of San Francisco owns the island. It was originally opened in the early 1900s for an expedition in the San Francisco area. There is a natural Island called Yerba Buena, which is the Coast Guard headquarters. Yerba Buena connects to Treasure Island via causeway, Treasure Island is a man-made island, made in the 1900s. It is a beautiful place; the city of San Francisco owns it now. None of the places I have stayed to include homes when I was in the military stand any longer, they are all gone, which is kind of ironic, they do not tend to keep the housing long. Probably because of the turnover.

**Q:** How long were you in Treasure Island?

**PJ:** I was at Treasure Island from November or December of '73 until August of '74. It's what they call the A school, where you learn operational maintenance of a couple of systems. One was a WR1, which is a wide end receiver to receive signals for what was the former Soviet Union, which was the biggest perceived threat at the time during the Cold War. Using a system, we would monitor sub-surface, surfacing air threats to the ship. Signal recognition patterns of different waves. And then there were some active systems that we would use to jam signals if there was an incoming missile, you were both operating and maintaining the system. Which is how you make it in the Navy because once you get on your way you can't get the retainer back at the pier you have to have a person doing that at both operations, you need to ask once a ship leaves

**Q:** Do you think by the time you got on your ship, your assignment, you were well trained?

**PJ:** I was. My first ship was the USS Newport News which is stationed up north.

**Q:** Now when did you do that?

**PJ:** When I left San Francisco I came home for thirty days and then flew to England with the hope of catching the USS Newport New and the second flagship, hopefully at the harbor in England, but it had left to go on an exercise, which was a large exercise in the north where you would show force to the Soviets, by putting an armada of ships. They would set up north in Norway, and do some exercises, just to show them that we can move that many people on ships. The ship was underway, and, in the fall, they did not want to fly me there in an aircraft carrier there. So, I waited thirty days and I worked at a base called Mildenhall Air Force Base, in the center of England up near Shippea Hill England, for thirty days. I flew on a different military aircraft to Oslo, Norway and caught my ship in the Oslo port.

**Q:** What kind of things did you do when you were in England?

**PJ:** What most eighteen-year-old guys did, shot darts and drink beer (laughter).

**Q:** You were the only Navy man on the Airforce base?

**PJ:** There was one other Navy guy waiting to go to the same ship, but for thirty days we just washed cars, we washed the general's car. There was one unique aspect of Mildenhall, one day I was asked to drive a step van to the end of the runway for some news media. They did not tell us initially what it was, when you got out there it was obvious there was this long, sleek, black jet plane was making its trips from the

Mildenhall air force base to Los Angeles, and they wanted to film it because it was supposed to set a record for the time, it made it in three hours and forty-six minutes from the time it left the end of the runway until the time it got to Los Angeles. I understand that it refueled in New Jersey. I recall the guys wore space suits because of the altitude they flew at. The plane dripped fuel at the ground level, when they flew off, the metal contracts and would come together in the air. It's a unique aspect for a Navy guy on an Airforce base to see a secret of planes at the time. I had only headed down to London for a day, and toured London. Mostly it was just a metropolitan area.

**Q:** When you arrived on your ship finally, what was your assignment on the ship?

**PJ:** My initial assignment was an electronic warfare technician. I can recall coming on board that day, something unique happened we were flying over to meet the ship in Norway, the plane we were on there was a Navy captain on board and about six or seven enlisted Navy people. And we were all sitting together at the back of the plane we were about to land and the captain asked us who was picking us up at the airport we said we did not have rides and were going to get a taxi or find our way to the ship somehow. He did not like the idea that enlisted guys had to spend their own money to go to the ship, so he called some cars as soon as we landed and said just wait there for about fifteen minutes, and sure enough buses came from everywhere, they were small, like eight person vans, they picked us up and took us back to the ship. He actually brought us on board, and he was part of the second flagship staff, so he was part of our crew.

**Q:** What was daily life like on board the ship?

**PJ:** Initially confusing because the Newport News was the last all gun heavy crew from the U.S Navy inventory. It was a beautiful ship, it had teakwood decks to absorb some of the shock of the guns going off. It was a model ship, the captain loved to show her off, we had a lot of dignitaries come on board as we sailed through the northern part of Europe. But I remembered going on the ship, with I think over 1,500 people onboard, and it was just so confusing to find out how to get from where you slept to where you worked to where you ate, and if you really did not have someone to take you by the hand through the ship, the first couple weeks you would be lost. It did not take long for someone to find out where you were, but there were many parts of the ship I never saw. And we ended up leaving Oslo and traveling to many different ports in northern Europe. I know we went to Copenhagen, Amsterdam, went back to England, and then we went to Lisbon, Portugal before we came back to put the ship to rest. After we decommissioned it, we came back.

**Q:** How long were you on the Newport News?

**PJ:** October of '74 until July of '75. We decommissioned the ship in Norfolk, Virginia. We were all presented certificates as plank preservers, as newer guys from the ship were plank preservers in July. My parents, my wife, girlfriend at the time, and her mom all came down to see the decommission which was really a sad ceremony to see the ship get taken out of the inventory.

**Q:** Do you know if it has ever been recommissioned?

**PJ:** No, in fact we are probably shaving with it. (both laugh). It was, for the longest time, in Philadelphia shipyard. When we flew into Philadelphia for work you would see it if you landed on a particular cargo. Then it got moved to a shipyard in the Great Lakes and got cut up.

**Q:** What was your next assignment?

**PJ:** After the Newport News I got orders to the Vogelgesang, U.S Naval destroyer out of Newport, Rhode Island. That was a much smaller presence it was not as anonymous when you went on board. As far as people, we only had a crew of 150 men. It was a great ship you got to know a lot of the guys, I think all veterans would agree the friendships you had in the Navy, and I don't think you would ever have as close in the civilian community. You tended to learn a lot about each other. I was on the USS Vogelgesang in Newport for two years, until August of 1977.

**Q:** Was it different sailing on a ship that small compared to a heavy cruiser?

**PJ:** Very much so, because even your relative rank on board, I was a third class officer, your duties as a third class officer were much greater than they ever could have been on the Newport News, because you had a smaller crew, you only managed about fifty percent of the level needed to run the ship efficiently, because as a night Naval reserve destroyer we had the reserves from the luminaries come on board at least once a month and do exercises with them and they would be the other captain and crew. We would go out alone, with just the 150 of us, we would just have later hours to get things done. It was very nice; I liked the size of the ship. It was different, at sea too, the Newport News was a rather large and heavy ship, and it didn't really take the effects of the swells as much as the Vogelgesang, the Vogelgesang felt like corks in the ocean, just a different ride. Fortunately, I was not one of the ones who got sick at sea.

**Q:** What were your duty assignments? Were they similar to the Newport News?

**PJ:** They were, but more senior. I would have to make more senior decisions on a daily basis, about the threats that faced the ship. Part of the job we had was not only receiving signals of the different Vogelgesang ships and aircrafts. You would have to identify them and also pass them along, we would take them and send them along to electronics intelligence on the east coast to make sure they all received the same day they received, in case there was a new censor that they had not seen yet. It was very detailed, we would utilize control receivers, in order to look at the fingerprints of the radars to see if anything was unique or changed and we would send the tapes to the intelligence center, in Maryland to review them.

**Q:** Did you ever see a surface combat ship or submarine closely?

**PJ:** Very rarely would we have combat off New England. We would have them off Norwich or Jacksonville. The only time you would ever see any clear potential violation of international waters was with EGIs or intelligence collectors. Which looked like medium sized fishing boats with no nets, all antennas (laughs). And they would come within twelve miles of the shore, mostly of the shore of Connecticut. We would go out and take pictures of them or whatever else we wanted to do for the day (laughs). Mostly I would take pictures of the antennas to see if anything had changed since the last time. They used to have a team, the Snooping team, onboard that would be called once we got a couple thousand yards to the EGIs just to take pictures of the antennas. You can tell by the antenna what the frequency range was, then we could determine what they were trying to collect. We never saw a surface combat, one sub popped up one day off of [inaudible], we saw a number of deltas, but we didn't physically see them. They flew a route down the east coast, which made Washington nervous because we got close to the coast, but it was a pretty regular occurrence. We expected it, just monitored the activity.

**Q:** Were there any incidents that you remember more than other, something amusing or inspirational?

**PJ:** We had a very unique captain on board, Captain Headner (?), he used to come on the surface warfare center, where I worked, and we had two captain's chairs, one in front of passive equipment and the other in front of active equipment. For some reason the white noise in the room put the captain to sleep. Captain Headner was one day given orders to try to infiltrate a carrier group. His orders were to take the Vogelgesang and try to penetrate the outer perimeter carrier. There were a number of ships who were given orders to do that and see if the carrier could be combatically identified as a threat to the group. What they did was attack the threat, which was us, he sat down with certain crew members and asked how he thought we could do this. We had just come out of a Boston shipyard and put a new radar on our ship called a Deca-1500. We would use these radars to communicate to port, they had a much higher pulse rate, and it would give you better definitions of buoys, landmarks and entryways to tight waterways. We told the captain there was a book in the Navy that had all the world's ships radars in it. After a couple of hours there were no updates to the publications that that particular radar was aboard our ship yet, so my counterpart in electronic warfare on board the carrier ship would not know that there was a Deca-1500 attached to the Vogelgesang, so we told my boss if we went the speed of a cruise ship and turned on the Deca-1500, which had the same radar fingerprints as a commercial ship, and turned off the lights, which was a violation of our Navy policy, and just had a party we would look like a cruise ship, and that's exactly what we did. When we got to the outer pickets of the ships, ships from that group turned on the control radars, which are pretty standard during transition through a battle group. They never recognized us as a potential naval boat versus a commercial aircraft. When you get within a half-mile of a carrier you are supposed to shoot off a flare and as soon as we did chaos erupted (laughs). The captain was thrilled he got through the outer perimeter of the battle groups; he got a lot of accolades from the destroyer squadron commander. That was one of the more fun things we did at sea.

We also had our issues with fires. I recall being in Jacksonville in charge of the core deck, when you were a second class or higher on a small ship you were in charge of the core deck, if it was a larger ship it was a commander officer not an enlisted senior petty officer. I happened to have the core deck watch officer duties, in Jacksonville, Florida while we were waiting for a Navy captain and his crew to come on board to do an in-service inspection. In service inspections take place when a ship has been in service for over five years, they have one to see if they are deemed seaworthy. They would go over every part of the ship from electronics to the boiler and would write up a report. It was really a score for the captain because it tells his boss if he has been maintaining the ship like he was supposed to. This is expected of every ship, and each captain has to understand that. As the captain was coming over, someone must have thrown a cigarette and it caught the flag bag on the port side of the ship, a structure that has international flags, the cigarette hit it and it immediately engulfed into flames so I had to tell the in service captain to stay off the ship and we had to put the fire out. It was embarrassing to have someone come on board to look at your ship, when it is on fire (laughs). Everything worked out ok.

**Q:** Toward the end of Vietnam, there were some problems on some of the ships with race relations did you have any problems on your ship?

**PJ:** Newport News once, certainly on the Newport News there was a greater race issue than on the smaller one. I do not recall any race related issues on the smaller ship. The Newport News had some, but there were 1500 people. The carriers had much more problems, unfortunately.

**Q:** Are there any other things you would like to add?

**PJ:** I enjoyed the Navy, they asked me if I could stay and go to officer candidate school in Newport, but I decided to go back to Buffalo, in the summer of '77, I'm glad I did, but I enjoyed the four years. There are a lot of good friends that I have today, a lot of fine memories.

**Q:** When you got out did you make use of the G.I Bill?

**PJ:** I did, the day I got out of the Navy I went to Canisius College and I used the G.I Bill for two years there.

**Q:** Did you stay in contact with anyone who served with you?

**PJ:** Yes, I stayed in contact with Captain Headner, who I mentioned earlier and Captain Ozar (?), who was his replacement. He was pushing me to go to the officer candidate school. Captain Ozar and I just emailed each other within the last couple weeks. He retired in Florida and Captain Headner is retired in Middletown. We lost one of our closest crew members Dana Dewitt, who had a heart attack at fifty, near Christmas. Which was tough to take, most of the core part of the crew that I was close to I have kept in contact with.

**Q:** Have there been any reunions from either ship?

**PJ:** Yes, the Newport News has a reunion every July. Which is heavily attended I understand. I have never been. The Vogelgesang has never had one, they both have websites. The Newport News advertises their reunion every year the Vogelgesang has never advertised it has never had one, but it was a much smaller ship there were only 850 guys. But the core part of the division I was a part of I have seen over the years, our own reunions.

**Q:** With the Naval Park, the cruiser, the destroyer, have you ever been to them?

**PJ:** I have not been to the Naval Park, ironically enough those two side ships were decided at the time. That was a light guided cruiser, not a heavy cruiser. The destroyer was a little older than mine, although they were both gearing class destroyers. The [inaudible] was at least ten years prior to the Vogelgesang. They look exactly like my ship did. I have never been down there, but I know my father has, he has a model airplane that he donated from that time.

**Q:** What kind of work did you do after you came out of service?

**PJ:** I was in college for a couple years, in the physics lab. Then I went on to a company called CR Research Corporation, a private company here locally. I joined there as an electronic technician in February 1979. Which had directly related to the work I did in the Navy.

**Q:** How do you think your time in the service changed or had an effect on your life?

**PJ:** From the beginning of the interview, I thought I had five choices and my father told

me I had four (laughs). Clearly he envisioned something I needed more than I knew I needed and I think had he not done that I would not be in the job I am today or be as happy as I am in my work as I am today. I think it dramatically affected and changed who I was in high school to who I was when I got out of the Navy. Ironically enough, when I was in boot camp, the night before I left my dad and I were in the backyard and he said all I can tell you is your either going to come out a man or you're going to come out in jail but I don't think there is going to be anything between, but a month later I had the honor of being named the company honor man of my boot camp. They sent my mom and dad a letter saying there were tickets and a V.I.P section in the stands for all the company honor men. My father did not believe it, he thought it was a joke or that I wrote it (laughs). But it was from the captain in Orlando. He sent for my mom and my brother Pete, who was a sophomore student at the University of Notre Dame, we had a good time. Surprising me, they did not answer, so I thought no one was coming. It was very nice to see my mom and my brother. To answer your question, my most profound change was the marriage to my wife.

**Q:** Thank you very much for the interview.

**PJ:** You're welcome.