

**Christopher Blair
Narrator**

**Herkimer, Fulton County Historical Society
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on July 8 2008
Herkimer, Fulton County Historical Society
Herkimer, NY**

CB: Christopher Blair

I: Interviewer

CB: My name is Christopher Blair; I reside at Twenty-eight Charles Street in Ilion, NY. I retired Navy and my title was Yeoman First Class Submarine Qualified, U.S. and Retired. I did twenty years in the Navy and I am now residing in Ilion with my wife and two children.

I: Now, you have made military your career for twenty years?

CB: yes mam.

I: Tell us about how you first got started in that career and then what it was like to have all those years in the military?

CB: Ok, uh, my older brother John, who lives in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania now, he joined the Navy before I did. I believe approximately three years before, and every time he came home on liberty wearing the Navy uniform, of course, you know it looked great, and because I had an older brother in the Navy and we talked a lot about it, it really interested me. And, he eventually was stationed on a submarine and of course that was a big interest to me, again through speaking with my brother. And to make it even more interesting I was a member of the Boy Scouts and we took a field trip, I guess you want to call it, to Newport News, Virginia, and the submarine was in the dry dock at the time of the yards, shipyards, and the scoutmaster drove me over there so I could meet my brother and see the submarine. So boy, when I got home I was like oh, I'm going to be on that submarine one day. And it was a little less than three years later I was ending my high school and I sent a letter of interest, ah, out of a magazine to Washington, or whatever the public affairs office, and they wrote back giving me the location of my nearest recruiter, I went there, explained to him that I really wanted to be on submarines and go in the Navy and all that, anyway, that got the ball rolling. One thing led to another, I was only 17 at the time so I had to get parents' permission. They were a little leery of doing it but I talked them into it and and I went in the Navy. I went to boot camp. Then I had to request submarine school. I was really nervous about that because it wasn't guaranteed when I went in. I was lucky enough to get orders to submarine school, and then from there I had to request brother duty on a particular submarine that my brother was stationed on, which was the USS Mariano G. Vallejo, which I can tell you a little bit about the name or the submarine later if you'd like.

I: How customary was it for a sibling to be put on the same vessel?

CB: Uh, at that time it wasn't very customary because, uh, it was actually the tail end of the Vietnam War years, it was 1973 and to my knowledge 1975 was the official end of the Vietnam. We did have a younger brother at home, I think that helped. Uh, you had to request duty,

brother duty, your brother actually had to agree to it if I recall, and then Washington or whoever the powers to be, Bureau of Naval Personnel in Washington had to approve it, disapprove it. I was lucky I had it approved. The only obstacle was I had to get through submarine school and then I could have orders out of, which I managed to do. I graduated from submarine school which was a very memorable moment for me, so.

I: How did, when you went into boot camp, and then you went to submarine school it's one thing to get the approvals, how did that affect you? Was it everything you thought it would be or different?

CB: Boot camp or submarine school?

I: Why don't you move from one to the other?

CB: Okay, boot camp kind of sent me back. It sort of surprised me a little bit, because it's one thing my brother really never talked about. [laughs] We talked about submarine duty and of course like anything else you always remember, or talk about more of the good times than the rough times, like the fourteen hour days of work or whatever, or the standing to midnight watches. But anyway, getting back to boot camp, I got orders, I was unfortunate, to Great Lakes, which is outside Chicago, and I reported on November Seventh, in the middle of the winter, in Great Lakes is not a place you want to be. Um, so that wasn't too good, but I fared well in boot camp. I went in, I was about one hundred and ten pounds and I came out of there about one hundred and thirty and some good muscle on me. So, it was really good for me as far as that goes. A lot of exercise, a lot of schooling, everything is classroom now. They teach you seamanship, how to tie knots, how to moor ships, everything about the ships, it seems. Little or nothing about submarines. So I learned a lot of shipboard stuff, but that's basically what it is. A lot of exercise, discipline, learning the rules and regulations of the Navy, uh, and you know that sort of thing.

I: Now you were in during the Vietnam War, but then you went on to submarine school, the submarines didn't have the same involvement in the wars as some of the other areas of the military, correct?

CB: Uh they, I guess it's, it's really hard to say, because submarines are of course coined the silent service, for good reasons, because they're the basically like the unsung heroes. You never hear of about submariners, submarines, or how they're involved in any sort of a conflict. Even today, you don't hear much about them until recently in the Iraq War, you did hear a few things about submarines, which was, and I was actually pleased to hear that they were getting some recognition. Um submarines, especially back in that era, we were on a boomer or a SSBN Fleet Ballistic Submarine and what our objective was, was to be a deterrent force. Basically, we were out, what we would call, poking holes in the ocean. We would, each submarine would patrol a certain area until relieved by another submarine. Only certain people on board the submarine actually knew where you were, why you were there, if there was a special mission, we'll say, um, it's just the crew themselves did not know where they were. We could have been anywhere, we could have been in waters we didn't belong in, um we could have been in, I mean off the coast of New York for all we know. I mean really, but the bottom line being a deterrent force we had capability to carry sixteen nuclear missiles, or missiles with nuclear warheads, I should say. Everyone on the crew, no one knew when they loaded them, if you actually had sixteen missiles with nuclear warheads. You could have had two, you could of had five, you could have had none, and that has to do, there's a good reason for that, too. But, our enemies,

as you want to say, I guess, they knew we had subs out there with capability of carrying sixteen missiles with nuclear warheads as well as torpedoes. They didn't know where we were, we could have been off their coast, so if they wanted to try something, like fire a missile on us, well, we could have intercepted them, or taken care of those people before you know. I mean, it was a deterrent. You do unto us, we'll do unto you. So, we don't know where yours are, and you don't know where ours are. So, no one wants to make a move and that's what keeps the peace. That's really what it was. It was to maintain the peace, and it's still like that today. Uh, also, it was during what they called during the Cold War years. We would track Russian submarines without their knowledge, they would track us, or they would try to track us, I should say [Laughter]. We would also, um, now later I found out, we would listen in to communications from other countries. Russia, you know the Communist countries, and such. We would also take soundings of the ocean floor for mapping purposes. We had, we did quite a few things, but our main, main mission was to keep the peace and be a deterrent force out on the line.

I: What would you suggest to young people now, someone who's been in the military, we have military uprisings, just going through a war, um at the time when you went in, the war wasn't a very popular thing, I mean, the military wasn't very popular, so it was interesting that you chose to go ahead and do that, even in unpopular times.

CB: uh, hum.

I: How about, what would you say to young people today about that, about whether going into the military, about, you know, just becoming a part of such a thing?

CB: Well, I would recommend it, especially today. I can tell you from a personal viewpoint, the military is really, I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't gone in the military. I don't know where I would have been but, I know for a fact, it would not be where I am today, but I would recommend it for anyone. Today, they have even more opportunities than we had. Today, they can go in and learn very technical skills. They can learn a trade, there's trade skills, too. They can, uh, save money for college. Sometimes, they have bonuses. Their experience and the schools they have today are wonderful and they're recognized by a lot of colleges for credits towards degrees when they get out. Most of your military people today, the one's that really thinking about getting an education when they go in most of them come out with a degree because you can do it through correspondence courses. You can do it on the Internet today, something we didn't have, and uh, you know it's just a wonderful, wonderful place to start and you learn discipline, you learn to be independent, you can take orders, you can give orders, uh, it's just a real great place to start, I think.

I: Do you find that you have commonalities with, say, some of the service people from the Korean War from World War Two, when they, if you get together with them and they find out you're from the Vietnam era, do you have a lot of commonalities or do you notice the differences right away? Would you...

CB: Well, personally, I belong to several Veterans' organizations, such as the American Legion, VFW, which is the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Vietnam Veterans of America and especially like, well all those groups actually; we have people from all War eras and from all branches of service, both men and women, alike. There's a lot of camaraderie there. I have never really run into anyone, uhm, I don't know thinking any more or less of someone that was in a different war era, I guess you want to say, or branch of service. There's some kidding around, you know like

pulling or whatever you want to call it. But, on a serious note, everyone recognizes everybody else as having done a job and done it well and for a good reason. So, that's how I see it.

I: How would you state the reason to a kid, a young kid, you know, our children, grandchildren, you know they need to know about the people who have given their lives in many ways for our country and what do you think that they need to know and understand?

CB: I think that they need to understand that the reason that they have so many of these wonderful things that we have today, uh, freedoms, especially, freedom of speech, freedom to first amendment freedoms, it's simple things, the Internet, the school systems, the I don't know it goes on. They just need to understand that the reason that they are living on a level that they are today, compared to our fathers or grandfathers that what lived through depression eras and different things, is because of those people. Uhm, they have to, they have to somehow they have to be taught that if, what would have happened let's say, if nobody went after Nazi Germany, how would we be living today, you know? I mean we would be living, and Communism if we didn't fight the threat of Communism, uh, they have to, I think the best thing for them to do would be to look at some of these third world countries and, and Communist countries today. See how those people live and then have it brought to their attention that this could be the way you, you may have been living today if it wasn't for people, men and women alike, that went and made sacrifices you know, so that we could have the democracy we have today. The, you know, it's our way of life. They need to I think, they really need to teach respect for the flag. I think they need in the schools, they need, I know they have programs today where the Vietnam Veterans go out and they share their experiences with the children. I think there need to be more of that and of course, with current events, people are starting to become more patriotic and recognize these things more and more. But, I think it needs to be taught, at an early level. [lifting arm upward] So...

I: You think there's heightened awareness?

CB: Yes, that's.

I: That's true, that's true. [Pause] I would like you to explain these pictures you have for the camera.

CB: Okay, Sure, certainly.

I: You can do that? We'll have you just take them one at a time.

CB: Okay.

I: Why don't you take this one because ... if we could you put it right in front of you, Yes, just kind of rest it there. I think you have to tip it forward just a little. There. [Picture being adjusted for video camera. Zoom to photo]

CB: Okay, this is the submarine that my brother and I were stationed aboard, that we served aboard I should say. This is what was called a, this is an SSBN Fleet Ballistic Nuclear Submarine. It was also called a boomer, which is kind of the slang term between the sailors. This particular submarine had a capability of carrying up to sixteen missiles with nuclear warheads. And, if I could point at the top part, right here, this part right in here, this is where the missiles, this [pointing], are housed, right in the back. Okay, here let me, I'll just hold it, I think I can explain what I'm, okay, okay, the bow of the submarine is all the way forward that's where the wake of water is coming up on top of it and then in towards the center is what's called the sail. Behind that sail is where the missiles are housed, sixteen missiles and then, of course, in the back you have your rutter. Uhm, all the way in the front, you can see it looks kind of like a

shark's fin, that's sonar. [zooming in on the sonar] That's the sonar dome. And uh, you can't really see too much of the submarine here because what you're looking at is called the superstructure, it's attached to the submarine. It just provides a deck to walk on and there's a track that if you're on, if you are topside and you're not submerged, you have to wear a harness and it attaches to a track and you can go from one end of the submarine to the other so you don't fall overboard and of course get taken under and uh.

I: How did you feel about first being, I want to say, cooped up in the submarine, you may not have felt that way?

[Laughter from both Mr. Blair and Interviewer]

CB: Well, the very first time out, I think that's probably a good way to describe it, cooped up.

[Laughter]. Yeah, it's it's, it's it's not the type of closure you want, if you want to say that.

[Laughs].

I: So, you can tell us what each of these are?

CB: Yes, I'll just go through a few things. [takes item he brought]. Okay, this here I thought was pretty neat. The reason I saved this is, I don't know if they even have them today. In the magazines, back when I was in high school they had little postcards, if you were interested in service, uh; this particular one was from the Navy. You'd just mail it in postage paid. Well, I signed my name, marked I'm interested and mailed it in and this is the letter they sent to me, this was uh, probably two and half years before I went in. [Camera shot of card], Okay.

I: This, this is what... Tell us a little about this submarine school?

CB: Yeah, uhm, this is what I refer to as my submarine school diploma. [Laughs] [Close up of diploma] I'm a graduate of submarine school [Laugh]. Uh, I think its class of Seventy-three class of Seventy-four, I think. [Laughs]

I: Not everybody gets to say they went to submarine school.

CB: Yes, I walked the stage though, but [Laughs] this is from Groton, Connecticut. Submarine School is in Groton, Connecticut. It was approximately sixteen weeks long at the time. And, just a little footnote, the most memorable part of submarine school was the escape tank. The escape tank, it's a tank which is filled with water. It's above ground of course, and they take you down one hundred feet, should I put this down, and you wear what's called a stanky hood. It's a hood, it's like a life preserver, okay, [takes picture away] it's a life preserver with a hood that goes over your head and it has two vents on the side and what you do is they pressurize this chamber and then they open the door, outer door to the tank. You're one hundred feet down, you walk out on a platform and immediately it wants to take you to the top. This is escape training for if you're on a submarine they have two escape trunks, they call them. So, you can escape if you're disabled. But, anyway, it was memorable because they don't, they don't do this anymore. Uh, they started they were only doing it at fifty feet. I understand they don't do it anymore, but I can't confirm that, and you just go up to the top and you have to keep blowing out. They used to make us say "Ho, Ho, Ho," to make sure we were breathing it out, because the pressure will expand your lungs and if not, you will rupture your lungs.

[New picture on the video camera].

I: [pause] Uh, that's, I know that's not a real happy huh,, [pause] Well, you know what, a lot of what we learned is that there's a lot of it that's not not very happy you know, a lot of the things that people have to go through to be a service people is not very happy.

CB: This is my graduation picture. [Holding photo camera getting in focus] and I'm down at the bottom corner, it would be to my left.

I: Down there?

CB: Yes, uh huh. I believe my left, nope, the other side, right there. Yep. Now, that's before they were in transition in this picture. You notice, there's two types of uniforms. This is when the Navy, someone had the bright idea, sorry, of changing the uniform from the traditional crackerjacks to, oh well, I won't tell you what they used to say but hey, we looked like, uh, elevator operators some people said. Some people said we looked like we were in the Air Force or Coast Guard. But, then they eventually, they actually surveyed Navy personnel and asked them what they thought and of course no one liked those uniforms and they went back to the Crackerjacks. And this was the transition period where they were going from one back to the other. So, that's why we have a mixture of uniforms there. [Set's photo down].

I: This here,

CB: Uh huh. This picture, I'll just real quick tell you what this is. This is, I saved this because of sentimental reasons, I guess, or it's my very first stripe. [Laughs] I went in and had one stripe and I'll tell you how proud I was of that [Laughs]. And, the picture postcard in here was, that's the barracks that we stayed in and they were actually old World War Two barracks, but they were still using them when I went in in Seventy-three. Now of course, they have new brick, modern buildings, you know, with all the conveniences but, that's okay. That's what it's all about. It should get better for everyone. And that's [pointing at article] the article, I believe, uh, which they wrote because I got brother duty. So, that was the article in the paper about that. The little red ribbon, my first cousin, she and I were like best friends. Well, she sent me a letter and it had that ribbon in there. It's a remembrance ribbon so, I just sort of hung onto it, you know. Do well, can't wait to have you back home, and so I saved it.

I: What's this one?

CB: Uh, that's my first set of orders.

I: Oh, that's what the orders looked like?

CB: Yes. Now, I don't know ... probably if you want.

I: No, I think these two [adjusting video camera] your discharge papers, I think we've seen a lot of

CB: I didn't bring in... I have bags of stuff.

I: I'm sure you do, right, that's a lot of years to be.

CB: Uh huh.

I: to be in the service [inaudible] I'm sure you have a lot.

CB: Actually, I uh, on a real good note, I saved every card and letter I received from my family when I was in, I have them all at home still in a bag. It's neat to go through that stuff once in a while, my kids they're embarrassed at what they used to write and draw little pictures with crayons and stuff you know. [Laughs]

I: Did you find it was, that's the stuff that kept you going, I mean how did you react to stuff like that?

CB: Oh, yes, that's definitely, yes, you know uh that's, family is, is everything. That's how we brought our children up, too. It's that, if, when everyone else has let you down, your family is always there so, you know we always stress family, is important...

I: Now two of you were in the service?

CB: Uh-huh.

I: That had to be very difficult on your family. You had, there had to be a lot of periods of time where you had to adjust to having one [takes photos] to have the one parent around is that true or...

CB: Well, my children, uh, Tim and Mary O'Connor, the children's grandparents, well they were like, actually like parents to the children because they stayed with them every summer and they were there a lot so, they were, if it wasn't for them we couldn't have done it.

I: This is? [looking at photo on video]

CB: This is my older brother, John and I, on topside or on top of the submarine. Behind my brother is what's known as a submarine tender. We're tied up to the sub tender and they would...

Tape ends prior to finish of interview