Charles L. Bennett
Narrator

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Charles L. Bennett**:** **CB**
Wayne Clarke: **WC**

WC: Today is the 11th of January, 2012, my name is Wayne Clarke. I'm with the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York. Today we are in Whitehall, New York, at the Isaac Griswold Library. Sir, for the record, would you please state your full name and date and place of birth, please?

CB: Charles L. Bennett, Troy, New York, 1952.

WC: Did you grow up in Troy and attend school there?

CB: No, Whitehall, all through school…. we moved up here when I was four years old. My mother's from Whitehall, my father's from Putnam.

WC: What year did you graduate from high school?

CB: 1970, Whitehall High.

WC: Once you graduated, did you go to work, or did you go on to college or secondary school?

CB: Well, I went to work and then I was about to get drafted, so I joined the Navy.

WC: Why did you decide on the Navy?

CB: Because I wanted to stay out of Vietnam.

WC: Ok. And where did you go for your basic training?

CB: Great Lakes, Illinois.

WC: Was that your first time away from home, basically?

CB: Basically, yeah.

WC: What was basic training like for you?

CB: Naturally, it' a whole different world, different environment. It wasn't too bad, physically demanding but it really wasn't that bad. Just follow orders and you'd stay out of trouble.

WC: Once you completed your basic training, where did you go next?

CB: I went to Great Lakes again, Mainside—what they called Mainside—I went from recruit training command over to Mainside for schooling.

WC: That schooling: did you have a choice on that?

CB: I was supposed to have been a machinery repairman when I went in, but they didn't need any of them, so they made me a boilerman. So I had to go there for basic propulsion engineering, and then I had to go to what they call BTA school.

WC: What did you learn there?

CB: How to steam conventional power plants, steam boilers, 1200 lb., 600 lb. systems, and how different propulsion systems work.

WC: Did you learn welding and basic--?

CB: No. That's what I was supposed to do (laughs). You know, the recruiters will tell you anything.

WC: How long did your schooling last?

CB: It was three months.

WC: Once you completed your schooling, what happened next?

CB: Well, I got orders to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, to pick up the ship USS Joseph Strauss, DDG 16, and I went aboard ship in, I believe, August of 1971.

WC: How did you get to Hawaii?

CB: Well, I came home on leave—which I had to pay for—but they (the Navy) paid my way from Chicago (Great Lakes Base is just north of Chicago), and from Chicago to Honolulu they paid for.

WC: So you went on a commercial flight?

CB: Right. Well, no – I had to go on a commercial flight to San Francisco, and then in San Francisco you pick up a military flight, and then they drop you off all across the Pacific. Wherever you're going, Cam Rahn Bay, Da Nang, wherever you're going.

WC: And you landed in Hawaii. How long were you there before you picked up the ship?

CB: Oh, I just took a cab right to it and reported aboard.

WC: That was the first time you were aboard a ship in the Navy?

CB: Yes.

WC: Did you work immediately in your specialty, or did you go through a training program?

CB: No, they send you to what they call "mess cooking" for new guys on the ship. So you go mess cooking, and that is where you're cleaning pots and pans and assisting the cooks—all the new guys go through that when they first go aboard ship. And the next new guy that comes aboard replaces you.

WC: How long--?

CB: Oh, I was mess cooking just a few weeks.

WC: Every day, doing the same thing?

CB: Yeah. Then I got to go down into what they called the "hole," down in the fire room. I was stationed in the aft. fire room. There's two of them on my ship Forward and Aft.

WC: What kind of ship was that?

CB: An Adams class guided missile destroyer. They were brand new at the time. They were converted gun destroyers from the Forrest Shermans. Forty-five hundred tons, 437 feet long.

WC: How many people were aboard?

CB: Roughly 330 men and officers.

WC: What were your quarters like?

CB: Well, in a room the size of this one, you would bunk somewhere around 30 people. The racks were three tall, and you had to climb in. They were canvas, though, they weren't hammocks, fortunately. You had one little locker (gestures a rectangular shape) this big, about 2 foot square, and that was all of your whole life.

WC: Ok. Were you on a specific shift?

CB: No. It rotates. The fire room gangs, the black gangs—snipes as they're called—were three section duty. The rest of the ship was six section. So three section duty underway means you're five hours on, ten hours off, but then you work all day long. (Laughs) If you're lucky enough to have the watch during the day, then that's five hours you're on watch. You don't get to slack off. It was a lousy job, it's brutal hours, and we were so critically low on people I've had to do a lot of other things out of my specialty. I've had to carry ammo for a fifty caliber mount, tons of 5 in 54 cal. ammo, I had to train with an M1 for deck watches, you know, when you're in close to shore and you have to throw grenades. You had M1 Garands (rifles) for swimmers. M16s at that time, they're not going to go through larger floating trees, you needed a 30.06.

WC: So once you got aboard ship, where did you go initially?

CB: This was 1971. My ship was just coming out of the shipyard. They were doing what they called "ref training," refresher training.

WC: Were you what they consider a plankholder?

CB: No. The ship was commissioned in 1963. They started building her in 1961 in Camden, New Jersey. At the Camden shipyards down there, not to be confused with the Camden yards in Baltimore—this was New Jersey. And she was relatively new as Navy ships go, and she was brand new for DDGs they had never been built before, this class of ship, they're the originals. It was a long process of refresher training, how to steam these things, because they're very dangerous and very touchy to steam. We had lots of mishaps over the years that I was on board. It was just hard, brutal work. Hot, sweaty. The heat in the fire rooms was almost unbearable, especially when you got over to the Tonkin Gulf. It was extremely hot; you had to go from blower to blower. Like there'd be a supply blower here (gestures right), you've got to run, say to the other end of the room (gestures left) to get to the other one, because you couldn't stand the heat in the middle—you'd pass out easily. Your clothes would be wringing wet with sweat, but you had to wear them because they actually kept you cooler once they were soaked with sweat. We didn't have really, scuttlebutts, what they'd call drinking fountains, down in the fire rooms because they wouldn't last, they'd explode because of the heat. So we used to drink boiler feed water out of the DA tanks.

WC: My God.

CB: Well, I'm paying for that today.

WC: How so?

CB: Well, the water that we made, I was exposed to Agent Orange because of the water. It was in the water. Although they were supposed to have stopped spraying that stuff in the middle of 1971, I watched it sprayed by ARVN aircraft. And I didn't get there until January of 1972. I think the VA admits they sprayed it right up until 1975.

WC: So, you're aboard ship now. Tell us about your first mission.

CB: The first mission we had was actually what we called "Chasing Russians." The Hawaiian Islands are U.S. territory, we claimed all of the water around the islands and in between them. Even though it's about 200 miles of ocean between Honolulu and Hilo, on the big island, we still claimed all of that water. And so the Russians sent this fleet through there, so we had to go out in the middle of their pickets—my ship (and we were all a bunch of green recruits) and another small destroyer escort with only a three-inch gun on it, and an oiler. And we'd just do pickets, and circles inside your pickets, and just harass the hell out of them till they left.

WC: Just follow them around—

CB: Yeah, just follow them around and just plain be a pain in their butt, we were. That was our first mission. And we come back and resumed refresher training. We didn't take off for the Tonkin Gulf—I mean, we're in and out of port, doing exercises all the time, going wherever they send us.

WC: Now you said, in and out of port. Did you get to spend any time off ship?

CB: Oh, of course. I did not like Hawaii at all, and I'd never spend money to go back there.

WC: How much time did you spend around Hawaii?

CB: Oh, a year and a half. I was home ported out of Hawaii my whole time in the Navy, except for the last five months when they transferred the ship to Bremerton, Washington, for another overhaul.
So that would be, we left there in September, it might have been earlier, in 1974, I left Hawaii for the last time.

WC: Ok, you want to tell us about that Tonkin Gulf mission?

CB: Right. The first time of all, everybody, and they're called Westpacs in the Navy, that's when, your deployment, amounted to at that time going to Vietnam for gunfire support.

WC: Did you know you were heading there?

CB: Oh yeah. We all knew we were going. Some guys went AWOL before we left off—lots of guys did. I guess I was brought up different, so I went. I should have gone AWOL probably, in hindsight. (Laughs) I should have gone to Canada—I'm kidding. But we arrived in the Tonkin Gulf, and for the first month it was kind of routine. We were just shooting during the day, gunfire support, call missions. It really wasn't that hot at that time. The Marines would call us, "Shoot here" or "Shoot there."

WC: How far off the coast were you?

CB: It varied. Depends on where we were shooting, and how far inland we were shooting. The guns ranged about 30 miles, but we could shoot farther if we went upriver. Which we did at Quang Tri City in the battle of Quang Tri. Around the end of March is when we got a call. They had sent us out for what they called "plane guarding." We were operating with the aircraft carriers, just escorting it in case any of the planes crashed.

They called us off plane guarding and sent us back to the Cua Viet River. We had to relieve the USS Buchanan and another ship, I believe the Lloyd Thomas DD-764, we had to relieve them on the Cua Viet River. We went to Point Alison, and we rotated between Point Alison and Point Betsy on the river. And what we were doing is we were shooting at tanks and we were directing fire onto these tanks. They had just swarmed down—we didn't know what the hell it was, we called it Tet 72, but now I guess they call it the Easter Offensive. I didn't know that until recent years. And they were just coming right down Highway 1, and they were trying to cross the twin bridges (one was a railroad bridge, the other was a road bridge) on Highway 1. We wouldn't let them cross the bridge. Finally ARVN did blow up the bridge, but the guy that strung those was under heavy fire when he was stringing those explosives. We were shooting and destroying tanks and popping off artillery pieces, surface-to-air missiles, and it was heavy fire back and forth.

WC: Now you were up on deck?

CB: No, no no—nobody's allowed out on deck during this kind of exchange. No, that's suicide. And plus, you're in range of snipers, I mean, I'm talking very close. The Cua Viet River is a large river, it's about the size of the Hudson. You're in range of rifles anywhere on the river. You don't go out on main deck. I've done that because I had to do that. When you're up close, you throw the grenades over the side, and that kind of thing. But I've had bullets whizz by my head and hit the bulkhead directly in back of me. When that hot lead hits against steel, it splatters on the back of your neck. It burns like hell, it'll blister you. I've had it splattered on my arms. The small arms was nothing it's the big stuff really scared me more. Have you ever seen those movies when a ship shakes. Well, that does happen, only it's a lot more violent. It's fast, and it's not a boom or a kaboom, it's a loud bang, and it's deafening. Dust flies everywhere. It picks you right up and it'll slam you against the wall, and that's how I got hurt. It picked my feet up in the air and then it slammed me right onto the deck. My shoulders stopped, the rest of my body kept going because it was on a step on a walkway, and it screwed up my back.

WC: Now, did your ship sustain any serious damage?

CB: Yeah. That particular night, we were two hours trying to get underway. We went dead in the water. We couldn't do anything. This was on Operation Linebacker. We were going inside North Vietnamese harbors and blowing them up and coming back out. The flyboys are going in, and then we would go in right behind them. They came out, and we were still coming back out. So they're shooting at us, and shooting at us, and we are trying to avoid getting hit, we got over into our own minefields out of position, we hit those mines and went dead. Knocked our boilers

right offline, we couldn't do anything. We couldn't fire our guns. The USS Berkeley, DDG 15, had done the same thing, but she was in better shape than we were. That was fortunate, because they were sending MIGs out to finish us off. If they had followed through, I'd be at the bottom of the Tonkin Gulf except for the fact that the Berkeley was able to lock in on them with their missile radar, and they knew they were targeted and waved off. And that's the only thing that saved my life, or I'd be dead right now. I'd be an MIA at the bottom of the ocean.

WC: How did you get the ship underway?

CB: Oh, we had diesel generators, but they're not big enough to do anything with. They did start the diesel generators, got them up, and then we were able to have electric fuel pumps and electric foredraft blowers to start the boilers back up. As soon as we got the boilers back online, we were able to go. But it takes a couple hours to do that, it doesn't happen in five minutes. In the meantime, there's repairs, and we had to check for damage inside the boilers, we had to do a lot of things. Hotter than hell, and no ventilation. It was an unfortunate night for all of us.

WC: How many guys were down in the boiler room, trying to get the boilers back up?

CB: Well, we only had, at that time, a total of twelve men per fire room, and about the same in the engine room. Now, on those same ships they doubled the size of the engineering crews well, those ships are all gone. But even in the early 1990s, they doubled the size of the Black Gang on those ships. But back then, In the 70's there were ships that couldn't get underway because there was not enough of a crew. They had stopped the draft in 1971, and the Navy wasn't getting any people in. So we had all these ships and no crews for them. So we were skeleton crews on almost all of them. Especially in the Pacific. The Atlantic's not so bad.

WC: Did you have a chief that was over you?

CB: Yes. Chief Ed Kowalski. He just died last year. We stayed in touch. I've been in touch with a lot of the guys that I was with. There's a reunion coming up in Boston this year.

WC: Now, let me ask you this: a lot of the guys you were with, have they been suffering from the same—

CB: (Nods) Out of a twelve-man fire room crew, five are already dead, and there's only one guy healthy. All of us have had to fight the VA for benefits, every damn one of us. It took me almost ten years to start getting paid.

WC: It's all Agent Orange related?

CB: Not all of it. I was getting a small pension on my back, and I also have asbestosis. What they're calling it is pleural thickening, where the diaphragm starts thickening up, that's what asbestosis is, and it chokes you off. But right now it's inactive. The Navy is aware of it because I made them aware of it. And so they will pay me if it ever does get active again. If it gets active again, I'll be dead in two years. But they don't pay me any money for that one.

Fortunately, that's a good thing.

WC: After that incident at the Tonkin Gulf, where did you guys go next?

CB: We just got underway and went right back at it. Artillery duels were commonplace, an everyday practice. We've had big guns hit near us, right between the stacks, right overhead. It was constant, it was war, it was every day.

WC: How much time did you spend in that area?

CB: In Dong Hoi itself, where this happened?

WC: We were only there a few hours. We were chasing, I think it was the 327th or 527th NVA, and that was the unit that had swarmed down below the DMZ. When they were heading back north, we were chasing them all the way up. Then they bivouacked on the Do Son Peninsula, that's up near Haiphong, inside what we called the Gold Circle. So then they brought the whole fleet onto the Do Son Peninsula, we caught these guys, they didn't even bivouac, they were so comfortable being there. Nobody had attacked it until 72. We didn't even hit it in 1968. They got hit once prior to this engagement in 1972. We floated in about 10 o'clock at night, and we just opened up. At 7 in the morning, I was standing out on the main deck smoking a cigarette looking at the carnage and nothing was coming back at us.

WC: Now, I take it at that time there weren't any firing restrictions: where you could fire, where you couldn't fire?

CB: Oh, of course there was, but that was what we called the Gold Circle--which was also a brand of condom. We used to call it going up and screwing with the Gold Circle. (Laughs) Yeah, before this, nobody was allowed to shoot in there, that was their breadbasket and all this, and that's where they'd hide all their SAM launchers and all this stuff. We weren't supposed to shoot inside that area, around Haiphong. After that, all bets were off. There was the incident with the USS Chicago CLG-9, This ship was shooting down mig 17's. The Chicago was our newest and greatest guided missile cruiser. She was shooting planes down as they were taking off. But these bases were inside China. The captain got relieved for that, but should have given a medal. (Laughs) That was the war. Hanoi Jane was doing her thing, and I know guys that are dead from guns she said didn't exist.

WC: I was going to ask you about her—

CB: I can't think of anything evil enough to be done to her—

WC: Were you guys getting any of this news?

CB: Yeah, we were. It was coming through the *Stars and Stripes*; it was the only version we got. It was basically the only news we got. My mother had asked the *Whitehall Times*… had paid for a subscription to the *Whitehall Times* to send me, but it never got to me. It was always

stolen before I ever got it, because they would wrap it up and they would… anything to read, you know? So I never saw them, I never saw any of them. So I don't know what was happening back here, I only knew what was happening over there. She was calling them "comrade." Back then we felt so isolated, we felt like the entire world was against us. Coming home on leave, people I've known my whole life calling me a baby killer, and a rapist.

WC: You actually had that happen here in Whitehall?

CB: Right here in Whitehall, right out here. There's a place called Flubberbusters, it used to be called Spardella's or Fireside Lounge. And some girls that had known me my whole life did this, or at least most of my life.

WC: And you were just home on leave?

CB: Home on leave from my first tour. I knew I was going back over.

WC: How long were you back here after your first tour?

CB: I was only home on leave for roughly three weeks, just through the Christmas holidays, then I had to go back.

WC: And you went back to the same ship?

CB: Yes. My whole four years in the Navy, I was on the same ship.

WC: And where did you catch the ship?

CB: At Pearl Harbor. That was home port, so usually that's where you would catch it. But you could catch the ship anywhere if it was deployed and you were assigned to that ship. We would pick up guys in Hong Kong or Thailand, or the Philippines especially.

WC: Did you spend any time at all in places like Hong Kong or Singapore.

CB: Yes and others, Hong Kong was a liberty port; we couldn't do any work on the ship there because of the treaty with the British and the Chinese. It was a British colony at that time, and we weren't allowed to work on our ships there. The only time we did was when we'd have divers come out—they had to be Chinese divers, they couldn't be our own—we had to hire their people—to come out and clear the mud cooling water suctions. It would always plug up in when we would go up the rivers in Vietnam, and in going into Hong Kong, because that's on a river. Anytime you get into a river, they would suck up mud. These suctions are this big around (gestures about three feet with his hands) with huge pumps to pull that water in.

WC: When did you go back to North Vietnam?

CB: That would be Operation Linebacker II, and I don't know the months… (gets up and walks

off screen; returns with a book and consults it) I believe it was May 1973 I got there.

WC: Now was that when you hit the mine and you were injured?

CB: No, that was 1972, June 4 at about 1:30 in the morning.

WC: Do you want to tell us about how that happened?

CB: Well, we were going inside the place called Dong Hoi—which I didn't know that until after it happened, they never told us where we were.

WC: This was in North Vietnam?

CB: Yeah, Dong Hoi was a major staging area for North Vietnamese troops before they head south. We were hitting a power plant or something, plus chasing these troops. We always had several targets, there was like eleven ships, it isn't just my ship. There was a whole squadron of ships and usually there was two or three squadrons tied up under one commodore. We were the flagship for the 33rd squadron.

We pulled into this port. You've got some ships sitting back here (gestures position of ships); they're just covering you. They're doing what they called gunfire suppression; the Army calls it an overwatch. They're firing at enemy positions that are firing at you. You're going in after specific targets. Then the flyboys were also in there—the Navy or the Air Force or whoever's hitting them at the time. And you just go in there, blow up everything and leave, that's the way we described it. Coming back out is when we started getting everything close to board, so they're starting to zigzag, trying to stay out of guns aim, so they don't bracket you. So we were going out, and somehow we drove right over these mines. The official version, like I said… the *Stars and Stripes* called it 132 mm shells; however, during my VA claim… I believe the Navy admits that we ran over our own mines. This happened to one other ship and she made it into Subic Bay under her own power, where they scrapped it.

WC: How seriously were you injured?

CB: I was injured well enough where I just had a couple of days of goofy little pills and a couple days in the rack and then I was back up and around. I never had to be transported over to the carriers or the hospital ships.

WC: Were there any other sailors injured in that explosion?

CB: We had a few, but all minor injuries. We never had a fatality on my ship. There were sixteen other warships that were shot up that year, and there were lots of fatalities on those.

WC: How badly was your ship damaged from those mines?

CB: We had to pull into Subic Bay. There was mostly shock damage, like flanges coming

loose, things like that, electronics that didn't work—it was all solid state back then—fuses and all that stuff would get broken. The electrical systems, things like that. Nothing major. We pulled in. They also had to check the screws too so they put us in dry-dock and they had to check the propellers. One of them was out of balance and they had to fix that.

WC: How much time did you spend there?

CB: In Subic that time? We were in and out of Subic all the time. That's where we would go for repairs. These ships, you don't have to hit them directly, a near miss shakes them apart, so we were always pulling in and out of Subic Bay. That time, probably just a couple of days, and we were back over to the gulf, every area was hot and you couldn't spend any time, like on liberty—you had to get back over there. Air support was grounded. Nothing was flying; it was the monsoons, so nothing was flying in the south. They seemed to be flying just fine north. I don't know why they couldn't get air cover in the south, but they just couldn't. That was just us, that's why we were on the river, no air cover. Things get a little hazy to me, so if I contradict myself, call me on it. Then I have to stop and think, all right? You don't think you'll forget this stuff, but when I talk to some of the other guys, they remember things entirely different from the way I remember them. I can see why the VA calls guys like us unreliable (laughs). I don't know if it's just the fog of war or if we're just old and senile.

WC: Then you went right back over again?

CB: Yeah. Well, it was supposed to be what they called a six-month cruise, and we were gone eight months. The second time we were gone probably eight and a half, nine months. We got home… Oh-- after we left, they sent us, in 1973, the Indian Ocean. We were holding together with bubble gum and baling wire, but they sent us to the Indian Ocean for another Arab-Israeli war. We got halfway there and they said no, we'll send you back, and they relieved us with somebody else. And so we went to Singapore. I crossed the equator and went on back to Pearl Harbor. Then we stayed in Pearl Harbor until August or September of 1974, and then went to Bremerton, Washington.

WC: Crossing the equator, did you go through the initiation—

CB: I sure did, sure did (laughs). Yeah, I am a Shellback. That was probably one of the more fun things that happened in my Navy experience. But I hated the Navy—I only joined the Navy to stay out of Vietnam. That didn't work.

WC: You said you ended up in Bremerton, Washington?

CB: Yeah, beautiful place.

WC: How long were you there for?

CB: Like I said, six months maybe, because I got out end of January 1975.

WC: Did you consider staying in the Navy?

CB: I did in the beginning, and then it just got so bad… the job I was doing, I just hated it. There's nothing to like about doing that job. They don't even have that job any more. At least on nuclear subs, which are steam powered, and nuclear carriers. These things are all automated, and you have plenty of crew to maintain them. In those conventional steam power plants, well you're not going to blow up half a city if it gets away from you, so we're not going to give you anybody to steam them. They were always in bad need of repair, constant working on them, just constant. The hours were grueling; I went days without sleep, especially in Nam. Days without seeing the sun, days without sleep. Then you're handling ammo, handling food, you're refueling, you're taking on water because your evaporators can't keep up.

WC: How was the food on board ship, especially when you were over in the area of North Vietnam?

CB: Over in Vietnam, it was terrible. We got slop, but there was always plenty of slop (laughs). But I mean, you'd hold up a piece of lettuce and it would bend over like cooked spaghetti. Mold in the tomatoes. Cold storage eggs—they look, smell and taste rotten. So you'd find steak sauce, mustard—you're always out of ketchup—anything you could find to put on to disguise the taste. The toast was always good, though. The cooks made their own bread, and that was usually pretty good. If the cook was a friend of yours, you'd get a loaf of bread as it comes right out of the oven and bring it down to the fire room, and the guys would devour it.

WC: Did you ever have any forms of entertainment?

CB: Movies.

WC: No USO shows, or anything like that?

CB: I went to a USO show in Hawaii, and I saw one Bob Hope show there. That was when he was first getting his tour started, and I was still a young fella, before I'd done my first tour, I saw Bob Hope in Hawaii. Could have seen him again… I think he was in the Philippines, but I didn't go. That was over on Clark Airbase, and it was too much of a commute to the Philippines. There, you'd get shot, stabbed, robbed, you'd just disappear—you had to be careful where you went. It was like that anywhere in the western Pacific.

WC: When did you say you got out?

CB: January 28th or 29th, of 1975.

WC: You mentioned going into the reserves, or the National Guard, too? How did that come about?

CB: The economy wasn't doing very well, and I needed extra money. So at first I joined the Navy Reserve—I joined the Seabees. I would have been promoted if I'd have gone into fleet

reserve, but I wouldn't do it.

WC: What rank were you when you got out of the Navy?

CB: I was an E4. I would have been an E5, but I didn't have enough time left on active duty to get my stripe. So when I went into the reserves, I got my stripe right off the bat. I stayed there two years in the Seabees, in the 12th Battalion Seabees.

WC: Where were they located?

CB: Right here in Glens Falls. I didn't like the Seabees because they were totally untrained. If they ever activated, that unit, they wouldn't last in combat more than thirty seconds. They had team leaders who never controlled the fire team, grenadiers who never fired an M203, machine gunners who never fired a machine gun. When you would ask them about that kind of thing, they would say, "well just take out a copy of the Seabee combat handbook and that'd tell you anything you need to know." O-kay! You know, I joined the Reserves, the Seabees, because I didn't want to go back to sea. I was not going back down in the fire rooms. I didn't like the Seabees, so that's when I joined the National Guard. I joined the National Guard as a Spec-5.

WC: What unit?

CB: That would be the 2nd of the 108th, Alpha Company right here in Whitehall. I was Infantry, 11 Bravo, and I joined that as a Spec-5 and I made sergeant about a year later. And I stayed there for two more years after that, so three years I was there. And I decided I had enough, I'm too old to be an infantryman.

WC: How many years total service did you end up with?

CB: Counting inactive time? Probably eleven.

WC: In between your bouts with the reserves and National Guard, did you go back to school, college, and trade school?

CB: Yes. I'm a machinist by trade. I went through a formal apprenticeship. But then after that you had to upgrade your skills all the time. So I had to go back and take welding, I had to brush up on more math. When you go through for a machinist apprentice, it's all math and science. You don't go in to a machine shop somewhere, because you run machines forty hours a week. You don't need that kind of training, what you need is the corresponding training, all the math, science and everything that goes with it: metallurgy, drafting was a biggie. That's the kind of thing you'd take for your machine apprenticeship. The curriculum is set by the State of New York.

And after that, I went back for electricity-- Elec Tech 119, 120; I took that at ACC [Adirondack Community College]. That's all electricity. And I've done drafting, more drafting, CAD programs, all kinds of things. I took business courses—that was just a few years ago. I tried to

retrain when they pulled me out of work—I have PTSD, so concentration is a problem, and memory is a problem. So I was spending so much time just trying to prepare for class.

WC: Are you receiving any sort of compensation from the VA?

CB: Yeah, 100 percent.

WC: 100 percent disabled?

CB: Well, it's all different. I'm 100 percent unemployable, 70 percent disabled. I have neuropathy in my legs, my feet are numb and it goes all the way up into my knees, so I can't walk very far, I can't stand very long. I do have a walker when my back goes out, and I have a cane that I'm supposed to use, but I don't. They wanted to buy me one of those motorized chairs. That's rare that the VA will even do that, but I told them no, I didn't want it. So, 50 percent of its PTSD, and I have a whole bunch of other illnesses that put me… You get 50 percent of 50 percent, so I get another 20 percent for each leg, that's another 40 percent but they only give me a total of 20 because it's 40 percent of the remaining 50 percent. It's the VA math. I know guys that, if you total it all up, they're like 150 or 160 percent, and don't get 100 percent because of the way they do the percentages. If there's a way of screwing people, they'll find it.

WC: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

CB: I was a member of the American Legion here, Post 83, but the politics of the place and the feuding and infighting that went on down there, I just got out. My father warned me that would happen. He was a Bronze Star recipient, and wouldn't even go in there. I've kind of distanced myself from the place. I am a life member of Chapter 79, Vietnam Veterans of America. I won't join the VFW because a friend of mine, a guy by the name of Sloan, who was with me in 1973—he's a combat veteran also—can't join the VFW because the dates aren't right that he was in Vietnam. (Laughs) I wrote back and told him, "You know what I'd tell the VFW, right?" He did end up joining the Legion, though, so he's a member of the American Legion.

WC: You mentioned earlier staying in contact with some of the fellows. Have you attended any of the reunions?

CB: No. They had one in Niagara Falls two or three years ago. That was when they first put me out of work. I was working, and when I went for my normal checkup the doctor wouldn't let me go back. So they had one in Niagara Falls, and I couldn't spend the money to go there at that time because I didn't know what was going to happen, as far as my retirement and everything. As it turned out it was ok, I could have gone and spent the money, but I wanted to save what money I had. It wasn't the kind of thing where I'd spend money on a vacation like that. And so now they're having another one in this area—they have them every year—and it's going to be in Boston, so I will go to that. It's in September of this year.

WC: Is your ship still in service?

CB: No. It was decommissioned and sold to the Greeks in 1991. That's longer than we should have kept it. Right now I get real angry with our Congress; with what we'll be sending these kids to war. We've got modern guided missile destroyers that can launch 64 missiles at a time, they've got one gun. We were firing 500 rounds a day. One gun is not going to last more than a couple days without melting down. I can show you pictures of that in here (points to book), it's called hot rounding. The recoil goes too far back, and when that happens, you have to change the gun barrels. So when you've got Marines on the ground that needs your gun, and your guns broken, what do you do? You can only launch 64 missiles—it takes eight seconds to lock and load a missile, and three seconds is a lifetime to a Marine on the ground. So, I mean we have all these high tech things; we can shoot a satellite out of orbit, but can we support Marines on the ground like we're supposed to do? Modern ships can't do it, none of them do. They're the size of a World War II cruiser and they can't go up a river, apart from maneuver on a river—they're too big, they're too long. The only good thing about them is they're gas turbine instead of steam, and that's the great thing about them.

WC: Do you want to show us some of the photographs you've got?

CB: Sure. I won't bother you with my DD214. This is a poem, called "Ode to a Snipe" and that'll tell you something about what I do. This is a copy of my Navy Unit Commendation (holds up document, awarded to the USS Joseph Strauss (DDG-16), which reads "For exceptionally meritorious service….")

WC: Was that your Combat Action Ribbon?

CB: No, that's a Navy Unit Commendation; it's a separate ribbon. It's up there as far as awards go. It's under personal commendations, but it's above, say, just a simple letter. It is my highest award.

(Holds up a photograph of a gun with several sailors nearby and one spraying water on the barrel from a hose.) This is what I was telling you, a hot round. Now bear in mind that that gun mount, as that water's going down, is completely electric, and we're dumping water down it with fire hoses. What happens is these guns fire one round per second, but they only have a sustained rate of fire of twenty rounds a minute. So these barrels get so hot, these five-inch guns will lock right up, and then you can't get the projectile out of the barrel till after you cool everything down. In the meantime, that projectile is already armed—you've got to get it out of there, push it out and get it over the side before it explodes on you. Several guys have been killed doing this. It's very, very dangerous. This happened, obviously, in Vietnam, because that's the only place you'd fire that many rounds that fast.

(Holds up a photograph of groups of large ammo on deck) This is a picture of some of the bullets that we'd fire in a single day. Those range anywhere from 76 pounds up to 100 pounds, depending on what they are. The armor piercing weighs the most. Though armor piercing is not for tanks, Navy guns are big enough to take out a tank with just high explosives. The armor piercing is for other ships, so we don't carry that many, mostly AAC and what they call Willy Peter (white phosphorous), which are fairly light, 76 pounds. But when you're handling 500 of

them, they get kind of heavy by the end of the day. Then you get to stay up all night long because you're at general quarters, battle stations.

(Holds up another photo showing a bay with targets marked on the land) And this is Operation Freedom Train, just for these two weeks. Now this isn't all the targets, this isn't all the places that I had to go during Freedom train, Linebacker II; this just gives you an idea of what happened. Those little circles are the locations where we were at, at the time they logged it in. The red tags and the buttons are the targets, and the pushpins are the targets.

WC: Ok, got it.

CB: (Holds up photo of a coastline with targets marked, and points out locations) this is the Cua Viet River, and that's the mouth, and that's Point Alison up here. Highway 1 is here—it's hard to see. These little circles are where we were at that time. They stop logging things when you go to general quarters. You don't bother to fill out the logs when you're in combat; they don't require that—funny. But like I say, it's a larger river; it's roughly the size of the Hudson. I've also been at the mouth of the Perfume River, that's like an estuary, it opens up, and it's really weird looking. But the river itself is no bigger than a brook—it's about the size of Wood's Creek, so we couldn't go very far up it. (Laughs) But that was to retake Hue in 1972. We were supposedly in support of ARVN marines, that's the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. That was ARVN 1st Marine, but everything we were hearing, they were American Marines doing the fighting. ARVN wasn't doing much fighting. Manifested at Qui Nhon. That's east-northeast of Saigon, so I think that's about the farthest south I've ever been. I'm not too sure which is farther south, Qui Nhon or Duc Tho, but this was a small firebase in and around Qui Nhon, and ARVN went in their bunkers and wouldn't come out and fight. They left all the fighting up to two hundred Marines. We did get those Marines out of there, and it took the entire fleet to do it, and we had to relieve them with an amphibious assault. But how many were alive, I have no idea. All I know is it's the first time in my life I ever felt sorry for Marines, they were getting clobbered.

And I think that's about it. (Picks up another photo) This is a picture of the ship right here, pulling into Hawaii. That's Ford Island in the background, as we are pulling in to Pearl Harbor. You can see by the lei on the bow that she's coming back from West Pac. Whether I was on the ship at this time, I don't know; it was just a picture on Wikipedia.

WC: Ok. Gary, did you have some questions?

Gary: Charlie, where were you and your crew when the treaty was signed?

CB: Out at sea somewhere.

Gary: What did you guys think of it?

CB: A copout. They signed that peace treaty, I think they signed it in March?

Gary: January 29.

CB: All right. So they signed it in January. Well no, I would have just gotten there; that means I would have been just on my way there. I think I got there, Jan 14,1972 Home in August, back over May 1,1973 left Vietnam for the last after our last combat mission of October 19,1973 We'd been out at sea—I was right on that—but exactly where.... it probably would have been just on gun line duty, because that would be during the Easter offensive. And then it came into effect in March, or May?

Gary: I'm not sure.

CB: We thought, oh this is just a copout, just to get us out of here. We knew what was going to happen. I mean, the stories that were getting to us is that ARVN helicopter pilots were charging their own wounded to take them out of the fight. I mean, that whole situation was a fiasco, collapsing fast. ARVN soldiers were getting 60 rounds a week. They're burning up an M16—60 rounds you can do in, like, two minutes? The whole thing was a fiasco. If we had saved Vietnam from the Communists, it would have collapsed under its own weight. It'd be like modern day Somalia. It's probably a good thing that the Communists did take it over. But the Communists never beat us—by the end of 1973, they were beat. And I've seen this on the Internet, though I never heard the guy say it personally, they were within days of capitulating, of calling it quits. I thank Jane for that too.

Gary: Did you ever get shore leave, actually in Vietnam itself?

CB: No, they wouldn't allow it. The closest I got was we got an LCM (mike boat) full of beer in Da Nang Harbor. You can't have beer on a Navy warship, so they brought this mike boat—an LCM is a landing craft—and they brought it alongside. It was loaded with beer, and we got to have beer rations. We'd been out at sea about forty days straight. The longest I was ever out was about 52 days—that's a long time.

Gary: Have you ever visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC?

CB: I did. It was a very emotional experience for me, very emotional. I went down there for the 25th anniversary of the Wall with Washington County… they had a Washington County bus going down. When I first went through it—I had to go through it twice. When I first went through it my wife was with me, and I had a death grip on her, I didn't even want to look at it, it was like the Wall was going to jump out and grab me or something. Ray Bailey's on the wall—he was an old friend of mine, and Billy Aiken. I had to walk through and just try to keep a grip on things. So my wife says "you can't leave it at that," so she walked me back through it again, and I was better that time. I went through with Boris Rushia, and Jeff Belden, Billy Vanguilder, John Svanderlk. Just having those guys around and my wife right there, made things a lot easier. But, yeah, it's a very emotional, very powerful place. And it says it all.

I went to the World War II Memorial there. That's a beautiful thing, but the Wall says it all. Fifty-eight thousand guys, and what did we accomplish? Nothing.

WC: (to Gary: Do you have any other questions? No?) (To CB) Is there anything else you'd like to touch on, that maybe we missed?

CB: No. If you see Jane, tell her to drop dead.

WC: You also have a cruise book. Do you want to hold that up, and tell us a little bit about that?

CB: (Picks up a book, opens it and holds it up) Well, all this does, it's a chronological event of where we were and it shows the guys on the crew. When you go to war with guys, it's a whole different thing.
This shows the schedule (pointing to a list of dates and locations) It's not 100 percent, but it's pretty close. This was written by guys during the cruise. Some of this stuff is ad libbed.

WC: By chance, is there a photo of you in there?

CB: There is, there's a couple of them. (Turns pages and holds up photo) Here! I'm the little Mexican looking dude right there; that's what I looked like back then. Gary would know me then.

WC: That's you, huh?

CB: Yup, that would be me, right there. I'm down in the hole on watch, in the fire room. We were all crowded under one of those blowers, that's why we look cool.

WC: You said there's another?

CB: (Turns pages) There's another, where there's a group photo, then I have a couple other things I'd like to show you in this. As long as you brought it up, I've got to find those engineering photos here. (Holds up book) Here I am again, right there.

WC: (Zooms in camera) Ok, got it.

CB: Going back, I'll show you some of the things that went on. (Points) There's that same picture of that hot round.

(Points to another photo) That's a gun firing—one of the guns, that's the forward mount, looking at it.

(Next photo) This is the ship in drydock, in the Philippines.

(Next photo) And there's a target [on land] being hit, right there.

(Next photo) That's an enemy gunboat. These people tied up here were VC. That's only the

forward part, with a heavy machine, and they have a recoilless rifle on the back. I think I said we sank two hundred of those.

We don't watch another ship sink, you don't do that. Even though I was home ported at Pearl Harbor, I've never been to the Arizona Memorial because it's bad juju, you don't do that. You're jinxing yourself. (Pages through book) When you're on ship, you take all the help you can get.

Here we are. (Next photo) These ships are not my ship. This is the USS Higby, there were eleven men inside that gun mount but I have learned they were outside because of a hot round when it got blown up. So only 4 men were injured.

(Next photo) This is the USS Stoddard. She got a hot round that blew apart and killed three men, and then she got hit here (points to large hole in side of ship) this is the front of the bow; that killed two more men.

(Next) This is the Newport News down here. She blew her forward gun mount; that killed twenty-two guys. Hot rounds again.

(Next) This is a surface-to-air missile, USS Buchanan. Every one of these ships were with us when these mishaps happened... Some were Operation Linebacker, some of it was like retaking Quang Tri City. And there are more. We lost sixteen ships in 1972, only one of them was scrapped. None went under the water, but what do you call it when a ship makes it into Subic Bay, then they have to scrap it because the damage is so severe? It's not sunk. So the Navy claims we never lost anything. Well, sure we did. We lost eight more in 1973. The enemy didn't sit there and let us shoot at them. Artillery duels were commonplace. Daily, routine stuff.

WC: I think you pretty much touched on it with what you've gone through with the VA and the Agent Orange. How do you think, overall, your time in the service changed or affected your life?

CB: I grew up. That's for sure. There was no time to be a kid. I hear it on TV all the time, how people under 21 are kids. I was never an 18-year-old kid. I was an 18-year-old man. I think we dumb down kids. They aren't allowed to drink, while I was drinking heavily at 18, 19, 20.

WC: Ok. Well, thank you so much for your interview.

CB: Ok. Thank you.