

This interview is being conducted on Thursday, April 27, 2017 at the home of Whitney Carter, III. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Whitney Carter who served in the U.S. Navy and is a veteran of the Viet Nam Conflict. Mr. Carter learned of the Veterans' History project through me, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project.

Here is his story:

When and where were you born?

I was born in Blue Island, Illinois, June 1, 1947.

What were your parents' occupations?

My father was a truck driver; my mother was a housewife.

What did you do before entering the service?

I graduated from high school and I worked for about nine months at a tobacco distributor.

Did you have other family members serving in the military?

I had uncles who served in WWII, Korea.

But no brothers or sisters?

No.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Two other brothers and four sisters.

How did you enter the service – were you drafted or did you enlist?

I enlisted.

And was there some reason – why did you choose that specific branch of service?

Well, I could have been drafted into the Army and I decided I just wanted to go travel.

So it was your own personal decision?

Yes.

Did you go with any buddies, or how did it come about that you enlisted?

I went on my own.

Was it in Blue Island?

Yes, I enlisted in Blue Island.

What happened after that? Where did you go and how was your departure for training camp and the early days of training?

Well, it's a funny story. I was sent downtown; we had our physicals and then we came home, and then we had a date to depart. So, I'd go downtown, I take the train downtown to depart and I go over to the Induction Center. I was one of the first guys to put my paper on the table and at the end of the day, after all the papers are on the table, they start picking guys to go up to Great Lakes – it was a Friday. So, they get down to the last three or four papers and they said, we have enough. They said, you guys can go home for the weekend. So I got on the train, went back to Blue Island, I'm walking down the street – 127th Street and my Dad is driving by and sees me walking and almost has an accident. He said, are you done already?

Ha, ha. He thought you left and maybe chickened out or something?

So then I just stayed home all weekend and the following Monday I reported back to the Induction Center and was sent up to Great Lakes.

Okay.

We get up to Great Lakes in the evening and there's a whole trainload of guys – a couple hundred guys – and we're walking up to the Main Gate and there's a guard there. As he's opening the gate all he said to us was, "You'll be sorry."

Ha, ha – that's a nice welcome, isn't it?

So I took my basic training at Great Lakes, but the first night we were there at the barracks, it was in May – we went into the barracks, all the windows are open. Well, it happened to snow up there that night, and we were all so dumb we didn't even have enough brains to get up and close the windows.

Ha, ha, ha – that doesn't say much for the Navy, does it? Ha, ha. When did you go in – your service dates are May 1, 1966 to October 1, 1970 – it can get cold up there. You were born here; you know it can get cold in May.

How were your early days of training – how did you adapt to the barracks and the food and the training?

Well, adapting was a little hard at first because you have people telling you what to do; how to make your bed; how to dress; when to get up; when to go to bed and what you cant do. In those days they even made you wash your own clothes.

Wow!

So, adapting was a little hard at first because you're not used to all of that discipline.

Was that your first time away from home?

Yes.

And how old were you?

I was -- just turned 18 – turning 19 –

You were in there with a bunch of guys who were your age too. So what did you actually do at basic training – I mean, describe a typical day of basic training.

Well, a typical day of basic training was getting up in the morning, field day in the barracks –

What time did you get up?

We got up at six a.m..

That was late; some guys got up at 4:30.

Well, the Navy teaches you real good this way. As you're going through basic training they have what they call "Service Week". For one whole week you stay up a minimum of like 20 hours a day, and all you're doing is constantly working and everything –

Really?!

Yes. By the time you get to bed it's midnight and then we were getting up at 4 a.m. to go do our jobs – whatever we were assigned to – whether it's the galley – wherever they put you –

But everybody did that – took their turn for one week.

Everybody would do the Service Week; they wanted you to go without sleep just to let you know that you could do it. So we'd work like about a 20-hour days. By the time you got back to the barracks and you had to take a shower, have your clothes ready for the next day –

But by the same token you knew you would only be doing that for one week – you wouldn't do that forever.

We'd have been dead!

So what else did you do – did you have classroom teaching?

Oh, yes, we had classrooms and the history of the Navy, and we had testing like for different jobs that you can go into. And we marched a lot.

No gun training –

Oh, yes, we had training –

Shooting – with rifles.

Yes, M-1 rifles.

Did you have any specialized training at that time, or later on?

No.

So basic was just basic.

Just basic training –

How long did that last?

We were there for almost 13 weeks..

Okay, and that was 1966.

Yeah. So just before we got out of basic training, they took the whole company and they lined us up; and you had to go into an office one at a time. And there was a Petty Officer sitting in there and he would say to you, “Now, what do you want? Do you want shore duty or sea duty?” So, I told the guy, I want shore duty. And there was a couple other guys that wanted shore duty. Most of the company said they wanted sea duty, so when we got back to the barracks, all these guys were laughing at us. They said, well, all the guys that said they wanted shore duty, they’re gonna go to sea. And all the guys – so what happened was, I went to shore duty with the other couple of guys and all those other guys went to sea. So I got to spend a year at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard and I worked in what they called the Commissary Store, which was like a big grocery store on the base for the dependents.

After your 13 weeks of basic training, what happened?

I went home for two weeks.

And then where did they send you?

Philadelphia Naval Shipyard.

So after your basic training, that’s where you went?

Yes.

And what were your duties over there?

I was doing ship serviceman duties which was working in the commissary store, working with produce and things like that. But I actually worked with a bunch of old Navy Chiefs From World War II, which I thought were crazy.

Why?

One guy, I don’t know if you remember, they used to have a cartoon with a big rooster that smoked a cigar?

Can’ t say that I do remember.

But this guy would walk around like that and talk like that; he used to stay high on G I gin.

G I Gin – ha, ha.

We used to go to the dispensary every day and get this brown cough medicine; he called it G I gin. So he was out of it already.

Well, he was an old guy; he was ready to leave, huh?

Yes. The funny part about it was he worked in the butcher shop and his name was Chief Bacon.

Ha, ha, ha.

And he would sit there and tell you that in World War II he had three ships blown out from under him.

Really – so he would tell stories.

Yes.

You know, I do remember that rooster; now that we're talking about it; he had a cigar and he talked with a Southern accent –

Yes.

I do remember that guy – it was Colonel – something or other.

That's the way this guy acted.

How long did you stay at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard?

I had one year of shore duty there. So then I decided I liked the East coast so I put in for everything on the East coast, and I got my orders and it said, Sasebo, Japan. So I went East.

Yeah, really. And how did you get to Sasebo, Japan?

Well, I came home for two weeks and then I caught a flight to California and I stayed with a friend of mine that was in the Air Force and was living there. And I left Travis Air Force Base on a MATS plane with dependents. And they flew us to Tachikawa, Japan, and I was in transit there for five days, because they couldn't find out where the ship was at.

Oh, the ship that you were gonna be on.

Yes.

What ship were you looking for?

The U.S.S. Ajax.

They finally found it, I take it.

Yes. They flew us to Kowshung, Taiwan – first we went to Taipei, then to Kowshunga, and I got there and the ship wasn't there. There was a ship in the harbor, which was called the Markab – M-A-R-K-A-B – that was a repair ship. So I spent the night on the Markab and they had nothing for me to do. And the boatswain that was in charge of me, his last name was the same as mine – C-a-r-t-e-r. So, they just paid me, gave me a Liberty Card, and I did liberty in Kowshunga the first night. And the next day the Ajax came in.

What kind of a ship was the Ajax?

It was a repair and supply ship.

How large was it?

It was 511 feet long and was over 90 feet high.

So you finally got on there –

I got on the Ajax, and they put you in a holding company, and seeing I was a Seaman, they just stuck me in deck force.

What did that entail?

Deck force is you're sweeping down the ship; the boatswain mates run cranes and bring things aboard –

Loading and unloading?

Yeah, and you're doing maintenance on the boat; you're chipping paint; you're painting – things like that.

Was that your regular duty or was that just a temporary thing?

I was there – I was in deck force from October of '67 and I got out of deck force on my birthday, June 1, 1968 – I transferred into ship service department – where I should have been in the first place.

And ship service was like you did before at the Philadelphia Navy Yard?

No, we had different things on this ship. We ran the laundry; we ran the ship's store; we ran the barber shop; we ran, they called it a gee-dunk - snack shop; and we ran the military clothing supply. We were part of supply.

Did you stay on this ship the rest of the time that you were in the Navy?

Yes. I stayed aboard the whole time.

And during that time, where did the ship go? Where did you travel?

Okay, when we were in Kowshunga, unfortunately for me, we had to pull out because of the typhoon. So it was my first time at sea, in a typhoon, and I was green, and I was throwing up, and we were in the typhoon for three days through the straits of Taiwan.

Three days, huh! Well, I'm sure you weren't the only one on board that was sick.

No, but it was a very, very bad storm. Some ships sunk out there.

Wow! I know you have photographs – Whitney showed me some photographs of the waves caused by the typhoon and they were as high as the ship, is that right?

Yes.

So where did you go after the typhoon?

We went to Sasebo, which was the home port of the Ajax.

And what did you do there?

Well, that was our home port and we would repair ships that would come into Sasebo. Plus, we had little mine sweeper ships we used to work on; they were docked right behind us.

So the men on board your ship actually went out and repaired other ships that came in to port there ?

Yes.

– **to dock – was there like a dry dock there?**

Well, there was a big dry dock but they would tie up next to us. Dry dock was for extreme overhauls.

Did you ever see any kind of action?

When we went to Won Tow, Viet Nam in 1968, that would have been 8th to 23rd of June, 1968, we were right in the harbor. And there was an Army fire base right by us, and they would get hit every night. But the first night I was there, I was up on deck with two other seamen; we had binoculars and we were watching the Army fire base there, and it was dark, and we heard the helicopter go up. When the helicopter went up, he dropped a flare. When he dropped the flare we could see two guys running across the beach, and all of a sudden the helicopter opened with the .50s and just cut them in half.

Oh, wow!

And it turned out later we found out those were Viet Cong sappers.

What are those?

Sappers would swim out to the ships and try to plant explosives.

Okay, so they were the enemy.

Yes. So, that's the first look I saw

That's the casualties you saw – how did that make you feel?

I guess that – well, I hate to use a four-letter word – like, you know, what did I get myself into? But, seeing that, at night – well, all 24 hours a day we had gunners mates that would walk around the ship, and they were armed, and they would drop percussion grenades into the water. This went on day and night, even during the night when you're trying to sleep, you'd hear grenades going off in the water – so, that went on 24/7. I did go into town. Like a fool I went into town. We had to go three miles from the jungle. I got to the boat docks and there was an Army truck coming by and I hitched a ride into town – just – I wanted to see what the country was like --like three miles through the jungle into town. The town was just like if you saw something in a movie where people are running every which way; it's so crowded you can't move and there's Army and police officers trying to direct traffic there.

How big a town was it? Or how small a town?

It was a big town.

Do you know the name of that town?

It was Vaung Tao V-a-u-n-g T-a-o. The American personnel could be in the town during the day, but at night we had to be out of town. The Viet Cong had the town at night.

Wow! But you were okay during the daytime.

In the daytime; but you couldn't be there at night.

Wow – funny, isn't it?

Well, it was a different experience.

How did you get back these three miles? Did you hitch a ride back?

I hooked up with another guy and we caught like, a little motorcycle that sat two people in the back and we paid somebody to take us back.

You had enough, I'm sure, after that.

Yeah, after that I never went to town any more. I'd just go to the docks; they had some little bars on the docks.

How did you feel about the sights you saw in town?

It was just a whole different thing. You're in a third world country and what the Ajax did do a lot of down there – we serviced the river boats there.

You mean the Viet Nam river boats?

Our river boats.

The American river boats.

Yeah. And if you ever saw the movie, *Good Morning Viet Nam*, the opening shot where they showed the river boats in the morning, is actually what it looked like. So it was real authentic. And we would service the river boats with any kind of mechanical stuff they needed or supplies they needed, ammunition, whatever they wanted. We had an Admiral on the ship and we had a standing order, we could not turn down any job orders. So, we would service these boats and some of them got shot to pieces.

What was the highest rank that you achieved?

E-5 – which would be a Second Class Petty Officer.

How about friendships formed – did you meet a lot of guys that you were friendly with?

I still have people that I served with that I'm in contact with constantly.

Good.

In fact there's one guy that belongs to my VFW – we went aboard ship the same day.

Have you gone to reunions after the service?

My ship was a reunion every year; we've been going since 1992.

Good. And do you go to different cities in the U.S.?

Yes; different parts of the country.

Wow! Do you drive there, usually?

We drive or fly, depending on where it's at.

So you're pretty consistent with that: you do go to reunions.

Yes.

How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home when you were in the service?

Well, when we were leaving Japan to go to the Philippines, and then we'd hit the Philippines and load up on supplies and go to Viet Nam – the night before I would call my parents.

Oh, you'd call from the Philippines?

No, from Japan; just before we got underway.

Was it easier? Could you make better contact or something?

Yes.

So then you would telephone. But other than telephoning occasionally, just writing letters.

Write a letter.

How about packaged – did you mom send you packages –

Oh, yes..

How long would you say that it took a letter to reach you – from the time they sent the letter until you actually got it?

Couple of weeks.

Two weeks delivery time.

Yeah.

That's what I find to be about average.

That's the only – in fact, when we left for Viet Nam the first time, I wrote my mother while we were under way, I wrote my mother a letter every day telling her what was going on.

And my mother's birthday was June 16; she received all the letters on her birthday.

Oh, how nice! Got them all at one time.

Yeah.

How about recreation or off-duty pursuits. What did you do – did you have any when you were off the ship? Sports, or cards, or what --

Well, when I was living in Japan, me and another sailor, we had an apartment in town.

And I had what they call Watch Standards Liberty, which means that when I left the ship I didn't have to be back until the next morning. So, we'd go and change clothes; we could

go to the EM club – the Enlisted Men's club to eat. We could go out of town – we had a lot of Japanese friends; we'd go bar hopping and sight seeing.

So when you were on the ship did you have like a 9 to 5 job and then you were free afterwards – you could go out?

My job, yeah, was like – was 7 to 4.

So you had regular work hours.

We had regular work hours and we only worked – if we were in port we only worked half a day on Wednesday; and the only thing we did on Saturday is we field day the work area, wherever you were working at – and I was gone.

How about when you were at sea?

At sea you worked 24/7 or whenever they needed you; whatever you had to do.

Would you say you were more at sea or more in port?

We were more in port because we had to repair ships.

You only went sailing when you went to the Philippines or to get something

We went from port to port. We went to the Philippines when they had the Pueblo crisis and we serviced the light cruiser St. Paul and her escorts that were going up to Korea for that crisis. We were also in Viet Nam when President Nixon decided to invade Cambodia, and that was wild because we were loading up the river boats with ammunition and with food to go up north.

So you had a pretty active engagement all the way around. Your time in the service was spent, other than your first year in Philadelphia, you were pretty active.

Oh, yeah, we were going everywhere and doing everything.

Wow, you had a varied enlistment.

Well, the ship was home ported in Sasebo, Japan, so we always made the rounds. We went to the Philippines, we went to Taiwan, we went to Viet Nam, we went to Hong Kong.

And did you like that?

Oh, I liked going around.

How about Hong Kong – did you travel --

Oh, yeah.

Did you go into the country when you were there?

Yes, but – I was there five different times; finally got tired of the place.

Okay, so you did get to see quite a bit of the –

Of the Far East.

Well, that's what you go to the Navy for – see the world. And you did.

So your enlistment was coming to an end; how did you return home?

The ship had been quartered in Sasebo, Japan for 13 years and haven't been back to the States, and they decided to send it back to San Diego. So after our last trip to Viet Nam in 1970, we came back to Sasebo, Japan, loaded up everything that you had there, and we came back to San Diego. We stopped for a week in Hawaii on the way back.

Oh, how nice. So you actually came back to San Diego on your own ship.

Yes.

What base was that?

That was the San Diego Naval Base.

The big one?

Yes..

How did you get home from San Diego – fly?

I flew home.

And how was your reception by family and friends?

Well, my family was grateful to have me back, but seeing the Viet Nam War wasn't a popular war, you just put your uniform in the closet.

That's right. Did you come home in civilian clothes?

No, I wore my uniform and then just put it away –

You're right; I remember that.

And I went to work for the Illinois Tollway System, and, you know, didn't talk about the Navy, just – you know

How was your readjustment to civilian life?

Uh, it was easier than I thought because you were free to do what you wanted, you know, you could go in your kitchen and open up your refrigerator and eat.

Oh, you couldn't do that there, huh?

No.

What did you have to eat on schedule with all the other guys?

Oh, yeah, you had your regular three meals a day, but six o'clock in the morning the galley opened up for breakfast. And then at noon they opened up for lunch.

Well, they closed at a certain time too, right?

Yes, yeah, to clean up. We had a thousand-man crew on that ship.

Okay, you didn't talk much about that. So once it opened at six, what time did it close?

They were like six to seven because they had Quarters at 7 o'clock; you had to be at Quarters.

How about lunch – how long was the galley open?

An hour.

Just an hour for food, so you had to hurry up and get your food, huh?

Yes.

And the same thing for dinner; you couldn't take any food with you, take an orange.

No, you didn't walk around the ship eating food.

No food on ship. So you better make sure that you ate enough at your meal.

Yep.

Okay, so you didn't have any real problem coming back home again –

No, I was shocked though when we got to Hawaii. I had never seen a Hari Krishna.

Oh, really.

You remember Hari Krishna?

Yes, I do, with those saffron robes.

I'm walking around and I'm going what country am I in; this is supposed to be Hawaii.

Yeah, right. They were popular then; I guess they still are around but you don't hear much about them today. So, you had contact with fellow veterans over the years.

Yes.

Anybody in particular?

John Zientak, lives in a little town called Crescent, Pennsylvania.

You were close friends and you keep in contact with him?

Yes, and another friend of mine, Charles Allen. He was from Johnson, Tennessee.

So you keep in touch with them by phone and email.

Yeah, and then another friend of mine, he's a Polish guy though, Pete Stackowicz. He lives in Moline and him and I talk constantly; he comes here and I go there.

Oh, Moline, it's not that far away. Moline, IL.

Yeah.

So are you a member of any veterans' organizations?

I belong to the VFW Post #2791, Tinley Park.

So you are active with them/

Oh, I'm very active.

Is that the only one, the VFW?

Yes.

So over all, how would you say your military experience affected your life?

Well, it taught me responsibility and discipline.

Overall it had a positive effect on you?

Yes, it really did; it really had a positive effect.

And life lessons learned from the military –

How to keep responsibility, I guess. If you're in charge of something, you're doing something, -- you're responsible.

Knowing what you know now, would you do it all over again

Yes.

So, all in all, you had a very good experience.

Being away from home for three years, yes. Because I was overseas right after Philadelphia Naval Station and went to Japan, I only came back – I flew home once in three years.

Well, you see the world and you see how other people live and you are thankful for America, I think, when you come back.

Yes. My mother said to me when I came home, she said, you changed. I mean, you're a kid when you go in, really – you don't think you're a kid at the time, but you are.

You are; and then when you come back, you're a man; you've seen everything; it does a lot more for you.

I still remember going through the San Diego Airport and a couple of old timers saw me walking in uniform with all my ribbons on and they said, that guy's been around.

That's what we didn't talk about, medals or ribbons. I know you wrote them down here but can you tell me what they are. Just say them out loud.

Okay, the National Defense Service Medal is what you get when you first go in – you're serving your country. I got a Meritorious Unit Commendation Ribbon; got the Viet Nam Service medal and I should have four Campaign Ribbons, which they don't have listed here.

When you went in you were probably an E-1, I guess and you went up to E-5; you did very well.

The first year you don't know what to expect, you know. And then I was with all these old timers; they were hard because they were all WWII veterans; they were tough guys. And then you go to a ship – we had a few guys who were WWII – like when I was in deck force there was a Lieutenant Commander, his name was Martin; he was in charge of

Deck Force. He was at Pearl Harbor and was blown off the battleship Virginia when it exploded. And it's really funny because there's this guy –

You're talking 1941 to 1966 – that's 25 years! And he was still in the service?

Yeah. There was this guy, Charles Allen, his uncle was with Martin; they both got blown off the ship together.

And they lived.

Yeah, and so this guy I served with, his uncle served with this guy Martin. They were at Pearl Harbor together. And then we had another old guy, his name was Dutch Holland, and he had been around since WWII too; tough as nails.

Whitney has some photographs I looked at; he's going to part with one of them so I can include it along with the transcript. He is on the U.S.S. Ajax, his home ship for his three-year deployment. He has many other photographs we're looking at right now.

I wish to thank you, Whitney, for this interview and thank you for your service to our country. I appreciate it.

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