Shayne Campbell: This is Shayne Campbell it is 10:30 on March 27, 1990. I am interviewing for the first time Captain R.E. Dodson, USN (United States Navy). This interview is taking place at the office of Captain Dodson, at Texas Tech University, B.A. building, Naval ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) unit. This is a part of the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project at Texas Tech University. Captain Dodson when did you enter the Navy?

R.E. Dodson: When did I enter the Navy?

SC: Yes, sir.

RD: I entered the Navy for the first time on 22 June 1954.

SC: When did you get sent to Vietnam?

RD: When did I leave the United States?

SC: Yes, sir.

RD: I left the United States on the twenty-third of November 1969.

SC: And how long did it take to get to your assigned station?

RD: Two days.

SC: Two days. What was your duty or your task during the war?

RD: My first duty, which lasted three months, November, December, and January, was the coastal surveillance, Center Advisor at Vung Tau, Cape Saint Jacques. And after
that period of time was over then I became the coastal, Senior Naval Advisor to the Vietnamese Navy Coastal Flotilla 3, which operated out of Cat Lo.

SC: What did a Navy advisor do during the war?

RD: Well, my job was to interface between the Vietnamese Navy and the United States Navy to provide them advice on the administration of material maintenance of a coastal flotilla. Composed of PCFs (patrol craft, fast), WPBs (United States Coast Guard, large patrol boat), junks, and assorted other river craft.

SC: What type of operations were you involved in during the war?

RD: Most of them were the interdiction of VC operating on the rivers and the canals, interdicting their supply, movement of their personnel, preventing their operations and also Operation Market Time, off the coast of Vietnam. Interdicting the resupply of VC in the South by the North Vietnamese in the North. Interdicting their ocean trade. If you want to call it traffic. If you want to call it that.

SC: Did you ever have any problems with the Soviets?

RD: No. Never saw them

SC: No. Did the North Vietnamese have their own ships that they patrolled down these rivers?

RD: No. The North Vietnamese weren't operating them. The Third Coastal Zone is in the southern part of Vietnam. You have four coastal zones. One, Two Three and Four, One being at the very northern end of South Vietnam and Four being down the Cau Mau Peninsula in the very south. The Third Coastal Zone was from the Saigon River (to the) south, until you get to the Cau Mau Peninsula. So down in the South the only people you saw, of the communist persuasion, were the VC. You did not see any NVA, North Vietnamese. So the answer to your question is no. The North Vietnamese did not operate down the rivers in the canal zone in the South. The VC did.

SC: Throughout the war in many areas the U.S. and her satellite troops controlled most of Vietnam during the day, but they lost that control at night.

RD: What’s a satellite troop?

SC: Like Australia.

RD: I wouldn’t call it satellite troops, but anyway, go ahead with the question.
SC: They would control the area during the daytime but lose it at night. Did you have that problem with rivers?
RD: Yeah.
SC: Yes. What type of problems would arise from it?
RD: Well, most of the resupply of the VC in the South occurred at night. So if you were spread rather thin in the canals and the rivers and they were out there operating at night then, generally speaking, you would get into a firefight. They would try to take control of the rivers and the canals at night, but they were unsuccessful at the time I was there.
SC: What type of boats did you operate from?
RD: Mostly PCFs.
SC: What does PCF stand for?
RD: Patrol craft, fast. Goes about thirty knots.
SC: What was a typical PCF armed with?
RD: It was armed with a dual .50-calibers amidships, armed with a 60-millimeter machine gun forward, .50-caliber aft. The .50-caliber aft was an over and under. Under it was a eight-one millimeter mortar. So you had a 60-millimeter machine gun forward, twin .50s amidships, up in a turret, and a single .50 with a eighty-one mortar tube under back aft. That was installed weapons. Of course, everyone on board had their own personal weapon, M-16, M-45, whatever they had, shotguns.
SC: What's a typical crew size of a PCF?
RD: Officer in charge, usually an ensign, (lieutenant) JG (junior grade). Most of them were JGs. Uh, one, two, three, four, four other, four enlisted. To include the machinist’s mate, who took care of the diesels. And you had one man on each of the installed weapons, the M-60, the twin .50s and the one .50 in the back aft.
SC: Did you ever work with South Vietnamese troops on your ships?
RD: Always.
SC: Would they usually be enlisted or were some of them officers?
RD: All of the above, officers and enlisted, yes.
SC: Throughout the war and towards the end of the war, the South Vietnamese were becoming ineffective against the VC and the NV. Did you notice that?
RD: No.
SC: Were they just as brave—
RD: They weren’t quite as dedicated as the U.S. sailor was. Some were, some were very brave. As a general rule they were not as well trained. They were not as well motivated as the average sailor, US sailor was, and I'll leave it at that.
SC: Did you ever have any troops come over from the Chieu Hoi Program?
RD: Sure!
SC: Did you trust them?
RD: Well, I did. They didn’t operate with us. They stayed with the Vietnamese. Yes, they did. We had them in our boats acting as guides. Going into the canals and whatnot. Yeah, sure we trusted them. We had a loaded rifle in their back, but that's all right.
SC: Where was your base officially located?
RD: Cat Lo.
SC: Cat Lo. What was base life like when you weren’t on patrol?
RD: Well, the home base was at Cat Lo, but normally we operated from an outpost. The outpost that we normally operated from was on the Basac River. And it was a tiny little river out in the middle of the river, very primitive, mud huts, wood, outhouses, a lot of dirt, a lot of mud, a lot of bugs. But it was the same living conditions of the Vietnamese Navy. You got to remember, if you’re an advisor, you go where they go, you eat what they eat, you do what they do. If you want to stay alive.
SC: You said you ate what they ate. What would they usually eat?
RD: Lots of rice, a lot of fish. If you were a good guy and they liked you a lot every now and then they’d give you a chicken head. They think that’s a delicacy. I didn’t. But they did.
SC: Did you lose a lot of weight during the war?
RD: Yes.
SC: Was it just because of the diet or—

SC: Where would you usually go when you had leave or RR (rest and recuperation)? When you would get RR.
RD: We only had one leave period and that was RR. I went to Hawaii to meet my wife there. Five nights, six days.

SC: Did you ever go into any large towns?
RD: Saigon.
SC: Saigon?
RD: Yes.
SC: What was Saigon like during the war?
RD: I wasn’t there very much. I only went there very infrequently. To visit with the senior naval advisor there in Saigon. To report to him periodically. At that time, in 1969, 1970, it was just like you’d see in the movies. Did you see the movie *Good Morning Vietnam* with Robin Williams?
SC: Yes, sir.
RD: That’s what it looked like.
SC: Throughout the war racial tensions built up. Could you tell—
RD: Where?
SC: Between blacks and whites. You didn’t notice?
RD: Not where I was. Not with my people. Nope, not a bit.
SC: Not with you?
RD: Nope
SC: And also throughout the war there was a tendency for the troops to no longer trust public policy made by the leaders.
RD: Not where I was. Not with my people.
SC: Why was it like that? Was it just because you were isolated or just because your troops and yourself believed what you were doing?
RD: Well, we were all advisors and that gave you a certain connotation, a certain feeling, i.e. if you were advising them you were fighting with them. You were not,
and you were spread rather thin. You were not in one large U.S. group of people. Therefore, that gave you a little certain perspective on how the war was going and what you thought of yourself in it. What your perspective was. You saw the war more through their eyes than through your own eyes. If you had been in a large U.S. group then you would probably see it through U.S. eyes. Also in 1969—'68-'70 timeframe while there was lots of political unrest in the US over our policies in Southeast Asia, I don’t think and I know it did not get done in the Delta—that it had much effect on the individual servicemen. They being the U.S. servicemen in the South, yet. That came later.

SC: Also through the war McNamara and the president would limit the—such as the bombing.

RD: Didn’t effect us at all in the Delta and I’m not going to comment on the, what happened north of us.

SC: Okay. The policies of the war, did you agree with them?

RD: Policies of the war? I don’t understand.

SC: Like the way it was being fought and the way the executive branch was controlling it.

RD: Not from what I understood. If going to fight a war then you go into fight the war to win the war. You don’t go in there thinking that it’s going to be a stalemate. And how the hell do you get out as quickly as possible. So, yes, there was a lot of discussion, there was a lot of uneasiness, but not down in my area! We were in what you might call Indian country. Not up in the North, not in the middle of Saigon, where all the big politicos and the high-ranking military people were and that king of thing. We were down there in Indian country. We were a little bit more concerned with what was occurring between us and the range of a M-16 or a .50-caliber than we were with what was going on in Saigon and what people were doing up at I Corps, II Corps, and places like that. So it didn’t bother us too much. I didn’t know a whole lot about it until I got back to the States.

SC: After Tet did you think the US still could win the war?

RD: Sure, but remember, you got to remember my perspective. I’m an advisor to the South Vietnamese Navy. Did I think the South Vietnamese Navy, in my area of
operations, could succeed in what they were trying to do? The answer to that is: Yes, they were. And that is to interdict the supplies of the VC moving north to south. Yes, that’s what the Vietnamese Navy was doing. Yeah, they were doing it. Don’t ask me about the army, the Vietnamese Army and what they were doing. I don’t know, personally. We operated with them. We did a lot of support operations for them, but whether or not they thought they were winning or accomplishing their purpose, I don’t know.

SC: Did you ever have any problems with deserters?
RD: Nope.

SC: North or South Vietnamese?
RD: Nope.

SC: When did you leave Vietnam?
RD: November twenty-fifth of 1970, three hundred and sixty-seven days.

SC: What do you remember most about the war that you disliked about it?
RD: The horrible cost of humanity, the stupidity of it.

SC: If you had a fondest memory what would it be of the war?
RD: We adopted an orphanage, our group of advisors. We adopted an orphanage down in the South. It was run by Catholic Church, Sisters of something or other. In 19—let’s just say in the early 1960s or the late ’50s, whenever the North broke off from South, South broke of from the North. An awful lot of people from the North walked south, because they didn’t want to come under the communist political system. Part of those people to walk south was an orphanage and at the time they started, the sisters told me, there were thirty-some-odd nuns (and a) couple hundred children. They started walking south. When they finally got south, where they were going to stay for a while, there was only about five nuns left and maybe a hundred children. But we weren’t the first to do it, but on the standpoint of adopting the Vietnamese church group or whatever you want to call it. But anyway, our group adopted an orphanage and we were able to bring a lot of food, a lot of medical supplies, fixed their orphanage and things of that nature and I guess that was the most satisfying of the year there.

SC: Is that orphanage still there or—
RD: I have no idea.
SC: You don’t?

RD: I have absolutely no idea. My counterpart, a Vietnamese, South Vietnamese Navy commander, a couple years ago was working in Washington, DC, when the fall of Vietnam occurred, in 1975, he and his wife left Vietnam and came to the United States. I think he’s running a restaurant or something like that in Washington. What happened to the rest of the people back there? I have no idea.

SC: When American troops came home, particularly Marines and Navy, the public would really show their dislike towards them. Did you ever have that problem?

RD: Yes.

SC: What type of problems would arise?

RD: When I got off the airplane in Providence, Rhode Island, a cab driver drove by and said, “Just back from Vietnam, huh.” I said, “Yes.” I was standing there with my wife and my children. And with that he cleared his throat and spit at me and drove off.

SC: Was that the only problems that you ever had?

RD: Yep. That was it.

SC: What was your personal feelings about the way the troops were being treated back in the States?

RD: Ashamed.

SC: Ashamed? Do think that people like Jane Fonda should have been sent to jail?

RC: Yep.

SC: For what she did?

RC: Yep. Ramsey Clark, yep, absolutely. She still owes an apology. She thinks she made one about six, seven months ago, but she didn’t.

SC: And then, a lot of the troops, not troops, a lot of the citizens that were going to be drafted fled the States. They went to Canada, some went to Mexico and then Jimmy Carter pardoned them. Do you think he should have done that?

RD: Nope.

SC: Do you think they—
RD: No! Because it’s not fair. What about the guy—did you see the movie *Born on the Fourth of July*?

SC: Yes, sir.

RD: This is an example? Why here’s a guy who’s paying for the rest of his life for doing what his country asked him to do. So why the hell should we pardon people who said, “Hey! (makes noise with his mouth) Screw you! I’m going to get out of the country!” I don’t believe in it. Who in the hell asked them if they believed in it! It’s their duty! It’s the price you pay for being a citizen. But anyway go ahead.

SC: When Saigon fell in ’75, what was your feeling about that?

RD: Very sad. I was very afraid for a lot of people that spent an awful lot of time, personal sacrifice to help us in what we were doing. And that was people who were at the mercy of the communists. So I felt very sad.

SC: Who do you think handled the war better, Johnson or Nixon, or even Kennedy?

RD: I don’t know. From my perspective I’d guess in retrospect in was probably Nixon because he got the damn thing turned off and got the hell out of there. The country came back together again. Johnson’s policies were flawed. McNamara’s policies were very flawed, over-control, if any control, micro-management, doesn’t work. Never has. It wasn’t Kennedy who got us into there. It was Eisenhower. It started way back then. But anyway.

SC: A lot of Americans towards the end of the war or even in the ’60s and ’70s were illegally going into Cambodia.

RD: Were what?

SC: Illegally—

RD: What kind of Americans?

SC: Some Marines, some—

RD: Service people?

SC: Service people

RD: Oh, my word! Really? I didn’t know that! Holy smokes!

SC: Did the Navy ever go into Cambodia?
RD: Did the Navy? US Navy? As a group or as advisors?
SC: As advisors or a group or legally, officially, unofficially.
RD: I can tell you, I was there, but I can’t tell if other people were there.
SC: What were you doing?
RD: Advising.
SC: Were you advising the—
RD: South Vietnamese Navy, yes.
SC: Why was the South Vietnamese Navy there?
RD: Well, they thought it might be a neat thing to go up the river and see if they could interdict some supplies that they thought were coming down the river from Cambodia. So they went up the river.
SC: Also, through the war many people thought that the Navy was ineffective—
RD: What section?
SC: Mud Navy.
RD: Mud Navy? I never heard of that.
SC: Dirty water Navy or the—
RD: Brown Water Navy?
SC: Brown Water Navy.
RD: Was ineffective? Well, what do they base that on?
SC: They base it on a lot of stuff.
RD: Like what?
SC: Like facts.
RD: What facts?
SC: And figures.
RD: Balaam!
SC: Do you agree with that?
RD: No! Obviously not.
SC: Was the Brown Water Navy limited in their capabilities in any way?
RD: Sure! You didn’t have an awful lot of equipment. You didn’t have an awful lot of what you might call classical support in an hostile environment. Sometimes you got into firefights and there was no way out other than fighting like hell. But I guess that
happens to everybody. It would be nice always to have air support all the time and you
didn’t. It would be very nice to have all kinds of ground support along the banks,
whatnot, as you go motoring up these little canals, you didn’t. So I can tell you out of
three hundred and sixty-seven days I was there I was in over three hundred firefights and
I got one.

SC: You mentioned air support.
RD: Yes.
SC: What type of air support would you get?
RD: Navy.
SC: And then what type of planes would they be flying? Fly F-4s—
RD: No. Nah-nah, nah. We had very little of that kind of air support in the South.
Most of it was OV-10s, or attack helicopters, flown by HAL-4 and VAL-4. The Black
Ponies, we called them, with 2.75-inch rockets. Very effective. Got me out a lot of
trouble.
SC: You mentioned an OV-10. What was an OV-10?
RD: It’s an observation plane, twin-engine turbo-jet, very small, carries two
people, fires 2.75-inch rockets, machine guns. Nice guy to have around.
SC: A lot of advisors in the Navy, in the Brown Water Navy, went up in these
helicopters. Did you ever have any experiences?
RD: Yep, sure did.
SC: Is there any that you remember the most?
RD: Sure.
SC: Can you explain it?
RD: A lot of them. Well, it’s always a thrill a minute to be flying at about eighty
or hundred feet. In a helicopter being flown by an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old Army
warrant officer who thinks he’s indestructible, and you know damn well that he’s not.
And you’re flying at an altitude so low that it’s easy to get shot from the ground. And if
your engine fails you, you’re too low for what they call auto-rotation. So if you lose an
engine you’re going to go in. Yeah, that’s a thrill a minute. But you had to, sometimes.
SC: This concludes this interview. Is there anything you’d like to add?
RD: Nope, not a thing. Would I do it again? If were told to.