Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone, I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. David White. I am in Lubbock, Texas at the Special collections library at Texas Tech University. Mr. White I presume you are where, at home?

David White: I’m at home.

RV: Where’s home located?

DW: Killen, Alabama.

RV: Very good. Sir if you could begin just telling us a little bit about your childhood. Where you were born and when you were born and kind of how you grew up there? Did you grow up there in Alabama?

DW: No, actually for the biggest part I was born in Savannah, Tennessee New Year’s Day, 1947.

RV: That’s right I saw New Year’s Day.

DW: We lived there for about six years. Then we moved to Lauderdale County. Lauderdale County, Alabama. I was raised outside in the county. My dad worked in the sawmill and he did a little farming. When I was 13 years old he bought his first cousin’s family home in Florence and we moved to Florence.

RV: Alabama?

DW: Alabama.

RV: How would you describe your childhood? Was it an ordinary childhood?
DW: It was average southern childhood. Back in my childhood everything was segregated. I knew a few people of other races around. But the schools were segregated. I think they became integrated a year after I graduated from high school. You know the people that had it, they didn’t indulge their children very much. No one had very much and it was sort of laid back. I went to a small county school. I had probably an average childhood. We didn’t have anything, but we had plenty to eat. Everyone was happy.

RV: What were your parent’s occupations? You said you dad worked in the steel mill?

DW: Actually no, he worked in the sawmill, but he worked at a sheet metal shop form the time I was about 11 until he retired when he was about 70. But he worked at a sheet metal shop.

RV: How about your mother?

DW: My mom was a housewife.

RV: Did you have a job in your youth?

DW: Yes, I sure did. I cut grass. I worked as a carhop at a little old restaurant. Then when I was 16, I went to work where my dad worked at.

RV: You kind of learned the business, what he was doing?

DW: Well, I worked there until I went in the Navy as soon as I got out of high school.

RV: So, you did complete high school?

DW: Yes.

RV: What was your high school experience like? What were your favorite subjects in high school?

DW: I like history mostly. That’s my favorite subject and American History.

RV: What years here, were we talking about for your high school?

DW: I graduated in ’66. I played football all four years I went to high school. I enjoyed that.

RV: So, right after high school you enlisted in the Navy?

DW: Yes, I did.

RV: You were not drafted.

RV: Why did you enlist? Was there any military experience in your family?
DW: Actually not very much. My father didn’t go in, because I think when World War II started he was 32. I think a couple of my uncles were in the Navy during the Second World War. But actually I was planning on going in the Marine Corps. I think the recruiter in the city where I lived, they had a recruiting office they kept open a couple of days a week and then they moved to another place. So, I had a couple of my high school friends lined up and we were going to join the Marine Corps.

RV: Why the Marine Corps?

DW: I just wanted to join I guess. As a matter of fact I went down there with them. We all went down there together one day and he wasn’t there. So, I looked for a job this was about a month after high school. It was in June. I just said to heck with it. I went down there the next day and the guy wasn’t there, but the Navy recruiter was right next door. So, I got to talking to him, so I joined the Navy. A couple of days later he packed me up on a bus and sent me to Nashville. You know to take the test. I did pretty good.

RV: In Nashville, what kind of test did you take?

DW: It’s just I guess a pre-induction test. Probably a skills assessment test or general knowledge test or whatever.

RV: How long were you there in Nashville?

DW: They sent us up there as a matter of fact we spent the night. We went one day, spent the night and finished up the process the nest day. I actually left from Nashville.

RV: Where did you go from Nashville?

DW: I went to San Diego.

RV: That’s where you did your basic training?

DW: Yes, sir.

RV: At this point in your life, what did you know about Vietnam? What the United States was doing over there?

DW: Actually all of us were pretty gung-ho in Vietnam. As a matter of fact my nephew’s wife, her grandfather was killed along about this time. He went to the same high school I did. His name was Charles Cox. I didn’t know the guy. He graduated probably in ’60. ’59 or ’60 somewhere in that neighborhood. He got killed in November
1965. But some of the guys knew him and knew who he was because he’d been raised in
that neighborhood. I know that he was the first guy that got killed from Lexington. Then
I went in the service in ’66. I had several friends in the neighborhood where I was raised,
the guys I went to high school with that were killed in Vietnam. But I never got to attend
any of their funerals or anything because I was gone for four years.

RV: Basically you knew the United States was at war in Vietnam.

DW: You know I kept up with it. My dad watched the news or listened to it on
the radio every night. I kept up with it fairly close too.

RV: I guess going into the Marine Corps, you probably would go to Vietnam.

How about the Navy? Did you think that you would go over there?

DW: No, not really. I went in the Navy and I was a deckhand when I first went
on the ship. I didn’t go to any A-schools or whatever. The gunner’s mate chief came by
after I had been on there about a month. He asked me if I wanted to be a gunner’s mate.
I said, “sure”. So, I was a seaman apprentice at this time. I was on the U.S.S.
Monticello. LSD-35 and it was a troop carrier. On the Monticello I made three trips to
Vietnam.

RV: Your training in San Diego, what can you say about that? Describe that
experience.

DW: It was regular boot camp. Probably about 12 weeks. You had a week of
mess cooking. They kept you busy, you didn’t have time to feel sorry for yourself or
anything. They were on a military life. They were pretty hill boned in the schooling part
of it. So we had to wash our clothes every night, shine our shoes and then study. So, for
all of it they kept us busy.

RV: Did you have a lot of physical training?

DW: We didn’t have a whole lot of physical training in the Navy. You had a lot
of marching, a lot of walking. The only kind of physical training you had, pretty
strenuous training was disciplinary action.

RV: How soon did you get into training on boats?

DW: You’re talking about?

RV: Was that during your advanced when you got on the PBR training?
DW: I was already on the ship. I was probably 21 years old when I went to PBRs. I was already an E-4.

RV: That came later?

DW: Yes, all the PBR, all the guys that went to Vietnam in our situation, they were all fleet sailors. They took these guys out of the fleet. Supposedly had a real sterling record that volunteered. It was supposed to be strictly volunteer. I volunteered for it when we came back from a little small, mini-cruise in 1968. They sent us to Da Nang for about two months. During this time, I’d volunteered for it and by the time we got back I left in April of 1968, the Monticello to go to PBR school in Mare Island.

RV: So from San Diego you went on the Monticello and you did short cruises there?

DW: Actually about all of 1967 we spent in Vietnam.

RV: You were off the coast?

DW: Yes, off the coast. You know the Marines had different operations that they performed, like landings and whatever. We supported the Marines. We probably had 400 or 500 guys on the ship. When we’d pick them up, we’d carry them in and they’d land, do whatever they had to do. We were their support group.

RV: What exactly was your detail there on that ship?

DW: My detail was of course I stood gun watch during the day and I worked on my gun. My shipboard watch was a helmsman. I steered the ship.

RV: How did you like that?

DW: Actually you couldn’t see what was going on. All you’d look at was a compass. You had an officer on the deck. He was telling you the courses and whatever form up above.

RV: What kind of weapons training had you had up to that point?

DW: I was in the ships armor. I told that later on. I pretty well knew on the ship we had all the old, pre-NATO stuff. We had .30 caliber machine guns, M-1 rifles. Thompson submachine gun, rat guns, .50 caliber machine guns and BAR rifles. .45 pistols, .22s and I was pretty familiar with all of that stuff. So, I pretty well knew a .50 caliber machine gun before I ever went to the boats.

RV: Had you grown up around guns, were you familiar that way?
DW: Shot guns and rifles.

RV: How would you rate the training you received at San Diego? Was it adequate for you?

DW: In Sand Diego they got you ready for shipboard life. It wasn’t combat training. We got that at Mare Island.

RV: After you left the Monticello you went to Mare Island to do your PRB training?

DW: Yes, sir.

RV: You volunteered to do the PBR training is that correct?

DW: That’s correct.

RV: You’d been in the Navy for how long when you did this?

DW: I went in June, I’d been in about nearly two years.

RV: What made you decide to do that versus staying on board the ship?

DW: Well, shipboard life’s a little blasé. I really believed in war and I wanted to make a contribution. Actually I think if a war goes on I think everybody secretly probably wants to know what combat’s like. I just figured I’d go over and see what it was like.

RV: What did your family think about that?

DW: My family didn’t think too much of it.

RV: Did they try to discourage you from volunteering for that?

DW: I don’t think, because I was in the Navy they figured I was going to be in too much danger.

RV: That you’d be pretty much on board ship, off the coast away from the ground fighting.

DW: Yes.

RV: Describe your training there at Mare Island. This was where in Georgia?

DW: No, this was in California.

RV: California. Describe that training.

DW: They’ve got a lot of slew, I forget coming off the Pacific Ocean. A little old town called Vallejo, up northeast of San Francisco. I think at one time during the Second World War Mare Island was a very, very large naval Base. So, basically about
all they had when I went through was PBR training. They’d break us up every morning. They’d line you up and you’d do calisthenics for about 15 minutes. Then you’d jog two or three miles. Then you’d go to class.

RV: How long were you there total?

DW: I was there in May, June and July, nearly all of July and I think the last of July, first of August I wound up in Vietnam.

RV: During this three months, what did they teach you. When you go to class what were they emphasizing to you?

DW: We had a week of survival school, a week of language school.

RV: In Vietnamese?

DW: Yes. As a matter of fact I think it might have been two weeks of language school. The guys emphasized to you, they had the guys that were the POWs in the Korean War. They came in and they emphasized, put a lot of emphasis on what you should do if you were ever captured. I think they had some unpleasant experiences in Korea for the young guys that were captured.

RV: Were any of your instructors Vietnam Veterans?

DW: A lot of my instructors, oh yes. Most of the instructors in PBR school had come off the boats.

RV: What did they tell you about combat or about their experiences in Vietnam?

DW: The guy told you on the shooting you had one to two seconds to make your mind up when they get to shooting at you. In Vietnam you had restricted fire zones and free fire zones. If you’re not going to shoot back and you can’t shoot back, you need to get the heck out of the way.

RV: Did you find that true once you got over there?

DW: Absolutely. See they built up their tactics, the Americans did or we did as we went along. We had a guy named Bob Monzingo, he was our patrol officer. He believed in ambushes of nighttime. He believed in shooting them up instead of them shooting you up. They emphasized that, the first patrol officer we had that I had for any length of time he was killed in 1968, in November.
RV: Before we get into your combat experiences there, during these three months, did you feel any change at all about going over there to Vietnam? Were you still like you said, gung-ho patriotic feeling? Feel like you wanted to do your contribution?

DW: No, actually I wanted to go at on time during the three months. I was gung-ho, go. Even when I got out I was never exposed to the negative part of it until I had already got out of the Navy and got home.

RV: How about your fellow students there, were they gung-ho as well?

DW: Yes, everybody was pretty gung-ho. It was all volunteers. I imagine different guys went for different reasons.

RV: How were you transported to Vietnam?

DW: Went on the Transworld Airlines.

RV: Was this an all-military flight?

DW: Yes, as a matter of fact I think it was a charter flight. Most of the guys were going to PBRs.

RV: All young guys were together on the flight. What was the mood on that flight on the way over?

DW: Well, it was along flight. You know the young guys, you know how the government works. GS-17, GS-15 and whatever civilians and officer and whatever would get off first. I think they didn’t pay too much attention to that. When they stopped if you got a chance to get off, you got off.

RV: Did you leave out of San Francisco?

DW: Yes, we did.

RV: You stopped in Honolulu?

DW: Stopped in Honolulu.

RV: Then where to?

DW: I believe we went straight into Saigon from Honolulu.

RV: When you landed in Vietnam and got off the plane, what were you feeling?

DW: I was amazed at how big the city was and all the fortifications and stuff around the airport. We went straight into Tan Son Nhut Airport.

RV: Did you fly in at day or at nighttime?
DW: We flew in during the day. I think it was later afternoon when we go there. Then they picked us up and bussed us to the Montana Hotel. We stayed there in the nighttime. What rally surprised me was probably the French building this big beautiful place. It was fortified and the toilets, steel deals and shower and stuff like that wasn’t up to par. Also they had bad mosquitoes.

RV: What else hit you that first night there? What did you think of Vietnam?

DW: There was a lot of noise. You know a big city all the honking and the motorbikes and whatever, a lot of traffic. You now you could hear all of that from where we slept at.

RV: Did the heat bother you at all?

DW: Not really because I was used to that. I was raised in the southeast, we never had air-conditioning when I was growing.

RV: How many days did you spend there in Saigon?

DW: I think we spent a couple of days and then they pulled us out. I think we got shots, they gave us another round of shots. Then they dispersed us, put us on a bus. I went to a small town a few miles outside of Saigon called Nha Be.

RV: What did you do there?

DW: Went into the river division, river section 544.

RV: You were assigned?

DW: I was assigned as a gunner’s mate on one of the boats after a coupe of days.

RV: How did you get to be a gunner’s mate again? Did someone just come up and ask you if you wanted to do this?

DW: The chief came by and asked me. He was a real nice guy I liked him. His name was Chief Levine, I don’t remember his first name. I thought he was ancient then. He was probably 35 or 36 years old. He asked me if I wanted to be a gunner’s mate and I said, “sure”. So he stayed after me pretty good. I went from Seaman apprentice to seaman. Then I took the third class petty officer test and I took it and passed it.

RV: So, how soon were you on board PBR?

DW: It wasn’t too soon about a week after I got to Nha Be.

RV: Did you feel prepared for it?

DW: Yes, sure.
RV: You’re still ready to go?

DW: Yes. We had excellent training. I was a familiar with all the weapons. They took you out to break you in, let you ride with somebody for a couple of days, then you’re on your own.

RV: What was your first boat ride like? Your first missions?

DW: We rode the boats when we were in Mare Islands. Basically the same boat in Vietnam.

RV: So you were totally used to that.

DW: Yes.

RV: Your first time out on the boat in Vietnam, what was that like?

DW: The Long Tau River we had the Rung Sat special zone. I think we were patrolling the Long Tau River. The river section I was in was only formed in May of 1968. They’d been May, June, July. They’d only been in existence for a couple of months. When I got there they were still moving people around and trying to reach into a comfort zone. Also during this time they were establishing so many new river sections, river divisions that they would take the older hands and move them out to a new one and then get an influx of new hands. So actually, probably a couple, three months I was pretty settled in.

RV: How did they introduce you to the missions? They kind of broke you in slowly to that stuff?

DW: You were out a couple of days and they bring the boat captains and the patrol officer in and brief them. On the patrols you had 12 hours patrols, off 12, on 12, then off 24. So you have two-day patrols, off 24 and then two night patrols. I’ve got the patrol reports for August. I got here about the first of August, but I made 25 patrols in the month of August.

RV: So, you really did jump right into the action?

DW: Yes. Then August, September, October and November the 8th everything was pretty quiet. The Rung Sat special zone was not real, real bad. You get a guy wounded every now and then. Matter of fact the first guy that got killed out of our river division was on our boat. He was killed November the 8th 1968.

RV: What had happened on that mission?
DW: We had been a blocking force up on the river. They sent us in some little
old inlet. We got in there and used us as a blocking force. I think some Vietnamese
Marines or whatever as we were coming out they had bombed that place. As we were
coming out we got ambushed. The boat I was on took a couple of rockets. The chief was
on the other boat and he came over and got on our boat because our boat captain got hurt
pretty bad. About the time he got on there, we took another rocket and he got killed. He
took one right straight in the head. He probably hadn’t been on the boat but just a few
seconds.

RV: How many boats were on patrol?

DW: Two. You always had a lead boat and a cover boat. Usually a patrol officer
rode on the lead boat.

RV: Can you describe your typical mission?

DW: The typical mission we could either insert some Vietnamese Marines or
operate with them in the nighttime. Or a group of Americans, American Rangers or the
Navy Seal teams, whatever they had you set up to do. Then a lot of times if we didn’t’
have anything special to do, we just had a patrol sector. Where in the daytime you
patrolled it and then there for the first few months in the nighttime we also patrolled.

RV: What were you looking for when you say patrolled?

DW: They have a curfew from like six in the evening to six in the morning. We
were looking for some curfew violators. You know you get out on the river and you’ve
seen any traffic during the day, we checked identification cards and checked sampans and
junks for contraband. Sort of like river police.

RV: How did the local Vietnamese react to this, when you guys would stop and
search? Did they expect this?

DW: Yes, they expected it.

RV: So, it was almost routine?

DW: It was almost routine. You know it’s sort of like you standing in the line at
the airport. You don’t like it, but there’s not very much you can do about it. Most of
those people they were pretty nice people. Their main mode of traffic was river traffic in
the Mekong down south.
RV: I read in your questionnaire you said you did get an aerial view of your area of operations. It was mainly water?

DW: Yes.

RV: Just flat out water. What did you think of the overall mission for the United States Navy down in the delta there and plugging up all of his waterways? Did you think that was viable once you had been there and seen it and seen how much water there was?

DW: Yes, I think so. I think the Navy did an excellent job. You know I’m not patting myself on the back because I was in the Navy, but as far as personnel and training and mission accomplished and whatever I think maybe the Navy did the best job of anybody.

RV: Did you ever see or meet Admiral Zumwalt?

DW: As a matter of fact I did. I got a Purple Heart on November the 8th when the chief got killed. We were on the U.S.S. Hornett County upon Operation Giant Slingshot. I think this was in early January of 1969. He came aboard and presented me with a Purple Heart?

RV: What were your impressions of him.

DW: I think Zumwalt was a great man. I think he was a great admiral. I think he really go the ball rolling when he took over in 1968.

RV: That’s what a lot of folks say. A lot of historians have said that as well. Things really picked up pace when he came on board and took over.

DW: I think he took over in September of 1968 and that’s when things picked up.

RV: How would you describe the Vietnamese people, the regular civilians first?

DW: The people that we came in contact with was mostly farmers, but they were very good people. Sort of passive. Even the language school we went to, you know different dialects and whatever. Had a hard time communicating with them. We had maids in our barracks. They were good people.

RV: How would you describe the enemy?

DW: The enemy, they were tough and tenacious.

RV: You fought mainly Vietcong, there in the Delta. Did you ever run into any of the regular Army?
DW: Yes, I think probably up on the Cambodian border when we were up on
Operation Giant Slingshot. I think we ran into a lot of the regular Army, North
Vietnamese Army. They only had a few miles to come right out of Cambodia.
RV: You said they were tenacious, what else?
DW: They were tenacious and inventive. They had a hard time with supply lines.
They could do you some misery.
RV: Such as what? Can you give me an example?
DW: Are you talking about setting up ambushes and whatever? They’d dig a hole
in the ground. They’d wait for the tide to get down where the .50s wouldn’t reach you.
Then they’d zero in on you, pull them rockets to you.
RV: What do you think the enemy’s strengths were?
DW: Home ground.
RV: How about weaknesses?
DW: Probably supplies, munitions.
RV: Just not getting enough stuff. What were your experiences with combat
like? You said immediately in August you did 25 missions. Did you see combat
immediately there?
DW: After a couple weeks.
RV: What was that like from the boat’s standpoint? Most people when they
think of the Vietnam War, they’re thinking on the ground, when you’re fighting like that.
What was combat like on those boats?
DW: Well, when you see what a rocket will do to a boat and you’re riding down
a river, about 40 or 50 feet wide, it’s kind of scary.
RV: Are you talking about a shoulder held rocket? Would the PBRs withstand?
How many rocket shots could it withstand?
DW: That one in November, it took several of them.
RV: In the hull?
DW: Yes, they were made out of fiberglass. Some of those things it was hard to
sink one.
RV: Was that their main weapon against you, the rocket?
DW: Yes, probably the rocket. Probably an RPG round or a B-40.
RV: On the boat itself, where were you stationed?

DW: Our training trained us to do everything on the boat, except for overhauling the engine. We had an engine man for the engines. On the big maintenance activities, actually they had the cranes pull the boats out of the water and put them in the shop. They had fiberglass people; they had maintenance people to do that. My biggest job I took care of all the weapons. I handled the forward .50’s most of the time. We had a four-man boat crew. We had a boat captain, and he could be either second class, first class sometimes even third class. We had a third class gunner’s mate or second class and then the same way with an engineman, either third or second. Then a seaman to take care of the boat. An engineman took care of the engineering part of it. The boat captain took care of all the charts, radios and he usually drove the boat. Gunner’s mate took care of all the weapons, grenades. The seaman kept the boat cleaned. But anybody could flip flop.

RV: I imagine that was very important to do.

DW: Yes. All of us were taught to drive the boat. All of taught to use the radios.

RV: Were the boats easy to handle?

DW: Yes.

RV: They basically took these motorboats, developed them on the east coast of the United States, the fiber glass type and put them in the rivers there in the Mekong and the basic take on this was a that it was really ingenious to do this. These very shallow draft, fast moving, very versatile boats.

DW: A lot of people think this was not a pleasure craft. It was strictly a war boat.

RV: Of course, right.

DW: They had two, six cylinder, diesel engines on them. They run off pumps. The pumps blow the water out with water jets. You’ve got your propulsion and you’re steering from the pumps. They were heavily armed. Most of the boats that we had, had two M-60s on them on each end you’d go. You had two forward .50s. You had an after .50 with a honey wheel mark 18 grenade launcher right on top of it. Three M-16 rifles and two M-79s that shot the .40 mm grenades. Actually everybody was a gunner except the guy that was driving.
RV: Of those weapons, which was your favorite one? Which one did you like to have?

DW: I liked the .50 the best.

RV: That’s the one you were on the most, you said?

DW: Well, that’s the one that was the most dependable. You get to it’s space and have the timing set on the .50 and it’d just keep on shooting.

RV: Were you on the lead craft a lot or did you rotate back to the support craft?

DW: We probably rotated.

RV: How did it feel being on the .50 up there in the front, lead boat going up a river? Did you get used to that?

DW: Seemed like nothing ever did happen if you were apprehensive about it. About the time you relaxed, that’s when everything started happening. It was hard to get comfortable and hard to relax.

RV: Right. Did you prefer night mission or day missions more?

DW: Actually I preferred the night mission later on.

RV: Why was that?

DW: Because we never did patrol, we’d set up ambushes.

RV: Can you describe one of those, a typical ambush?

DW: You were sort of caddy corner across from each other, boats get a good field of fire for both boats. One drift in, you cut your engines off. Drift into the bank just reach up and grab a branch or something and tie into it. You just sit there and wait for somebody to come along.

RV: When they did?

DW: They usually got the worst end of the deal.

RV: How did you know that when you drifted away from the shore, you were apprehensive about who might be right there on the shore?

DW: Not really because that jungle foliage is so rough, so thick. The places that hadn’t been sprayed, they hadn’t sprayed a whole lot down there where we were at. Some of it in ’68. You just drifted in there and grabbed something. The boats were painted about the same color, so they blended in fairly well.

RV: How often would you do these night ambushes?
DW: Later on in late ’68 and early ’69 about every patrol. You know the Army had the heat sensors. They could pick up body movement and they relayed that information to our headquarters. They pretty well knew where they wanted you to set up ambushes at. Where they had a lot of movement.

RV: When you set these up you were expecting. You didn’t set them up just randomly. You set them up where they had told you where to expect some movement.

DW: That was my information, that was my understanding. I was an E-4. I was a gunner’s mate. We weren’t real privy to a whole lot of the decision making process.

RV: I think a lot of people, at least the ones that I have talked to, if they’re not a historian who’s actually studying what went on in the Mekong Delta, their image of the PRB and that kind of revering warfare was from the movie, “Apocalypse Now”.

DW: Actually it wasn’t nothing like that.

RV: That’s what I wanted to ask you. What do you think of that representation?

DW: I’ve seen “Apocalypse Now”, but I don’t have much faith in that.

RV: Why?

DW: The whole process of it. All the crazies, the dope smokers and potheads and whatever. We had guys that drank. A lot of the guys had been in for any length of time. Most of them drank, but they weren’t real big on the dope and stuff.

RV: You guys stayed pretty squared away when you were on a mission?

DW: Yes.

RV: Was there a lot of drinking or alcohol abuse that you saw?

RV: No alcohol abuse, but see the water was so bad, I guess the evaporator where they made the fresh water it had a salt tinge to it. About the only way I could ever drink the water was make coffee out of it. Then it still had that old brown flavor. We drank beer. They didn’t say nothing about drinking a soft drink or a beer. But there ain’t nobody abused anything. You had to keep yourself pretty straight.

RV: How about drugs? Did you see a lot of drug use or not?

DW: No. Not really. Some of them guys from big cities are probably used to it. They might have smoked a joint or something sometimes. I didn’t really see that much drug abuse.
RV: You answered in your questionnaire that you had received two Purple Hearts, is that correct?

DW: Yes.

RV: Can you describe what happened on those two separate occasions?

DW: Well, one of them was on November the 8th when we took all the rockets. Everybody on the boat got wounded. As a matter of fact, we were taking some of the new guys out. I believe at the time the chief got killed. I think there were six guys on our boat at this time. You know one of the new guys that we were breaking in. He got wounded, the engineman got wounded. The seaman got wounded bad and the boat captain got wounded real bad and the chief got killed.

RV: Did you take shrapnel?

DW: Yes, shrapnel.

RV: Whereabouts?

DW: I got shrapnel in the back and where it hit the fiberglass I got fiberglass back pretty good.

RV: How about the second Purple Heart?

DW: The second Purple Heart we were using a runabout to set up ambushes. We were just coming off an ambush and we were with two PBRs. We ran off and left them and the guy pulled the boat back dead in the water. We were about ten feet from the bank and they hit it with a rocket and it blew up in my face. Matter of fact, probably the rocket didn’t even go off. If it had a concussion probably was going to kill me.

RV: Were you evacuated out of the area?

DW: I was evacuated to Saigon and then a couple days later I was sent to Japan. I came home after that.

RV: Really? So that was it for you? What happened to you physically?

DW: Outside of getting my feeling hurt and being depressed and being scared, I thought I lost my eyesight.

RV: Really?

DW: Because the flash burnt my eyes. I got a big split down across my forehead. I had shrapnel in my left hand and up and down my right arm. I took a heck of a concussion right in my face. I was sore for several days after that and I couldn’t get
around good. It burned all of my hair off, burnt my eyelashes off, eyebrows. It burnt the right side of my face pretty good.

RV: Were you able to recover?

DW: Yes, sure.

RV: You’re ok today?

DW: Yes.

RV: What kind of contact did you have with ARVN?

DW: The ARVN people?

RV: Or the Vietnamese Navy?

DW: Actually we didn’t have too much contact with the Vietnamese Navy. We probably worked closer with the Army than we did with the Navy.

RV: What was your impression of ARVN?

DW: I don’t know. About all we did, I don’t think they were too disciplined some of them. I’m sure some of them were excellent soldiers. I might not say that. We had a kid I believe it was in September or October 1968, they were inserting a bunch of ARVNs. They’d take those frag grenades and put a big, wide rubber band around them and pull the pin on them. They had a boat full of those ARVNs. One of those guys dropped a grenade. The kid was in the gun tub he came out for it and al the ARVNs reached for it. I think a guy named Spiller I think it blinded him. He got hurt pretty bad.

RV: Did you think they lacked poor leadership or discipline or what?

DW: Actually I can’t say because I didn’t know enough. Probably some of the guys that were advisors and stuff, see al we did we inserted these guys. When they’d call for us, we’d come and get them. That was about our extent of them.

RV: Like a taxi service only?

DW: Yes. Sort of like a cover boat. You insert them, then you go back out. Then when they holler at you to go back in to pick them up, we go back I and pick them up.

RV: What was life at the base like?

DW: Life at Nha Be was pretty nice. They had a nice chow hall. They had fresh milk, long sandwich line, opened 24 hours a day. You could get about anything you want o eat, excellent food. Living conditions for the PBRs in Nha Be were really good. When
we went to the Hornett County and operated off it, the food was good, but you know you
didn’t have as big a selection as you did off the base.

RV: Were you well equipped? You answered some of the questions in your
questionnaire that you had a lot of equipment. You basically had your pick. Your boats
were well taken care of.

DW: Yes, they were. We had an excellent maintenance facility both on the
Hornett County and at Nha Be. The boats were well cared for. They were well
maintained. We had excellent leadership. You know most of the guys were probably
average age on the PBRs it was very, very old for a combat outfit. Most of the younger
guys were 20 or 21 years old. That’s probably 2/3 of them. Then you have the chiefs
and officers. Most of those were probably 25 or 26. Some of the chiefs, first class were
over 30 years old. The average age rounded out to I’d say 24 or 25 years old.

RV: That is older than what was on the ground as far as American forces were
concerned.

DW: Most everyone on the boats was a petty officer.

RV: You said you described the leadership you had as really good. What about
overall American leadership in Vietnam?

DW: Well, from a Navy standpoint I think we had excellent leadership even on
the ships I was on. On the U.S.S. Monticello. I think officers a ship board was very, very
good. It was excellent. Of course everything I’ve seen in the Navy in Vietnam, they did
an excellent job. As far as all the preparation, execution and taking care of the people.

RV: What did you think of overall American policy in Vietnam?

DW: I wasn’t too enthused with the overall American policy. Sort of like
dumping in on hand and wiping with the other one. There wasn’t nobody that could
really make their mind up what they wanted to do. I think everyone understood that at
that time.

RV: Did that affect morale?

DW: Well, really not on our unit. You get a lot of negative statements. I know
in 1968, well actually I was and I think most of the other guys were proud to see
President Johnson leave.

RV: Why is that?
DW: I think he was too wishy-washy.

RV: Did you guys think that Nixon was going to do something really different?

DW: Yes, I did really. I think he probably handled it about as good as he could.

RV: How much were you able to keep up with news back home in America?

DW: We had a TV in our den. You walk into the barracks at Nha Be we had a rec area where we had a TV. You even go the ball games. You got them a week late. They use to have a week of the ballgames.

RV: Like the NFL?

DW: College games, yes. Actually if you weren’t doing anything you’d go in, probably the Armed Forces TV network. They were showing NBC, CBS or ABC. You know we had *Stars and Stripes* Magazines. Probably some of the Navy magazines, Navy news and whatever. I’ve always liked to read so I kept up to date pretty well.

RV: Did you ever encounter any problems with the media coverage there while you were in Vietnam?

DW: I never ran across anybody in the media. If I did, I didn’t know who they were.

RV: What do you think of media coverage overall with the Vietnam War?

DW: I wasn’t too enthused about it. Matter of fact, I’m not too enthused about it right now. I think it’s hard on anything now. We live in such a diverse society that nothing is straight true and narrow. You’ve either got flip flop off/on whatever. Nothing is right and wrong. You know what I’m talking about. People’s got to make their own opinions. You’ve got a good education. You can make your own opinion about what they do.

RV: How much religion was in the field there with you in Vietnam?

DW: Actually quite a bit. The guys that we got killed they always had a memorial mass for them. We’d always either had a priest or a lay preacher or whatever, they’d come in. A military chaplain usually a Navy chaplain they’d come in and hold it for you. Usually if I’m not badly mistaken I think on Sundays they always had either a mass or church of some kind at Nha Be on Sundays.

RV: So you had opportunity to attend services?

DW: Absolutely.
RV: Did you attend them?

DW: Very rarely. I always attended the memorial or whatever.

RV: Were there a lot of Navy chaplains around Nha Be?

DW: They had ones assigned to certain areas and I’ve seen chaplains several times. I don’t exactly know how many there were.

RV: You had access to them if you wanted to?

DW: Yes.

RV: Were there any counselors available to you guys at Nha Be?

DW: Counselors?

RV: Yes, just in case you had combat stress or what have you. Were you able to talk with somebody professional if you wanted to?

DW: I’m sure that they would probably have loaded you on a bus and sent you to Saigon if need be.

RV: How much contact did you see with disease? One of the main concerns of the Americans making the policy was Malaria? You’re right there in this very heavily mosquito infested area in the Mekong Delta, what kind of exposure did you have to any kind of diseases?

DW: We had a lot of mosquitoes, but I don’t think we had very many people get sick with Malaria.

RV: Did you ever get sick?

DW: No.

RV: Did you take your Malaria pills everyday?

DW: I think we got shots. I think they gave us pills and stuff. We pretty well took our medicine.

RV: What did you guys do for entertainment?

DW: We drank, listened to music, watched TV, played cards, gambled. I think they had movies there. If you weren’t on patrol when we were in Nha Be from 4:00 in the evening to 8:00 at night you could go into the town of Nha Be.

RV: What would you do there?

DW: Chase the women and drink, shoot the breeze, get your clothes pressed and whatever.
RV: Did they have good bars there in Nha Be?

DW: not really. The bars were set up to relieve the sailors of their money.

RV: What was your typical night there in Nha Be like?

DW: We had barracks, they had rooms petitioned off, two guys to a room.

Usually in my room I had my stereo. I had a small refrigerator. Of course we had the
chow hall right across the road where you could eat anytime you wanted to. Usually
we’d get together we’d play cards or play poker, gamble drink beer. Watch TV
sometimes.

RV: Did you ever take any R&Rs?

DW: I took R&R I took a week in Vung Tau, when I got hit in November ’68.

RV: What did you do there in Vung Tao?

DW: Drank, went out on the beach, walked up and down the beach. Just lazed
around for a week.

RV: Did that relax you or did you miss being with your buddies?

DW: No, I enjoyed it.

RV: Did you ever see any USO shows?

DW: I don’t remember seeing a USO show. I saw one USO show, but that was
in San Diego in1967 I believe. It was Flip Wilson and I can’t think of the guy’s name. “I
get no respect”.

RV: Dangerfield?

DW: Yes, Rodney. He’s good. I saw him and Flip Wilson do a USO show.

RV: I bet that was funny show.

DW: Yes, it was.

RV: What kind of wild animals did you guys see there?

DW: We saw mostly those lizard type things. I forget what they called them.

RV: Geckos?

DW: Sort of like geckos. I don’t think they called them geckos. We saw several
of those. A lot of poison snakes.

RV: Where did you see those were they at base?

DW: They had a lot of water snakes over there.

RV: Anybody ever get bitten that you know of.
DW: I think one guy after I left. I saw it on the internet where he’d got bitten, but it was a non-poisonous snake.

RV: Where did you see these when you were out on patrol and hanging in the trees and things like that?

DW: Yes, usually on the bank or swimming in the water or whatever.

RV: Did you guys ever disembark when you were out on patrol and get off on the bank?

DW: Yes, several times we did. If we had something we wanted to check out if we wanted to, we’d go on the bank and check it out.

RV: What would you do?

DW: We’d just pull up on the bank and you’d just jump off the bow of the boat and go about whatever you were going to do.

RV: Was that one person would stay with the boat and the other three of you would?

DW: Usually you’d have a couple of guys and the rest of them stayed in the boat.

RV: Did you ever have any trouble, any contact with the enemy when you did that?

DW: No.

RV: I’m sorry go ahead.

DW: If you thought there was any possibility that you had contact with the enemy you weren’t going to the bank.

RV: Right, I can imagine. What about the country itself? What did you think of Vietnam itself?

DW: Vietnam was a beautiful, beautiful place. Sort of like the Philippines. You know what I’m talking about the climate and whatever. It’s just a tropical paradise.

RV: Would you ever want to go back?

DW: Not really. I’d like to go to Hawaii, but I don’t have much of a desire to go to Vietnam.

RV: Did you ever get exposed to Agent Orange or come in any kind of contact with that?
DW: You know they did a lot of spraying in ’68 and ’69. Up there on some of the rivers especially when we went on Operation Giant Slingshot they sprayed the heck out of those banks. I’m sure that we probably came into contact with it.

RV: Have you had any problems at all that you know of?

DW: Not really that I know of. I don’t know what all the problems are, but as far as I have no cancers that I know of, whatever.

RV: Were there any race issues that you were aware of?

DW: That’s when they were having a little bit of racial trouble in ’68, ’69. I think the Democratic National Convention, but not really. We had a few blacks in our river division, but they were squared away guys, straight up. Most of them were pretty good people.

RV: So, no incidents that you are aware of?

DW: Of course we had a few other red neck guys too. Most of them were like the guys from down south. I was friends with a couple of them. I got along good with them. As a matter of fact, the seaman on our boat was a black guy. He was a friend of mine.

RV: Did he make it out?

DW: I hadn’t heard form him in several years. I don’t know whatever happened to him.

RV: Were there any discussions or incidents of fragging?

DW: You know I never heard that until I’d already got out of the service. I’d never heard that. Are you talking about getting rid of people you didn’t like?

RV: Yes.

DW: As many books as I’ve read in the last few years, I’ve come across it several times, but I never heard it when I was in the service.

RV: What was the bravest action that you witnessed there in Vietnam?

DW: Probably the bravest action it took a lot of guts for everybody to go up and down the river. You know when things got pretty hot everybody filled in and done their job. The things that I’ve seen personally actually you can’t put one guy above another. When things got hot, things got pretty tenacious everybody chipped in. They did their job well.
RV: If you could change anything about your experience there in Vietnam what would it be?

DW: I hate to see the guys that got hurt bad. I hate to see the guys that died. That’s the only thing that I hate about my experience. I think it’s been a good lifetime experience for me.

RV: No regrets about doing what you did?

DW: Absolutely not. I think we did a wonderful job. At the time I think we did a job that needed to be done.

RV: How did you leave Vietnam? That’s when you were in Japan right? You were evacuated out?

DW: I was evacuated out and I stayed in Japan probably about six weeks. I left Japan on an airplane and flew back into San Francisco and then flew from there home.

RV: How long were you actually in country?

DW: I looked at that the other day. I was over there a little over eight months.

RV: Did those eight months go fast for you or did they seem to drag by?

DW: When you’re 20, 21 years old everything drags by.

RV: What was you flight back like?

DW: I had a reaction from some medicine I had in the hospital. They bought me a new blue uniform. We stored all of our uniforms, we wore nothing but jungle green when we were over there. When I got back to Japan they bough me some clothes. I put on that travel uniform, I put on that blue uniform and I got a reaction off that wool all the way from Japan to San Francisco. I got out and I went into a little old airport store and I bought me a bottle of rubbing alcohol and that’s the biggest relief I have ever had. Everywhere the wool touched my skin I got a bad skin rash.

RV: So that was miserable flight back across?

DW: That was a miserable flight.

RV: Were you in a seat or were you still lying down?

DW: I was in a seat.

RV: What kind of reception did you have at the airport?

DW: Pretty uneventful. As a matter of fact we flew in I was under the understanding I just flew in and I got me another flight, got me a flight home. Actually I
don’t really remember it much now. At this time military people weren’t held in too high esteem. They didn’t bother you too awful much.

RV: Did you have any difficulty transitioning back into civilian life?

DW: Yes, I did. I had it real bad for three or four years two or three years whatever. I had a pretty rough time.

RV: Can you talk about that?

DW: It’s just hard to go back out. Matter of fact I had a hard time, I went back in the fleet when I came back. I got back in April so it was May probably about seen or eight months. I had a hard time just going back out and going to work in there. I don’t know it’s probably depression.

RV: Did this start when you got back home basically before you went back out with the fleet?

DW: Yes.

RV: How did your family react to you when you got home?

D: My family was glad to see me. All my friends were glad to see me. Matter of fact my next-door neighbor and right about the time I left to go over there he was killed May the 25th of ’68. That’s when I was going through PBR school. I was in the hospital I Japan longer than I had anticipated. I hadn’t wrote my mom or called her. She wrote someone trying to find me. She got a little bit ill, my mother did when she found out I was in the hospital and they hadn’t notified her. I put down not to notify my parents. I absolutely thought it was necessary.

RV: Why, to protect them?

DW: Yes, to keep their anxieties down or whatever.

DW: I got home and my parents they took it pretty good.

RV: So, how long before you went back out with the fleet?

DW: After I got home?

RV: Yes, sir.

DW: Probably about two weeks.

RV: Wow! Pretty quick. You were gone another seven or eight months you said?

DW: Yes, but I came home on weekends. I went on ship, I went on the Vermillion out of Little Creek (VA). Our deck officer told us gunners mate and
boatswain’s mates went in together. He just came down and told me he said, “anytime you want to go in on weekends, you come tell me. I’ll write you a special liberty chit. You leave out on Thursdays and come back on Tuesday”. I said, “man that’s great”. They looked out for me good.

RV: Was that because they knew you had been in country over in Vietnam?

DW: Yes, that’s because they knew I had been over there.

RV: Did you encounter other Vietnam veterans who had done their tour?

DW: No actually not very much in the Navy. I came back from Vietnam and I went straight to the east coast. You didn’t see a whole lot of those guys over there.

RV: When you finally go tour of the Navy, how difficult was it for you to transition to the civilian life permanently?

DW: It was pretty bad. I was probably pretty bad for a couple of years. I guess too much drinking and whatever. I got straightened out long about ’73 or ’74. I got married in ’74.

RV: Great.

DW: Had a child. I stretched it out pretty good.

RV: That helped you out?

DW: Yes.

RV: Before that time was it post traumatic stress disorder do you think? Were you reliving your experiences in Vietnam or were you just having difficulty relating to people or what was that?

DW: Probably a little bit of both. The bad thing about the guy that relieved me on the boat. I left February the 26th. The gunner’s mate that relieved me on the boat that I was on he got killed I think about the first part of April. I don’t know the exact date. Think it was the 9th of April. I’d only been gone five weeks and my replacement got killed. I wrote our operations officer. I wrote him a letter when I got on the Vermillion. Rarely you didn’t find out what happened to other people and they didn’t know what happened to you when you left. But I wrote him a letter that I wanted him to sell my refrigerator and my stereo and all my stuff and send me the money. He sent me the money back and he told me about the guy getting killed. You know I felt bad about that.

RV: Did you feel guilty about that?
DW: Yes, I felt a little bit guilty because actually I could have went back if I wanted to. I decided not to.

RV: Why did you decide not to?

DW: I was depressed a little bit and my mom was raising cain with me. Another kid on there he had been wounded before. He went back and he hadn’t been back long and he got killed. We were losing guys. I’m talking about December, January and February ’68, ’69 on that Operation Giant Slingshot. Most guys you’d have on the river out at one time was probably 18 people. I think we had 35-40 people wounded. A couple of guys killed. I guess three or four guys killed. A lot of guys wounded during this time. December, January and February was really, really bad months.

RV: So you decided you did not wan to take the chances again?

DW: They gave me my choice. If they’d sent me back I would have went back. When they give you a choice it take a pretty tough guy, really a dedicated guy to go back. I don’t guess I was that dedicated. Probably fear and common sense.

RV: I don’t know if it ha anything to do with your dedication. It might jus be common sense and your experiences too. Let me ask you a couple questions about U.S. policy. When you got back the United States was still fully involved in the war. What did you think about that? I know you served out your seven, eight months, but when you got out of the Navy did you not keep up with what was happening in Vietnam?

DW: Yes, I sure did. I kept up with it all the time.

RV: What did you think about U.S. policy?

DW: I didn’t have much respect for U.S. policy at the time. Actually what I think they were scared they were going to get another China.

RV: Meaning like Korea? If they went all out the Chinese would come in?

DW: Yes. It’s disheartening to think you’ve got an excellent military, you think you’re doing an excellent job and they put a leash on you. Basically that’s what I thought of it.

RV: What do you think the United States could have done differently?

DW: I think that they should have made Vietnam more responsible for a lot of stuff.

RV: Let the Vietnamese take care of business more?
DW: Yes, I think they tried to meddle in internal affairs too much in South Vietnam, probably early ‘60s. I think if they let the Vietnamese take care of it, give them a lot of support. I think they probably would have been a lot better off.

RV: What did you think about the policy of Vietnamization. That was basically 1973, turning the war back over to the Vietnamese.

DW: I think it was a little bit too late for that. All the material and men and probably well you’re pulling 500,000 or 600,000 people out at one time. That’s a pretty good-sized Army to pull out to replace. When they did that we turned all of our boats over if I’m not mistaken by 1970. The Navy was probably completely out of it, probably ’73. They probably had their advisors and stuff up to the end. As a matter of fact I think I read where the Army was pretty well out of it by about ’73.

RV: Did you think the Vietnamese were capable of continuing the PBR program?

DW: I don’t know. They started that when I left. The guys that came in, I’m sure they were. Vietnamese were just like anyone else. Some of them were well educated and some of them were smart. Some of them were ambitious. If you put enough resources into training anyone, regardless of what their race is, I think you’re going to come out with a well-rounded sailor or soldier.

RV: Do you remember watching on TV the fall of Saigon in April of 1975?

DW: Yes, I did.

RV: How did you feel about that?

DW: You feel disappointed and betrayed. Personally I know probably 20 guys that got killed over there. Like guys from my neighborhood, school, military. I don’t think the Vietnam people go their just do. I don’t think they got the respect that they should have got.

RV: The South Vietnamese?

DW: The American soldiers, the airmen, whatever, the Marines. You know we were pretty disappointed. Basically what I think is the United States chickened out and the Chinese picked the pace up.

RV: How do you think the Chinese picked the pace up?

DW: Absolutely. I think the Chinese furnished pilots, manpower, weapons, money.
RV: So as soon as we were out of the fight, they stepped it up?

DW: They stepped it up absolutely.

RV: What can the United States learn form the Vietnam experience? It’s very relevant today.

DW: Very relevant today. If you’re not willing to expend the manpower and the resources to get the job done, don’t start it.

RV: One of the common complaints about the American leadership was that in Washington D.C., they were basically running the war and not letting the military who were on the ground, in the water, in the air over there run it. Do you think that would have made a difference or do you think the people in Washington were trying to do the best they could?

DW: I think the civilians should make the ultimate decision on where to go to war. Probably on how are they going to apply the war. Like on what type of weapons to use. I think when they make that decision I think they need to turn it over to the military. That’s probably like a house painter going to come in and do the plumbing. (I don’t think civilians, I’, not knocking education thing. I think they’ve got entirely too much harbored in guilt in the government in the last few years. Probably post Second World War).

RV: Have you had any contact with the Vietnamese here in the United States since your time in country?

DW: No sir I don’t.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today?

DW: Probably a Communist country. I don’t think they’re much better off then they were back then. South Vietnam is not as well off. I don’t think North Vietnam has changed any.

RV: When you’re looking back at our service you mentioned you listened to music and things like that. One thing I like to ask veterans, any particular music or musical group or song that reminds you of Vietnam, your service there?

DW: “Black is black”. I remember that song, I listened to it. “Black is black and I want my baby back” or some junk like that.
RV: That’s exactly how it goes. Anything else any other songs any groups that you listened to a lot?

DW: No. I like CCR, but I listened to them mostly when I got back home.

RV: How about books on Vietnam what do you think are the better books on Vietnam?

DW: Well, I like James Webb pretty good. Are you talking about fiction or non-fiction.

RV: Well, either. What you think. If I wanted to read about Vietnam War, what do you thin I should be reading?

DW: The Vietnam War.

RV: Or about soldiers experience there, Navy experience there?

DW: Actually I’ve never read any books on the Naval experience. I read Webb’s books. I read the book “Stolen Valor”. As a matter of fact I read that “Papa, Bravo, Romeo”. Did you read that?

RV: No sir, I have not, but I’m familiar with it.

DW: I read that, but that would probably come near. You know the guy trashed a lot of people, but he wrote a pretty good book. If he left the negative statements out. That would probably come nearer to us than anything probably that I’ve read.

RV: How about the movies on Vietnam? They’ve been coming out since the late ‘70s. Which ones do you think are more authentic?

DW: I’ve read the book “We were Soldiers”. I read that book and that was a good book. I’ve heard that movie, I haven’t seen it yet. I’ve heard that movie was probably the best one. The only movie I’ve ever see I’ve seen that “Deer Slayer”.

RV: “Deer Hunter”.

DW: “Deer Hunter”, I didn’t think it was worth a crap. I’ve seen that “Apocalypse Now”. I didn’t think much of it. I’ve seen that movie “Platoon”. Of course we didn’t have I would probably have been more in line with World War II Army outfit than it was with us. Actually I hadn’t seen any movies on the Navy.

RV: There are not that many actually, I don’t think. For young people today, what would you tell them or teach them about Vietnam?

DW: Are you talking about he outcome of it?
RV: Just anything. If you walked into a classroom.

DW: If I walked into a classroom I would say you know the NBC newscaster Brokaw, he wrote the book about the greatest generation. I don’t’ agree with that. I think the greatest generation is the now generation. If you can’t learn from the lessons from your predecessors, you’re a lost species. I think the greatest generation we’ve got now is our young people. I think when we were the young people we were the greatest generation. I think we did an excellent job. As diverse a society and as many home problems as we had during the ‘60s and early ‘70s. I think the people that went over there and it didn’t matter religion, race or whatever, I think the people did an excellent job. Most of the guys that went over there are very proud of it. Most of them I’ve ever talked to. They’re very, very proud of their military time.

RV: Yes, is that how you feel about your service in Vietnam?

DW: Absolutely.

RV: Is there anything else that you would like to add or say for the record?

DW: I’d just like to say that I appreciate you guys doing this. I think you’re doing a great service. I’m sure that all the guys do. As a matter of fact I found this in the website at Texas Tech, what you guys do. I met one of your buddies, I can’t think of his name. But he came to the game warden reunion in New Orleans.

RV: Steve Maxner.

DW: That’s him, sure is. I think you guys are doing a great job. All the guys really, really appreciate it.

RV: It’s something we believe fully in. We want to make sure we get your accounts on the record. I certainly appreciate or conversation this evening.

DW: Thank you sir.

RV: Yes, sir. Hold on just a second sir while I stop this. This will conclude our oral history interview with Mr. David White.