Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Sumner Clayton. Mr. Clayton and I are in the interview room at the Southwest Collections Library on the Texas Tech campus and it is Wednesday, October 30, 2002. Mr. Clayton, if you would, please start with some biographical information for us. Where you were born, when you were born, and where you grew up.

Sumner Clayton: Okay. I was born here in Lubbock on January 25, 1941 in a hospital called The Sanitarium. It was the predecessor to Methodist. Well, it became Lubbock Memorial then it became Methodist. I grew up, other than about a year, in Tahoka when I was maybe three or four years old probably. I grew up in O’Donnell, Texas, 40 miles south of here. I went through twelve grades of school in O’Donnell. Of course, O’Donnell we didn’t have but two certified teachers. We had a lot of Tech students in their third year that were teaching and making some money for their last year, I guess. And we had a couple of farmers and this that and the other. There was only 16 in my graduating class. That was in 1959.

RV: What do you remember about your small high school experience there?

SC: My high school experience mainly was devoted to working in Clayton grain elevator after school during the harvest. And I helped Dad out. He owned, bought a grain elevator from a fellow down there in 1955. I started working in the elevator that first fall.

RV: How old were you when you started working there?
SC: Oh, 15. 14. I was 14 years old when I started working there, so it might have been ’54 when he bought it. I worked all through high school, worked in a grain elevator during the whole fall harvest which started usually about July or August and went sometimes as late as first of the year depending on the weather. There was a lot of milo maize grown here then. In my high school experience I wasn’t on any sports teams. Friday nights I was working in the elevator when the football games were going on just like Saturdays and Sundays. When the harvest was going you had to work to get it out to beat the weather. Then Mr. Clayton, I can’t say anything really spectacular about my high school deal except I did manage to graduate somehow.

RV: Were you a good student academically?

SC: Barely C average. You have to understand I was working, and I’d get out about 2:00, 2:30 in the afternoon and during the harvest I’d work until 11:00 at night, sometimes midnight. Then I’d get up and go to school the next morning and you don’t have a lot of time to study. If I studied, I had the books in my car parked out at the elevator and if we got a slow minute down there, well I’d read a little bit, but like I say, I just barely got through, I think.

RV: Do you remember what your favorite subjects were?

SC: Growing up when I was younger, reading was my favorite subject. High school, I think I was a member of the high school band for a while before I got to high school. In high school I don’t recall any favorite subjects really because I really wasn’t. History, I guess would have been my best one because I think I made better grades on it probably than the rest of them. I was no mathematician or anything like that. They only offered one year of general math and Algebra I. We only had to have 16 credits to graduate. So it was just a kind of a barely get by type education I guess.

RV: Did you play an instrument? You said you were in the band. What did you play?

SC: Well, in the high school band I played clarinet when I was in elementary school and junior high school. First chair clarinet. I also took piano lessons, played guitar and eventually the guitar won out over all of them. I took eight years of piano lessons, too. But all this was before high school. It takes me a while to tell a story but I’m going to add this anyway. Mr. Clayton wanted me to go to Texas Tech.
RV: Mr. Clayton being your father?
SC: Yes. That was just the thing to do. At 17 I tried to get him to sign so I could join the Navy and he wouldn’t do it, see.

RV: Why did you want to join the Navy then?
SC: He had three brothers in World War II. One of them was a tail gunner in a B-24 or a B-17 bomber in Army Air Corps, got shot down once. Uncle James was in the 1st Special Service Force, half Canadian-half American outfit; paratrooper. I think they were the 1st Rangers really. He got shot twice jumping out of airplanes, once in Sicily, once in France during the invasions. Wayne told the best stories. I liked his uniform best. He was in the Navy. So I decided to join the Navy. But in the meantime working up to all this, I had to go to college. So Dad got me enrolled, sent me up here the first summer semester after I graduated.

RV: Now, did you want to go to college or was you father insistent?
SC: I think he was insistent. I wanted to join the Navy. I had a sailor suit when I was this high, talking about two foot high probably. I wasn’t college material and I knew it. I was no good at math. My English was terrible. Science, I just barely made it through; economics and all that I wasn’t any good either. Just enough to pass. That was it. I had to have a little help on that. But anyway, I came up, lasted one summer semester, failed nearly everything and I studied. I studied really hard but I just wasn’t prepared. They didn’t prepare you back in those days in small high schools I don’t guess. They didn’t at that one anyway for me. I needed some extra help and I didn’t know it and they didn’t know to ask maybe or they couldn’t see it. Anyway, I went back home, worked in the elevator. He give me a job that fall again. So I worked full time at the grain elevator. During this time, I was making 75 cents an hour. I saved a pile of money. I decided that maybe a small college might not be bad. I went down to Sul Ross down in Alpine, I knew a couple of boys went to school down there. The dean in my first interview told me to go join the Army, get my military requirements out of the way and then come back and see him. Well, I came back home and I told Mr. Clayton. It didn’t sit well at all. After about two weeks of fussing, I finally just got in the car and I took off, went out to California and blew nearly every cent I had in about three weeks.

RV: Where did you go in California?
Out in the Los Angeles area just for somewhere to go. I’d never been to
California, thought I’d just go out there. So anyway, I had a good time, spent a lot of
money, came back to Lubbock nearly broke and I didn’t want to go back to O’Donnell.
So I got me a room in Lubbock, didn’t tell him I was back. I went and saw the Air Force
recruiter. They were all up in the old post office on the second floor. He wasn’t home. I
didn’t want to join the Army. The Navy was next door and he was standing there in the
two when I walked in the hall. So I went in and talked to him and took the test. For
someone who came out to be as dumb as I thought I was, I can pass a multiple-choice test
on anything. I don’t even have to know what it’s about. I learned how to take the things
somehow. I did really good on that entrance test. He sent me to Amarillo the next day and
passed the physical. Of course I was one eighth of the draft but you weren’t drafted until
you was around 24 years old in 1960. 1960 I was registered in the Lubbock draft board
and they had told me that they were drafting about age 24 on the average. It gave you
plenty of time to get a college deferment, get married, have kids, whatever. Okay. I went
in on the delayed entry, he said, “Say, how long would you like to go tomorrow or do
want a little time?” I said, “Well, I haven’t told my folks I’m doing this yet. I ought to go
down and make my peace with them. Give me a month.” He said, “Okay, I’ll be down at
the O’Donnell Post Office two weeks from Tuesday. We have to run some references.” I
said, “Alright.” Well, I met him at the post office, got in that gray station wagon with
U.S. Navy wrote on it, went to the school, the principal and the superintendent gave me a
really good recommendation. We went to the deputy sheriff. He gave me a real good one.
Of course, I never had been in any trouble anyway. Then he said, “Now, we have one
more reference to run through.” I said, “Who might that be?” He said, “Your last
employer.” [laughter] “Well,” I said, “Okay, that’s my dad and he doesn’t know I’m
doing this.” So we drove out to the elevator.

Together.

Together and talked to Dad a little while, and the he asked me if I wanted a
ride back to the post office. I said, “Naw, I guess I better stay over here for a little while.”
So I talked to him and Dad offered me some part of the crop and wanted to buy me a
Mustang. Everybody was buying their kid a Mustang if they’d stay at home then. I said,
“No. I’ve already thought about this for years.” I said, “This is my second try at it so I’m going through with it this time.” So I had another two weeks and then I left.

RV: Were they supportive? Was your father and your mother supportive?

SC: Eventually they were. Eventually they were. Mother thought I was, mother was still alive, both of them were alive when I went over to Vietnam. I told her I was working on a base in the ship store the whole time.

RV: Oh, really. She didn’t know you were…

SC: Not until I got back. I wasn’t about to write her in letters and tell her.

RV: She probably appreciated that I guess to an extent.

SC: I think she probably did. Dad pretty well knew what I was doing. I’d throw little hints in the letter every once in a while.

RV: “I saw a mine today,” Right. So you went to San Diego for your basic training, is that right? What was that like?

SC: It wasn’t really hard for me because I was brought up, my dad was pretty [strict]; he was a father. He had a lot of authority. He never did actually take his belt to me unless I really deserved it, and I remember every one I got, which wasn’t very many. I was used to when I was asked or told to do something, you just did it. Shoot, that was right down my line in boot camp. Didn’t bother me a bit. I just had a lot of people telling me what to do.

RV: Right. Instead of just one.

SC: I was used to not stern discipline. My dad did not beat on us or threaten us or anything else. If you messed up he’d let you have a lick or two every once in a while, but you really had to mess up to get his attention like that. I was used to authority and me being under some type of rules. You’ve got that. You had the rules of the schoolhouse and of course the law-abiding part of it. Boot camp was easy to me.

RV: Was the physical part challenging to you?

SC: No. I’d been using a grain scoop for five years, no aluminum. We had the real thing and they’re about that wide and about that long and about that deep with a short handle [indicating with hands]. The thing weighs 20 pounds. I was the best shape I’d ever been in [laughing].

RV: Well, what kind of training did you undergo there? Is this your basic?
SC: Just basic military requirement type training. How to recognize the different rates and ranks of the different officers and NCOs and this, that, and the other. A week of mess cookings. I shoveled hamburger for a week. I shoveled hamburger coming out of a blender, a big [?] blender. We washed our clothes with a scrub brush and hung them out on the clothesline and did a lot of marching. Boot camp was really easy for me, I thought.

RV: How long did it last?

SC: Nine weeks.

RV: What was the most challenging thing about that for you or was there anything challenging for you at that point?

SC: Well, it was all a little bit of a challenge. I’m not saying that I just breezed through it. I guess I should rephrase that. It was a lot easier than I thought it was going to be. That probably makes more sense because the way I was brought up. I think the best thing about boot camp, like any school was the graduation ceremony. I thought it was really something. I didn’t think much about that part of it really. I was in good physical shape, had the ability to read, write, and understand.

RV: What kind of weapons training did you have?

SC: We had .45 caliber and the M-1.

RV: Now had you handled guns before? Were you used to this?

SC: Oh, yeah. Down in O’Donnell everybody had a rabbit gun. I had a .410 shotgun and a .22. Of course a .410’s got a .22 on it anyway. It’s over and under deal. I used to go rabbit hunting all the time.

RV: Okay. So you were used to handling weapons.

SC: Sure. And I knew the safe way to handle them. That was back in the days when nobody would dream about taking one to school or something. Wouldn’t have done that for the world. The thought never entered anybody’s head to bring one to school. But we did a lot of rabbit hunting on weekends.

RV: How would you rate your training, your instructors? How were they in your basic training?

SC: I think I had some really good instructors. All of them were able to get the point across, some of them in various different ways than others. Some of them had to yell a lot in order to get the point across and some of them didn’t. I found out I’ve always
been one that the yelling kind of just made me a little nervous sometimes. I’d always do what I was told or asked anyway.

RV: Were any of them combat veterans of World War II or Korea?

SC: I’ll tell you the truth. I don’t know. I would imagine that our company commander might have been in World War II. I don’t know. Of course, Korea, I was still in junior high school during Korea. He might have been a war veteran. I’m pretty sure he probably was. He had a lot of ribbons.

RV: Probably so then.

SC: But I don’t remember right now what they were.

RV: So after that nine weeks was up you graduated. Did your parents come to the graduation?

SC: Oh, no. They couldn’t.

RV: It was out in California.

SC: It was out in California and I had orders to Key West, Florida.

RV: Right after graduation?

SC: Yes. But I had 14 days to get there. So I just jumped on Trailways bus, got off at Big Springs. They were five of us left at the same time, were in the same company from that area and one boy was from Lamesa. His mother came down and met him on the bus and he said, “How you going to get to O’Donnell?” I said, “Well, I’ll wait around and try to catch another bus, I guess.” He said, “Get in the car. We’ll just take you up there.”

And he said, “When you get ready, I’ve got to go to Mississippi somewhere.” He was going to Biloxi I think. He said, “I’ve got to come down here and catch a bus about the same time probably. So we came back down to Big Springs about the same time going the same bus. He got off at Mississippi and I kept going. So it worked out really great.

RV: How did your parents feel when you came back home after you were now in the Navy?

SC: I think Mother still had mixed emotions, and of course I’m sure they was awful glad to see me. Dad, he wasn’t too sure about it. He never was in the service. He was the oldest of the five brothers and he pretty well had to help his mother and dad. He was married and I was about 11 months old when World War II broke out. So he was kind of the older brother that stayed and helped.
RV: How many brothers and sisters did you have?
SC: I have two sisters.
RV: Two sisters. How'd they feel about you being in the Navy and going that route?
SC: The oldest one is three and a half years younger than me. She thought it was pretty good. She married an Air Force boy, so she knew just a little bit about the service. He wasn’t in very long, about four years. Elaine had never been associated with anybody in the service I don’t guess, the younger one. I think she thought I was a blooming idiot the way she talked. Still thinks that sometimes. I get kind of indications [laughter].
RV: So tell me about Key West. What was that like? This is your advanced training.
SC: Key West I went to fleet sonar school. Like I say, I could take a test, and that whole battery of aptitude tests in basic training and I scored really high on the electronics believe it or not. I didn’t even know how to turn the radio on hardly. They sent me to fleet sonar school, Key West, Florida. That six months electronics training equaled two years in college.
RV: Really.
SC: Right because you haven’t got the English, Math. You ‘re supposed to already know this. It’s a sonar underwater radar type deal. Well, I lasted three months out of the six months before I finally bombed out because of the math. I just didn’t have it. They would threaten me. They’d call me in there and hold up this paint scraper and they’d say, “Do you really want to do this? To have to work with this thing the whole time you’re in the Navy?” I said, “Well, there’s not a whole lot else I can do. I guess I’ll have to.” So they sent me to Little Creek Amphibious base to the U.S.S. Dash ocean minesweeper 428. A wooden ship, 171-foot long and carries about 65 per crew; 65 people, five officers. I got down there, and since I had three months of sonar training, they put me right in sonar shack as sonar striker. Radar operator underway. I had it really nice until we were in a shipyard and the sonar console was a U.Q.S. I Delta [sonar] and it was one that he school said was obsolete, that you would never see. That’s what we had on this ocean minesweeper. Anyway, we had had one of the drawers out and the shipyard workers had done something to it. Put some updates or
changes or something in it, brought it back and so they let me wire it back up. You’ve got
about ten bunches of wires. Each bunch had about ten or twelve wires out of it. They’re
color-coded. You’d hook purple and red or purple and yellow on the screw on bus A, the
first screw, and the pink one on another one and the green one on another one. And I got
that thing about half way through but the trick of it was, the breaker box is down in crews
birthing [compartment], forward birthing downstairs, two decks down. There’s no lock.
We don’t lock the breakers. You red tag them. Cut them off, put a red tag, whose name
on it and the time you tagged it out and nobody’s supposed to touch that sucker. Well,
apparently somebody did because it really, all it did was scare the heck out of me and
knock me down. I knew enough to work with electronics with one hand anyway. But
anyway, it felt like it just kind of stood me straight out, shook me real hard and threw me
across the room is what it felt like.
RV: You had got shocked.
SC: A 440 DC. I was out of my mind I guess. I went straight down to the ship’s
office and I told them I’m not going back up there anymore. I said, “Just give me a paint
scraper.” Biggest mistake I ever made in my life.
RV: Oh, yeah. Why’s that?
SC: Because I wound up on deck floors for the next 19 years on mine sweepers
chipping paint, cleaning, running boats, running cranes, rigging and playing with mines.
RV: Instead of running sonar.
SC: Instead of running the sonar.
RV: Now, where was the U.S.S. Dash stationed?
SC: Little Creek Amphibious Base, Virginia. It was halfway between the city of
Virginia Beach and Norfolk Navy Station on the South end of Chesapeake Bay.
RV: And you went there from Key West right?
SC: Right.
RV: And you were in Key West for three months, you say. About three months?
SC: I was there actually from May til August of ’60. So that would have been
three months.
RV: How long did you stay up in Virginia aboard the Dash?
The first time, from August of ’60 till September of ’63, then they sent me to Charleston, South Carolina to Mine Squadron 10, which was a bunch of 57-foot river minesweepers. While I was there before I got on a minesweeper, I got to be on this mine [recovery boat]. We had a LCU 1492 Landing craft utility that was converted to be a mine layer/mine recovery vessel because they put the old U.S. S. Nahant –AN-83 that they had out of commission. That was the only minelayer we had on the East Coast. So I was on it for a while. Then they put me on mine sweeping boat number 7. I was on it until, this is including the Mediterranean cruise with that boat, too. Not that boat, but we had some MSLs, 37-foot mine sweep launches with a Boeing gas turbine for an engine and they sent, while I was there at Mine Squadron 10 that time, we made a Med cruise for about seven to eight months, I guess.

RV: Over to the Mediterranean?

SC: On the U.S.S. Lindenwald. Landing ship, dock number 6. Then we came back and they put me on the MSB 7 then. I was on it until, let’s see, I wrote that down on the questionnaire. ’65 sometime and they sent me back to the U.S.S. Dash at Little Creek. So I spent another year or so on it, on the same ship I started on.

RV: Back in Charleston?

SC: In Norfolk.

RV: Oh, back in Norfolk. Back at the Dash.

SC: While I was on that thing of course, we was going to the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and back and forth all the time.

RV: How did you feel about traveling? This is the first time you—

SC: I liked it. I really liked it, especially the Caribbean Islands and the Mediterranean. I was one of them when we would pull into port, the first time, usually they’d try to set up some kind of a tour for anybody that might be interested. Most sailors, as soon as they get off head for the nearest bar. But I liked to, the first day I was off, to take those tours. I’d eat in the local cafes. I’ve been to the top of that Volcano, Mount Vecuvius that is blowing right now. Been right at the top of it when it was dry as a bone. I took a tour through an interesting factory. Cameo jewelry is handmade out of seashells in Italy and they have a factory in Naples. I went through it.

RV: You toured the factory.
SC: Toured the factory. Bought some jewelry for my mother and did things like that. That’s what they make cameos out of, seashells.

RV: Did you keep in touch with your parents regularly?

SC: Yes. I wrote to them every week or two weeks. Sometimes it might be a month but I kept in pretty regular touch with them. I’d call them sometimes when we would leave the States. Because we’re talking Caribbean three months, back on the East Coast, in and out, going here and there. After three months you need to go to the Mediterranean for six or seven months or you’d go back to the Caribbean for another three or four month tour. We used to rotate our tours. We had a lot of divisions of ocean minesweepers. We had about five divisions of them. We all rotated between the East Coast, the Caribbean Islands and the Mediterranean Sea. I was gone a lot.

RV: This was, for how long were you back, when you were north, for how long?

SC: We’d be back anywhere from four days to a month.

RV: This total tour lasted, you said, about three years. Is that right? Or your second visit.

SC: My second time on the ship, it was only a little over a year. Early ’65 to about November, September, October ’66. Then they sent me to Navy Career Counseling and Recruiting School in Bainbridge, Maryland for six weeks. Then I came to Lubbock as a Navy recruiter.

RV: Now, did you request to come back here to Lubbock?

SC: Yes. I put Lubbock as one of the choices. They said that we could put, like if it was in the 8th Recruiting District out of Albuquerque. It was the main office. I put in for, actually I put in for that particular recruiting district. They had an opening here in Lubbock. I was a E-5 Trial Field Recruiter, I guess. Most of them were E-6 pay grade and up career sailors. I was in the first class where they tried career E-4s and E-5s for field recruiter. There was two of us in that first class, I think with all the other chiefs.

RV: How did you like that job?

SC: I liked it. We had the draft still going. We didn’t have any problem putting people in the Navy at all. Until the Pueblo got captured, in three months we didn’t see anybody come in the office. They thought the whole Navy had been captured, out here anyway. But we didn’t have any problem at all recruiting.
RV: When you were back up in Virginia on the Dash the second time, this is ’65-
’66, this is when the United States was really getting heavily involved in Vietnam. How
much did you pay attention to overall national policy and what the United States was
doing in Southeast Asia?

SC: Well you couldn’t ignore it. It was in the news every day. Periodically we
would get kind of an update on the, as far as the ships company and different things like
that. But we got most of our information, really from the news media when you got down
to it.

RV: So you were aware of what was going on in Vietnam basically. What did you
think or why did you think the United States was even involved in South Vietnam and
Southeast Asia?

SC: I thought, myself, that it was just we didn’t like the people that were in power
in the government, and I assume that it was like the other places that we’d been involved
in and we wanted to eliminate that and probably put somebody that our government was
comfortable with in there. At that particular time, they were still, communist was kind of
a dirty word.

RV: This is the middle of the Cold War.

SC: Even in the Cold War. It was communist hold on Vietnam is what we
understood it to be. That’s really about all I thought about that. I just figured that we got
in it because of those reasons; to prevent communism from just flat taking over smaller
countries or parts of countries. I thought that that was what we were supposed to do.

RV: When you were recruiting there in Lubbock, you’re here for four years, what
were you telling the kids about Naval service and I mean, I guess possibly going to
Vietnam and serving there?

SC: The first question out of their mouth.

RV: “Am I going to Vietnam?”

SC: “Am I going, when do I go to Vietnam?” I said, “Well, I don’t know.” I said,
“It depends on where you are stationed. Needs of the Navy, of course, come first.” I said,
“I can tell you one thing, I haven’t been yet and I’ve been in the Navy since 1960 and I
haven’t been yet, but like I say, I wouldn’t doubt what I’ll have to go eventually unless
they end this thing pretty soon.” That’s what I’d tell them. That’s all I could tell them. I
could not say, “No, young buck. You're not going over there.” On the other hand I
couldn’t say, “No.” I said, “I can't tell you they're going to send you right out of basic
either. I don’t know what they're going to do with you. It’s up to you. You have to take
test in recruit training and between those tests and the needs of the Navy, they're
going to determine what they’re going to do with you, where they’re going to send you
and what job you’re going to be doing.” I tried to tell them the truth as much as I could.
My recruiter told me what I believed to be the truth. I guess it worked because I never
did have any of them come into the office mad at me after they got out of basic.

RV: That’s good.

SC: I can't say the same for the boss in my office. He used to, boy he could make
it look like a six month cruise in the Caribbean with no duties and not ever have to pick
up a weapon, get an honorable discharge, but he would really say that. He could have
been a used car salesman or something. I don’t know. But he had some kids come in
there, their parents looking for him a couple of times.

RV: Where was all this located in Lubbock.

SC: In the old post office building.

RV: Oh, it was still in the old post office building?

SC: Room 206 right across the west, east of the courthouse. It was upstairs up
there.

RV: Now did you have a lot of contact with your parents now that you were back
in this area?

SC: Yeah, I did. I used to see them just about every other weekend. I was married.

Of course, me and my first wife would go down there. Dad fell off a grain dryer one time.
He had two big grain dryers outside the elevator. He was one, he’s send the hired hand,
old Ramon Martinez worked for him forever. He’d send him home and say, “Well, I’ll
dry one more load and then I’ll shut it down.” That was my dad. Well, he climbed up on
that 600 bushel grain dryer and that ladder and little catwalk that didn’t have a guard rail
on it and it was only about this wide [indicating with hands], about three boards, get up
there to get a test. Stick a four foot probe down there and get a test sample, run it up to
the office and see how dry it was so he’d know when to run it out of there and put it in
the bin. He slid. It was heavy dew and some grain chaff, and he slipped off that dang
catwalk and landed on both his heels on a concrete drive, broke both of them. The grain
elevator office was about a block and a half up the lot there from the elevator. He can't
reach the controls in the dryer because he can't stand up. He managed to get up on his
knees and he like about, he said, about that much [indicating with hands] reaching the
darn things to shut the dryer off because it's a gas dryer. So he crawled. And this it 2:00,
1:00 in the morning. Ain't nobody up on O'Donnell except the night watchman and he
might be taking a nap. So he crawled all the way up to the office, got in that pick-up, was
a straight shift three speed, used his hands on the clutch and the brake and the gas and
rode home. It wasn't but about ten blocks across O'Donnell. We lived right on the other
side. Sat out in the driveway honking the horn, woke Momma up, made her go get my
Uncle Wayne Clayton, get him over there and they sat Dad out in the yard and she had to
go get Raymond and wake him up and send him over there to shut all that mess down,
lock it up before he'd let them take him to the hospital in Lamesa. They called me the
next day and said, “We need some help.” So I talked to my boss and I got three weeks
emergency leave and went down and run the elevator while he was convalescent kind of,
until he got to where he could get to the office. Because I worked in the office quite a bit,
too; weighing trucks, taking grain samples, cutting dummy orders for the train cars and
the big trucks we was loading and writing the checks and the whole bit. So I run the
office and Raymond run the elevator. There for three weeks, he kept a cot there and
during the busy season, he didn’t have time to go home. Mother was bringing supper and
lunch or we’d send somebody to get hamburgers at the Dairy Mart. So I slept in the
elevator office on that cot because I’d get about an hour, maybe two hours of sleep a
night if you could sleep. We had trucks lined up everywhere by the middle of the late
rush. Thanksgiving weekend.

RV: Oh, Thanksgiving weekend.
SC: Thanksgiving Day was the biggest day that year.
RV: So you kept the business going.
SC: I kept the business going. I kept in touch with them pretty good.
RV: Now, you’re getting ready to get your orders, getting ready to go to Vietnam.
Now, what kind of training did you have for Vietnam?
SC: What they did, I got my orders, actually eight months before my recruiting

tour end. The chief recruiter from Albuquerque called me on the phone and he said,

“Petty Officer Clayton.” I said, “Yeah, Chief.” He said, “You ever been to Vietnam?” I

said, “Well, no. Why?” He said, “Would you like to go?” I said, “Well, I guess it’d be

alright on a ship or something and all you could hear was him laughing over that phone.”

He said, “Guess what.” He read me that set of original orders and I said, “Well, okay.” So

I thought about it and thought about it and I said, “Well, I was going to re-enlist for six

years anyway. I might as well just re-enlist and take this set of orders and be done with it

because I know I’m not going to get out of them.” I never did know anybody well enough

to get out of a set of orders.

RV: Did you want to try to get out that?

SC: Nah. I was ready to go. I was kind of patriotic back in them days, still am. I

actually wanted to go and just go ahead and do what I could. I really didn’t try to get out

of it at all. I don’t think I could have anyway.

RV: Did you feel like here in Lubbock you were here for four years doing

recruiting, did you feel like you were making a contribution to the war effort and helping

out in that way or were you kind of feeling unfulfilled?

SC: I think I was because for one thing, during that period of time, they came out

with project 100,000 they called it. It was people that made the low score on the entrance

test. Armed Forces as a whole were directed to take 100,000 of these people that made

real low scores, put them in for two years, and they’d go right on deck force or something

like that if they went in the Navy. And in fact, the Navy even drafted, took some draftees

during that period of time there for a while. They wouldn’t find out about which service

they’d go to until they get to Amarillo. I feel like I helped because we tried to get the best

even with those particular people because normally, you had to be a high school graduate,

cut a 65 or better on the test to get in the Navy or have some college or something like

that. We tried to get the best individuals that we could and if there was something real

wrong with a fellow’s record that showed up, I’d just recommend that he not be put in the

Navy. Sometimes my boss didn’t like that because quota is quota. But that’s the way I

did. Sometimes I’d tell him and he’d order me to go ahead and work this individual and

process him anyway. Well, if he did I had to. If he ordered me to, like I say, I always
followed orders but most the time I tried to use my own discretion on it. Anyway, back to
the school and training.

RV: Now you had eight months. You got the orders and you had eight months
before you went?

SC: Right.

RV: So you had a lot of time to think about this.

SC: A lot of time.

RV: How’d your family feel?

SC: Mother was scared to death. Dad didn’t know what to think. My grandmother
and grandfather on Dad’s side were still alive then. It was about a year before they died.
My grandmother thought that I was just the best thing there ever was, like they do all
grandsons. She thought that was just wonderful that I was just doing some good. My
wife, first wife, I don’t know exactly what she was thinking about it because we kind of
fussed a little bit here and there. She didn’t insist that I try and opt to get out and I
wouldn’t have done it anyway. Tried to get out, I wouldn’t have done that and throw
away ten years? There wasn’t no way I was going to do that. So anyway, I think most of
them were a little apprehensive about it. I was probably a little apprehensive but I just
didn’t show it or tried not to show it, but I already knew. I’d been to school on mine
warfare, seven weeks of school on it and years of on the job training with every mine
counter measures equivalent you could think of. I knew how to rig it, how to put it out in
the water, how to bring it back, how to sweep mines, and how to fix it if it broke. So I
didn’t see too much problem. It was just live mines is all. Anyway, went to California
and this was 1970, May, I think, April, March 1970 I guess is when I went out there. We
did a lot of running around the football field, a lot of PT. The first month of the training
was, “What a rewarding tour you’re going to have.” We heard that quite a bit. We learned
a lot about the Vietnamese culture and their ways of life as the instructors especially had
been there. I’m assuming all of them had. So we had a month of just a lot of physical,
getting everybody back in shape. That’s something interesting, too, because I never was
much of a runner. I’d keep pulling ligaments in my ankles and things.

RV: During PT?
SC: During the running phase. I never was a runner, not even in high school. 220 something people in this class. Of course, they had a us in about seven abreast. For some reason or other in the Navy, they always line the tall men in the front line and the short men in the back line. And that fellow that’s going to call the pace, he’s going to be about 7’5”. Legs up to the ceiling. By the time we ran around that park one time, I’d run around it four times all the steps we took. And about my second go around around it, one time was a quarter mile and you’d run three or four miles around that darn thing. After about a half mile, I’d already pulled something in there and never did have to run that thing again because it took it months to get well again to where I could even walk good.

RV: I bet you didn’t mind not having to run.

SC: The running, that didn’t bother me not having to because when I did really, that damn thing hurt the way I pulled it, twisted it or something.

RV: What did your instructors tell you about Vietnam, about the culture?

SC: About the culture, they taught us about the, of course, any oriental atmosphere, you have the politeness, kind of a bow. When you motion someone over, you would with palm down not up because it was an insult. It insulted them if you point your finger and say it like that. They taught us about the food, the manners, I guess, the table manners you would say, which I learned anyway after I got there. As long as you, we’re brought up, “clean your plate.” If you got it on your plate, eat it. That’s the way I was brought up. And you ate it and there wasn’t anything you didn’t like. That’s just the way it’s supposed to be back then anyway. If you empty that rice bowl over there, he’s going to fill it up again, so you better leave a little in there if you’re full is what they told us and then that’s true. Because on those boats, they cook, about every three or four hours they cook a big hodge pot full of rice and throw a little fish in it and chop it up, cut it small, you know or C-ration meat or peas or beans or whatever they happened to have extra, or they could get extra, and as long as you emptied it, they’d fill it up again, so you learned real quick, if you was full, just leave it in there. Of course they taught us the story. And I never did figure out if that was true or not about the fish eyes and all that mess that they offered it to the honored guests. I never did find that out for sure. But they always told us that the honored guest always got the head of the fish. I don’t know whether that’s true or not.
RV: How about language training?

SC: Language training, I had six weeks of it. When President Diem came to the States when he was overthrown or got out before he was overthrown, he brought a bunch of Saigon schoolteachers with him. They headed and taught in the language school at Coronado Navy Station, California. He was head of the school. I had this teacher from Saigon and I can take a test. I wound up in the accelerated class.

RV: About Vietnamese.

SC: Yeah. Well, I could speak a little Spanish at the time, which I was around it all my life. So that probably helped I guess, on the test. Well, there was something. I’d been in South Carolina and Virginia and Florida and raised in O’Donnell, Texas and my accent is a little bit different than most folks. Back then it had a lot of Southern to it. She would have me say a word like toi, nine thousand different meanings depending on what other word was in front or behind it or used with it. And I’d say it and she’d say no, not toy, toy. And I’d say it again and then she’d start laughing. Of course, we couldn’t speak any English in the class, so it was really, you had to learn a lot in a hurry to ask her what she was laughing about. She finally told me in English one time after class. She could talk English a little bit. She said, “Now, you’re accent, where did you get that?” Well, I did pretty good. My final exam was a written and oral. Now I studied three and four hours a night, went to the library, listened to the tapes, got a set of the tapes, bought a tape recorder and had it in the apartment. I was living off base. I had a heck of a time with it but I did manage to get through it.

RV: It sounds like you did quite well.

SC: I was with college boys and high school graduates that had just got out of school and never took a book home and they’d ace the test. Well, I did pretty good anyway. My final test was a many word essay and they gave us about ten or twelve topics to pick from. And one of them was something about agriculture. So I told her in Vietnamese about cotton farming in West Texas. Now, you think that wasn’t a trick in Vietnamese. [laughing] But I did it and I got a good grade out of it somehow.

RV: That’s good.

SC: But I think it might have been a sympathy grade. I don’t know because she was laughing while I was telling her this story. Okay, now, the difference between
somebody from Alabama talking to somebody from Brooklyn, New York, that is the
difference between Saigon Vietnamese and Quang Tri Vietnamese. Some of the words
are even different coming from different dialects. So I had the basics anyway. We learned
30 new words and ten new sentences five days a week for working vocabulary of over a
thousand words. And I can't remember six words of it right now.

RV: You haven’t had to use it in quite a while.
SC: After I came back I didn’t have to use it. It went away.
RV: So when you got there, your language skills were pretty basic.
SC: I could communicate. I had one boat crew that did not speak English that I
rode with sometimes.
RV: And you had to communicate with them obviously.
SC: Sure. And I could talk to them and understand what they said as long as they
didn’t get too fast.
RV: What other training did you have besides cultural training and the language
training regarding Vietnam?
SC: Ok. They sent us to Camp Pendleton for a week of patrolling through the
mountains hunting the enemy type deals.
RV: Even though you were Navy.
SC: Right. I was a point man one day during this thing. First, they had us camping
out on the beach there on the rocks there in Coronado, and we fished for crabs and this
that and the other for our meals. We did this while we were in kind of a pre-survival
mode I guess you’d call it. Then they sent us to Camp Pendleton for a week. At the end
of that, we got weapons training, a lot of it.
RV: What kind of weapons?
SC: M-1, M-14, .45 caliber, the .38 revolver, and M-60 machine gun. I don’t
remember what all else. I think I might have fired an M-79 once or twice over there. I’m
not sure, grenade launcher.
RV: What was your favorite weapon?
SC: My favorite weapon of choice was the M-16, I guess.
RV: Why was that?
SC: Well, I was just good with it.
RV: That’s a good reason to like it.
SC: As long as you cleaned it quite often, well, it worked really well.
RV: Would it jam a lot I guess if you didn’t clean it?
SC: Mine never did. I’ve seen them where the bullet in the chamber was rusted.
RV: Were you proficient at other weapons, your .38 or .45?
SC: .38 and .45 I was pretty good at. The Navy didn’t give a whole lot of marksmanship badges or anything. I probably might not have been that good enough to earn one but I was pretty good with a rifle, not bad with a pistol.
RV: So this training at Camp Pendleton, this is a week of weapons training?
SC: Weapons and riding through the mountains like an Army squad would.
RV: Were your trainers, were they Vietnam veterans? Had they been in country?
SC: I’m thinking most of them probably had?
RV: How did you find the training? Was it difficult for you?
SC: Well, it kept you going pretty good. You learned a lot if you paid attention and you were really tired at the end of the day sometimes, especially when my ankle was still bothering me. Map reading, we learned during that time. We learned how to read an Army grid map and to get from point A to point B through the mountains. That was pretty interesting.
RV: Do you still remember how to read the maps?
SC: I can remember the grid. You had numbers down and across the bottom and I can't remember a darn thing about it other than that but you could get it in the cross hairs there and have an area, probably 10 or 20 yards square, 10 yards square maybe that you could possible pin point something. But I haven’t read Army grid maps since I was over there. Navy charts, that was a different deal in the ocean or rivers or something, but they're not like a grid map. Not set up like one really.
RV: So what happened after Camp Pendleton?
SC: Then we got to got through the survival escape evasion type deal.
RV: Was this at Camp Pendleton as well?
SC: No. This was at Warner Springs out in the desert, I guess about 40 miles outside of Los Angeles, Coronado. Warner Springs was the name of this. So we had two or three days out there and it would get so cold at night out there, we had sleeping bags full a pack, we was carrying. The pack weighed nearly as much as I did with the rifle. It was an M-14. We had two or three days of that and then we wound up in the escape evasion, the evasion part of it in the SEER school. We had to get from point A to point B without getting captured out in all this cactus and mesquite trees and this, that, and the other. Nothing out there but a few snakes and lizards. The jackrabbits even hid when we came out there. Well, everybody gets captured because the instructors, you assume they’re ahead of you and they're actually coming in behind you, following you through all this mess. So you get captured and even if you manage to make it through, you still get to go to the penitentiary, the prison compound anyway. Well, they found out that I, we fill out a paper, a little bit of history about our self and then its our job to get us to tell them some of this, like what the wife’s name is, the kids, where you brought up, all this sort of stuff. Of course, they brought up name, rank, serial number, date of birth. That’s all we’re supposed to tell them. Well I did really good at that even when that big fellow was bouncing me around everywhere. What they did, the captured us, put us in some deuce and a halves and took us to the prison compound. This thing has to the concertina wire, the guard tower, the cellar, the hole and the whole bit. We’re in there so they have air raid drills and every time the air raid drill would, first they’d strip you down to your drawers when they first get you there, take all your clothes away, in you drawers and a t-shirt. That’s it, bare footed. And make you crawl under some wire and they’re poking sticks at you and things like that. And you get to the other end and they pull this canvas hood over your head and that’s what they lead you around with where you can't see where you’re at. Then they put you, I’m going to have to show you if I can. If I can get back up off the floor. But this little cardboard box was about this high [indicating with hands] and about that long and maybe that wide and the only way you could fit in it was like this. You had some holes in it.

RV: Okay. Down on all fours and squatting.

SC: Squatting position and it had a coffee can in there just in case you could figure out a way to use it.
RV: An empty coffee can.
SC: Yeah, to pee in or whatever. Now, what they would do, they had three sizes
of boxes for all three sizes of people. I was little, so I got the small one. I weighed about
128, 129 pounds and about 15 pounds less than I do now, 20 pounds less. Anyway, about
the time that you’d decide to relax, try to relax and maybe even doze for a minute, this
fool would come kick on your box and when he did, you better answer up with you name,
rank, and all that. If you didn’t, he would open the box, they would drag you out, they’d
go interrogate you.
RV: This box was closed.
SC: A closed box.
RV: Dark.
SC: Dark. It had about six holes in it that I can remember for air. This whole
thing, process this going to take about maybe 20, 22, 24 hours. But it’s going to seem like
a week. Okay, what they do, when they interrogate you, they pull you out of the box, slap
that hood over your head. They’d lead you around, bump you into everything imaginable
and they’d get you in this place and they have like those spotlights there. It’d be about
four of them on this thing and they’re up about that high to me, shining directly at you
and they’ve got you in the corner of the room.
RV: How far away were the lights from you?
SC: About right here [indicating with hands].
RV: About five feet away.
SC: Just enough room where they shined over the individual that was going to do
this interrogating.
RV: And right into your eyes.
SC: Right in your eyes. That’s what you saw was them spotlights because it was
dark in the room when you pulled that hood off. The first time he does and you’re
supposed to say, “Sir, yes, sir;” and all that every time they ask you something else, or
“Sir, no, sir;” or something like that. If you didn’t answer just right, what he would do is
pick you up and he would go from one corner to the other corner about six times and the
last time he’d come across like that, across your face.
RV: Slap you.

Anyway, they would try to get you tell things they already had all this stuff they knew everything about you and they tried to get any type of information. Anyway, after several times in the corner, then after a while they’d give up and they’d take you back to the box and drag some other poor fool out there. After a while, I guess they, whoever they got to break might have broke and they did something with them. I don’t know what. Anyway, the rest of us held up pretty good. Then you’d go in the, what type of warfare would it be.

They’d tell you your wife is seeing somebody else.

RV: Psychological warfare.

SC: Psychological warfare. That was the next step to break you down. And they would tell you everything in the world and they’d show you these newspaper articles of the demonstrations out in California and here and there. And they tried to break you down that way. Well, that didn’t work either on that old hardheaded farm boy. I guess hard headedness seems to remain with me anyway. Anyhow, that didn’t work either.

Finally, we got out of that thing and they give us [food]. Now, we hadn’t had anything to eat to speak of in about five days other than one night we had some, found some wild mustard grain, so we made a pot of soup. Two nights we ate cactus leaves. That’s where you learned to wipe off the knife really good because the needles tends to hang onto it and make your tongue all sore inside your mouth. So you really had to be careful how you ate those things. One time, they fixed us, in the prison compound, they fixed a big old batch of instant oatmeal, I guess is what it was. I’m not even sure. I think that’s what it was. And it was scalding hot and they give it to us in these tin cups and we had about five seconds to drink the thing. And it was boiling nearly. So that was the extent of our food for five days really.

RV: The interrogation part was at the end of it.

SC: Right. The interrogation part was, the physical interrogation was the shock factor. That was the first thing. Then the psychological warfare came afterwards when they couldn’t break you down. When they couldn’t beat it out of you, they’d try to do something else. That didn’t work either.

RV: Did you ever get broken.
SC: Nah. He’d be bouncing me off that wall, ask me this, that, and the other and all I’d do, I got to where I was just screaming my name. I’d say Sumner Clayton. Bos’n mate, First Class. Give him my service number and my home of record or something like that. That’s all I gave them anyway. But I’d get to where I’d just over and over and over that’s all what I’d say until he finally quit banging me on the corner of them walls. He finally just gave up on it. Great big old’ fellow, about 250 pounds. Eating steak and drinking beer every night and here I’ve been starving to death and I was puny anyway for my size.

RV: So after this training, this is a week basically of this.

SC: Actually, the prison compound wasn’t but a day, 24 hours.

RV: But the whole survival type thing was a week.

SC: The whole survival, the SERE school was a week.

RV: Okay, and from there, where did you go?

SC: When they turned us loose from there, we had a set of orders and I had seven days to get to Fairfield, CA to catch a plane.

RV: So that was it. You were ready to go to Vietnam.

SC: We graduated. We were ready to go. Told us not to drive for 24 hours.

RV: Oh, really. Rest up.

SC: We hadn’t had any sleep, hadn’t had any food, and you could smell us two miles away. We had this camouflage junk all over us. We hadn’t had a bath in a week. Never rained the whole time. So we were ready to go overseas then.