Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Bill McCollum. Mr. McCollum is in Middletown, New York. I am in Lubbock, Texas. It is December 11, 2002, about 6:10 PM Central Standard Time, 7:10 PM Eastern Standard Time. Mr. McCollum, why don’t we start with a brief biographical sketch of yourself? Tell me where you were born and when you were born.

Bill McCollum: Okay, I was born in New York City, April 2, 1947. My family lived in Manhattan until I was around eleven years old.

RV: Wow. Whereabouts in Manhattan?

BM: Ah, 178th Street.

RV: Okay, so that’s north—


RV: Okay, what was it like growing up in Manhattan in these very early years of your life?

BM: It was—we had a neighborhood of forty, fifty kids in a two-block radius. We were all within three or four years of one another and it was very exciting. There was lots of things to do. We played ball, we went down to the park and down to the river where we wasn’t supposed to, where we got caught by our parents. But it was a very
peaceful neighborhood, there was very little crime and it was a very enjoyable childhood down there.

RV: What did your parents do for a living?

BM: My father was a (?) engineer in a hospital then he eventually went to the New York City school system working in the schools as a custodian. My mother was just a housewife and then later on in life she started working in stores as a sales clerk.

RV: Okay. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

BM: I have two older sisters and a younger brother.

RV: What are their ages in relevance to your age?

BM: Okay, I’m fifty-five, so my oldest sister is fifty-eight, the other one is fifty-seven, and my brother is fifty-two.

RV: So you’re all relatively close in age.

BM: Yes.

RV: Did you have a tight family?

BM: Very tight.

RV: Did you work in your youth, when you were there in Manhattan before you left?

BM: Did I work in Manhattan? No.

RV: Now where did the family move after you turned age eleven?

BM: We moved to Yonkers.

RV: To Yonkers, okay. What was it like there?

BM: It was basically the same, but now it was a little more rural with private houses instead of apartments. But it was the same basic—a lot of good people. We did the normal childhood things, playing baseball and all the sports and didn’t get involved with too much trouble.

RV: How big was the apartment in Manhattan?

BM: The last one—we lived in three different apartments—was three bedrooms.

RV: There were six of you?

BM: Yes.

RV: Did you share a room with your brothers?

BM: Yes, my brother and I shared a room and my sisters shared a room.
RV: Okay, so then when you moved to Yonkers was it a lot more space for you guys?
BM: Just a bigger room.
RV: Yeah? Okay.
BM: My brother and I still shared a room, but it was much bigger.
RV: Did you attend high school there in Yonkers?
BM: Yes, Sacred Heart High School in Yonkers.
RV: Tell me about your high school experience. What was that like?
BM: The school was a small parochial high school so there wasn't much opportunity for sports. So I didn’t really do much, just the normal. Nothing out of the ordinary.
RV: What were your favorite subjects?
BM: History and math and chemistry.
RV: Were you particularly good in these fields or did they just hold your interest?
BM: When I put my mind down to it and studied I was good at it. But I was a typical high school student, listening to the radio and watching television and dancing was more important than school.
RV: What years were you there in high school?
BM: Sixty-one to sixty-five.
RV: You mentioned watching TV and dancing, what do you remember about the outside school activities that you participated in?
BM: Excuse me?
RV: What do you remember about the outside school activities in which you participated?
BM: Nothing too much, really.
RV: Okay. Was there any military experience in your family?
BM: My father, no. My father did not serve in the military but his brothers did. So I had an Uncle Jim that was in World War II and an Uncle Sonny that was in Korea and my grandmother’s brothers were all in the war, World War II. She lost one brother.
They were all Army.
RV: All in the Army.
BM: Yes.

RV: Now, did you have much contact with your uncles who had served?
BM: Yeah, as much as any family but they never talked about it.
RV: Really?
BM: No.
RV: You were aware that they were in the wars?
BM: Yeah, but that was just the extent of it.
RV: Were you curious about asking them about it or were you told not to talk to them about it?
BM: The subject never came up so we just never—didn’t think much about it to tell you the truth.
RV: So you graduated high school in 1965. Where did you go from there?
BM: Well, ’65 was a turning point in my life that way, that summer after high school my father passed on and so that changed any college plans I had. So I just went to a community college in Brooklyn for a year or two. I tried to get into the Merchant Marine Academy. I just liked—I guess from watching all those movies on television—I liked the Navy. So I tried to get into the Merchant Marine Academy and didn’t make it. Then I just—the last time I tried, which was late ’66, early ’67, I said, “Well, if I don’t make it now I’m going to enlist in the Navy.” The timing, my father passing away, life was not, I wouldn’t say bad, but I wasn't happy. I didn’t have a social life I was going to school full time and actually working full time from six at night till twelve at night.
RV: What were you doing?
BM: I was a janitor in a high school because my father had been in the parochial, I mean excuse me, my father had been a custodian in the school systems. So through one of his friends I got a job to help my mother out, because I gave her most of the money. So I was going to school full time and working full time and never had more than five dollars in my pocket. So I was just [not having a good time]. It was the ’60s and a lot of things were changing, I just wanted to do something different so I joined the Navy.
RV: How did your mother feel about that?
BM: Well, actually she was kind of relieved that I joined the Navy because she was worried about me being drafted into the Army. To tell you the truth, I really never
thought much about it. I mean I thought about going into the military because, unlike
today, back then we had the draft and it was a foregone conclusion that you were going to
be drafted or you were going to enlist. I just never gave much thought about—I was
never worried about being drafted into the Army. But when the time came I just told my
mother that, “I’ll join the Navy, Ma. Don’t worry, I won’t go to Vietnam.” I did tell her
that.

RV: What did she say?
BM: She said, “That’s good.” She was worried that I would get drafted and be
sent to Vietnam.

RV: What did your other siblings think about you joining the Navy?
BM: They supported me. We never much talked about it from that perspective.
But my sisters were both married at the time so it was really only my brother and I. My
brother and I didn’t get along as well as we had in the past. He ran around with a
different crowd than I did and he was more involved with the smoking pot and things like
that.

RV: How would you describe yourself in 1965 and ’66?
BM: Very old. I was very straitlaced. Everyone else was at the long hair and
doing all of that stuff and I had my hair the same as I always did. I think it’s because,
you know, working in the school system I always had jobs with more adults. Even
though I had a lot of friends my own age I really spent a lot of my social time with older
people. So I was very straitlaced.

RV: Tell me why the Navy and not the Army.
BM: Tell you why. (Laughs) I was always fascinated with the Orient and I
always wanted to travel. Growing up watching shows like “Route 66” on television, that
was a life I wanted to do and I figured that the Navy offered me a better opportunity of
seeing more places than being stationed in the Army. My brother-in-law and a few
other—both my brother-in-laws were in the Army and I talked to them about their
experiences. But they were like stationed in Germany for six months and whatnot. I
wanted the thrill of going on a cruise like to the west Pacific or the Med and just see
various different places. I figured the Navy offered that opportunity. It was worth the
extra two years.
RV: This was in 1966 when you joined up?

BM: I joined up in, I think, that’s another thing, really some of those other things, boy it’s amazing some of these people with the dates. It was probably October ’67.

RV: Okay, October ’67. So you were in the community college there in Brooklyn for a couple of years?

BM: Yeah, and my last semester I really didn’t do much but I just figured that I would just stop. I’d already talked to a recruiter. I just wanted to have that one last summer activity before I’d went away, so I’d made the plans to just have a good summer. I had gotten a good summer job. In Yonkers they had a company called Otis Elevators. They used to hire college students in the summertime, pay them a real good salary for that time and I had plans to enlist in October ’67.

RV: Tell me what it was like when you went to enlist and where did you go?

BM: Well, I went to Great Lakes to do my boot camp.

RV: Where is that located exactly?


RV: Is this the first time that you had traveled, gotten on out of the New York area?

BM: Yeah.

RV: How was that for you?

BM: It was interesting experience. I mean more so when, because boot camp was—boot camp was almost like school. I mean I did join boot camp with a couple other guys so I really wasn’t completely alone. But boot camp was more like going away to school because I spent more time in classroom than doing anything else.

RV: In basic?

BM: Yeah. Then I went, after basic I went to a Naval A-School, engineman A-School. I had never done anything like that in my life. I wasn’t even sure if I was going to be good with my hands. But being my father was an engineer, was very good with his hands, I figured let me try that one. I did good enough in this Naval test I could get into almost any Navy school. I picked engineman A-School. But that was the—went I back after my boot camp for leave for two weeks. Some things always stand out in your mind. I’ll always remember the feeling after I checked in back at Great Lakes, I went back to
Great Lakes for A-School, walking across the yard there, right after going back to the barracks and I just put my sea bag on my shoulder and said, “Man, this is it.” Up until that point it wasn’t, not that it wasn’t real, but it was not the same because, like I said, you went boot camp and in very regimented environment. Now all of a sudden I’m on my own walking across this drill field and I said, “Wow, you really did it. All the years of talking about getting out and being on your own, now you starting.” I’ll always remember that feeling.

RV: How did you feel at that point?

BM: I felt great. It was just, it was the changing point of my life that now I was going to have to do things differently. You didn’t have that comfort of home and mommy and daddy always being there and I was on my own.

RV: Let’s talk about your basic training just for a little bit. How long did that last? Do you remember?

BM: Oh, let me see, about three months, I think. October, November—yeah, two-and-a-half months.

RV: Tell me kind of your basic routine there, if you remember that.

BM: Well, we were in a big dormitory-like environment with about eighty-eight guys. So we had forty-four racks, probably twenty-two on each side of the dorm-type thing, barracks is what they call it. It was a great cross-section, all different types of people. Obviously different racial mixture which was not something I was not unused to because I worked with my father in the schools a lot on summer vacations and they were all in the south Bronx. But it was just, they were just weren’t all New York people, from all different parts, mostly from the East and South. It was a very good first exposure to a cross-section of what people, different peoples, not just New Yorkers. So that way it was very exciting. I’ve never had any contact with any of them but you developed a lot of friendships. It was for the most part—for me it was actually easy. Like I said, after going through almost two years of school, full time and working full time, this to me was easy. It was almost like back in school with a lot of the things. The good thing was as far as, first of all the Navy didn’t have as big a physical training like the Army or obviously the Marines. But we were also in a very cold environment up in Great Lakes area. So we didn’t have a lot of outdoor activities. So the physical side of it wasn’t as
hard as the Marines. Maybe because I was older, almost two years older than most of the
guys were just fresh out of high school, a lot of the games they played I just realized what
they were playing, they were playing head games.

RV: Right. These were your instructors or your fellow ensigns?
BM: The instructors. I’ve always felt that boot camp was just a mechanism of
weeding out the individuals who are just not cut out for a regimented lifestyle. The other
thing about boot camp which was hard to a lot of people, I think the older age, I don’t
want to sound—but I was a lot more mature than a lot of them. Was the fact that for the
first time in most guys’ lives they were thrown in an environment where they just said,
“Here’s the rules and here’s what happens if you break the rules.” Then let you go on to
your own devices. I was already involved in a lot of that thing because my parents were
very strong discipline and a parochial school environment was a lot the same way. To
me it was easy; a lot of the things they did to us, I just thought was nothing.

RV: So you were able to handle that regimented lifestyle without much problem?
BM: Yeah, very easily.
RV: How about the classroom aspect of it?
BM: That also came easy. I did very well in most of the things.
RV: Do you remember the subjects they taught you?
BM: Not really, just basic seamanship and different things like that. But the
memories are also getting commingled with A-School and boot camp because they came
so close to one another. A-School was nothing but going back to school.

RV: Were any of your instructors Vietnam veterans? Had they been over the
Southeast Asia?
BM: No, definitely not in boot camp.
RV: How about in A-School?
BM: Don’t remember. I know one of my classmates had been over there on a ship
because he had already been in the Navy almost a couple of years.

RV: How old were you at that time, when you got into boot camp?
BM: I was twenty.

RV: How much contact did you have with your family during your boot camp and
you’re A-School?
RM: Oh, boot camp just letters and a few phone calls here and there. In fact I got to call my mother more than some people because one of the gentlemen I joined with was Jewish. In boot camp they encouraged you to study religion. The Catholic and Protestant services were on the boot camp side, the Jewish services were actually on the A-School side, so I went with Jewish services to him. Three of us went because they didn’t discourage that. We got to use the phones unrestricted to call home. It was always on a Friday night and after services one of the Jewish, the women from different temples or different Jewish organizations always put out a spread. So they had, after boot camp food, great pastrami and corned beef and salami sandwiches and we were—they packed enough food for three-hundred people and there was probably only thirty people there. Everyone from the boot camp side, we used to just wrap up as many sandwiches as we could stuff in our jackets and Friday nights after we came home from services we went back to the barracks and woke everybody up and we always had a good feast afterwards.

RV: That’s great. That’s a great memory.

BM: I haven’t thought about that in I don’t know how many years.

RV: That’s interesting that that’s one of your main memories there is of the food. What do you think was the most difficult part of your boot camp?

BM: The loneliness, being with eighty-eight other guys and there were times you just felt like you were on the moon by yourself. In my personal life it was good but that was—just before I joined the Navy I was going out with a girl so at least I had a girlfriend to write to and look forward to. You get so excited, wait for the mail and you’re almost in tears—sometimes you did cry when you didn’t get a letter that day. Then the next day you got three letters and you were ecstatic and then two days later you didn’t get any. Those emotions were very rollercoaster, up-and-down but everyone was going through the same thing.

RV: How would you rate the training you received?

BM: Adequate. Like I said, I really felt that most of it was just an indoctrination into being on your own. A maturity factor and a lot of guys probably did grow up in that time.

RV: Now when boot camp was ending, is that when you got to choose, after you did some testing, of where you wanted to go?
BM: Yeah, you applied for different schools in boot camp and then you were assigned, I got assigned to A-School and other guys went right to the fleet. I went right to A-School.

RV: Tell me about A-School. What was that like?

BM: It was, like I said, basically going back to school again. It was going away to college, which I didn’t do. When I went to college I commuted back and forth. So this was, it was almost a little bit like a college atmosphere. I had evening classes from like four to eleven. I did very well because you get challenged. The other thing about— somebody said, “Oh, I did good one test.” Some of the upperclassmen said, “Oh”—not really upperclassmen, just different groups. “Oh, yeah it’s easy on the first one, but you won’t maintain that ninety average throughout the class.” I took the challenge and I did. But a lot of it was stuff I had already learned in school. There was math and different things like that. It was the first time I got exposed to working with my hands because I was studying to be an engineman. I remember one shop-type class where we had to make a tool and I did my best. (Laughing) I gave it to the instructor because they weren’t teachers, these were just different officers and whatnot. He took one look at it and said, “Obviously you’ve never done anything like this before in your life, have you?” I said, “No, I went to parochial school.” He goes, “You didn’t have any shop in high school?” I said, “No, I went to a Catholic high school where the trade schools were looked down upon.” They actually used to threaten you, well if you didn’t get good grades you’re going to go to ah, you know Saunders, the trade school like it was a demotion. But he gave me a B on that because he said, “I know you did it by yourself and you gave it [your best].” But it was interesting for the first time of my life to work with my hands.

RV: How did you like that, working with your hands for the first time?

BM: I have a job now that I’m paid to work with my brain. If I could get one thing out of the Navy I could guarantee it was that I wasn’t cut out to work with my hands. I was always good, like during the theory part of the class, but then when I started to take apart some of those valves and things like that it’s like, “Huh?” Then some of these other guys who couldn’t do well in the theory could take these things and put them back together again blindfolded. But I enjoyed it.
RV: But didn’t you turn out to be an engineman in Vietnam?
BM: In the Navy, yeah.
RV: So you must have been pretty good at this.
BM: I could get by where the real natural mechanics, they did it quicker and better. But I wasn’t the—I deferred—on the boat we were on we had two engineman and I deferred to Adam who was a natural mechanic. So I was more or less like his helper and it didn’t bother me in the least.
RV: You were the thinking man’s engineer.
BM: Yeah.
RV: Okay, what kind of weapons training did you receive in basic and then in your advanced?
BM: Basic, I just us remember shooting an M-1. It wasn’t until river warfare school I did anything more than an M-1 and a .45 caliber pistol, I think I remember.
RV: Had you ever fired weapons before?
BM: Only in the Boy Scouts, fired a .22 rifle.
RV: How far did you go in the Boy Scouts?
BM: First class.
RV: So you could rely a little bit on that.
BM: Yeah.
RV: How was it? Were you good with weapons?
BM: I was a decent shot. I could hold my own, qualified as a marksman.
RV: How long did your A-School last?
BM: Let’s see, January, February, March, April, almost four-and-a-half months, and May.
RV: This is in 1968?
BM: This is’68.
RV: Right, and then from there you went through your advanced training—
RV: Did you really? Okay.
BM: Yeah, in A-School we got orders for Vietnam.
RV: Okay, how did you feel when you got those orders?
BM: Shocked.

RV: Really?

BM: Yeah, it was like, “The Navy has riverboats?” It was like—I didn’t expect it. I really didn’t expect to be thrown in that type duty. The hardest thing I had to do was tell my mother that. But I chickened out, I told her over the phone.

RV: How did she react?

BM: You know she was kind of on the stoic side, she didn’t get too bad. She just, it was normally upset, worried that something would happen. But I didn’t see much of her being—just normal, normal concerns.

RV: Did you have time between when you left A-School before you had to report to the river warfare school?

BM: Yeah, in fact I had a month off because for boot camp, they figure we’re going to be—river warfare school was going to last two or three months and you’re your time off and Vietnam. So I had a month’s leave before I got sent overseas. I got sent to California for river warfare school.

RV: Right, to Mare Island Naval Station.

BM: Right.

RV: Before we get into that, tell me about when you were in school there, did you from any formative relationships when you went through basic? I know you talked a little bit about basic but then in advanced, in A-School, were you able to make friends?

BM: Oh, yeah. I was, you know, I never kept contact with any of them. I have talked to one of them. But, yeah, we became very friendly.

RV: What kind of engines did you work on? Were you trained to work on engines at that point or not?

BM: Just a variety, A-School they taught—in fact, the first part of A-School was really a general for all the engineering side of the Navy. So you learned a little bit about the boilers, what the machinist’s mates learned, damage control, air conditioning/refrigeration, and diesel engines. Then that was the half of the class and about halfway, then you split off to the specifics and I learned more about diesel engines and valves and different things like that.
RV: Did you have a particular area that you were more interested in than the others?

BM: Yeah, air conditioning/refrigeration. I was never able to go any further. But that was the part I liked. That was more like an investigative thinking side to it because you had to figure things out more than just tearing apart a diesel engine. But being I never got on to a big ship, I was never able to go that far into it.

RV: That was going to be my next question. Did you ever get to get on one of those, the large ships I guess you saw yourself on before you joined up?

BM: Yes and no. I mean I did get onto a ship after Vietnam. But it was an oceangoing minesweeper and they weren’t exactly the cream of the blue water Navy. They were small and slow.

RV: Did you know that you were going to go into riverine warfare? Is this what they were prepping you all for?

BM: They prepped us, not in boot camp, not in A-School.

RV: Oh, not in A-School. Okay.

BM: We knew we were—we had heard from stories about the riverine—nothing like the type I wound up on. I actually thought from talking to the people in A-School I actually thought I was going to wind up on PBRs (river boat, river). Truthfully, I don’t remember if any of the instructors had any Vietnam duty then. But a couple of them did talk about the PBRs. We had discussed them. All of the normal scare stories, like we’d go down a river and every square foot of the river was the booby traps and the mortars landing and the things like that.

RV: Did that make you less desirable as far as getting to that kind of service or were you or did you look at that as a challenge and something that might be exciting?

BM: Well, I never thought of it truthfully as a challenge. It was just something that was going to be, it was beyond my control to change it. There was never, never in my mind any thought of doing anything but going.

RV: So tell me about your advanced training there in California.

BM: Okay, we go to California, Mare Island, and this was, unlike, it was some ways similar to A-School but in other ways the base was very liberal. The Navy at that time was very old fashioned and you couldn’t have civilian clothes. In fact, that was one
of the things the instructors did tell us, “Don’t bring any civilian clothes because you’re not allowed to have them.” You know, things like that. One of the first things we did when we get there, they said you could have all the civilian clothes you wanted. They were very lax that way. They relaxed a lot of the regulations about civilian clothes and even the duty watches were very—we didn’t do anything. You just sat around the barracks and it was very lax. They didn’t check up on you that much. The training itself was interesting, like playing at war is fun. We had riverboats, we had boats but they weren’t anything like the boats we were on. They were actually just the old LCM-6s (landing craft, mechanized). Which they took those style of boats and made them into Vietnam riverboats, but at the time I really had no idea what the boats we were going to on looked like. But we trained on the weapons. I as going to be a .50-caliber machine gunner and engineman. We traipsed up and down the rivers and the byways around the delta areas of San Francisco and had a good ol’ time.

RV: Can you describe some of that training? What exactly would you do?

BM: We went on different night ops. Everyone got experience driving the boat and learning how to deal with the currents, beaching the boats, and dropping the ramps and mock firefights with the .50-caliber machine guns, with the blank rounds going off and just various things like that.

RV: What was your impression of the .50-cal?

BM: Awesome. Awesome to say the least.

RV: Did you choose to get on that or did they assign you to the .50-cal?

BM: Everybody had to take the various times at it. Everybody had to learn how to fire it and we had to learn how to disassemble it and clean it and things like that.

RV: Right, right. You said that—well, was there any school time, classroom time, or was this more activity outside?

BM: Mostly outside. The school time tended to be more just on first aid and the maintenance of the guns and taking them, things like that. But I don’t remember anything past that.

RV: What kind of tactics did they teach you? You mentioned going on night ops and firefights and that, but did they teach you how to undergo an attack up a river or how to perform your duties that you would be performing in Vietnam?
BM: Yeah, but just by just going up the rivers and simulating firefights and things like that, ambushes, things like that.
RV: How would they tell you to set an ambush?
BM: They ambushed us. We were ambushed.
RV: They’d send you up the river and then they would pop out of nowhere at some point?
BM: Yeah, and would shoot at us and we’d shoot back.
RV: Okay, what was the most difficult thing for you there, in your advanced training?
BM: Running five miles on Friday.
RV: Was that every Friday you had to do that?
BM: Yeah. Every day we ran, on just Monday thru Friday, weekends we had off. But physical training in the morning and then we ran a mile each day and then Friday was the five miles.
RV: How many men were with you?
BM: Good question, I really have no memory because it was different classes.
RV: Do you remember kind of approximately how many were in your particular class? Was it fifty or ten?
BM: I would say closer to fifty because we actually got assigned boat assignments there. So a few of the guys that I trained with, we went to Vietnam together. We went over as a class, a group, at least fifty, probably more.
RV: How were you feeling when you were getting ready to leave and go over?
BM: Normal anxiety. The reality of what war was about didn’t hit you yet. Like I said, up until that point, I hate to use the word fun but when you’re playing at a game and that’s all the training is, is a game, it comes across as fun. It’s not until you get to the real thing that you realize that—in the ambushes at night no one gets hurt in training. But then in the real world people get hurt.
RV: Did any of your instructors, had they been in Vietnam?
BM: I really don’t know because the Mobile Riverine Force had really just started, so in ’68 the guys who would have had that experience probably weren’t coming back yet. So if I had to wager a guess, I would say no.
RV: Okay, you mentioned earlier in high school that you enjoyed history, you were pretty good at history and I’m assuming that continued through your initial military training. How much did you keep up with world politics, world diplomacy, what the United States was doing around the world, particularly in Southeast Asia?

BM: Just what I read in the newspapers, things like that. But to tell you the truth I probably didn’t read as much about it as I used to. I was caught up in the have-a-good-time-and-party environment. As a matter of fact, not that I didn’t know what things were going on, but I think I was in river warfare school—no, actually I was at A-School around the first Tet Offensive and the siege of Khe Sanh and I don’t remember much about them except the fact that they were happening. Even though I probably should have paid more attention to it, the barracks didn’t have that many televisions and I was more interested in going out and having a good time.

RV: Now you had described yourself as kind of straitlaced, did you loosen up a bit when you got into A-School and then Mare Island?

BM: Yeah, I had nothing—just the party atmosphere.

RV: Did you make any really good friends there at Mare Island?

BM: Yeah, just like the guys who I went over to Vietnam with, I have seen a couple of them and talked to a couple of others.

RV: Did you actually end up serving together on a boat?

BM: Yes, we went over together and served in the same river division. A couple of us were in the same boat and others of us were on different boats but we all were in the same—we were with Division 111.

RV: Did you feel adequately prepared for your Vietnam experience, looking back now at your training versus what really happened?

BM: Probably as well as they can do. It’s very hard to put real fear and anxiety into your training. But I would say that based on the tools they had, because like I said earlier, the river training was something new even to the Navy from that point. So I can’t say what the Army guys went through because they had a different type of training and they were on the ground more, but all of these tactics, especially with these type of boats was new to everybody.

RV: Did you get any time off before you had to report to go overseas?
BM: No. I got the month off before I got to river warfare school. But we left from California on a Friday night. I think eighty percent of us were hung-over. I'm sure you heard this from the other guys; one of the prevailing attitudes in river warfare school was very lax in that, “What are they going to do to us, send us to Vietnam?” You should have heard of us singing Country Joe and the Fish songs on the plane going over there. All of the older officers and whatnot were not happy with us, but we were on a plane bound for Saigon. I don’t think we cared. So we sang anyway until we got tired of singing.

RV: What was the mood on the plane like, overall?

BM: Very jovial, very upbeat. The training was over, now you were really going.

RV: How did it feel when you got over to Southeast Asia being in a combat zone? Did your attitude change a bit?

BM: We went to Saigon first so we didn’t—we landed in Tan Son Nhut and we stayed in the transient barracks called the Annapolis Hotel. Down through the years I’ve read many books about guys who have gone to Vietnam and Vietnam stories and they all mention the smell when they first get off the plane and I don’t remember that at all.

RV: Yeah?

BM: No, I don’t remember that at all.

RV: What do you remember when you got off the plane?

BM: Nothing really, just that we’re here. The first night was, we had to stand watch and I think I had the twelve-to-four watch. Once again, just like when I first went to A-School that feeling that you feel there, I’ll always remember my first night in Vietnam. I remember sitting in that guard shack with a loaded M-14 and looking around and its like, “Wow, you’re really here.” Up until that point it was training and the anticipation of going, then all of a sudden it’s like, “Oh, my God. You’re here. You’ve got a flak jacket on, a helmet and live bullets. It’s not a game anymore.”

RV: Were you by yourself?

BM: No, there was two of us.

RV: Was the other person new as well?

BM: Yeah, we were all new.

RV: You guys were talking about actually being there?
BM: Yeah.

RV: What other weapons did you train on, besides the .50-cal, apparently the M-14?

BM: We, mostly the M-14, a lot on the .50, a little bit on the .20 and the 40-mm pom-poms. Those are the three guns that we’re going to have on the boats, but mostly the .50.

RV: Which did you prefer?

BM: The .50. The .40, I wasn’t going to one of those Mike boats and the .20s jammed too much. The .20s had a bad reputation of jamming. I wanted to have something that wasn’t going to jam.

RV: Right, of course. Now, when you had arrived there in Saigon, did you understand or know what the United States was trying to accomplish in Vietnam?

BM: Yes, I did. I supported what we were doing in Vietnam from day one that I can remember. I’ve read in high school many numerous books about communism. My two favorite subjects of books I read in high school were Nazism and communism, and I should say World War II in general. Not that there was any appeal for it on my part but just because it was going on in the world. I believed in the Domino Theory and I felt that we had to do it. It wasn’t popular and obviously the way they were fighting wasn’t necessarily the best way, but it was a stand I felt we had to take. Did you ever see the movie, Pork Chop Hill?

RV: Yes, sir.

BM: That’s the philosophy, you know, will we fight? I will tell this to everybody, except the mother of a boy killed in Vietnam, that we had to fight because us fighting over there in the long run prevented potentially a nuclear holocaust. If you give into the bullies something really worse can happen and if we didn’t put out these little brush fires—and that was one of the things that I resented about the media is that they never told the whole story. If you listen to some of the things that went on back then, you would have just thought it was big, bad American military picking on this poor, third-rate country. But they never had much mention of where they got their weapons from; where they got their sophistications, putting missiles and all of those things in Hanoi that it was the most dangerous place to fly in the world; that there was a whole another side that was
fighting us. It wasn't just us against the North Vietnamese. I believe in what we did and
I really think we made the world a better place for doing it.

RV: So when you were there in Saigon you were thinking basically the same
thing, that you needed to be there, the United States needed to be there?
BM: Right.
RV: If you would, tell me what happened there in Saigon your first few days,
your first week.
BM: Well, within a couple days we were sent down to Dong Tam, the 9th Infantry
base there and we reported for the riverboats. We relieved crews. Never saw them but
we just went, within a couple days we were on the river.
RV: Was that too fast, or were you ready for this?
BM: No, we were ready. I don’t think there was anything more that we needed to
do at that point than just, we had spent three-and-a-half months getting ready for this,
now we were there.

RV: Can you tell me what your living quarters were like there, at Dong Tam?
BM: Well, Dong Tam for a day or two we did spend in some hooches that
probably that were not much bigger than a normal living room with about ten racks in it.
We slept there a couple days, just to get indoctrinated and I guess they might have given
us a few more shots, whatever and then we went right out to the riverboats.
RV: Okay, where did you, what was your base camp like there? After this initial
housing that you just described, where did you live from there on out?
BM: On the riverboat.
RV: On the riverboat itself?
BM: Yeah, we had, each time the—okay maybe the best way to describe it is we
had different periods of activity, the worst one being the line period. So we would tie up,
the whole river division there would be tied up to one of the barracks boats so then we
would be close enough to pick up the Army troops. Then when we did hash and trash
which was just, just different things. Sometimes we escorted the artillery barges. Our
sister division, 112, if they had a big operation they might take one or two boats from us,
we’d be on a different ship. Then the final one was the base security where the boats
were constantly going around the ships. Twenty-four hours a day there was always boats
protecting the ships and then we tie up to a different type of ship. So we always had a
rack on board the ship but a lot of times it was easier to just to sleep on the boat. We had
our racks and our lockers on the boat.

RV: Why don’t you go ahead and describe the boat itself?

BM: Okay. I was one of the ATCs, armored troop carrier. It was—I’m not very
good at the description of the length, but it was probably no more than sixty feet long. It
was just a big well deck and in the back of the well deck they had racks. They had four
racks back there and we had to string up racks from the rafters, the boats had canopies.
So I had one of the racks up by rafters, I figured it might be a little cooler up there. The
back part was the engine room and above the engine room, above the living space there
was the coxswain’s flat and they have built the gun mounts back there. The boat had
triple gun mounts in the back with .20-caliber in the center and two .50s on either side,
20-mm. The front of the boat, by the ramp, they had two .50s. We had two .30-calibers
towards the back of the boat but they never worked. I was, during operations I was the
.50-caliber [gunner] on the port side in the well deck. So when I went down, when we
went down the rivers I was always down there with the Army guys.

RV: How many decks was the boat itself?

BM: Really only one big deck, but in the back you could go up to a different level
for the coxswain’s flat and the gun mounts.

RV: When you would pick up troops they would just basically gather there?

BM: Yes, they would climb, we had seats, they actually had seats in there for
them to sit on.

RV: How many troops could you carry?

BM: About forty, so I think the size of a platoon. Actually, I think the way they
designed it we could actually carry more if we wanted to fill them up. But they always
wanted to make sure if one boat broke down that we could very easily pick up another
boat’s troops without overcrowding.

RV: What kind of speed would this boat go to?

BM: (Laughing) With the current? About five knots, maybe. They were
extremely heavy, like forty, about sixty tons, I think. There was a lot of armor plating on
them. The boats are very heavy and very slow.
RV: Were they loud?

BM: Pretty much, yeah. They knew when we were coming. They had two diesel engines, General Motors six-cylinder engine and twin screws, so they were pretty loud.

RV: Where did you get your food, did you eat there on the boat?

BM: We carried C-rations on board the boat. We always had fifty, sixty cases of C-rations. Some of it was the, in front of the coxswain’s flat had this bar armor and a space. The bar armor being to detonate the rockets prematurely so the shrapnel would not go through as easily. We always, that’s where we stored our C-rations as an extra miniscule protection against the rockets and just a place to put them. We always bartered our C-rations for whatever we needed. We needed a case of beer, you used to a case of C-rations, got a case of Coke, a bottle of Jim Beam, ice, female companionship, that’s what we used the C-rations for.

RV: Was there a lot of bartering that went on?

BM: Oh, yeah.

RV: It was readily easy to do?

BM: Yes.

RV: Okay.

BM: Because right near Dong Tam it was like a small village there, the people always coming out, coming with the sampans to sell us things. No matter where we went, unless it was a very hot area, there was always kids and people around trying to sell us things.

RV: Did you feel like you had enough supplies there in the field?

BM: Oh, yeah. We had plenty of ammunition, plenty of water, as much of the C-rations as you want. The only thing we were lacking was the heat tabs to heat the C-rations, so we used to use plastic explosives. I was always, we were always making deals with some of the Army guys. I didn’t smoke so any time I got my hands on cigarettes I always kept them so I can always use some cigarettes to trade one of the Army guys to get a couple sticks of C-4, a couple claymore mines and take them apart. That’s what we used to heat our C-rations.

RV: How would you do that?
BM: Well, plastic explosives don’t explode unless they are under compression in a very sharp, short electric spark, so you would just pull off a piece the size of a large marble and you would light it with a match and it would burn very hot. You would take one of the empty cans of C-rations, you’d make like a little stove, punch a couple holes in it and that’s what you would use.

RV: You could do this right there on board?

BM: Yeah, the metal, the bottom of the deck of the boat was metal so you could just do it right there on the deck there.

RV: That’s interesting. What were the most favorite things that you guys would try to get, barter for?

BM: Beans and franks.

RV: Beans and franks?

BM: Yeah.

RV: C-rations?

BM: Ham and eggs weren’t too bad.

RV: C-ration beans and franks?

BM: C-rations beans and franks, yeah.

RV: Okay, and ham and eggs?

BM: Yep.

RV: Okay, and what were the things that you would try to get when you were bartering for outside things, you mentioned a case of beer, Jim Beam, women. What were the things that you really tried to go after?

BM: The women. (Laughing)

RV: Tell me how that worked.

BM: The girls would come around and depending on whether the boat captain wasn’t around you let them on the boat or if we were able to, if the area was secure enough we might walk off into the bushes with them.

RV: Were you ever worried that these might be Viet Cong?

BM: You worried about it for about five seconds when they came around. The normal male genes took over. I mean we heard all the rumors, this and that and the other thing. But the boats used to just sit there if they were going to shoot at us they didn’t
have the women to come up to us, they could have just shot at us right from the riverbank.

RV: Now, did this happen mainly when you were back tied up toward the mouth of the river, or back toward Dong Tam, or was this pretty much wherever you went?

BM: Wherever we went. Well, okay, on a normal operation we would pick up the troops, we’d just go down this river or canal. I really never had much—I was not involved in driving the boats. I never really paid much attention to where we were going and we would drop the troops off and the plan was that they would sweep an area and we would go downriver three or four miles, whatever it took, and wait for them. In fact I went to one of these reunions, not this one, a couple years ago, I was actually talking to one of the 9th Infantry guys and I said that to him, he says, “You guys stayed out there with us?” I said, “Yeah, where did you think we went?” He goes, “I don’t know, I thought you guys went back to the ship.” I said, “No, no man. We just went down the river three or four miles,” and that was also for their protection. So we could make a quick extraction because like I said the boats weren’t fast, so even though we weren’t going that far it sometimes took a couple hours to get there. So we stayed in close proximity so that we could be there. We’d go down the river, twenty boats strong, twenty, twenty-five boats strong, talk about seventy-five .50-caliber machine guns. So we could put out a lot of firepower in that protection and extract them. But they always, we were always near some village or whatnot and they knew we were there so they would all come out. The kids would be the first to come out. They would hang around and talk to us and the people would come out with the boats and have the beer and whatnot, and then girls would come around.

RV: What was your impression of the Vietnamese people?

BM: I thought they were very nice. I don’t like to use the word “sorry” because, not that we’re above them, but I felt deeply sorrowful for them, especially the kids, that they had known nothing but war. (Editor’s note: Mr. McCollum is referring to an occurrence in his home) You know, World War II had just ended and then the fighting with the French and the fighting with us. I mean, this was a whole generation that knew nothing but a war. The kids were the worst to look at because they were the ones that hurt the most, I think. But as a rule I thought they were very pleasant, very friendly people.
RV: Did you ever try to learn Vietnamese?
BM: No, not really because we really didn’t have enough full contact with them except in—the thing is most of them knew American slang anyway so it was easier because they could talk to us.
RV: How many boats you said would go down the river on a typical mission?
BM: Twenty-five, sometimes a couple more.
RV: How many of the ATCs would go?
BM: Oh, sometimes a whole contingent. We had thirteen in the river division, so all thirteen would be going down the river, sometimes more, depending on the size of the operation.
RV: Okay, what was your particular job on the boat?
BM: Well, during battle stations I was the .50-caliber machine gunner and other than that I was the second engineman. We had a radioman, a couple of the guys were gunner’s mates and we had two enginemen, so we just had to keep the engines going.
RV: So when you would go down the river, would you be on the .50-cal or would you be hanging back with the engines?
BM: On the .50-cal.
RV: Okay, so when you tied up back at the barracks ship, that’s when you would work on the engines or do whatever repairs were necessary?
BM: Right.
RV: Were these boats reliable? Were there a lot of repairs involved?
BM: Pretty reliable. I mean like any machinery, you’re going to have them break downs. But I would say they were fairly reliable. I remember enough times you went down the river a boat broke down or whatever but it wasn’t a common thing.
RV: What happened when a boat would break down when you were in the middle of a mission?
BM: I was lucky enough to never have seen it happen with any of the boats I was with during any firefights. But just in a normal operation, you would just tie up to another boat, another boat would come along side you, you’d tie up the ropes and we’d tow them. The other thing as an engineman what we had to do these—I’m sure you’ve seen the pictures of the boats where the ramps used to just drop down. Now they had a
wench in the engine room, connected, was the belt that connected the wench to the port
gine. Now, by the time we got there, like I said, there was already a whole year’s
crew. They had learned the hard way that those coxswain’s flat where the wench was,
they were pretty small and they found it was very common to hit that lever and partially
engage the wench. So at the worst possible times during a couple of firefights or just
troop extraction, they found out that the clutch was burnt out on them, on the wenches.
So, when we down the river and we weren’t getting ready to do any dropping of the
ramp, we did not have the belt on the engine. Against all safety regulations, we had to
put that belt on the ramp with the engine running, standing off to the side with a ballpeen
hammer. Every once in a while missing and watching the hammer go flying across the
engine room. So, right before we were going to have to drop the ramp one of us would
have to go back to the engine room and put the belt on. The first fire fight I was ever in, I
was the one who was going back. Another thing that I’ve always felt that they don’t
show in TV or movies enough is what these Army troops really take in the field with
them. Until you’ve been on a boat, or even closer and you see what they hump off the
boat with them. So I was going to the back of the engine room and by then they were all
standing up and trying to get their racks and packs on. I was like on a crowded subway
train, pushing my way down and I get to the edge of the engine room door and I open it
up and I turn back, looked and I couldn’t see the other engineman up at the other .50
because all of the Army guys were standing. As I turned to go into the engine room,
that’s when the rockets first went off and when I looked back all I could see was Adam at
the front of the boat, all the Army guys hit the deck. Every one of them, this was their
first time on the boats also, maybe there was a couple of the sergeants. So they didn’t
know what to expect either, so they were down there kissing the deck. Training takes
over, the only thought I had was I had to get to my gun and I just crawled over them. I
ran up to the front of the boat and started shooting.
RV: This was your first experience in combat?
BM: Yeah.
RV: Okay. Did you know what you were shooting at?
BM: No, I mean it was just—we heard some rockets, you could actually hear
them whooshing and just over the radio. I don’t even remember what position we were,
it’s just that all of a sudden you heard all of the guns open up because the order came
down to open fire. That’s all I remember is that I heard all the commotion and ran up to
the front of the boat. Of course, I had a good laugh with those guys when they came back
on about kissing the deck. By our second firefight, they were all on the edge of the boat
with the guns and their M-60s firing back, because, not the novelty, the first shock factor
of being fired upon on one of the boats was gone now and they were prepared to shoot
back with us.

RV: Did you carry the same troops basically?

BM: Sometimes, not always. It depended on the operation. Sometimes they got
rotated. To this day I know like they were the 3rd of the 60th and the 4th of the 47th but
back in those days I just knew they were 9th Infantry. Sometimes I did see the same guys
that we picked up and we’d take them back a few days later.

RV: Was your first firefight, was that daytime or nighttime?

BM: Daytime. I was only involved in one nighttime firefight.

RV: Why don’t you go ahead and describe that?

BM: All right, the night time firefight was—the river division had moved up near
the Cambodian border and we were operating with some Green Berets. One evening we
got the orders for just my boat and another boat, we had to take some troops back to this
smaller outpost. They weren’t even 9th Infantry, they were 1st Cavalry. I mean the Big
Red One, not the 1st Cavalry.

RV: The 1st Armored Division.

BM: Yeah, and they had a small outpost, middle of nowhere, just way down
this—that’s the other thing about the Mekong Delta, unbelievably flat, not like up in the
Khe Sanh area, the northern part. The Mekong is like as far as you can see. So we’re
just going down, down, all of a sudden this outpost was there. It was right at dusk now
and normally we would have gone back but they told us they didn't want us to go back at
night unprotected. Plus, the intelligence was that Charlie was going to hit that outpost
that night and they wanted us there as a surprise to the Viet Cong. So we were like
twenty, thirty yards down from the base. One boat was banked on one side of the canal,
we were banked on the other, don’t remember what time at night it hit but they did hit
and they didn’t expect us to be there. That was probably the longest firefight. Probably
the first phase of the firefight probably lasted around twenty minutes. If there was at
night—I don’t know if I killed anybody. But if there was a firefight that it did happen it
was probably that one because being it was at night you could see where they were firing
from, you could see the flashes of the gun, the AK-47s when they fired at us. Even when
they fired the rockets you could see the trail as soon as they fired them. So we were able
to concentrate our fire. The whole thing probably lasted well over an hour but after the
first twenty minutes it was just some sporadic shooting by the Viet Cong trying to get us
to shoot at the base and the base to shoot at us. Because you could actually see from
where they were shooting from they were moving more parallel hoping that they would
shoot and duck and then we would shoot at the base.

RV: Had you landed the troopers that you were carrying?
BM: Yeah, we did that before dusk, before dark.
RV: Okay, and then you went and parked the boats and waited.
BM: Yes, and then we waited.
RV: Were you on alert all night or did you go in shifts?
BM: We were on alert all night.
RV: Do you remember, you said you could see where they were firing from. You
said they were firing AKs and rockets. What other weapons did the enemy use?
BM: That’s all that I know they used on us.
RV: How well protected were you on your .50-cal? Besides having the actual
rounds firing off.
BM: Really, not, I mean maybe there was like, like a little shield, maybe twelve
inches to either side of the .50. Looking at it back today it wasn't much protection. The
gun mounts in the back, they had more protection because they were enclosed and just
had a slit that they were able to fire from. But the gun mounts up front, we were fairly
exposed from the upper chest up.
RV: Wow. Do you remember thinking during the firefight, or were you just
reacting?
BM: During the firefights you never thought, you just reacted. You know, it was
the before and after. The general rush that took place during the firefight you didn’t
worry about it you just fired.
RV: What did you feel before and what did you feel after?

BM: Before extreme anxiety, like, “I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die.” Then afterwards just a total relief that nothing happened unless a round cooked off and then it felt like someone stuck a hot poker up your butt. The .50-caliber machine guns got hot. They actually, I’ve seen mine gun barrel red, that’s how hot it would get. Of course, there was no touching that afterwards. I found out something: some boats had asbestos gloves for changing them. We never had them on our boat so we didn’t touch them. So you couldn’t even touch the breach to open it up, so there was always a round in the chamber. So after a firefight you always pointed the gun up in the air, because you never knew when one was going to cook off. But the good thing was when it cooked off only one went off, it didn’t fire as a machine gun. But boy that was one of the—because like I said, your body is just relaxing and you’re saying, “Oh, my God. It’s over.” Then the gun goes off and then it was like, “Oh!” That didn’t happen that often.

RV: Did you ever worry about when you guys were tied up on the bank did anybody trying to come aboard your ship?

BM: No.

RV: Why not?

BM: There was always somebody on watch, so it was like even though we were doing nothing there was always at least two people. We always had a two-man alert and I just never worried about it.

RV: What was your crew? How many men were on board with you?

BM: Okay, there was three gunners up front which made the—and the guy driving the boat was four, two in the front of the boat is six, and the boat captain is seven.

RV: Pretty light crew.

BM: Yeah.

RV: Did you ever notice any tension between draftees, people who were drafted, versus those who were careerists?

BM: Not really, no.

RV: Did you ever hear any discussion or witness or hear about incidents of fragging?

BM: I’ve heard the stories, never anybody saying they did it.
RV: Right. Nobody—the stories you heard, were they within your task force?
BM: No, not with the 9th Infantry.
RV: How would you rate the enemy? You came in contact with them a few times I would guess and what would you say, first your general impressions of the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) or the Viet Cong?
BM: Extremely courageous. The firepower that the American military put out on these people was unbelievable. It’s like I said, the boats going down the river, on one bank we had fifty .50-caliber machine guns going off. There was always helicopters in the area and we had the .20s were going off, maybe, ten, fifteen .20s. We put out an enormous amount of firepower, which is also why they didn’t stand and fight toe-to-toe as much as the American military command would probably have liked because it was suicide. So they relied on ambush. Generally, most of the situations where I heard of people getting hurt was the first part of the ambush because by that time these guys were not going to be standing up firing their rockets at us that easily with that much firepower coming at them. But I had the greatest respect for them. I think that they were extremely courageous, dedicated group of men.
RV: Could you ever tell whether they were Viet Cong or NVA regulars?
BM: I never saw any of them. I only saw a couple captured and they were definitely Viet Cong. But who actually was firing at us, I was never aware of who they were.
RV: How could you tell this guy was Viet Cong?
BM: Well, he didn’t have a, he had like just normal clothes on.
RV: Okay. What would you say were the enemy’s strengths?
BM: Okay. What would you say were the enemy’s strengths?
BM: Well, their ambush ability and their ability to pick when and where they wanted to hit us, that was their greatest—and their ability to escape based on the tunnel complex. I did get a chance to see a couple of the bunkers that they had built along the sides of these canals and rivers and there was like three or four feet of dirt and a metal sheet in the middle of it. It’s just extremely strong looking and I can understand how that when we shot at them we didn’t always hit them.
RV: How about his weaknesses?
BM: His weakness? Well, from a military perspective they just couldn’t put the firepower back out at us. They had to rely on numbers. But on the rivers they really didn’t hit us in any great numbers.

RV: Were you ever wounded?

BM: No.

RV: Tell me about your first experience with death, with American casualties.

BM: That would have to be Halloween night, 1968. The ship we were tied up to—well, actually it turned into November 1st, it was about 3:25 in the morning. They put two mines on the side of the Westchester County.

RV: Yes. Where were you? You were—

BM: Three or four boats out.

RV: Were you on watch that night?

BM: Yeah. I was semi-awake. You ever been on a watch at 3:30 in the morning? You ever been on watch at 3:30 in the morning, but not on military watch.

BM: Yeah, but you know. I mean you’re awake but you’re not awake. But, no I was sitting on the edge of the boat, just listening to the radio, always had the radio on.

RV: The military net or were you listening to Armed Forces Radio?

BM: Armed Forces Radio. No, if we were out on an operation somewhere we always had the—but then we still, we had our radios on. Just saying, “Oh, just about twenty-five more minutes and I can go wake up my relief and get to bed.” That’s when it hit.

RV: What happened?

BM: I thought I was dead. I thought I was dead and I was watching it happen. This huge blast and explosion. Truthfully, I can’t even remember if I can say it was a bright light. The funny thing, not funny, but when it first happened I thought it was an explosion on the ship, I thought one of the boilers went off, one of the big boilers went off. I said, “Wait a minute, they don’t have big boilers on one of these ships.” But all of the stuff—it must have been light enough because I could see stuff going up in the air. Just laying back on the canopy saying, “Oh, my God. You’re dying and you’re watching
it happen.” Then all the stuff came down and it’s like, “Oh, my God. You’re alive.

Nothing happened.”

RV: About how far away were you? You said four boats. You’re talking about a
hundred yards?

BM: No, I would say maybe twenty-five yards.

RV: Oh, okay. Did you see the American casualties?

BM: No, I didn’t see any of them.

RV: Twenty-six were killed, if I remember correctly.

BM: Yes.

RV: Was that your first and only experience of such an incident with the death of
American troops?

BM: Not the only, there was—I could feel I didn’t get to see some of the Army
guys that became friendly with, enough of the Army guys, and periodically, “Where’s
Joe?” “Oh, didn’t you hear?” “No.” I knew what they meant. “Took a sniper shot in the
head.” So there were a few instances like that. I wasn’t on the boat the night my boat got
hit in March of ’68. We were also up in a place called Muc Hoa. That’s the Vietnamese
place, the other place we were at was a Green Beret base, but at Muc Hoa I was taken off
the boat and put on a radio watch.

RV: Is this March in ’69?

BM: Yes. The biggest reason—my boat captain and I had a strained relationship.
Just normal, I was from New York so I was a bum.

RV: Where was he from?

BM: He was from Ohio but he spent a lot of time down South in the military. He
thought all New Yorkers were bums. He told us enough times. I didn’t do too much to
make him think otherwise. But he had an opportunity to get me off the boat, so I stood
radio watch for about a week. I was an engineman so I really, not that I had no business,
but I wasn’t qualified to stand a radio watch. I complained to our division commander
and he said okay he’d get me back on the boat and we were getting ready to go out that
night. I was cleaning my .50 and it was like twenty minutes before they went out and he
came over to me and pulled me aside and said, “Mac, I know I told you I’d put you on the
boat, but please do me a favor, the guy who was supposed to relieve you is sick would
you stand the watch one more night?” What can I say, he was nice enough to treat me as
a, not an equal, but anyway I stood the watch and the boat got hit that night.

RV: What happened?

BM: They took two rockets, they were going, that was another night op. But one
of the Mike boats, I don’t know how many rockets they took, they took quite a few also.
But on my boat one guy was, who I trained in California with and went over there with,
his killed. An Army lieutenant was killed. Two other guys, three other guys,
actually, my boat captain included, was medevac’ed out, including the guy who was
where I should have been.

RV: Really, on the port .50-cal?

BM: Yeah, he was hit with shrapnel from two rockets. One hit the front of the
boat on the ramp and the other one hit right near where the coxswain’s flat is so he was
more or less hit by two of them. I don’t even know whatever happened to him. He
survived but that was one of the things that they didn’t tell you. In other words, someone
would get hurt and sent out and they never thought enough to bring people up to date that
so and so is all right or whatever, unless he came back.

RV: Did you guys have a problem with that?

BM: It was just the way it was so we didn’t think much of it.

RV: How did you feel when you heard this news when you got back on board?

BM: I knew it when I was happening because I was on the radio watch. I felt
extremely upset. I continued doing what I was supposed to but then they knew what
happened and they came and relieved me and I sat outside the radio shack and cried for
an hour.

RV: Did you know that your friend had been killed?

BM: Yeah. He was hit by the heat round, so he never felt anything. That I didn’t
find out until a reunion a couple years ago, I just thought he was hit by shrapnel. But I
finally went to one of the reunions where I met a couple of the guys I was over there
with. Even though I knew that I met them afterwards, after I got back from Vietnam and
we went to sea school together, we never talked about it. But we talked about it that
night. He was hit by the heat round so he never felt a thing and that’s when I found out
that the Army lieutenant had died from the wounds.
RV: Apparently whoever was supposed to turn the gun skyward did not.

BM: What do you mean turn the boat sky—?

RV: Well, turn the gun, the .50-cal. It was a heat round, the one that went off after?

BM: No, the heat round was from the rockets. The rockets they fired at us had heat rounds in them.

RV: Oh, okay. He was hit by the rocket.

BM: Yeah. The rockets detonated and shrapnel exploded all in the area but they were armor-piercing heat rounds so they knew they were shooting at these big boats with the armor piercing. That just thing goes right through the metal.

RV: Did you ever have any problems with your weapons functioning incorrectly? We talked about the .30-cal but—?

BM: No, the .50s were probably the most reliable gun in the world. The .30s, the trouble with the .30s was we didn’t have .30 caliber ammunition, we had 7.62 rounds. It’s one of those hypothetically they should work and they do work, but they had a tendency to jam. So we just never bothered using them. Plus, as it actually turned out, we had more guns on the boat than we had people. So we had five people manning the guns and one driving. So that just left the two .30s, decorations in the back of the boat.

RV: Were there any weapons that you wish you had but did not have?

BM: No. We had twelve gauge shotguns, sawed-off barrels. We used to use them to shoot the crap in the water because there were times they used to put floating mine devices in like the clumps and weeds, hoping to get lucky and blow up a boat. So we were able to shoot anything in the water like that. We had percussion hand grenades to throw in the water for divers. We missed the divers the night of Halloween but—.

RV: Did you encounter a lot of the floating mines in the rivers?

BM: No, I never, we never encountered any of them, shot at things but nothing ever detonated.

RV: How much contact did you have with home while you were over there?

BM: Just letters and I just talked to my mother when I went on R&R (rest and recuperation). I was able to call her from Thailand twice.

RV: How were those conversations with her?
BM: Very pleasing, on both sides. She was very happy to hear that everything was all right. Well, one of the things, there’s a memorial in lower Manhattan and it has letters from soldiers from Vietnam, my mother could not put my letters on the wall because I never told my mother anything. My mother worked in a stationery store in Yonkers. It was owned by two brothers and I was friends with the brothers before they became my mother’s boss and I used to go out with one of them. He was single, we used to go out drink on Friday, Saturday nights, and I would help them in the store. He said to me right before I got shipped out to river warfare school, he said, “Bill, all the years I’ve known you I’ve never tried to tell you anything because as a dumb kid you would never pay any attention.” He said, “But you’ve got to pay attention to this one. Don’t write your mother anything about what you’re doing and how you’re feeling because it’s going to be bad enough on her that you’re over there. Don’t make it worse by telling her about it.” So I never told my mother anything. I used to write her la-la letters, “Hi, Ma. It’s hot. We dropped off the troops. I’m sitting here reading a book. It’s hot. The food is lousy. I’m fine. I hope you’re doing all right. Bye.” So I didn’t have to burden her with—same thing applied when I got to R&R. It’s just, “Hi, Ma. Send me some money.”

RV: So you watered it down as well on the phone calls?

BM: Yes, plus by then I was in Thailand having the greatest time of my life and the last thing I wanted to do is think about going back there.

RV: Did you end up telling your mother later what you did?

BM: Oh, yeah. I told her the night I got home and she turned white as a ghost.

RV: Tell me about your R&Rs that you mentioned. How many did you go on?

BM: I went on two.

RV: Where did you go?

BM: I went to Bangkok both times.

RV: Okay, how was Bangkok?

BM: Well, you know what they called R&R. It was—the Thai people were fabulous. They were all friendly, they all came across as, “Welcome to my country.” I took as many sightseeing trips in Bangkok as I could. The time spent with the girls was wonderful but that wasn’t the only thing. Now I was finally doing what I had joined the
Navy to do, visit a foreign country. I had a ball. I didn’t drink as much as some of them did because I didn’t want to waste my time being drunk.

RV: How long were they?
BM: Five days.
RV: Were you able to go with some of your buddies?
BM: If you had set up to go, but from the time we got to Vietnam we had heard rumors about us turning over our riverboats to the South Vietnamese Navy and us going home early so a lot of the guys I went over there with didn’t bother taking R&R. We had to be in-country five months, five and a half months and I put in for R&R as early as I could. I wasn’t going to waste an opportunity to go visit an exotic land. The second R&R I took from Da Nang because it did come to pass that we turned over the boats and they changed their minds. In 1969, the first troops Nixon sent home were Marines and 9th Infantry troops. The 9th Infantry troops had our flights, so we got shuffled around and we actually got sent to Da Nang. That unto itself wasn’t too bad because once I got to Da Nang and realized that the rumors that the sky fell every night there and it was so dangerous was not true. Coming off of a front line combat unit, going to a rear support facility was second best besides going home. I got a second R&R out of it because I put in for R&R and didn't tell the division commander that I took it. He asked me, “Didn’t you take R&R when you were down south?” I told the truth, I just didn’t tell the whole truth. I said “Sir, when we thought we were going home early a lot of guys did not take R&R.” That was the gospel truth. I just didn’t tell him I was one of six that did. So he put in a second R&R. I went back to Bangkok only because when I got to the R&R center they had two flights leaving the next day, one of them was Bangkok, one of the was Kuala Lumpur and I picked Bangkok. On that trip I got, because now I’m the old established veteran and was talking with, sitting on the plane with some Marines who were going on their first R&R and I knew all of the things to do. So on that one I got to pal around with three or four Marines and one in particular that we did a lot of things together.

RV: Did you feel recharged once you got back in-country?
BM: Oh, yes, ecstatically. It was like you were in a walking dream for a few days afterwards.
RV: Tell me what your duties were in Da Nang.

BM: I worked at a small support facility where we rebuilt two-cylinder diesel engines.

RV: That was it?

BM: That was it, that’s all I did all day.

RV: Were they for ATCs or—?

BM: No, they were different things. Some of them were just for generators, small things. Actually, we didn’t even know what they were used for, we just got—the engine would come in broken with a piston blown or something like that and we just fixed it, put it back on the truck as done and they would take it wherever they brought it from. I worked with a Filipino guy there, he was a very good engineman.

RV: You mentioned that you kind of got to know the troops a little bit that you carried up and down the river. How much did you mingle with them when you were on the mission?

BM: On the mission only as we were going down the river. Once they left the boat we had no contact with them until they came back on. When we were in a down time I mingled with them a lot on the ships, watching television, having a few drinks, playing cards with them. They used to come off the boat and there was quite a few guys from New York who were in the Army there and they were predominantly black and Hispanic. I would talk to them because we had a common bond. We were both from New York. So I was one of the few white guys they would invite into their compartments to get drunk. So I had a lot of contact with them on the ships.

RV: Did you ever encounter any race issues?

BM: Not drastic, just the normal thing. Nothing of any, not too many race issues in the front line units.

RV: What would you guys do for entertainment?

BM: Watch television, drink, and play cards. Tell stories about all the girls you had at home, all the things you were going to do and what you were going to do when you got back to the world.

RV: What kind of drug and alcohol use did you witness?
BM: I saw some guys smoke pot. I saw some Army guys, the aftereffects of them when they were smoking pot and the drinking. I’ve never seen any of them, either the drinking or the marijuana, during an operation or right before. In fact, the only time it was, it happened to be that we were operating down near, actually near the sea. We were supposed to be in a down status, so technically when we went into down status we weren’t going to move unless something critical happened. So, you know, we pounded back a few and, well, you live in Texas, you know its hot, you don’t have to drink a lot to get kind of high when its that hot, so it’s not that we were sitting there—but you have a few beers and you felt—and we did have to go out on an op. We had to move that night. It was like very quick and this one Army platoon we were carrying, we had carried them before and I was very friendly with one of the Army sergeants. This was, turned out to be one of the closest times we might have had an Army/Navy incident. As I said earlier, there were times I didn’t get along with my boat captain and one of the things we as a collective crew weren’t too crazy about our boat captain was he wasn’t exactly a John Wayne, to say the least. We were going down this river, very few places in the United States do you see, like it is over there, when there’s no lights, anywhere, pitch black. It was one of these moonless pitch black nights and somebody in some helicopter saw some unexplained lights and they wanted us to drop the troops off in the middle of nowhere and have them investigate it. So like I said, I was in the front of the boat, we had operated with these guys before so I was on a first name basis with quite a few of them. Don’t ask me their names now because I’ll never remember. From the minute we dropped the ramp my boat captain was fearful. I’m not going to say he was afraid or scared, but just too quick to tell them to get off the boat. He come down a couple of times and told me, “Hurry those guys off, I want to get out of here.” You can’t, unless you’ve been there see what these guys stepped off into, I was so glad I wasn’t going anywhere off the boat. So I think it was part of the thing that my boat captain had too many to drink because he was an alcoholic.

RV: Really?

BM: Oh, yeah. I used to like to drink but from when I met him in California, he was an alcoholic. I’m not saying he didn’t function but he drank all the time. So he’s telling us to get off the boat and of course the sergeant is arguing with him, “I’m not
going to get off fast. I’m going to do this.” He starts screaming at the sergeant that, “If you guys don’t get off the boat in five minutes I’m going to raise the ramp.” So I jumped into the hunt and started screaming at my boat captain, “Leave them alone. They’ll get off the boat. If you try to raise the ramp on them I’ll kick the goddamn belt off.” So we’re having a big row and he starts screaming at me that there goes my promotion. I told him I don’t give him a flying…about my promotion so they got off the boat. They took their time because they were stepping off into a hostile area that you couldn’t see three feet in front of you. So then the next day—well during that exchange my boat captain told me that that’s it he’d going to put me on report insubordination. By then I told him, “I don’t care because these guys are my friends and I was not going to let them rush off into a problem.” So the next day my boat captain doesn’t say anything to me, but all of a sudden the sergeant shows up with his lieutenant.

RV: The sergeant? The Army sergeant?

BM: The Army sergeant, yeah, shows up with his lieutenant, company lieutenant and we have a nice little powwow. He asked me what happened and I explained it to him and he said, “Okay, that’s exactly what the sergeant told me.” He said to me that, because the sergeant heard the boat captain tell me he was going to write me up and said, “Did he follow up on that?” I said, “At this time I haven’t heard anything.” The lieutenant says, “Okay, don’t worry about a thing. I’ve already discussed it with the captain and if you’re brought up on charges we will be there to defend you.” I said, “Thank you very much, no problem.” My boat captain heard part of this exchange and nothing was said from that point. But he was nicest to me, for two or three days it was like there was nothing he wouldn’t do for me, but that was the only time that there was ever an incident that I saw anybody drinking while we were—on anything related to an operation but that was circumstance.

RV: That was your boat captain.

BM: Yeah. Oh, we were probably feeling no pain also because we had been, like I said, not that we were drunk, drunk. But even after just having three or four beers across, you got hit very easily. It wasn’t like drinking—a lot of those guys, we were young and regular drinkers in those days so I knew how much we could put down and I saw the
same guys get tipsy on two or three beers that I used to see them sit and have a lot more,
but it’s the climate. But other than that I saw no incidents of drug abuse during the time
that they were in the field. It was always in a down status. But very few—there was only
a couple—mostly it was just the drinking. We did tie a few on, I’m not saying we never
did that but we weren’t going to go anywhere for a day or two.

RV: Right, right. What other things would you do for entertainment? Did you go
to USO (United Services Organization) shows?

BM: Yeah, they had a few of them, just local Filipino groups and whatnot. I
missed the Bob Hope show. He showed up and my boat captain made sure I didn’t go.

RV: Was this at Dong Tam?

BM: Yeah, at Dong Tam, right. My sister was in the hospital having one of her
children when she watched the show. Of course, she screams to everyone around, “My
brother is there! My brother is there!” Because she knew I was in Dong Tam. Because
Bob Hope said that he wants to say hello to all the River Rats out there from Dong Tam.
I didn’t see it, I was on the boat.

RV: Your captain wouldn’t let you off?

BM: No, he pulled regulations. The regulation said that you’d had to have a
three-man crew on board at all times. So between the two river divisions, 111 and 112,
you’re talking about over fifty boats, forty-nine of those boats they kept two men on
because you could get by with two men, one to drive the boat and one to tie it and untie
it. My boat had three men on it. I legitimately, we drew straws and I didn’t win. But
two of the guys, one guy, my friend Adam said, “You know, look, I saw Bob Hope three
times in college I know how much you want to go and the other guy said he doesn’t want
to go no matter what.” They volunteered to stay on board the boat and even they all
asked the boat captain to let me go. But he insisted, “No, the regulations say you have to
have three men on board.” But it was because we didn’t get along.

RV: It sounds like you and the other guys had a kind of adversarial relationship
with the guy.

BM: Yeah, he was—he wasn’t, I don’t know if I can describe it. He was thrown
into a position of command and not everybody is good at commanding and he just did not
know how to handle people. A couple times, one time in particular, he came back on
board after he was on the ship with his friends drinking and was in a cantankerous mood. Of course, he picks the smallest guy in the boat and starts to pick a fight with him, like he’s going to be a bad guy. But I jumped out of my rack and stuck my nose in the boat captain’s face and said, “If you’re going to hit anybody on board this boat—” So we had a few rounds like that but for the most part, even though we thought he was a jerk we still got along most of the time.

RV: Tell me what your impression was of the Vietnamese Navy. You mentioned turning the boats over to the Vietnamese Navy and this, I guess, was starting of the process of Vietnamization, turning the war over to the Vietnamese. Did you think, first of all, competent to handle their duties on the river and in the ocean?

BM: Not what we saw. Enough of them didn’t look like they had the mechanical skills to know how to operate the engines properly. So I don’t think they was anywhere near as trained as we were on how to handle the boats. But we didn’t see too much, we only periodically saw a couple of them come onboard the boats. But I do remember one time one of the Vietnamese Navy guys was riding with us and the Army had one of those Chieu Hoi scouts, whatever the hell you pronounce it.

RV: Chieu Hoi, that’s right.

BM: Chieu Hoi and we didn’t think nothing of it and said, “Why don’t you go talk to them? You can finally talk to somebody in Vietnamese.” He looked at us and shook his head with this look of hatred on his face and said, “Number ten, VC, VC.” Because they all were ex-Viet Cong who came over to our, the so-called American side. So he wanted nothing to do with them. That’s one of the things I do remember. As much as they were supposedly very good in the field with helping some of the Army guys in situations, this Vietnamese Navy guy wanted nothing to do with him. The other parts were, like I say I just heard other stories, other guys who had more contact with them that they were just not that competent for taking care of the boats.

RV: What did you think of the American policy of Vietnamization in general?

BM: In general it was the right idea. But just, I don’t know, how do you say—I’m not saying it wasn’t able to be done but it was just too big a job, too big a task. The ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) Army was a lot of draftees on their side so they weren’t as hot to fight. The Vietnamese Marines were, they were something else
though. They were more than willing to fight. I mean it was a good idea, but I just—I think just based on all the things I’ve read and heard about it, it’s true we didn’t understand their culture. So it’s very hard for us to come in and teach them things that just—most of the world doesn’t do the things the same way we do. So I think that was a big part of it. But basically it was a good idea but it just didn’t fly right.

RV: What did you think of Vietnam itself, the country?

BM: Beautiful country. I mean I thought, when I got a chance to go to Saigon a couple times, I would loved to have seen Saigon before the war. It had to be an exciting place to be. People, it was just very nice and the women were very pretty. It was a very picturesque country. It was too bad it was so dilapidated by a war.

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

BM: The bravest action?

RV: Yes, sir.

BM: Being that I really didn’t see anything out of the ordinary because like I said I was never on the boat when it got hit so I didn’t see anybody do anything extraordinary, just a normal day to day doing their jobs.

RV: Do you recall a humorous event that stands out in your mind?

BM: Humorous event, okay. We were going down one of the various rivers. It was a free fire zone, so unless—Even just going down a river it was always two men had the duty, twelve to four, four to eight, et cetera, et cetera. Unless you were doing something specific like if the engine was broken and we were doing some maintenance, you didn't have to do anything. So you laid, I laid in my rack and I was like dozing, sleeping and unknown to me one of the boats behind us wanted to test his .20. They were working on it and they decided not to tell me that they were going test fire the weapon. So, I’m laying in my rack and all of a sudden I hear the .20 going off and I think we’re under attack. So I leap out of my bunk and my bunk was way up near the front of the boat not that far from my gun rack. Almost like one motion as I landed on the deck I grab my helmet, put it on, put my flak jacket on and threw a round in the chamber and I was getting ready to shoot. Then out of the corner of my eye, I catch and I hear the laughter of about three or four guys in the back of the boat. They’re laughing their asses off and then I got it. Then they said, “Mac, you’ve should have seen yourself. It looked
like you almost levitated out of the bunk.” They thought that was the funniest thing. The
other thing that wasn’t as funny but I got drunk one day and took a nap or passed out
whichever way you want to call it in one of the dried-out rice paddies. The guy told me
he took a picture, spread eagle, we wore nothing but shorts so I was half, you know. He
says “Oh, you should see this great picture I took.” I said, “Well, where is it?” “Well, I
sent it home to my mother.” That’s one I would like to have seen. But that was the
funny—

RV: Did you ever encounter any wild animals or anything unusual? Any unusual
wildlife on the river?

BM: Just seen snakes in the water that’s about it.

RV: Yeah, what kind of snakes?

BM: Just big snakes and rats.

RV: Yeah?

BM: Rats, there was rats on the ship. That was some of the other kind of funny
incident. You’ve seen the pictures of the ships with the pontoons tied up to them and the
boats were tied up to the pontoons. Every once in a while some rat would scurry from
the ship and make the pontoon. Now, it scurried up and down the pontoon trying to get
on the boats. Everybody on the boats got every stick or broom or something that they
could get trying to whack at this rat so it doesn’t come on our boat. It was like the
Keystone Cop routine with this rat running up and down the pontoon with the guys on the
pontoon trying to stomp on it. The guys on the boats trying to beat on it so it doesn’t
jump on the boats and then it eventually diving in the water.

RV: Did you all have any pets?

BM: No, we didn’t have pets.

RV: As your dog chimes in the background, perfect timing. You said you formed
some relationships there with the men with whom you served. You mentioned Adam a
few times, have you kept contact with him?

BM: I’ve talked to him a few times and met him at a couple reunions. I hadn’t
talked to him, we went, we were in river warfare school together, we went to Vietnam
together and we were in C-school. We went to Charleston, South Carolina, for
engineman C-school, so I saw him after I got back from Vietnam. So that was ’69,
September ’69. I didn’t talk to him until the summer of ’87. I was going down to Washington. They had a concert down in Washington, “Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans” concert. My sister who is very lucky at these things won a contest from a radio show in New York City. They were going to run bus trips down there. I’ve always been very bad with names and I couldn’t remember the name of the guy who was killed on my riverboat. I knew his name was Whitey, we called him because he had platinum blond hair, his name was Donald. I called Adam, he was the only guy I could—for whatever, I remember his name, Adam Carl Metts, III. He was one of the few names I remember besides Mathew J. Nutt, those were the only two guys whose names I remember. I knew he lived in Dallas. So I called the, one day I just got off work and called the Dallas information and said, “Look, I’m trying to locate a guy. I don’t know where he lives. I know he used to live in the area. I’m sure it’s not a common name and I haven’t talked to him since I got home from Vietnam.” I got his father’s number and so we talked. He couldn’t remember his last name either. So when I finally, this is before the PCs with the lookups and what not, in ’87 the just had the book there. It was July 4th, and he thought it was something like Brickhouse or Burkhouse. I’m trying to go through this and there’s people waiting behind me and I never got to see his name on the Wall the first time I went. But I subsequently through one of those Moving Walls they have, where they have the PC, his name was Donald Bruckart. So I was able then to finally locate it. It was like a tremendous feeling of relief that I was finally able to see his name on the Wall, even if it was the Moving Wall.

RV: What was your experience like at the Wall in Washington?

BM: Well, I was so stoned. Going down, I went with my sister and some guys in the back of the bus lit up and she goes, “Go ahead.” But it was very—I remember just coming upon it, it was very stirring. I was just so awestruck by it the first time I saw it. It was very rewarding to finally have gotten there. Even though I didn’t find his name there was plenty of other names on the Wall to see. It was a great concert, too, by the way.

RV: Who was playing?

BM: Oh, Neil Diamond started the show. They had Frankie Valley, the Four Tops, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. What’s her name? A couple of female singers
who their names escape me right now. Stevie Wonder, James Brown, John Fogerty who
played a Creedence song for the first time live on stage in fourteen years for that concert.
RV: I actually remember, I know this concert, when you just said that, yeah.
Okay.
BM: Yes, if you saw the concert on HBO then you saw my sister and I, because
we were on—we were in the sixth row so we were there a couple of times. The only
person that I didn’t sit through the concert, when he came out on stage I walked out, was
Kris Kristofferson. I don’t know if you remember reading about the incident were he was
presented a plaque. He performed in some concert in the Buffalo area, the local Vietnam
veterans group gave him a plaque and they found it in the garbage the next day, in the
dressing room. Of course, his people said it was a mistake, he didn’t mean to throw it
away but I didn’t buy it. I didn’t buy it for two reasons. I didn’t buy it because I don’t
believe—I believe he’s a big liberal. The other thing was, I’m a great believer in, I don’t
have to believe everything you say, but I would have respected the man more if he came
on stage and said something to us face-to-face, not sending his three flunkies out to
explain what happened and to give his side of it. So that’s the only part of the concert I
didn’t see. Even when I watch it on tape I don’t watch that part. But, it was very
interesting to be down in Washington on July 4th.
RV: What was your experience at the Moving Wall like? Where did you see it?
BM: I saw the Moving Wall in Kingston. Same thing, it has the same impact but
more so because I was able to finally locate the names of Donald and Harry, the guy who
was killed on the Westchester County, was one of my very good friends. It was, how do I
put it? It was a form of—you get to a certain age your mind just starts to wander. It was
just a feeling of just relief that I was able to find them, fulfillment, a certain amount of
closure that I could touch their names. I also got involved with a Vietnam veterans
chapter that brought the Moving Wall to our area here and that was a tremendous
experience. I touched every name on the Wall.
RV: Did you really?
BM: Yeah. Well, you know we had to wipe down the Wall every night, in the
morning when it got the morning mist. I went out there the first morning to do it and I’m
wiping all the names, all of a sudden it hit me, I’m touching every name by wiping the
wall down. So I just never stopped, I went through the whole thing. It was so great to see some of the Gold Star Mothers, a couple of the Gold Star Mothers. One of them used to come to the meetings and the woman was beaming. She just said to us, “You guys don’t know how happy you’re making me that you’re not forgetting my son. I feel as long as you guys are around my son will never be forgotten.” That was just, that just hit me so hard, that that’s how they feel. The passage of time doesn’t change that for them. One of the other families, one of the mothers who never went to the Wall in Washington came to this one. Her sister, his sister, we had to have twenty-four hour coverage on the walls. So on a Thursday night after everybody left and was gone and we’re sitting around having a couple quiet beers and she came over to all of us and gave us all hugs and kisses and said, “This past week you’ve made my brother alive again.” So those are the memories I carry about. The respect for their loss and the feeling is why I get involved in things like this and always have my hats on and my shirts and things like that. I don’t want anybody to forget the sacrifice that these families had to put through. I did meet another Gold Star Mother there. Like I said to you earlier, I’ll say a lot of things to people but I met this woman at the Wall. I stayed at the Wall, they had the politician speeches and all that, I stayed at the Wall I wanted to be there helping people. I’m trying to comfort this one woman, “Are you all right?” She says “Yeah.” I said, “Was it somebody you knew?” I’m expecting like a cousin or something, and she says, “Yes, he was my son.” She started in like, “Why did this have to happen? Why did he have to die in that terrible war to accomplish nothing?” There’s nothing you can say to them. But the best story about the Wall, a Marine, a former Marine comes up to me and says, “You know, I looked up in my company boot camp yearbook all of the guys I went to boot camp with who eventually went to Vietnam. I’ve got these ten guys that I haven’t heard from and I don’t know if any of them made it on the Wall. Can we look?” So I’m going through name by name because I had one of the books. His eyes are just brightening up, brightening up and we didn’t find one of his ten names on the Wall and that was very good. But the Moving Wall was also, besides the normal, my wife thought that somebody she knew from school was killed over there and never knew for sure. She was able to, unfortunately for her, find out that he was. But for the most part it was very, I don’t necessarily, would not want to go through the preparation that we had to put in, the
months of work to get it there, but it was an experience I wouldn’t want to change that we
did it.

RV: Tell me how you felt when you left Vietnam in 1969.

BM: (Laughs) With a level of ecstasy and ecstatic. The good thing was I did get
almost a month, a month-and-a-half of being off the river. So it wasn't as drastic as going
from the front line unit back to home. I hadn’t been home in fifteen months, hadn’t seen
my family. I just couldn’t wait to get out of there.

RV: Do you remember that plane flight back?

BM: Do I ever. I remember the feeling of such—when I saw the Golden Gate,
well I take that back, we didn’t see the Golden Gate Bridge but we saw the cloud cover
because we landed in Oakland first. They never let us off the plane, which is something
I’ve never been on before that they refueled the plane with us on it. I guess most of the
guys wouldn’t have gotten back on. Then I got—we flew to one of the Air Force bases
down near Los Angeles and now I’m ready for the typical hurry up and wait. You know
how it’s going to take hours and hours to process the 166 guys on the plane and it took
twenty-five minutes. I couldn’t believe it. I was like, “Oh, my God. I can’t believe
they—” See the thing with this, I wasn't supposed to have been on that plane, I actually
got a change to go home early. When you got your flight date, they would give you the
date approximately a month in advance, anytime before that month if there was an open
seat and you got all your papers signed and your division commander authorized it you
were able to go home. I had just gotten back from R&R no more than a few—I don’t
remember the exact number but it couldn’t have been more than three or four days
because I still had that feeling of euphoria. I’m standing in the machine shop working on
an engine and a friend of mine comes in, he comes running in, he has these papers and he
whacks me in the back of the head and I’m getting ready to turn around and curse him out
and he’s got this look on his face. He goes, “Mac! Mac! Get your ass up to flight
control. They’ve got a hundred open seats going home the day after tomorrow and I’m
on it,” he told me. It was like, “Are you kidding?” I just got my papers. So I didn’t even
have a chance to think about being short. I went from having almost three-and-a-half
weeks left to on the plane two days later and it was just—I still have this picture that I
took. Actually because I didn’t leave the day I was supposed to, they had some delay and
we left the second day. I’ve got this look on my face like I’ve just lost my puppy with—
I’m sitting in my dress blues because I had nothing else to wear. I lost my sea bag over
there. My sea bag took a trip to Japan. When I came back from R&R the first time the
river division had moved. I said that we had lockers on board the ships, so we kept most
of our stuff there like the whites and things I wasn’t going to use. Don’t ask me why I
had my dress blues on board the boat. But my river division had gone up north towards
the Cambodian area there, so I didn’t think nothing of it. I hitched a ride on one of the
other boats going up there one day and by the time we got back I said, “Where’s the
ship?” Then all the other guys on the boat said, “Oh, they were going to Japan. Didn’t
anybody tell you?” I said, “No. Did you guys get my stuff out of my locker?” They go,
“No.” So my sea bag went to Japan. So I had no whites to wear home, I had these dress
blues and sitting in this rec area in Da Nang like, “Why aren’t I on my way home?” But I
made it, the flight was great. I get to LA airport, one of the guys I was talking to lived in
Boston and he had less flights. He had a flight at three o’clock so I put myself on a flight
at 2:30 because I figured we’d go to the bar first. We just couldn’t wait to get a Tom
Collins. Went to the bar in Los Angeles airport, ordered a Tom Collins, the guy put it in
front of us and before he turned around with the money to ring it up we had finished the
drinks and were asking for another one. So I wasn’t feeling much pain by the time I got
on board the plane. Then another guy comes back from first class and says, “Were you
on that plane from Da Nang?” I said, “Yeah.” He goes, “I thought I recognized you
from the plane. Come on up to first class with me, I got a couple bottles of champagne.”
They wouldn’t let me go up there but he came back and sat with me and so we polished
off two bottles of champagne. So by then we were just like, you know. They started the
movie and I said, “Oh, this looks like a good—(makes snoring noise).” I fell asleep. The
next thing I know, “Fasten your seat belts. We’re landing in Kennedy airport.” I had
always wanted to surprise my mom. I never told her I was coming home and I just
wanted to show up at her door. So it’s 2:30 Los Angeles time which made it 5:30 back
here in New York, a six-hour flight. I didn’t want to get to the airport, eleven, twelve
o’clock at night and not have a car to rent. So I wanted to rent a car. The girl says, “No
problem, I just need a credit card to pay for it.” I said, “I want to pay cash.” She said,
“No, I’m sorry you can only pay cash when you’re there. But to reserve a car you need a
credit card.” So I said, “Look at me, sweetheart. I just got back from Vietnam. You really think I got a credit card on me?” You can’t be mad at the girl for the policy. So she says, “I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do. The best you can do is when you get there—” So I said, “No, I don’t need the hassle.” So I called home and I got my sister and she goes, “What’s the matter?” I said, “Nothing is the matter.” She says, “Where are you?” “I’m in the Los Angeles airport. I’m coming home.” So she started screaming, “What flight are you on? What airline?” So I said, “I’m on TWA Flight 729.” As God is my witness, she goes, “How do you spell that?” So, that’s another memory I will never, to the day I die I’ll remember that look on my mother’s face when I saw her.

RV: Was she at the airport to meet you?

BM: Yeah. She come around—I was walking and I saw her come around the corner and I just, I couldn’t move watching this little old lady run as fast as Jesse Owens. So it was quite a feeling to get home, finally all of the dreams came true. I used to have a recurring dream in Vietnam about being home. They weren’t sad dreams. In fact, they were rather quite happy because I was home partying with my friends. In all of the dreams it was always, “Are you home for good?” I would say, “No.” I would say, “I have to go back. I don’t know when I have to go back but I know I have to go back.” I didn’t even know why I was home. I just knew I was home. Hold on a second. So, I finally got home and had another month’s leave and had a great time. I stayed drunk for twenty-nine out of thirty days.

RV: How did you transition back to the United States? Was it difficult for you?

BM: Not really because being I was in the Navy and I actually got—I wasn’t even in the Navy two years by the time I got back from Vietnam. So I had two more years of my enlistment to go. So being in my hometown wasn’t too bad because I didn’t get bothered that much, but I went back to California and was more or less in a military environment again. I was stationed in Long Beach, California.

RV: So it wasn’t a really severe transition for you?

BM: No, I had a few incidents. Thankfully I was never spit on, but I was called baby burner a few times by idiot kids but it was never anything severe.

RV: Did you discuss your Vietnam experience with anybody? Did anybody ask you about it?
BM: Nobody asked, I mean I did discuss it with a few people. In fact, I never got to finish the other part of the big firefight story with that small Army base. I’m sitting in a bar—the Dunwoody Tavern, I’ll always remember the name—I saw a guy there that I hadn’t seen since we went to grade school together. So we lost contact in high school, and it’s like, “Kevin, how’s it going?” “No problem, what have you been doing?” He goes, “Man, I just got back from Vietnam.” I said, “Yeah, so did I.” He goes, “Who were you with?” He says “Big Red One.” I said “Oh, yeah. I’ve heard of them. I was with the Mobile Riverine Force.” He goes, “Is that those little gunboat things?” I said, “Yeah.” He says, “Man, I remember one night we were in this one little fire support base in the middle of nowhere and Charlie hit us that night and these two Navy boats were there. Boy, you should have seen it when Charlie, when the Navy boats opened up at them.” He was on that base. It was like, my jaw hit the ground like, “Are you kidding me?” So we had a good old time.

RV: I bet so. Wow. How much did you keep up with American policy and what was happening in Vietnam once you got back to the States?

BM: I went into a shell. The big things, yeah. But one of my minor, major, whatever you want to call, it regrets in life: I never knew they had those MIA bracelets. It’s like, “Where did they come from?” So maybe part of it was because of still being in the military for two—it’s just, I knew what was going on but I just went into a shell. It wasn’t until—I mean not that I never talked about it but the feelings of what we went through and the anxieties—it wasn't until, what was it? When the hostages came back from Iran, ’80 whatever that was.


BM: I worked in Manhattan then also. They were going to have the big parade for them up Wall Street and I was like a half-a-block around the corner and I remember the day, getting excited like everybody else. Even before the parade started we were throwing things out the window, computer papers, and having a good old time. Then twelve o’clock rolls around and the whole office empties out and I sat at my desk.

RV: Why?

BM: I don’t know.
RV: Did you somehow relate that, the hostages coming back, to your Vietnam experience?

BM: The experience of the way we were treated. I didn’t expect parades when we came home, but the whole prevailing attitude of the nation back then was we were wrong, we were baby killers, we lost the war, we were drug addicts, we were bums. I almost got into a big fight—the closest I ever came to really hitting someone in an office environment when some guy who never served in the military, my age, for whatever reason he didn’t go, started telling all of the—we were having a discussion on it because it was mostly a male environment, all the other guys how lousy the fighters were in Vietnam compared to the other wars. It’s like, you know, I just got insane. I said, “How dare you? How dare you make a comment on something you know nothing about?” So it was just like, I just sat at my desk and people asked me, am I going and I said, “No.” “Why?” “I don’t know. I just don’t feel like it.” I could watch the news last night and the comment came about, a lot of Vietnam veterans did not want to go, read about it in the paper the next day. Then a lot of things changed. You start looking at the experiences from a different perspective.

RV: Have you ever suffered from any PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) symptoms?

BM: No. I was blessed three times. I survived. I was never wounded. I mean we all, all Vietnam vets suffer from some parts of anxiety but never to the point of—in fact, I was talking about that with one of the guys in my Vietnam veterans chapter just the other day. I think part of it is—because he says, “Do you think you’ll ever suffer—be affected by it later on in life like maybe when you retire?” I said, “I don’t think so.” I was never—I was in combat but I never had any of the experiences of the boat being hit. I saw a few dead bodies over there but I was never that close to any of that happening. So I just don’t think it’ll ever—not that I don’t get blue about it or the old survivor guilt, things like that. But I never—in the long run I think it’s made me a better person, serving in Vietnam.

RV: Yeah?

BM: Yeah. I think that—stronger, able to handle more things, the loyalty end of it from the military. We were taught loyalty and I carry that over to my civilian life. I
expect loyalty in my bosses because if people weren’t loyal to you then people were going to die. So I think it’s made me a stronger person.

RV: Would you say that was the most significant thing you learned there?

BM: Probably. It was just the idea of, life is very short normally and then when you realize how short it is when you’re twenty years old. I’ve developed a very good attitude about life and living in general. I’m going to enjoy it because it’s too easy to be taken away from you.

RV: Is there anything that you would change about your experience in Vietnam?

BM: Well, I definitely don’t want to say I wanted to be wounded or anything. No, I don’t think so.

RV: Do you remember how you felt April 1975 when South Vietnam fell?

BM: I felt what a waste. Everything we tried to accomplish, all of the lives that were lost on both sides and we just walked away with our tales between our legs and the other thing was we abandoned them. We promised them that we would train them, we would support them, and then in their greatest hour of need we ignored them. I was very down on the way the people who were running the country.

RV: Do you think the United States learned any lessons from the war?

BM: From the military point of view I think they did. I mean during the Gulf War, I don’t remember the name of the book, there was a book that was mostly about the Schwarzkopfs and Colin Powells and quite a few of the Marine generals who had served as lieutenants and captains during Vietnam that just told President Bush and Joint Chiefs of Staff that if they pulled the same crap on them and their men that they did in Vietnam, without supporting them and having a specific goal that they would resign their commissions and would not tolerate it. I think the military, and somewhat basically because of the Ronald Reagan years where we changed our attitudes, I think the American government has, for the most part, that you have to go war with a specific purpose. Not a war of attrition like they did there, not saying, “Well, we’ll keep doing this.” You have to have a set goal and I think—mostly I hope we’ve learned it because too many men’s lives were lost because we didn’t have a clear path. I hope we learned that we can’t fight a war that you just don’t fight it. I mean, if I can believe some of the things I’ve read that are coming out of some of the analysis by some of the North
Vietnamese today that they were very close to capitulating if we had kept up the attacks and started bombing the North more. But you can’t fight a war when you don’t go after them and that’s what we did in Vietnam.

RV: Do you think the United States should have invaded on the ground, North Vietnam?

BM: If they really wanted to finish the war, yeah. But it was all political. They were so afraid of the Chinese entering the war like they did in Korea that they didn’t try to win it. I think that was what I resented the most about how they did it. Like I said I believe we belonged to be there, but don’t fight a war for eight years with no real attempt to win it. Don’t fight a war with—don’t handcuff the military. If you’re not going to be there to win, then just don’t bother.

RV: What would you tell young people today about the Vietnam War, if you had a chance to talk to them?

BM: Well, I would tell them that what we did there was necessary. I went, the first reunion I went to was in Kentucky, I forget the year, but Admiral Zumwalt was one of the guest speakers. Besides the fact that it was my first and it was very emotional, he gave a speech that for the first time as a Vietnam veteran I felt good about what we did. Because he said when he left Saigon in ’75 before the fall, he stopped off at, I think he said Singapore, one of those countries in Indonesia. It was very hard to remember. It was very emotional. He said he was having supper with the president of the country and the president told him, “I know you and the rest of America feels very bad right now about Saigon falling.” He said to the admiral, “I know right now you think that you accomplished nothing over there and everything, that Americans you lost accomplished nothing.” But he says, “That’s not true. What you accomplished is you bought time for my country, Thailand, other countries of Southeast Asia. That we were able to build ourselves up economically and we’re not susceptible to the type of revolution that hit Vietnam. For that I want to thank you and all of the Americans who gave their lives and fought there.” That’s what I would tell the young people. Nothing in the world today is a single event. Everything has a ripple effect and everything that’s done is done with more than just the singleness of the United States and Vietnam. I’ve read some books further about the commitment that we made. We did make a commitment to the South
Vietnamese that some of these other countries that we were trying to help and were being
bombarded from the Communist side, if we just pulled out and left Vietnam, what are we
going to tell these people when we tell them, “Do this and do that and come out
democracy. We’ll support you.”? So there’s the ally-type thing that you have to support
your allies and everything has a ripple effect, nothing is so singular that it’s unaffected by
the other events in the world. That’s what I tell them. The other thing, I would tell them
about the gallantry of the American fighting force over there. I thought that We Were
Soldiers, Colonel Moore, I thought he did a spectacular job of—it’s an old cliché but
when the bullets are firing at you there’s not right or wrong there’s just you and the guy
nest to you trying to survive. That’s what I’d try to impart to them, that it’s a game of
survival.

RV: Did you feel like you fought more for your buddies on that boat when you’re
in a firefight versus for American policy or—?

BM: Well, I guess the best way I can say is, the night that I was sitting on that
radio watch and everything that’s logical says I should have been happy that I was there
and not being fired upon, I will go to my grave regretting I wasn't with them. So it’s
definitely you fight for them. Which is, I think, why a lot of the guys would go back. A
lot of the guys went over there for more than one tour. I think that’s the reason.

RV: Have you experienced the so-called survivor guilt?

BM: A lot of times, you know nothing—yes. That’s the best way of putting it,
yes, I have. I’ll read some books about it or just anything sometimes—it’s never
overwhelming. It’s just a feeling of depression of times, but not enough for it to have ever
bothered me more than just the anxiety of the moment. But, yeah, I’ve felt it.

RV: You said you’ve read some books on Vietnam. Tell me what you’ve read or
what you think are really worthy books written about the war.

BM: Well, We Were Soldiers is probably one of the better ones. I read so many
books it’s very hard for me to remember the titles. There was a book Combat
Infantryman and there was another book was just called ’68-’69. I read constantly and
there were a lot of times I read two books at a time so the titles just blur after awhile.

RV: How about movies on Vietnam? Did you go see them?
BM: Yes. I’ve seen—most of them I’ve seen. I thought that *Deer Hunter* was a joke, had nothing to do with Vietnam as much as the impact of Vietnam on people. *Apocalypse Now* was one of my favorite all-time movies, as a movie, also was crap, had nothing to do with Vietnam. From the military point of view they would never have done what they did there. I did like *Platoon*. I thought that what’s his name, the maker of the movie?

RV: Oliver Stone.

BM: Oliver Stone is not one of my favorite people, but I thought he did a good job in *Platoon* about showing both sides of the story. I mean you really have to watch it. Like the Charlie Sheen character. If you really look at it, it captured a little bit about what could happen in the environment of ambushes and booby traps. You have to really understand that the Viet Cong were trying to get the Americans to do some of the things they did and also how it’s very easy to be the other insane guys, just to go crazy. *We Were Soldiers*, spectacular. I thought that that was by far the best. *The Hanoi Hilton* was another tremendous movie. *Hamburger Hill* was good. I thought *Full Metal Jacket* was crap. But then it’s just my opinion.

RV: That’s what we’re after. Any songs that you listened to on the radio take you back to Vietnam?


RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese here in the United States?

BM: Just a couple times down in Washington. I was down in Washington the year 2000, Veterans Day. I met a few of them. I met some Vietnam nationals in Las Vegas and Reno. One of them was actually from My Tho, which is right down the block from Dong Tam. They were very interesting people.

RV: Would you ever want to get back to Vietnam?

BM: I don’t know. If I did go back I’d like to go back with a group of guys that served over there in the same—probably yes, if the circumstances were right.

RV: What are your thoughts on Vietnam today, the country itself?

BM: Well, overall I’m a capitalist. If we can create American jobs by trading with them, why not? Some of our biggest allies today are Japan and Germany. You
know what happened in those wars were no worse than ours. I don’t feel that any 
Vietnam veteran who can’t stand the Vietnamese or want anything to do with them, that 
they are wrong. But I just don’t feel that way. I think the people—the people are not the 
government. Just like here the government is corrupt and I don’t always blame the 
people. But from what I’ve read in some of the magazines and some of the shows I’ve 
seen on television, they’re very hard-working, industrious people. From some of the 
people who I’ve known, Vietnam vets who have gone back that they don’t show any 
animosity towards us for the most part and, God, if anybody should feel animosity it’s 
them. We don’t even know how many of them we killed, never mind their MIAs. So I 
just—I think the past is the past and we can go on.

RV: Well, sir, is there anything else that you’d like to add to our conversation 
tonight?

BM: Not at the time.

RV: Okay. All right, we’ll go ahead and end the interview. Thank you, sir.

BM: Okay.