Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I am continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Sumner Clayton. It is November 15\textsuperscript{th}, 2002, Friday morning about 9:45 am Central Standard Time and we are in the interview room of the Special Collections Library on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Clayton, we left off our interview last time with your completion of your survival training, which you did successfully. This is the summer of 1970 I believe, and you were getting ready to ship off to Vietnam. So after you completed your survival training, where did you go?

Sumner Clayton: Okay, after I finished the survival training, then I had five days to get to Fairfield, California, Air Force Base [?].

RV: On your own. Did they make you pay your own way?

SC: Oh no. They paid travel pay every time they send you somewhere like that. So I had five days to get there. They told us not to drive for at least 24 hours because we had had basically very little sleep or rest or food or anything else. So they just wanted us to lay around for 24 hours and then go to Fairfield. Then I went to Fairfield and I got there the day before I was supposed to fly out. We just got a room in a motel. It was about three of us that just drove up there. One of them had a car so we just pooled expense money and went on to Fairfield. Got there the day before. So the next day, the following day, we went to the Air Force Base at the air terminal to check in. It was on an
Air America jet that took us over. There was quite a few people. I don’t remember how many.

RV: Was it a military flight?
SC: It was a military contract type flight. It was the airline Air America was who was contracted to fly us over there.

RV: Do you remember what the mood was on the plane when you guys left?
SC: At times, I guess it was like any other time that we would ship out going anywhere. A lot of excitement, a lot of apprehension, a lot of talking and then everybody just ran down and napped the rest of the way until we got there, I guess, just about. When we flew in, and it was a straight flight, I think going over.

RV: Did you stop and refuel somewhere?
SC: I can't remember. I know I did coming back but going over there I don’t remember stopping. Yes, we stopped at Yakota, Japan for refueling at the Air Force Base there and refueled. Then we went into Vietnam. It was about one or two in the morning and you could see the apprehension started again because you could see the different explosions going off here and there and just around the area because you’re pretty high up. So we fly into Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base and they take us off, put us on some buses and take us to what they call the, let’s see the name of that hotel. It was in Saigon, downtown Saigon. I can't remember the name of the hotel. It may come to me later. I checked in, turned our orders in, so they gave us a place to sleep that night in there.

RV: What was your first impression of when you got off that plane and you know you’re in Vietnam?
SC: My first impression was just that. I am here in Vietnam. I always wondered about it. I had been over in Europe and in the Caribbean numerous times. I’d never been to the Southeast. So it was a little bit new, a little bit different experience to me. A lot of the younger boys, I think they were a little more apprehensive than I was really because I’d already been here and there and everywhere else anyway. So the next day then they give us our field pack in addition to what, we didn’t have to take very many uniforms or clothes over there anyway. So they gave us a full duffle bag or sea bag as we called it full of your camouflage. They weren’t camouflage. They were the regular utilities like the Army usually wears or the enlist wear them to work detail and stuff like that. So they
were olive drab, heavy utilities. They gave us an M-16 rifle, a bandolier of ammunition. I think a bandolier had about ten clips of ammo in it.

RV: Was it a new M-16 or was it used?

SC: Well, if it wasn’t new, it was pretty clean. We had a flak jacket, bulletproof vest type thing, helmets, the boots. The boots had canvas tops, had a steel shank running through the sole and the heel. There was a reason for that I’m thinking. We were told a lot of times the Viet Cong had a lot of ingenuity about making a dangerous weapon out of nothing, like little pieces of bamboo and they could stick them in these, put a little poison of some kind of or another on them, put a point, sharpen them up, put them down in a hole in the trail, cover it up, and you step in it and the darn spike goes through you foot. Well, this was supposed to help prevent all that. So we got all our uniforms, all our clothes, all our canteen, the belt, the whole works for survival, military survival. Then we hang around. We have to go about four blocks, we walk four blocks to the mess hall where they feed us. So you get to get out of the hotel every once in a while right down the street in Saigon.

RV: What was your impression of Saigon?

SC: It reminded me really of Naples, Italy or places in Sicily as in the automobile, bicycle traffic. It was a really dangerous thing to try to walk across the street because in most of those places that I had been in, you have policemen I guess, traffic directors that would be standing on this pedestal in the middle of the intersection. They’re supposed to be, I assume, directing traffic, but you never see them move or do anything. They’re just standing there and you hear a lot of horns honk. I always thought it was kind of funny. I thought that it seemed like the louder the horn you honked and the more you hit it, well you got to go through the intersection eventually. They had tricycle taxicabs and just a whole lot of traffic and a lot of smoke. It would put Los Angeles smog to shame. That was really my impression. I did get out, take some pictures. I had a little Kodak 126 which was a pretty good camera in those days and I went downtown, took pictures of the governor’s palace, Parliament building, the statue. Interesting tale about the statue we used to tell.

RV: What’s that?
SC: When the one soldier cramps down behind the other one and it’s pointed
toward the Parliament if I remember right and there was a big debate between us on
whether it was the Vietnamese hiding behind the American soldier or the American
soldier was pushing the Vietnamese. We couldn’t figure out which it was. I’m sure there
was a little more meaning than that to that statue, but I never did research it and find out.
But that was the joke we told each other anyway, not to any Vietnamese [laughing].
Anyway, wandered around town one day and took some pictures. You had to be really
careful. You didn’t want to wear a wristwatch. Those little kids were really good at
snatching them off your wrist. You wanted to keep your hand on your billfold at all times
because they were really good. I knew several people that had their billfolds lifted while
we were walking to the mess hall. They always went out in a group of people so that
always helped. If you wore a weapon, which you did usually, of course you had to wear
it on the outside. You could not conceal it anyway. The blouse on the uniform hung down
to about here. I wore an extra small, extra short. It was the only size that was small
enough to fit me and the top of it, the outside come down to about here.
RV: Just a little bit above, about five, six inches above your knees.
SC: Right. I’m not that tall. Anyway, after about four days actually more than
that; I stayed there nearly ten days. And this fellow in charge of the barracks, an Army
fellow, came over and told me--I was an E-6 First Class Petty Officer Bos’n mate in the
Navy--he said, “Petty Officer Clayton, here is your orders and nine other sets of orders.
Collect these gentleman up and 2:00, 1400 hours this afternoon, we’re going to put you
on transportation to go to Cu Chi Army Base,” which was on by the Cambodian border,
“for some base perimeter defense training.” So I collected all of them up. We left there,
most of our junk there in the Saigon motel. I guess that’s what we called it, or Saigon
Hilton. Took our weapons and enough clothes and some of our papers and they put us on
this gray colored, looked like a school bus. So we drove down, they drove us down this
paved road to Cu Chi Army Base. We checked in there and while we are there, we’re
there five, six days. Six days I think. We go through the firing range. We go through
weapons training which included the fieldstripping, cleaning, putting the weapon back
together. We trained on the .45 caliber service revolver, the M-16. We had like an M-1.
There was an M-1 and an M-2 carbine that they trained us on. They trained us on, they
called it a riot gun, a little sawed off shotgun. They called it a riot gun. We trained on that
and M-79 grenade launcher.
RV: Which of those was your favorite?
SC: Well, I was pretty good with a rifle and a pistol already, so I would assume
both of those was the easiest for me to adapt to. The M-79, of course, or the shotgun
would, I fired a shotgun a lot of times hunting, also. So I can't say I really had a favorite
in them. I wound up when I finally got to where I was going, I had an M-16 and a .38
revolver. But that’s a little bit later in the story here. Okay, we got a Medevac
demonstration. That was my first helicopter ride and it was unnerving to say the least. I
was the man in the stretcher. They put us on a, I think it was a CH-146. The helicopter
troop-carrying helicopter with no doors on the sides. When they laid that stretcher in
there, it seems like part of me hung out either side and they had me strapped in the
stretcher and they told these two other sailors, get in the helicopter. I didn’t see them
strap the stretcher in. They tied it real tight. He told them sailors, “Hang on to him and
don’t drop him.” And here he goes. So we did everything but fly that sucker upside
down. It scared the dog out of me. It didn’t last but five minutes, seemed like an eternity.
We finally got down and I was in a lot better shape when I got back on the ground. After
that, helicopters didn’t bother me at all. That was my first ride. Okay, we finish our
training and we’re going through booby traps, how to march through the jungle as in
staggered and kind of far apart, this, that, and the other. An amplification of our field
training in Camp Pendleton you might say, except it was actually in the jungle. But it was
all on the base, the Army base. Okay, we get back on the bus, head to Danang. “Okay,”
he says, “Pick up your orders. We’re going to send you to Danang for further transfer
north to Qua Viet.” Which in Quang Tri, is the northeast part of Quang Tri province. And
I was going as mine sweeping advisor to an outfit, it was mine interdiction division 92,
was the Vietnamese designation of it.
RV: So you were going to be advising the Vietnamese as your specific role.
SC: Right. I’m going to be one of nine Americans in the advisory team for the
mine sweeping outfit.
RV: This is part of President Nixon’s Vietnamization policy of turning the war
over to the Vietnamese.
SC: About a month, maybe two months before I got there, well, it started actually about a year before that. At an American Navy Base at Qua Viet, they turned some of the boats, a lot of the equipment, a couple of jeeps, you name it, over to the Vietnamese Navy which had a Navy base just right down the river or up the river. It was up the river from the American Base. Then they tore down the American base completely. Nothing was there but the big LST ramp. So we on being sent. Anyway, we were being sent as Navy Advisors for the Vietnamese mine sweeping unit. Well, in the meantime, lost my military records.

RV: You did or they did?

SC: They did. They lost them while I was Cu Chi Army Base. So I went everywhere to every base I they could think of before they sent me up north, left a copy of my orders, pay records, everything was gone. I told them, I said, “If they catch up with you with my records, send them up to this place.” Before I go through the story, it took three months to get my service jacket. Luckily, I drew out some pay when I first got there because my pay record was in my service record.

RV: So you didn’t get paid for three months.

SC: Three months. We were going to get paid once a month on regular basis. My medical and dental records showed up two weeks before I came back to the States. But anyway, that’s beside the point. Okay. They take us to the airport at Tan Son Nhut, put us on a C-130, put me on a C-130 with a bunch of other fellows going to Danang. This plane is going to stop at Hue first and drop off some people, pick up some more, go to Danang. So the let me off; I fly to Danang on a C-130. I hadn’t been on one of those before either. Those are really neat. You’re sitting there strapped in a web cargo net with a seat belt. Cargo’s all tied in the middle and your people are sitting around. Up in the corner by where they go kind of up three or four steps, the pilot, to get in the pilot place, you have this big transformer-looking thing and it’s got sparks shooting out of it and all sorts of good things. You wonder if the thing’s going to get off the ground. Well, it did and it was a pretty nice plane to fly I found out later. Okay, we got to Danang and checked in at the Military Advisory, it’s a compound. I think it was called Haiku. It was down close to deep-water pier on a peninsula kind of like if I remember right. Right before you got to the deep-water pier, you turned off to the left, there was a little elementary school right
there on the right and then the compound was right past that. They took us over there to check in. We checked in, spent the night in the barracks. Then they took us and put me and one other fellow in this back of a pick up truck and we went up Highway 1 to Quang Tri. We’re sitting in the back in a lawn chair or folding chair on this pick up truck. So we drive all the way to Quang Tri and check in there with the Army advisors because that’s where I’m going to get my mail is through the Army at A.P.O. number instead of a fleet post office number. Then we get in another vehicle in a jeep and they take us up to Qua Viet from Quang Tri and I check in there. It’s a small outfit. It doesn’t take a whole lot of orientation. That afternoon, they showed me around on the Navy base. Showed me a little bit about the boats, found out a little bit about me, and the next morning I went on the river.

RV: How many men were at this base, would you say?

SC: The South Vietnamese, I’m not real sure. I used to know. I would say probably they might have had 100 to 150 sailors. Some of them had their families living on base. There was a village right outside the gate where some of the rest of the families lived. I couldn’t say for sure. There was nine American advisors. Then there were four American coastal group 1 advisors that lived in a different building and there were three Australian Demolition Advisors, EOD people, [Diapers?] Demolition. The rest of them was Vietnamese.

RV: Just seven of you then.

SC: There was nine of us in the particular outfit I was in. There was a lieutenant junior grade. He was there for a while and then there was just the lieutenant. Then there was all the enlisted people. So what we would do--

RV: Is this where you would spend your tour in Qua Viet the rest of the time?

SC: Yes, the whole year. The whole year there. Then what we would do, we would go down to the boats and we would stagger the times, they would stagger the time we would leave every morning. It would be anywhere from 7:30, 7:00, 7:30 in the morning to 9:00 or maybe even 10:00. It depended on what time the convoy got there really because the supply boats would come up the coast from Danang and whenever they would get in the vicinity, we would send one of the advisors out to escort them like a river pilot, lead them in the river mouth.
RV: Did you ever do that?
SC: Yes.
RV: What kind of boat did you take out?
SC: It was a yabuda junk, a wooden junk. It had a 371 engine in it and it was made of wood, had a little house built on the back of it where the coxswain drove it. It had a little awning made out of sandbags cut up over the top of it and they had painted big red eyes around the running lights on each side of the bow. We were told this was so the boat could see where it was going. I don’t know that for a fact. I think they had a lot of superstition, we were told, in their culture. So they would take us out on that particular boat and put one American on the supply boat. The other mine sweeping advisor, of course, would be on the minesweeper and then we would lead them up the river to Dong Ha, approximately 10 miles. It would take about three hours. There’s a reason for this. We’d go very slow. I’ll go into the reason when I describe the mine.
RV: This is your daily routine.
SC: Daily routine. Everyday. I think we had about two weeks that we didn’t go up the river when there was just a monsoon right off the coast. It was just bad and we didn’t have any supply boats coming up anyway. So, what we would do when we’d get to Dong Ha that was as far as we would go and they had a ramp there. All these particular boats were landing craft where the front ramp on the boat, they could lower it down right on the ground. They’d leave the thing running, the engines running in real slow forward speed, which would hold the boat right on the ramp while they’d offload everything.
RV: Now were you driving the boat or were kind of on board just supervising?
SC: I was just a passenger and advisor. If something happened to the mine sweep gear, the Vietnamese sailors on the mine sweepers pretty well knew what they were doing. They’d been doing it for quite a while and I guess they broke in on the American boats when the Americans were running that river. All the crews were pretty sharp on it that I saw. We had about five different boat crews that I can remember that ran actual mine sweepers.
RV: How many were in a convoy that would go to Dong Ha?
SC: It would be anywhere from one boat to maybe 20 at the most, 18, 20 at the most.
RV: That’s a pretty sizeable convoy.
SC: Hardly ever over 20. The average convoy would have 10 maybe 11 boats in it from what I can remember.
RV: Were you on the front boat?
SC: On the front one right behind the mine sweeping gear that the minesweeping was dragging through the water.
RV: So the minesweeper was in front and then you were on the next boat.
SC: Right. Or I’d be on the minesweepers and another river pilot would be on the other boat.
RV: Now which did you prefer? Which boat did you prefer to be on?
SC: Actually, I preferred to be on the minesweeper.
RV: Why’s that?
SC: Well, that was just my real regular job was mine sweeping. I’d been on mine sweepers forever, the whole time I’d been in the Navy nearly. I just, I was there just in case we hung up on something, a wire broke, had to help them retrieve it. The advisors, advisors are a funny, kind of a strange breed of people. You cannot sit there and just tell them line for line how to do these things. A lot of it you let them do it and then they may ask you or you may show them a little trick and they may or may not take your advice on this deal. We were there mainly, one of our main jobs on the boat, really, we had a field radio with us and we could call our radio operator on the base. If we should need fire support, they always kept a big ship, battleship New Jersey was off the coast for about eight months, about five miles off the coast while I was there. If we needed fire support, I had the Army grid map and a field radio and I could call in support.
RV: Did you ever have to do that?
SC: Never had to. It was really pretty tame up there where I was at most of the time.
RV: That’s close to the DMZ. It’s right up there.
SC: About two miles south of the south. I don’t think its two miles. It may be one mile south of the southern end of the DMZ. Anyway, we’d just sit up there and go ahead and let the boats offload. The minesweeper, when it would tie up, of course, we’d have to bring, we’d haul a fishing net, a trawl net behind us to sweep the mines with. This net
would either tumble the mine (the mine layed on the bottom) it would tumble them and
make them blow, or if it was a dud, it would get hung up in this net and then when we’re
pulling up the net, there’d be a mine hung up on it. So then we would call the
Demolitions people. We would get off the boat and they would take care of it. When all
the boats got offloaded, then we’d lead them back up the river sweeping the channel
ahead of them again. Then the river pilot would go on out, take them all the way out to
the sea buoy out in the ocean and then either the yubuda junk or we had one command
junk which was made out of phero cement by the way, or it would go out and pick up the
pilot and bring it back to the base.

RV: How many times, how often would you find a dud mine in your netting?
SC: We didn’t find that many really. I can recall maybe fourteen or fifteen at the
most.

RV: In the whole year.
SC: Yeah. A lot of days we would go up the river and not sweep a mine and not
pick one up. Anyway, describing, we did this. What I can do is go through that and then
maybe Lam Son 719 and then describe the mines that we were sweeping. December 16th
1970, they started a campaign called Lam Son 719, which was going to be the invasion of
Laos.

RV: An effort to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail and attack those sanctuaries.
SC: Right. So I volunteered to be a river pilot on the Army boats, alternating on
that minesweeper with another had 85 Second Class Bos’n mate Advisor. There were
actually only two of us that were actual Mine sweeping advisors. The rest of them were
attached to the advisory team. But me and the other fellow had been to mine sweeping
school and knew what to do with the equipment.

RV: Are you still going to be on the same river?
SC: Same river.

RV: Why did you volunteer for that?
SC: They just needed somebody to get on and ride the boat. And they were US
Army [boats]. I had an ulterior motive there too. I thought maybe, we had to buy our
food from the open market, the fish market in Quang Tri, the fist market in the village
outside the base, and we had C-rations, of course, issued to us and this, that, and the
other. And I would get to talk to all of those boat skippers on the Army, the big YFU
supply boats [skippers] had been in the Navy. In the late ‘60s the Navy had a program
where that if you were E-6 or a chief, first class or chief bos’n mate, quartermaster,
signalman, in the top three or four ranks, you could transfer over to the U.S. Army and
become a warrant officer and run Army boats. Every one of them had done this. My
ulterior motive was maybe I can talk them into bringing us some tomatoes and lettuce
and all these things that we’re doing without. Steaks. And it worked. Every once in a
while, one of them would bring it. One time they brought a whole case of tomatoes. We
had fried green tomatoes. We had salads, we had every tomatoes fixed, grilled, every way
you could think of. They were great.

RV: So you were very popular by getting this food for the guys.
SC: I guess. I considered it kind of part of my job really.
RV: Were you the senior officer there?
SC: No, I was senior enlisted.
RV: Senior enlisted, okay.
SC: I had two officer over me for a while. A lieutenant and lieutenant junior grade
and then the junior grade left and then I had the one lieutenant that was over me. We
eventually got it to where we could buy our food off the Army in Quang Tri and we
bought it off an Engineering Battalion and they would even get it helicoptered to us. We
were paid subsistence. Our lieutenant in charge, we made him the president of our
anything to do with the food is called the mess in the Navy--mess hall, mess this, mess
that--he was in charge. We fixed something like 25 cents for breakfast, 50 cents for
lunch, 75 cents or a dollar for supper and when you ate you would put your mark by your
name, which meal and payday, which was once a month, he would collect from
everybody and he would go shopping over at the storage place in Quang Tri and we
would buy groceries for the next month.
RV: Now you were buying from the Army.
SC: Right.
RV: So here, U.S. soldiers, getting paid by the U.S. government, paying the U.S.
Army for their food.
SC: And paying the Vietnamese for what we could get from them. There’s a reason for that. Anytime that you are in an advisory, military advisory capacity in another country, in a host country, the host country, you are pretty well just cut off from your own supplies. Your host country is supposed to provide and usually they don’t provide near as well as we do.

RV: How’d you like the local food?

SC: The local food, well, I liked rice anyway. We ate a lot of rice. I can tell you about the way they cleaned their fish to put in the rice.

RV: You watched this?

SC: Oh, yes. I ate it for a while until I saw them clean it.

RV: Well, how’d they clean it.

SC: Well, they’d just take a big fish knife, lay it down and chop it up in pieces and throw it in there.

RV: Scales and all?

SC: Scales, guts, everything. They wouldn’t throw the head in. I think the head had another purpose in there we were told.

RV: Did you stop eating the rice after this?

SC: No, I ate rice, but I’d pick out the fish. What we would do, they would cook a big hachi pot full of rice and one on the way up and one on the way back. They eat rice about four or five times a day.

RV: You’re talking about on the boats.

SC: On the boats.

RV: Would they catch the fish in the river there or would the bring it from the base from town?

SC: Most of the time, our patrol boats--Okay we’re getting a little ahead of myself here; across the river, they have a village called Xuan Khan. It’s a resettlement village. They moved this whole town out of the DMZ and put it on the north bank of the river right across from our base. They had fishing boats that would go out in the ocean everyday and fish all day. There’s a curfew on the river. When they come back, the Vietnamese and an advisor on the patrol boat would be at the river mouth and have to search each boat coming in. Vietnamese are pretty ingenious. They found out right away
from the Vietnamese Navy that if you souvenired them a few fish or a sack full of shrimp
or something, you could get searched a whole lot faster, because you’ve got a bunch of
boats sitting there and one boat searching them. So everyday the patrol boat would come
back with a pretty good catch. Sometimes the fishermen would give them something.
They’d pull up along the minesweeper sometimes and throw them some food. It’s really
strange the way they did things.

RV: Were you ever out there doing the search or advising the search?
SC: Yes. Only twice. When I first go there they had me go on every phase of boat
operations since I was senior enlisted so I would know exactly pretty much what was
supposed to go on.

RV: How’d you feel out there searching? Was it nervous?
SC: No. I wasn’t really. You had a crew of five Vietnamese. Two of them were
doing the searching and most of the searching did not involve the Vietnamese going on
the fishing boat, just sometimes. It just depended.

RV: How did it usually happen?
SC: Usually, they would just look in because most of them are open sampans.
You could just look in the boat and see most of what was in there.

RV: Did the Vietnamese soldiers or Navy men, did they have their weapons out?
SC: Yes.
RV: So this was conducted with weapons in view.
SC: It would be one, the coxswain of the boat and there would be me. Of course, I
had my weapon. There was a two Vietnamese with M-16s and they were standing right
there on our boat and then two people were looking in the other boat. So I wasn’t really
worried about it.

RV: So go back to Lam Son 719.
SC: 719, what the supply boats were bringing were food, ammunition, just every
type of logistic support that you could think of that could be brought in by boat and we
would bring it. They would bring it to Dong Ha. Then it would be put on either C-130
airplanes, some type of cargo helicopter or by truck and moved inland. I never knew
really. I thought some of it might have went to Khe Sanh. I wasn’t sure because that was
about the only place I was familiar with the name of west of us, west of Dong Ha. So I
really didn’t know where all the supplies did wind up at. But we did that until April of ‘71.

RV: Would you still do one convoy a day or was it increased volume of convoys?
SC: Mostly one convoy a day. A couple of times we would have maybe two or three boats would come up the coast and they’d go ahead and take them up and then about noon or so, well, here’d come a few more and then we’d take them up. We tried to get everybody back out in the ocean by dark. We didn’t want to leave them sitting there up at Dong Ha overnight if we could help it.

RV: Tell me why.
SC: Well, the Viet Cong, North Vietnamese, they had a lot of Chinese made mines and armament. They were really good with what they call a limpet mine. It was some type of a device, kind of a round device that had a magnet on it and they had divers that could swim really good. Those people were brought up in the rivers. They could swim underwater, get off a boat, swim underwater with this thing, attach it to your hull right about where the engine room was underwater, arm it, and swim away and they could sink that boat right in place. I saw it done several times as far as the boat sinking.

RV: Anybody ever hurt?
SC: Yes.
RV: Any advisors ever hurt?
SC: We had one, wasn’t hurt really bad. No, we were really lucky in that outfit I was at. Now, we had one patrol boat hit a bottom mine while they were on patrol one night and it killed all five Vietnamese crew on it. It was an MCPL, was the designation of the boat.

RV: Did anything ever happen to you?
SC: No, not really. Like I said, it was kind of quiet. Dong Ha and Quang Tri were catching incoming every night. You could see the red tracers. When you’re shooting belted ammo, every fifth shell is a tracer, red. That way at night you can tell where you’re hitting I suppose. You could see it every night. They were trying to hit the fuel depots and the ammo dumps and ammo storage in both those Army bases. We took one rocket at Qua Viet in that base the whole year I was there, one night.

RV: Just one time.
SC: And periodically you would have snipers shooting across the river at us. But nobody ever got hit. We were really lucky.

RV: Pretty quiet there then.

SC: Other than just the mines, it was just the everyday routine until about probably three months; no it wasn’t even that long. About two months before I came back to the States and then they had some regular North Vietnamese Army had a division of them roaming around in Quang Tri province somewhere. We never did have any contact with them or anything. I think they were, other than the mines in the river, that was their main deterrent or trying to deter the supply line that we had going, but they didn’t accomplish that. I’ll describe the mines.

RV: Sure. Let me ask you a question first. How much interdiction did they try to levy upon you guys as you took your convoy up? During the day, would they fire at you from the banks or was it relatively quiet?

SC: Relatively quiet most of the time. Several times there was. Snipers would fire a couple of shots and that’d be it. The reason for this, from Quang Tri up about six or seven miles up the river, and then the Qua Viet River forks. The right fork goes to Dong Ha, the left one to Quang Tri. Up to that fork in the river, its flatland, rice paddies. There are no trees except one little section of tree line about maybe 200 yards long on the south bank and that’s it. Nothing on the river at all except the village of Xuan Kahn, and that one tree line until you get there; then it gets a little more brushy. The real jungle doesn’t start until after you get past Dong Ha really.

RV: Did you ever get past Dong Ha?

SC: Yes. I went to, I think it was Cam Lo one [several] time on a patrol boat when I first got there. When you get up there, the river bank was about seven or eight feet above the river itself on both sides, and the river got really narrow and had a lot of sandbars in it. Cam Lo, we got nearly to Cam Lo and that was as far as we could go. It was during the dry season.

RV: How large were your patrol boats?

SC: I don’t remember exactly how long the LCPL was. I was on the LCPL, what we used which was a metal boat. I would say probably close to 60 feet maybe. It might be 60 feet long. I doubt if it was that long.
RV: What kind of draft did it have?

SC: Draft was about 3 foot I think. Probably four foot maybe. But if it was less
than probably six foot of water, we just couldn’t go in it hardly.

RV: Did you stand out in the open as you’re going up the river to Dong Ha or did
you try to take cover?

SC: No. I stayed out in the open most of the time. I was usually back there by the
coxswain flat, by the driver. They had this canvas awning over a frame over the whole,
the open well deck in the front of the boat; the driver’s in back and the engines are in the
back. Then the ramp is cut off. It’s not landing craft so it’s cut off flush, welded shut.
This thing has a--on a mine sweeper now--its called a mine sweeping monitor and its
actually about a 96,000 pound Mike-6 was the designation of the boat as it started out. As
bar armor, Styrofoam padding. In the well deck you have a single .50 caliber up in the
middle of the ramp facing forward inside the well deck. Right on the forward part of each
side, you have something, I think it was similar to a Honeywell. It’s only about maybe
two foot long. It’s got a pretty good-sized barrel and it shoots something that would look
like a belted M-79 grenade round. But it shot belted rounds. We had in the back corner,
each corner of the well deck, was a single fire 20mm electric fire anti-aircraft gun, plus
we had our own weapons, the crew of five and the advisor. So we were, if you had a
weapon jam or anything, you just moved and got another one. Those boats were loaded,
you might say. Loaded forbear.

RV: Did you speak to the Vietnamese while you were going up the river?

SC: Sure.

RV: Could they speak English?

SC: All the crews but one would speak English. One crew would not speak
English or actually, I can't believe they didn’t know English.

RV: Did they just refuse to speak it?

SC: But one boat crew did not like to speak English. All of them spoke
Vietnamese and French. Nearly every one of them could speak French, which, of course I
didn’t know a word of. But I had been to the Vietnamese language school so I could talk
to them, yes. We would talk in Vietnamese and try out, practice my Vietnamese so to
speak and they would practice their English on me. So we would make the time pass as we went.

RV: Did you have a radio on board?

SC: Yes.

RV: I guess you had a radio obviously to call the base if you needed to, but did you have a radio where you could listen to music and things like that?

SC: No. If we did, the Vietnamese had it. See, their living quarters, they could stay down in that well deck and they may have had one down there. I don’t know, because a lot of times, half the crew would go down there and go to sleep while we was going up the river.

RV: So they would cook for you on the boat. I guess you’d eat your lunch. A three-hour trip up, eat your lunch and then come back.

SC: Right. They would cook going up and sometimes they’d cook coming back. If you were on a patrol boat, they’d cook a pot of rice four or five times a day. I mean a pretty good-sized pot. It would be about half full and we would put peas or beans in it. Sometimes if we had little C-rations with a canned some type of meat in it, we would souvenir that to them to mix up in the rice. And they would put a lot of fish in it and just different things like that. A farmer had a pretty nice watermelon patch on that river, little bitty. It looked like the, I don’t know if they grow them here, but in South Carolina, they call them sun and the moon watermelons. They have these patterns on them and they’re real small. The watermelon would be about the size of a large cantaloupe out here. Every once in a while the farmer, he’d get on the sampan and just bring it right out to us while we was going down the river.

RV: Did you ever worry that this person was a VC? I guess you knew him if it was the same farmer.

SC: Well, it would cross you mind the first few times that you saw him. After a while, you’d still wonder about it because Viet Cong are dressed in ordinary, what here you would call street clothes. Most of them, if they were, a lot of them, if they were working in a rice paddy, they wouldn’t have the black [clothes] and the cone hat on because the heat is terrible. The sun is really bad. It’s really hot during the dry season. Sure you wondered about it.
RV: What was your impression of the enemy, the Viet Cong and the regular NVA?

SC: I thought that, like I say, I didn’t have any contact really with the NVA. I had been taught about them. They had tanks. They had jeeps and truck and they are a regular trained Army, the NVA is. They wear uniforms just like an American Army or German or whatever kind of troop. The Viet Cong, he could be the barber on the Army base working in the barbershop. You never knew. You tried to be alert enough, but you tried not to think about a lot of it sometimes. Put it in the back of your mind and go on and do your job. We were, like I say, we were lucky. It was pretty tame where I was at most of the time. The mines were really something. They were a pressure release mine. As your boat or ship goes through the water, your hull puts out a displacement, which would kind of be called a hull pressure, a certain pressure going through the water. You get to a certain point about 2/3 of the way back from the bow of the boat, the pressure reaches its maximum and then starts declining. These were pressure release mines because all of our boats other than the patrol boat LCPL, all the minesweepers, the driver and the engines were in the 1/3 of the rear of the boat. They were in the back of the boat.

RV: That’s to protect it because the mine would detonate before it got to the back of the boat.

SC: No. It would detonate about the middle of the back of the boat by the time. It depended. The faster you go, the more pressure you put out in the water, the more hull pressure. The slower you go, you don’t put out as much. You don’t put out as big a wake. For some reason or another, you could drive real slow up the river and you’d have to hit the mine to set it off. You could not go over it and set it off if you went slow enough. So ten mile, approximately from Qua Viet to Dong Ha would take three, three and a half hours, one-way trip.

RV: How many knots?

SC: Well, fighting the river current and everything, it would be kind of like a slow crawl, maybe a knot and a half, two knots.

RV: Wow, very slow.

SC: A knot is a mile and a 16th. So you could walk faster to get right down to it.

You’re just going just enough where the supply boats could maintain headway and not
get turned sideways in the river current, get messed up. So two, three knots at most. It’d be about three and a half miles an hour. Very slow, but you wouldn’t set off the mine with the boat because you’re towing your counter measures here behind you, so you don’t want to set off stuff on the mine sweeper because if you do, you’re going to block that whole river channel and those boats are up for grabs then. So, what they would do, they would, the wicker basket would be about two foot square and about probably a six inch high wall around it. They’d fill it with plastic explosive. In the middle of it, they would tie a battery. It was a round chamber about probably six inches in diameter and about eight inches tall, which would be the battery compartment. On top of it, you had a wire birdcage-looking affair on top of it with something that looked like a hot water bottle inside of it or a punch ball. And off of that, first, they would have a little piece of bath soap about the size of my thumbnail for a delay in arming and it would be put at a strategic part of this mine. The river has a current, eventually the soap’s going to wash away, the mine will arm. It usually took 24 hours on the average. Then you’re hull pressure, if you set off this mine, it would blow the air out of this, it would force the air out of this thing, it looked like a hot water bottle to me, into this battery compartment. It would go through, how to explain it, through some wires, through a chemical pencil for an arming, another arming device, wires go on each side, hook to two quarter-pound concussion hand grenades that are imbedded in the plastic explosive. When it went through all of that process, when it finally got there, the mine would blow up. It wouldn’t come up and attach itself to the boat or anything. It’s on the bottom, but when it’s laying on the bottom, the concussion has nowhere to go but straight up and that’s what tears the boat up. These things would have anywhere between 40 and 60 pounds of plastic explosive in them. The way they’d get them out of the river, they would do it at night usually from the resettlement village is where, right off that village is where we caught most of them, where we blew most of the mines up. They would tie a truck inner tube or a jeep inner tube around this thing and inflate it, carry it over, put it in the water, tie it to the back of the, to the stern of the sampan with a motor. They’d tow it out down the river wherever they wanted to plant this thing, stab the inner tube, cut the tow line and let it got to the bottom and then it would start the arming processes.
RV: How did you know exactly how they got them out there? Did someone tell you? Did former Viet Cong tell you?

SC: No. Actually, I had a counterpart. It was a E-6 and kind of in the bos’n mate field in Vietnamese Navy that I was pretty well, we were, you might say we were to be like brothers the whole time we were there. If I went off the base, he was supposed to be with me unless I was on the patrol boat or the minesweeper. If I went to Dong Ha and I decided to go wondering around town while they’re unloading the boats, which I had identification cards which allowed me in orders which allowed me to do this. I had to have that counterpart with me. I couldn’t just go wandering around by myself. So he told me a lot about it because he had been riding the river on the minesweepers quite a bit. He still did quite a bit after I got there. Then I think they eventually promoted him or did something. Anyway, I wound up with another counterpart who I didn’t see that often. So I’m not too sure about that part of it. But between that, I know what the mines looked like because we had the Demolitions people brought one back to the base, which I took some pictures of where they had it dismantled kind of.

RV: We have those pictures in the Archive now.

SC: Yes. It’s a real primitive mine, but it did the job. We had one minesweeping monitor that actually hit one of them. They were using it for a patrol boat. It wasn’t in the actual going up the river leading the convoy type thing. It was an overnight patrol and it got in shallow water and it actually hit one. It got in some shallow water and when it did, it blew, completely separated the well deck of this boat from the coxswain flat and the engine room. The well deck went straight up about eight or ten feet. I saw this happen, and then it flipped it over and it just came down. The whole boat just sunk right in place. It took us forever to get that boat out of the river, but it wasn’t in the channel, so thank goodness for that.

RV: How’d you get it out of the river?

SC: They towed it back. The Vietnamese did this and they got nearly every boat that they had that wasn’t doing anything, patrolling or whatever, and they went up there, hooked a tow rope up to it and they bounced it on the bottom all the way back to the base. We had a LCPL hit one and of course I’ve got pictures of that one too. That was a small patrol boat and we did it the same way. We couldn’t get a crane in the river. The river
had not been dredged in years. We had dredged when a Filipino crew came up there in
about September, last of August or early September of ’70 to dredge river. They dropped
anchor in the river right off the riverbank, right off our base. The divers with the
magnetic limpet mines sunk it in place. Of course, it wasn’t in deep water. They nearly
drowned anyway.

RV: This was the dredge ship?
SC: The dredge ship had a Filipino crew on it and a tugboat had towed it up there.
So, they finally got everything patched on it and fixed up. They finally got a bigger crane,
pulled this thing up and put it on a barge of some sort or another and towed it back to
Danang and there never was another dredge attempted to come in the river. So the
sandbars, of course they shift the whole time. You had to run the river everyday to know
where they were. It took me about a month to really learn that river and then I kept
learning everyday I went on it.

RV: How many mines actually detonated during your tour while you were on the
river?
SC: That certificate, during Lam Son 719, I think had something like 45 or 46
were detonated and actually there were more than that. They were just on that certificate
that they gave me for participation in that deal. I showed that certificate to my wife right
before I came down here for the first interview. She asked me, “Are you nuts?” She’d
never seen it. It said, “Petty Officer Clayton volunteered to do this.” I didn’t know they
put that in there. I’d forgotten. “Are you crazy?”

RV: You were just doing your job, right.
SC: She was in doubt there for a minute. Anyway, that was the type mines we
had. They’d recover, the divers were called sappers. That’s what the South Vietnamese
Navy would call them. We had some pictures of various things we recovered off some of
them, a couple of Chinese grenades and this, that, and the other. They got a lot of Chinese
weaponry, AK-47 of course, was a popular weapon of the NVA and the Viet Cong.
Anyway, we had a coastal mine sweeper during the typhoon which hit, it was probably
about December, January maybe. We ran aground. It was coastal minesweeper and that
thing was 145 feet long and had 45 people on it, and it was still there when I left
following July.
RV: The Vietnamese?

SC: The Vietnamese. We had given them a coastal minesweeper and they ran it aground right on the beach. We have some pictures of it, too, I think. Anyway, about ten days before I was due to rotate back to the States, they sent me down to Danang for checking out kind of a—I got some debriefing, but not a whole lot before they flew me back to the States in July. I guess July 13, 1971.

RV: Who debriefed you? Do you remember? Was it a Navy officer?

SC: It was a senior Navy officer in an advisory outfit down at Danang.

RV: What kind of questions did he ask you?

SC: I really don’t remember a lot of it. I remember we were not to take souvenirs back. We were not to take anything back that might get picked up by customs or whatever. No weapons whatsoever. I don’t know what the advisory part or what. I just don’t remember what all they did ask me.

RV: Did you feel like it was a really complete debriefing?

SC: No. It was pretty quiet, pretty tame really. It lasted about an hour at the most.

RV: Were they asking you about—

SC: They asked me about, I think they were trying to get a feel on what my mental state was really [laughing]. You know, you always hear about these people that go overseas and they’re either Army snipers or they’re in some dangerous deal where they’re shooting people and carrying on and they go through a little more elaborate debriefing than I went through, I think.

RV: Did you feel like you had all your mental faculties about you?

SC: They wanted to make sure I knew what I was doing I think.

RV: Did you feel okay?

SC: I felt fine, ready to come home. They offered me an opportunity, they called it, to extend my enlistment for six months, but I turned it down because I had this really good set of orders back to some river mine sweepers in Charleston, South Carolina where I had been on before. That was the best way that I could get back. If you went to South Vietnam, you got your choice of which coast, and they would try, due to the needs of the Navy and this, that, and the other, they would try to put you somewhere close to where you wanted to be. And I still have a minesweeping bos’n mate designation. The Army
calls it MOS. It’s an NEC Navy specialty type job, designation and I still had that. So I
knew I would go on mine sweepers anyway, and they were all in Charleston. In
Charleston, we had one unit that I was in, the Ocean Mine Sweeper Force at Little Creek,
Virginia. We had a mine lab at Panama City, Florida. I knew I was going to one of the
three places anyway, so I asked for mine squadron 10 again in Charleston and then I
lucked out and actually got it. But the Vietnamese, like I say, we were sweeping real
mines. I learned quite a bit about what I was doing. Our mine countermeasures I didn’t
describe that. We used two different things. The main one that we used though, was like a
nylon fish net made out of sand, sand colored, sand twine. You made some knots just
about like that. The minesweeper, you would have two, on the big ones, we called them
multiplane kites. These were kind of like paravains only they weren’t. It has blades on it
which allows it to veer out from dead of stern to about 20, 23, 25 degrees off dead of
sterne and one would go to each side which would spread the net out. The net is 140 feet
long or wide and its got the holes in it probably about the size of a coffee cup between
each weaves. They were hand made and when a mine would blow a hole in it, we would
patch it by hand.

RV: Your Vietnamese counterparts would?

SC: The Vietnamese boat crews, I would help. Being a bos’n mate in the Navy, I
did a lot of rope and wirework, a lot of rope work. With all different types of line,
decorate the quarterdecks of the ship, I could do all the knots there was back then. I knew
what purpose it had. But I could make picture frames out of rope, everything. I’ve got
one hanging in my hall, matter of fact. But the thing was 140 feet wide, 8 foot tall, had
round weights spread out along the bottom of it and it had your round floats, like you see
where they divide the swimming pool, maybe the deep water from the shallow end or
something like that. Those type of floats would be along the top, which would hold the
net kind of straight up. This thing would bump along the bottom of the river. We’d drag it
on the bottom of the river. When it would hit a mine, catch a mine, it would either tumble
it in some fashion and it would blow, simulating a boat hitting it or something, or if it was
a dud and water got in the battery compartment and the thing was no good, it wouldn’t
arm. That wire would hang up, the wire cage would hang up in the net and we’d get to
the end of the river, pull it up, there it was.
RV: Now, when a mine would blow, obviously, you stopped, and would you take
the net up and put a new one down?

SC: No. We’d just keep going.

RV: Keep going, even with the hole in the net?

SC: Yeah. Because it takes a while to patch these things and we only carried one.

RV: Wasn’t that dangerous to go with a hole in the net?

SC: Yeah. Because it’d blow pretty good sized one.

RV: About how big?

SC: Oh, I would say probably sometimes 8 to 12 feet in diameter.

RV: Wow, that is big.

SC: It would be dangerous but we’d have to keep going up to the end of the river
because we couldn’t stop in the middle of the river because these YFU, the Army supply
boats, the flat bottom, got a ramp in the front, well deck in there where they put all their
whatever they’re carrying, trucks, jeeps, tanks. They’d carry all sorts of stuff. They’re
big. They have a high sail area and if there’s any wind at all, it would blow them right up
in the sand if they stopped, so we couldn’t stop. We had to keep going and we were just
taking our chances the rest of the way, I’d say.

RV: How many boats did you lose?

SC: We didn’t lose a single supply boats. Two patrol boats is all we ever lost the
whole year I was there. One of them happened to be a minesweeper, but it was on patrol
instead of minesweeping. But we never lost a single supply boat.

RV: That’s a great record.

SC: It was really considering the mines. You could always tell when the villagers
in Xuan Kahn knew when there was a mine. The channel came from the south side of the
river where our base was and it had kind of went, I would guess kind of northwest across
the river, kiddy cornered kind of. It was wide right in that area, the river is, and then the
channel would be right off a pier there on the North side of the river where the fishing
village was where they tied up their fishing boats. And we’re going from here to that
wall. I’m talking, 20 feet from the village is where the deep water was in there in that
particular area. If there was a mine there, you could pretty well be assured that they knew
because the fishing boats had not left yet. They’re all sitting there watching us go by in
the convoy. If there were no boats to be had anywhere around that village, you could
assume they had left and went out in the ocean fishing and you probably wouldn’t hit a
mine. That would hit true 99 percent of the time.

RV: They were waiting for you to sweep the river.

SC: If there were no fishing boats, we probably weren’t going to hit a mine at that
particular place.

RV: Or anywhere behind you.

SC: Or anywhere behind us towards the ocean. It was kind of iffy the rest of the
way, very iffy sometimes because right there at that junction, the fork in the river so to
speak, that is the only other place where we ever blew up any mines in that river except
for one in the river basin. We blew up one in the river basin. We had one deal, had an
ocean minesweeper came up there one time. So they took me out on the ocean
minesweeper, American ocean minesweeper, U.S.S. Pledge, I believe, MSO four
something, 171-foot with an all American crew on it. So they sent me out on this
minesweeper. It just went up and down the coast that night just to kill time until daylight.
When they came in, then I piloted them in with their sonar, which helped and their radar
and their charge and they had a good navigation team on there. We got the ship as far in
as we could toward the river mouth, they dropped anchor and of course we swung the
boat around where the tail, part of the fan tail was pointing toward the river basin which
was, you had the river mouth, you have a basin so to speak is what we called it, and then
the river itself. It had a little peninsula stuck out on the north side dividing it kind of.
They had a magnetic cable. The magnetic cable on those ocean mine sweepers were 1600
feet long. They have two electrodes, 150 feet long on them and they are 800 foot apart on
the aft end of this cable. This cable is a wound cable about a foot in a half in diameter.
You get to the S section, which is the last 800 feet, it’s only about 8 feet in diameter.

RV: 8 sections.

SC: Or 8 inches in diameter, rather. Then you have your two electrodes which are
a couple of inches in diameter and 150 feet long, each one, so they tie floats on them,
sausage floats they called them, and then let the bottom end hang down. They crank up
the generators and this puts a magnetic field, simulates a magnetic field in the water
because they had intelligence reports that we had a magnetic mine right there in the river
mouth. I was on that ocean minesweeper for one day while they were sending pulses through and never blew up anything. Bring all the gear back in, we did for about four days and nights. At night we’d steam out in the ocean, sail around and then come back the next morning and do it again. At dark, we’re back gone again. That four days they finally gave up and said there probably wasn’t any mine there. Sent me back to the base. About two days later, a fishing boat set it off.

RV: So it was there.

SC: There was a mine there.

RV: Why do you think they missed it?

SC: They got a call to go somewhere else and there just wasn’t any other ocean minesweeper with magnetic countermeasures capability in the area at all. Before they could even get anybody back up there with another ocean minesweeper, or they had to send this one somewhere down south for something. I don’t know what. A fishing boat blew it up or set it off anyway before the ship could get back.

RV: Do you think they planted that mine after the ship left for good?

SC: I don’t think so, because I think the intelligence reports that we were getting were fairly accurate on most accounts. I think it was there. But see, a magnetic mine, now, these mines are something because they have a delay in arming. Now, we’re talking American mines now, kind of off the subject in a way. But if it was anything like ours, our magnetic mines, we can put a 90-day delay in arming on them things, up to 90 days. 1 to 90 days. Then its got a ship’s counter. You can set it to after it finally arms, you can set it to go off under either the first ship goes across it or the tenth one. So when you’re mine sweeping in say a sea-lane or a harbor, you don’t just go through it once and swept all the mines and the harbor’s clear. You’re going back and forth and back and forth for days and nights until you get them all cleared.

RV: Lets take a break. Okay. Mr. Clayton, if you would, let’s talk about your life at the base camp. Tell me what that was like. We looked at some pictures that you brought in. You showed me where you lived, what your barracks were like. Describe where you lived.

SC: We lived in, it was a butler building, which is a steel building and then the back half of it, the south half of it was a warehouse for storage for the Vietnamese. The
north half, they put kind of wooden dividers and made cubicles for the advisors to sleep in. You had a room that was four of us, two of us to a room. It was a bunk bed type deal and the whole room was for each person. Each person had a little refrigerator deal with a little freezer thing in it. The whole room was probably 14, 16 feet long, each cube, 14 foot. It may have been 14 foot, maybe a little less than that, by about eight feet. 8 by 14, 8 by 10, 8 by 12, something like that. In this, you could hang your, have your flak jacket, bulletproof vest, your rifle. It had places to hang up different things and had a locker to put your uniforms in, which we had to have 100 watt light bulbs in the clothes locker because it was during the wet season, it was so damp and everything would mildew overnight.

   RV: It would just stay wet all the time.

   SC: Yeah. It’d just mildew over night. So you had a light bulb in your closet or in your locker. Like I say, the bunk beds had the mosquito netting. The mosquitoes, they would put ours to shame for size and there were a lot of them. Then we had a common area, probably about as big as this room, whatever the dimensions of it are, probably 20 by 30 at the biggest. We used it for a dining hall and then had a little room off to the side of it for the kitchen. It had propane stove, a refrigerator, a deep freeze and this that and the other.

   RV: Who would do your cooking for you?

   SC: Well, we didn’t have a cook there for quite a while, so those who could cook and who weren’t on the river all day, essentially the radio operators, because they worked in shifts in the radio shack, they were the cooks. They might be an engineman or a gunner’s mate. There’s not telling who would do the cooking. Each one had their specialty. We would go like that. During the good weather, we had a pretty nice barbeque grill that we wound up with and we would do a lot of grilling. We’d get a lot of shrimp off the boats coming back in the river, biggest shrimp you ever seen in your life. We would have a fish fry and shrimp at least twice a week for supper usually. We had our regular grocery supplies the we bought in the meantime. But it took about two or three months, two months probably before we were able to set this supply line up from the Army for our food. So we had C-rations that we used a lot. Then once we got that
established, well, we did pretty good. Then about two months before I came back to the States, they sent us a cook.

RV: Vietnamese or American?

SC: American Navy pay grade E-6, E-6 Commissaryman, First Class Commissary; really knew his stuff. He was a baker; he could do it all. So we ate really good the last two months. The rest of the time it was whatever we could fix up. We had a fellow that was an EOD specialist. He was from Australia. He could do wonders with anything that C-rations made. He could make them look good and taste wonderful, whatever he did to them.

RV: Would you take them out of your packet?

SC: Out of the can and he would cook them up. The powdered scrambled eggs, you’d swear up and down they was the real McCoy. He could just do anything with C-rations and they were good when he got through with them. It was amazing.

RV: Did you have any civilians, Vietnamese civilians on base?

SC: Just the dependents of the Vietnamese sailors as far as I know.

RV: How much interaction did you have with them?

SC: Hardly any really. Most of the time it would be pretty close to dark by the time I’d get back in off the river anyway. By the time I’d eaten and settled down, it was a couple hours of amusement, amusing myself. I’d play a little guitar and I wound up with one over there and letter writing and card games and this, that, and the other. Cleaning the place up where we were at, taking care of all of that because we had two cleaning girls that did a lot of it, a lot of cleaning, but we still went in behind them a lot of times. Then I’d be back into bed by 10, 10:30 at night usually unless on occasion I would have to stand radio watch to fill in for somebody or if we got shorthanded. So I’d pull a four hour tour in the radio shack every once in a while and then get about an hour’s sleep, get up and go to the river after I ate something for breakfast. But it was pretty much of a routine. We had one little, real small building about the size of this room that we actually made kind of like a military club. We had a bar set up. We had probably the only pool table north of Quang Tri. A lot of Army people used to come up there just for the heck of it out of Quang Tri and Dong Ha just to get off the Army base. For something different, there for a while, those that knew how to surf would even get out there off the beach and
surfboard. I wouldn’t have tried it. Some of them did because there was snakes in them
rivers and everything else you know.

RV: Did you see any interesting wildlife or snakes?

SC: Snakes like herds of them for lack of a better word. They’d lay in the river
kind of a red color. I don’t remember what kind they were.

RV: Did anybody ever get bitten or any problems with them?

SC: No. Not that I know of.

RV: Did you have any pets on base?

SC: They had some dogs. Funny thing, you never saw any young pups. They were
all old dogs.

RV: Why was that?

SC: You never saw puppies. The Vietnamese always told me that they were pretty
good for food. I never saw a cat the whole time I was there. Never saw one.

RV: Was there a reason for that that they said? Did you ask?

SC: I never did find out why that was. Because in the jungles, heck, they’ve got
tigers and everything else up in the high mountains, but you never saw anything like a
house cat or anything like that. I never saw one the whole time I was there.

RV: So were you able to keep up with any news back home in the United States
while you were there?

SC: A little bit. We would get the Armed Forces newspaper

RV: *Stars and Stripes.*

SC: *Stars and Strips.* And of course, all of us, we had several radios that we
could use and I could listen to a radio every once in a while. Most of it was Vietnamese
stations. Sometimes I could pick up an American broadcast somewhere. Other than that,
we had Armed Forces television. We did have a T.V. and certain hours of the day, we’d
get news broadcasts. Of course the letters from home, my letters from home really didn’t
go into the news aspect of it that much. We would just go into the family part and how
are you doing or what are you doing and I would try to tame it down as much as possible,
especially for my mother and dad. My mother thought I worked in a ship store on the
base the whole time I was there until I got back and then I finally kind of slowly, but
surely broke it into her. Dad knew pretty much what I was doing. I don’t know whether he ever told her or not or anything.

RV: Were they worried about you?
SC: I’m sure they were.

RV: How often would you write each other?
SC: Now, there’s another funny thing. There for a while I couldn’t get my address straight, so I didn’t get any mail for a couple of months after I got there. The Vietnam roster had me down by Saigon somewhere. I was actually 800 miles north in another, they had me at a place called Cat Lo. Is that by Saigon, maybe?

RV: It’s in the south, yes sir.
SC: They had me in a minesweeping, it was a river outfit in Cat Lo.

RV: So all your mail went down there.
SC: And then eventually wound up in the dead letter office I guess. My first wife went to, because I kept writing. They kept getting my letters. I kept saying I’m not getting any mail. So she went to the Congressman, Mr. Mahon and I guess he found a whole sack full of mail to me in the dead letter office in the post office somewhere. So eventually, they got everything straightened out because somehow or another, when it would get so far to Vietnam in country, then it would get diverted to a place where I was not at.

RV: That was tough for you, I’m sure, not to get mail for two months.
SC: I wondered what was going on, sure. I was writing. I wrote a little bit most nights; it may be on the same letter. I made it a point to write my wife and my parents, my grandparents. I dropped them a note not quite as often as I should. But Mother and Dad, about once every week or two weeks and my wife, about every week I sent her something.

RV: Were you ever able to make any of the MARS telephone calls?
SC: Never was.

RV: Where was your television located? Was it in your barrack there or was it in the little club that you had?
SC: It was in the dining area.

RV: Oh, the dining area, the mess area.
SC: Yeah. That was the only one we had. Interesting thing about being lost, we had a, I think it was an E-4 third class petty officer, I think. I forget his designation, but his mother or grandmother or something. He received word through the Red Cross that some family member had deceased. He was a young kid, really tore him up. He wanted to get emergency leave, go back to the States. So I piled him in a jeep and we drove to Quang Tri on the dirt road and went to the Red Cross office on the Army base, and I went in and told them the story of the whole works and introduced myself, of course. We were in there. I think the Red Cross had a lot to do with finding me, too. I wasn’t really missing, they just didn’t know where I was at. It wasn’t missing in action sea story or nothing. It was the truth.

RV: Missing in Vietnam.

SC: Vietnam. So I got him set up for emergency leave and this young fellow from Red Cross said, “Sumner Clayton. Why does that name sound familiar?” I said, “Well, I don’t know, sir. I never have been in this office before or had anything to do with the Red Cross.” He said, “Just a minute.” And he got to digging back through some files or folders. He said, “We’ve been looking for you for two months” [laughter]. So, I said, “Well, who’s looking for me?” He said, “Your wife and your father and mother.” I said, “Well, send them a telegram or something and tell them I’m okay and where I’m at.” So he did, I guess. But that was just pure accident that everything got found. Shortly after that, anyway, between that and I was told Mr. Mahon had a hand in it too in the mail. I got a whole sack full of mail and after that, everything was all right because another mix-up, we got our mail at an Army post office box out of Quang Tri at the Army advisory Team 16 or something like that, I think was the name of it. They’re the ones that got our mail and we had to go down there to send somebody everyday to pick up the mail and messages from the Army.

RV: Was it a dangerous drive down from where you were down to Quang Tri?

SC: No, not really. Pretty flat, rice paddies. You had people working out in the rice paddies. You drove right through the center of a real small village. I don’t know how many huts they had in that village, but it wasn’t very many.

RV: So no incidents, no problems.
SC: No incidents whatsoever. When you got to Quang Tri, the first thing you’d 
smell would be the open fish market and then you’d go in to Quang Tri City. An old dirt 
road about eight miles.

RV: Did you ever see any drug use or excessive alcohol use while you were 
there?

SC: Alcohol use, yes, other drugs, no. Of course sailors, they really like to drink 
sometimes. I’m sorry to say the first senior advisor we had was in pretty bad shape. I 
won’t give his name. He had been there too long I think. He was a Navy captain and he 
had an alcohol problem. I drank a little bit more than I should have in the evenings 
sometimes, as did most of the other ones. I can't say that I didn’t have too much to drink 
several times because I did and I shouldn’t have and I knew better but I did anyway and 
luckily nothing happened. Like I say, sometimes we do things that we shouldn’t.

RV: Did you find that you had enough supplies in camp that you could at least get 
them through your various means?

SC: Well, we ran out of ammunition for M-16s one time. We were down to about 
1,000 rounds and couldn’t get any, couldn’t get them from the Army for some reason or 
another. Couldn’t get them from the Navy. I had a team, we put together a team. They 
were good. Somehow or another they confiscated four cases of M-16 ammunition out of 
the armory on the South Vietnamese base we were at. And we could go to the Army base 
in Dong Ha and we found out, because sometimes you’d have to go there for supplies or 
this, that, or the other, and we had this Vietnamese chief, had two of those. We wound up 
somehow, I won’t say how, with an American Marine Corps jeep.

RV: You won’t say how or you can't say how?

SC: I won’t say how. The numbers were changed on it. It wound up with a new 
paint job and we also had kind of like a pick-up bed trailer that we wound up with. When 
we would go to the U.S. Army bases, we couldn’t get on there with a Vietnamese jeep. 
We could get on those bases with this particular jeep. I think it came from Danang 
somewhere. Anyway, we could drive over there with an empty trailer. We needed 
sandbags one time. We needed to fill some sandbags. We couldn’t get any sandbags 
anywhere and they had many of them over there. We couldn’t get them because the 
Vietnamese have to provide. So I went to a Signal supply place. I went to the Army
Engineers place first. He said, “Yeah. I’ll tell you what I need though. We need quit a bit of garden hose,” for some reason or another. I’m not too sure what that reason was either, but he needed about 500 feet of garden hose. I said, “Okay, I’ll trade you the garden hose for two pallets of sandbags. And I need them trucked over there to Qua Viet.” He said, “No problem.” This is the Army Engineers. They could fix our jeeps by the way and we could take them by, the test run. We would take the mechanic by the liquor store on the base and he would be paid pretty good. We’d take him back. We’d trade a couple of fifths of good whiskey and they could overhaul the jeep, no problem at all. Coffee grounds were good trade material. They’re always good. But anyway, I didn’t have 500 feet of garden hose, not even close. I didn’t even have a garden hose.

RV: But you told him that you did.

SC: You bet. So he shipped me the sandbags. I took one pallet of the sandbags and traded them to an Army Signal battalion who just happened to have a lot of garden hose. Then took it back, gave it to the Army Engineers about a week later and everything was just fine.

RV: Why was it so easy to do this barter system?

SC: You were Americans and you were in a foreign country and the Saigon warriors could get anything they wanted. Everything came in at Saigon. Something like a simple American soft drink, there were no Coca-Colas at Qua Viet. Danang you might see some. By the time the supply train, so to speak, got to Qua Viet, you were looking at probably a cheap brand of Sprite or a grocery store brand of some cola. But you could go out in the fishing village right outside the gate, pay somebody ten dollars American money and buy a case of Coca-Colas. I never did but I know people that did a bunch. If you ordered beer, we got Schlitz and Falstaff. Saigon and everybody else was getting the good stuff. And the whiskey was just about the same shape. The farther north you got the more scarce it got. But anyway, I also found out that I could go in any shop in any Army base and just act like I knew what I was doing. I could walk off with whatever we needed half the time.

RV: How would you have to act? What would you say? What you mean you’d have to act like you knew what you were doing? What would you tell them?
SC: Act like you knew what you were doing. Just go in and tell this fellow, say, “I need to pick up such and such and take it over to,” and tell him where he was taking it to. And he’d say, “Sure, go ahead. You need some help loading it?” [laughing] My team, there was four of them and they were really good at this. So supplies, we didn’t have a washing machine, didn’t have a dryer. When we first got there, we had no running water to the commodes and the bathroom in our building. What you did, if you had time before you had to use the commode, you went and took a bucket, went down to the river and got a bucket of water and brought it back. Of course, you pour it in, it’s going to flush. If you didn’t have time, after you got through, you’d go to take your bucket and get a bucket of water and bring it back. By the time we got through, we had a water buffalo, which is a water trailer on wheels. We wound up with that somehow or another, traded some things for it, I think. I’m not sure, but I think we did. We brought it back because the Vietnamese had the key to the water pump on the base. They would only let us have one hour of potable water at lunchtime and one hour at suppertime and that was it and that was if the man that had the key was on the base. That was our extent of our potable water on the base. What we would do, we got some CBs, Navy CBs came in. They decided the Vietnamese, they was going to build them a pier so they could tie their boats up to it. We got them to take their crane, their welder, took all the wheels off this water trailer, took a crane, set it up on top of the building above the bathroom and we had running water because we piped it in from the pipe coming from the water pump. We had it going up there and every time we knew that water was on, we had water running and we’d fill that water buffalo. We had running water for our kitchen sink, everything.

RV: Pretty ingenious.

SC: You had to be to survive in that particular outfit.

RV: Tell me about the monsoons. You had some pictures of before and after the monsoons. What was that like?

SC: Well, the monsoon season, you have the dry season in the summer, no rain whatsoever. The river gets really low, in some places as low as six foot deep and some of those boats were probably close to five-foot draft, four-foot draft anyway. You may get five on some of them. It was hot. I’m sure it was close to probably in the 120 bracket or thereabouts in the daytime, it felt like it and probably in the 90s at night. I’m just
guessing from what I can remember of it. It was cold during the monsoon season. We wore rain gear all the time, Navy foul weather jackets which have kind of a fur or fleece lining in them. You’d have that. You’d have a raincoat on top of that, rain britches, the whole works. You can imagine the hardest rain you’ve ever seen and imagine it doing that for 52 or three days and nights straight, with very little breaks. Then it was cloudy and no rain for about three days and nights. The sun actually came out a couple of times and then it rained for another month and a half and then the monsoon season was over. The river during that season, we also had the monsoon, one monsoon—I don’t know the name of it—came pretty close to the coast, which makes the tides just like hurricanes. They do strange things. The river rose to where our building was probably 50 feet maybe from the water or maybe a little farther than that. The building had four foot of water in it at one point. So they had to move us back farther into the base in another building there for a while. It was just rainy, dreary, and you went on the river everyday and it would rain so hard that you couldn’t even see up the river where they were going half the time. To be a river pilot in those circumstances was just a little hairy. There was a lot of apprehension then.

RV: As an advisor, did you feel like the Vietnamese were capable of taking over the war and defending their country?

SC: As a whole, I don’t know because I don’t think. They had been around it so long that a lot of them didn’t take it all that seriously I don’t think, the sailors didn’t. When they would go to general quarters, which is battle stations, that one night that a mortar came in and hit right in the middle of the base over by the helicopter pad, as a matter of fact, we were all spread out in three different bunkers and the Vietnamese were all on the inside of the perimeter. Now, this base on two sides and the side where the road comes in, has mine fields with land mines, claymores, I guess. Some type of land mines anyway, and then you have the river on the front side. The Vietnamese, some of them, when they would come to battle stations, they would bring a blanket and a cot with them and several of them would lay down and go to sleep. You’d have one over here, one-way over there standing guard.

RV: And that’s all?
SC: Yeah. All of us, we were wide-awake, had flak jackets on, helmets, the weapons, the whole works. We were ready for bear and the Vietnamese were taking a nap out there. So I don’t think they took it that seriously. Overall, I don’t know whether they were ready or not, but that particular bunch that we were advisory team to, I don’t think they were. I saw that attitude several times. We had one instance where we had a new kid come on board, American. Green, right out of boot camp I think. He hadn’t been in the Navy hardly anytime at all and he was young. The first thing we did after we break him in, we go on patrol with him, send him with somebody else on patrol a couple of times. He’s going to be a radio operator riding patrol boats. The first night we send him out by himself with the Vietnamese on the boat.

RV: The first night.

SC: The first night. This is after he’s rode on several trial runs with another advisor aboard. The Vietnamese go down to where this particular checkpoint was, which was right before you get to the fork in the river is one of the checkpoints where we always kept a patrol boat in that area. And they run this Mike 6 up to the beach. They put it in forward gear. They lower the ramp, and the Vietnamese, every one of them bailed off the boat out there in the middle of the night and went off wandering around and left that kid on there. All we could hear was screaming over that radio.

RV: What was he saying?

SC: You couldn’t make it out other than, “They left me and come get me.” He was just about [?]. Well, we didn’t have a boat. We can't just go out and jump on a boat because they all belong to the Vietnamese. I wake up the senior advisor and he goes over and talks to the base commander. This is at 3:00 in the morning, 2:00 in the morning maybe. The base commander has to get a boat crew together. So they get a boat crew, finally. Then this takes about an hour to do all this through the lines of communications. They finally get a boat crew, me and another advisor, me and two other ones went on this trip and we go to rescue this kid. Well, we get up there and he’s still up there by himself. The Vietnamese, we can see them just fixing to come on the boat. This kid, he’s just about to shoot everything that moves with that M-16 if he really knows how to use it. He just had a nervous breakdown just about over that deal. We brought him back. We finally calmed him down, got him on the other boat, took him back to base. The next day, we
took him to Danang and I think headquarters might have done something else with him.

He wasn’t ready for that. That’s how seriously, the Vietnamese took some of this stuff in
the outfit I was in.

RV: That’s a good example.

SC: I can’t say that all of them are like that because I don’t know. But we did have
some goof balls just like the Americans did.

RV: How would you deal personally with the idea or with the thought that you
could be killed at anytime?

SC: It’s a lot differently than if someone was out in the woods shooting at me and
I could shoot back. A mine is a whole different feeling because you don’t know if there’s
one, and if there’s one you don’t know if it’s going to go off under your boat or not, your
boat’s going to hit it. You’re pretty apprehensive about that. You always think about it. It
got a lot easier as the trips went along, but I was always a little bit, I was a little leery of
it. I was scared a lot of times. I can’t say I wasn’t. But of course you’d have to try to do
your job and I think that if I would have really broken down on the river so to speak after
a mine or during a mine sweeping venture, Vietnamese, I don’t think they would have
thought much of me really. I don’t think they would have. They’d have been. I always
thought they might be like a bunch of little kids. You’d never hear the end of it. Sure, I
worried about it. I was scared. I had come back in. I guess, like I say, I did drink. I
would come in and have a cold beer and I’d sit and relax a little while and I’d have
supper and I might have two or three more before I went to bed and I might not,
depending on what I had to do. I always had to get together with the senior advisor and
find out, he tried to keep me just about as informed as he was.

RV: This is the Vietnamese right?

SC: This is the American, my senior advisor. So I’d get together with him every
morning and every evening for additional instructions or what might be going on that he
just found out or this, that, and the other. So I really didn’t have that much time to play
around. That kid, he liked to have lost it. I don’t think they took it seriously, a lot of them,
the Vietnamese sailors. They were born in the thing. The French were fighting them
before or they were fighting the French really. I just don’t think they took it seriously
enough.
RV: What did they think of Americans, of you guys there?

SC: Well, that’s hard to say. Several of them I considered pretty good friends by the time that tour was over. We had one boat crew that would not speak English whatsoever and they were liable not to say too much Vietnamese to you. It was kind of like you were in the way so to speak. One boat crew did act like that. The rest of them were fairly friendly. If you had cigarettes on you, they were extra friendly, or C-rations, they were extra friendly also. I can't speak for exactly what they did really think of us. I think some of them were glad we were there to help. I imagine some of them just wished we’d disappear. It just depended.

RV: Did they ask you a lot of questions about the United States and what it was like in America?

SC: They asked about where I was from and the area that I’d been brought up in. Of course, I asked countless questions about them. I’ve been one that every overseas country or every island in the Caribbean I’ve been to, I was curious. I want to know this, that, and the other. I want to go in the café and eat their food. A lot of Americans go to a foreign country and if they can't have steak and potatoes, they’re just unhappy with the whole atmosphere. They want it to be another United States and it’s not. So I ate Vietnamese food. I tried to learn the language. I could speak it pretty good there for a while, but I lost it when I came back just by not using it.

RV: Do you remember any Vietnamese?

SC: About the closest thing I could come to and the accent is not going to be right because I have a weird accent. I could not get their singsong deal down. But it had something to do with toy di Vietnam mot nam, which with any kind of luck that should have read, “I was over there one year.” I was hi quan trung si something or another was, “A Navy Advisor something or other.” But I don’t remember that much of it anymore. A via was of course, a road way or waterway or something. I don’t remember a whole lot of it.

RV: What did you think of the overall United States policy toward Vietnam? And you were there in the later stages.

SC: I was there in the later stage. I was a Navy recruiter during the bad part, here in Lubbock. Lubbock, I have to give the people here a lot of credit because I didn’t see
here what I saw on the national news in places out in California and different places like
that. I did not see that here.

RV: You’re talking about the antiwar movement.

SC: Right. I didn’t see that. I had a lot of kids come in and ask me, “Will I have
to go to Vietnam?” And we had the draft, which was good incentive to join the Navy or
some other service if you so desired. I would tell them I hadn’t been yet. I went after--I
got my orders to Vietnam while I was on recruiting duty about 8 months before the end
of my tour. I could truthfully tell, I was trying to tell the truth if I could. ‘I’d tell them they
wouldn’t like boot camp. They was going to take a lot of tests and they better do the best
they can on them because otherwise they wasn’t going to get a very good job at Navy and
then the needs of the Navy and sometimes you don’t get what you want even though you
get three choices. The needs of the Navy come first and I tried to tell them all that mostly
to keep them and the parents from coming in the office mad at us. Because that’s really
bad publicity then for the recruiting service. These kids would come in, “Will I have to
got to Vietnam?” I said, “Well, I don’t know. I can't tell you that. I can tell you that I’ve
been in the Navy so many years and I have not gone yet, but I do expect a set of orders
maybe. But I don’t know if they’ll send me or not.” That’s what I used to tell them. Most
of the time it worked.

RV: Did you think that the United States efforts to secure South Vietnam as a
democratic country was viable, that it would work?

SC: I think it could have if they would have let the Americans do the jobs they're
trained for. We had restrictions. As an example, on the Qua Viet river, in order to fire for
an American advisor to fire a weapon the Qua Viet river--

RV: Like your M-16.

SC: Right. I could not fire unless I was being fired upon. Then before, if you went
about it the legal way, which I’ll tell you how we got around it. Say you caught
somebody on a patrol boat at night or right about dusk and it’s past curfew a little bit,
they're still out there wandering around up and down the riverbank. You don’t know how
many is out there. The only place we had a free-fire zone was the river basin at the river
mouth. Past that, that was probably a quarter of a mile. Anywhere inland, we had to get
permission to fire. In order to get permission to fire, you were supposed to contact your
senior advisor who would contact the commander, his counterpart was the commander of
the Navy, Vietnamese Navy base. That was his counterpart. He would contact every
village chief, mayor or whatever you want to call them. They call them village chiefs, the
province chief, and everybody in that whole area before you could shoot anything. The
Vietnamese didn’t go by that. The Vietnamese sailors, if they saw somebody, they could
fire just like that.

RV: How’d you get around this?
SC: Usually we’d fire when the Vietnamese did. If they really wanted to fire at
somebody that they just swore up and down that they just needed to shoot at, the
Vietnamese sailors on the boat, they would have somebody in the bow of the boat firing
M-16 in automatic. Somebody in the back of the boat would key the microphone on the
radio and they would say something to the effect of, “We are taking incoming. May we
fire back?” And they would give them permission just like that.

RV: Then they would do their business.
SC: Then they’d go ahead and take care of it and go on down the river.
RV: Did you ever fire your weapon?
SC: Yes.
RV: What was that incident like, or incidents?
SC: Well, we could barely see the flash from across the river. It was a sniper
shooting across the river. You couldn’t see anybody and we did fire back in that direction
several times. I could not see anyone. Other than just target practice or something like
that, I never fired a weapon over there. I carried them all the time. I never had to fire one
except that one time. Then I wasn’t really too sure that I hit anybody or not anyway
because I couldn’t see them.

RV: Were you firing your M-16.
SC: Yes.
RV: So how did you feel when you got orders or you knew you were leaving?
How’d you feel?
SC: Well, I felt kind of apprehensive. I use that word a lot on this tour. When I
got my orders, I got a verbal confirmation first, from the chief recruiter in our
headquarters in Albuquerque. And he called me up and said, “Petty Officer Clayton, have
you ever been to Vietnam.” I said, “Well, no, chief, I haven’t.” He said, “Would you like to go?” And I said, “Well, I guess to go over there on a ship or something might not be too bad.” He started laughing and then he started reading my orders and he said, “Guess what?” He said, “I’ll go ahead and send them to you, forward them to you in the mail. You should get them the next day or two.” This was eight months before my tour was up here.

RV: How’d you feel leaving Vietnam when you were there in Vietnam and were getting ready to go home?

SC: Leaving, I was actually really happy to come back. I was coming to a tour of duty, that I had a good sense of, I was kind of proud that I did my best, what I thought was my best at my job. In this particular deal, we got to show them a couple of things that were new. Of course, they didn’t use them but I got to show it to them anyway. Once the Vietnamese sailors decided one way worked, well that was it. But I was really happy to get back and go to Charleston. I had the opportunity to take the chief’s test for E-7 pay grade while I was on leave. I had 42 days to get to Charleston counting 30 day leave, travel pay and delay and reporting and everything else that they tack on there. But I had to be in Charleston in 11 days in order to take the test. Well, I got there and took the test and passed it and made it. I was really happy because I knew I could take that test then. I was eligible in Vietnam. They couldn’t let me off the river to go to Danang and take the test the first time I was eligible.

RV: What was the flight back like?

SC: Everybody was pretty happy on it.

RV: Did you leave out of Tan Son Nhut down in Saigon or did you fly out of Danang.

SC: No. We left out of Danang.

RV: Okay. Go ahead, sir. So the flight home you said was extremely happy.

SC: Yeah. Everybody was in a pretty good mood all the way back. We stopped in Honolulu International Airport about midnight one night to refuel. They let us off the plane for about 45 minutes. Of course there wasn’t anything open much in the airports. We got back on the plane and we flew into Norton Air Force Base, California. I guess it must be about 30, 40 miles out of Los Angeles. Okay, we had to go through customs.
There were only 10 sailors on the plane. Most of it was Air Force and the Army, mostly Air Force on that particular plane, a few Marines. The Air Force went through customs first since it was an Air Force base and we had to catch a cab to the airport in Los Angeles.

RV: Now, were you in uniform?

SC: I was in dress blues. We had to come back in dress uniform. So I came back in my dress blues and went through customs, went to L.A. International. That picture book, I figured they’d confiscate it right off the bat. We were told not to take any pictures and bring them back. The customs in Danang and the customs at Norton Air Force Base had looked at it, didn’t even open it, just kept going because all I had was a small duffle bag. I didn’t have a whole lot that I brought back. But I turned in all my military weapons and helmets and all that sort of stuff before I left.

RV: Did you have an problems at LAX?

SC: No. No problems at all. I got there just in time to get on the plane and we stopped 10 minutes in El Paso just to take on or let off some people and then right to Lubbock.

RV: How did your family react when you got here back in Lubbock?

SC: They was pretty happy. I didn’t know exactly when I was coming in. I had told them, when I wrote I gave a time frame, but I gave them about four different days there and I got here the day before the first day I thought I was going to be here. We left a day early because it was another typhoon coming in over there in the Danang area. So we left, they put us on the plane a day early. So I got to Lubbock airport and nobody knew I was here. So I called the house and my first wife wasn’t home. So I called O’Donnell from the airport and told them I was in. By the time I had got a hold of the first wife, everybody had met me at the airport. It was a pretty happy reunion and she had already got her mobile home pretty well packed and ready to go back to the East coast. So we stayed about five days and then had to go out there so I could take that test.

RV: Did you have any difficulty transitioning back to the United States from Vietnam?
SC: I don’t think I did really. I don’t think I had any problem at all when you get right down to it. It was a little strange there for two or three days, but other than that, nothing spectacular.

RV: Did people ask you a lot of questions about your Vietnam tour?

SC: Yes. They asked and they acted like they were pretty interested and I told them a little bit about what I did. Like I say, the people in this area, I’ve heard some terrible stories from people I know that were over there that say these terrible things happened to them when they came back to the States. I never saw it. I was really lucky I guess. But I’ve heard of people just throwing eggs and spitting on them and cussing them and everything else, but I never saw none of it. None of it ever happened as far as I was concerned.

RV: How did you feel when the United States left Vietnam in 1973? Did you think it was the right thing to be done?

SC: At the time, I didn’t think that we--we were over there but we were so restricted I thought, by government or whoever, or whatever entity was restricting us from doing the job. I can see one reason possibly why not because if we would have invaded North Vietnam, then we would have had to dealt with China and it would have been the domino effect I think. We could have been in a real mess. On the other hand, I think we were better, we were just as well off to go ahead. To me it looked like everybody just said, “Okay, that’s it. This is the end. Let’s all go home. We all won.” That’s what it looked like. Then I felt kind of sad because the government that we were trying to keep in place for so long was no longer going to be or was no longer and it had reverted back to the government from Hanoi and the North Vietnamese government. I just didn’t feel right about that.

RV: This is April 1975 and the fall of Saigon didn’t sit well with you?

SC: I watched a lot of it on the news and everything, the television news. It brought back a lot of memories of where I was at and I could picture people. I could actually picture some of the sailors, Vietnamese sailors and some of the advisory unit. I wondered what ever might have happened to some of them then. Because I’m sure they all had to revert back to the North Vietnamese way of doing things. I didn’t know whether the South Vietnamese, I mean the Viet Cong so to speak or the South
Vietnamese would be fighting anymore. It comes under, I thought a lot of them would
come under the deal about the battle quarters on the base where life goes on, so to speak.
So I finally came up with that conclusion on it. I don’t have any bad feelings. I think our
government and our heads of state did the best they could with what they knew about the
thing. I think in certain ways they could have done a little bit better. Like I say, we
might be in World War III if we’d had kept advancing, if they had actually let us do what
we’re trained to do. The Armed Forces main job is keeping peace and fighting and
shooting people, to preserve some way of life, or killing them or imprisoning them or
whatever. That’s what Armed Forces do. You just have these fancy jobs to keep you
occupied to help you do this.

RV: What do you think about the United States’ role in the world, trying to do
things like they did in Vietnam, basically encouraging democratic countries and being
involved militarily in these type of operations?

SC: I think that we need to expand the defense budget quite a bit because look at
our Navy. We used to have over a thousand ships in the United States Navy at one time.
That was during President Carter’s tour. We have right at 400 now. I think its hard to
spread out people and restrict them in their jobs in a whole lot of countries without
getting more man power, more ships, more planes, expand the military forces and you
cannot do that without money. You have to have the budget increased. If they don’t, we
have a volunteer force. I’m sure sometimes its hard for the recruiters to get somebody, to
make their recruiting quota so to speak, for the month or however they do it now days.
Because they know if they’ve got any sense at all, the kids are going to know, once I get
in the service, there’s a good chance that I’m not going to be in the United States for a
while when I leave and I’m going to be gone for a longer period of time than years ago
probably. If they know anything about it at all, they’re going to know that. If they’ve
had people like me telling our stories, then they will know. [For example,] Like my dad
was in World War II, my granddad as the case is now days. They left for four years, some
of them. It could bet back to that point where you’re just gone in some other country
forever.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today?
SC: Vietnam. I’m not one of them that’s still fighting the war. I do know that in
the long run, in most cases, we go in, we try to do the right thing to get the right form of
government, the right person in the head of state or whatever, and I know that after that
you do certain things with bullets and bombs, then you have to, our country, we put
money and people and we try to build them back up again. I do know that. I do know
they were doing, there’s a lot of trade areas opening in Vietnam now for private trade
with the United States. I have nothing against that really. Maybe they will buy, for just an
example, maybe they will have cotton mills set up over there by Americans or Russians
or some other country that has them. China has a lot of them. Maybe they will have
cotton mills. They will buy United States cotton which will help ease the surplus, which
will bring the price up to where it should be, where we won’t have to have a government
safety net in order to just make expenses. Just for an example, I’d use that because I’m
involved in the cotton industry.

RV: It makes a lot of sense. Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam?

SC: Now I still have no desire really to go anywhere in any foreign country,
because of two reasons. It’s expensive to go overseas and the attitude of certain parties, I
think it’s a little more dangerous to be an American overseas in certain countries.

RV: Yes. I would agree with that.

SC: And I’m not near as, I guess, brave, or as gung ho as I used to be. I’m older.
I’ve developed a little sense now. I have no desire to go overseas. I haven’t had since I
got out of the service. That’s why I got out of the service. I was tired of being gone. I had
one year, a 14 month period, I set my foot on the soil in Norfolk, Virginia one day. I was
gone nine months. We came back for four days. I had duty on the ship three of those
days, the Thursday we came in and the Saturday and Sunday. I got off Friday night after
work, went home to my family, went back Saturday morning, had duty, that’s guard duty,
fire party, you name it, and do the weekend work that needs done. Monday, we left for
the Caribbean. We were gone and that was during the Dominican Republic deal in ’65.
So we were down there patrolling back and forth down the Caribbean for four months.
My last year in the Navy, I spent 10 months of it at sea on an ammunition supply ship. I
was tired.
RV: It makes sense. Have you had any contact with Vietnamese Americans, Vietnamese that are here in America?

SC: There used to be a lady that I talked to every once in a while, worked at the BX, the store out at Reese Air Force Base. When I’d go through the line, well we’d talk a little bit while I was checking out. That was about it. I don’t know any other Vietnamese in Lubbock, I don’t guess. I know there are quite a few of them here. I’ve just never met any of them.

RV: Do you read books on the Vietnam War?

SC: No. I don’t.

RV: Have you seen any movies on the Vietnam War?

SC: Well, I saw one; it was *The Green Berets*. I saw that one.

RV: With John Wayne.

SC: Yeah. With the Greyhound Trailways bus going across that one scene. I’ve watched, I like service movies. I especially like Navy movies, old movies or new ones. I’ve watched *Saving Private Ryan*. I went to the theatre and watched that one though. That was some really good acting in that one. But normally, if I watch movies or anything, I go for comedies, even on television. I watch the news religiously every night and usually every morning. I try to keep up with things, current as they tell them to us on the overseas Iraq and this, that, and the other. I kind of can keep up with it pretty much on the news and the papers.

RV: Are there any songs that take you back to Vietnam, your Vietnam time?

SC: No. I never did know any of them. There were a lot of them written by a fellow here in Lubbock, I understand. I heard him sing a few of them over at the VFW one time. But I never did hear any of them over there. Most of the time when I listened to the radio over there was Vietnamese music. We had a Vietnamese USO show came up there for Christmas. It was actually a Filipino USO show came up there and they sang everything in Spanish.

RV: A Filipino USO show in Spanish?

SC: Yeah. Then they had the Vietnamese, a bunch of little Vietnamese kids got up there and sang a couple of Christmas songs and Vietnamese songs, I guess. I guess it was
Christmas songs in Vietnamese. That was it. But I’ve listened to a lot of Vietnamese radio stations.

RV: Do you miss that music at all?
SC: I don’t miss it. It was interesting to listen to, it was different. Of course, I’ve been around music all my life. I took eight years of piano lessons, played the guitar since I was ten, been in several western dance bands when I was younger. So, I’ve noticed music. We’d go dancing a lot, and this, that, and the other.

RV: What do you think of your service in Vietnam today when you look back at that year you spent there?
SC: I’m proud of my service that I spent there in Vietnam. I wish we could have done more. But I’m proud of the service that I gave them.

RV: What was the most significant thing you learned while in Vietnam?
SC: Patience [laughing], patience with the Vietnamese. I learned a lot of leadership qualities that I didn’t really possess all that well. I learned quite a bit. Of course, I had that bunch that I [?] with something else. We had a lot of good times really. I’m proud of my service. I’m glad that I went over there and I probably would have extended, but I had this really good set of orders to go back to a river mine sweeper in Charleston. But I was proud of it.

RV: Today if you had to tell young Americans about the Vietnam War, and about Vietnam, what would you tell them?
SC: The same thing I’m telling you. I’d probably stretch it a little bit more. By then I’d probably remember, if it came up pretty recently, I’d probably think of a few more things I haven’t told you that I haven’t thought about [laughing].

RV: Do you think the United States learned any lessons from the Vietnam War?
SC: I would hope that we have. But when we send our people into other countries that are not actually fighting with another country, they're fighting within, I wonder. But I hope we learned something out of it. I’m sure we learned that the people in Vietnam, the North Vietnamese do not give up very easily. But like I say, I hope we learned something. Sometimes I doubt it when I see the news. But I hope we did.

RV: Would you classify the Vietnam War as a loss or stalemate or victory for the United States?
SC: I think it was a stalemate and a loss. We lost over 55,000 military people over there. That was the loss. We spent a lot of money losing those people. That’s another loss. I think they just had to work out some kind of a treaty that appeased all the parties involved. All of us could declare ourselves winners and go home. I think we just got tired, really and saw that we weren’t getting anywhere with the way that we were fighting this thing and they didn’t want to actually go to an all out deal, I don’t think. I don’t think they really wanted to do that. Like I say, it could have dominoed on us I believe. We’re always having words with China to start with. China was big backer and probably still is of North Vietnam. I know they were because the North Vietnamese used a lot of Chinese weaponry.

RV: So is there anything else that you’d like to add to the interview or any other information?

SC: Well, I can be real brief with the rest of my time in the service I guess.

RV: Go right ahead, sir.

SC: Because its nearly lunch time anyway. Anyway, I went to Charleston and they put me on a mine layer/mine recovery vessel for a year. Then I went on a mine sweep boat number 7, MSB 7 which I had been on when I was a deck hand, a seaman, years before. We took all the mine sweep off of it and the 13 boat and put a tow rig on it and we had trained the helicopter pilots in HM 12. They were starting to learn how to have helicopters tow miniature mine sweeping gear. It’s the same thing they used in Hanoi harbor to clear it after all this mess was over. We had trained the pilots on the East Coast. We did that for three years. We would tow the gear under the bridge, the Grace Memorial Bridge, Cooper River Bridge out in the harbor. The helo would come by. He’d drop this huge hook on a cable about a two-inch diameter down. The tow wire had a big ball that had a flat side on the back of it that was affixed to the end of the wire. He would drop the hook, pick up the wire at some point between us and the sweep gear. We would hit a quick release hook called a pelican hook and turn it loose. Then he would get his wench and pull the tow wire up to the inside of the back of the helicopter, hook it up and the would start back and forth through the mine field. You only had actually not hardly danger at all to anybody. You had a crew of five in the helicopter 70 feet above the water.

RV: Much safer.
SC: They’d fly around, tow it all day, bring it back to us. We’d recover it, take it into the pier. They’d bring it up on the pier because it was pretty big equipment. And we did that, us and the 13 boat for three years.

RV: Was that more effective mine sweeping in your opinion than what you had done before?

SC: I think.

RV: Before, you were on the river on the water, and now you’re above.

SC: On the water, I think there’s more danger, but I always thought the effectiveness, we had more to work with on the boats. The helicopter didn’t have a whole lot of room to store all these different types of gear. You couldn’t store any of it, really. So they had to have a tender boat so to speak, or escort or whatever to get this equipment out in the water so they could pick it up and use it. I think they did really well once they learned how to use it. And they miniaturized some of it. We still got the old ways, the chain bottom drag is a wire hooked together between two ships or two boats running up the river. You’ve got the contact mine, a wire down to the cement anchor. It’s below the surface usually where you can't see it. This wire hooks on to it. When that finally pops up to the surface, then the boat behind shoots it or something and detonates it the contact mines. In the helicopter, it’s just hard to do that. Anyway, after that, I went to an ammunition ship, ammunition supply ship, U.S.S. Santa Barbara, E-28 out of Goose Creek Naval Weapons Station in Charleston. Spent a year on that. On that, what we did was refuel and arm carriers and destroyers and then we’d take the bullets off of them. Well, after that I was a tugboat operator for four years. I’m sorry, in Norfolk Navy Station and I hauled ammunition and field barges to Yorktown up the York River or along side the ships. So I ran a 109-foot tug for four years.

RV: This is after Charleston?

SC: After Charleston. This was in Norfolk Navy Station. Then I went to the U.S.S. Santa Barbara back in Charleston again and spent my remaining time in the Navy on it.

RV: This is ’79.

SC: ’79 and up ‘til March of ’80.

RV: Why did you decide to get out of the Navy?
SC: I was just tired of traveling and I think the duty might have had a lot to do with it. Santa Barbara, I’d been on small boats and mine sweepers and tugboats and the first big ship I was attached to a ship’s company, not down in the troop compartment so to speak, and I didn’t really know the job that well like I was expected to. I was the head of the 2nd Division for three months and I finally requested a transfer. I knew I was fixing to get busted or something because I just flat didn’t know what I was doing. Those transfer rigs on that ship weren’t even in the book that I had for going up for rate. Never seen them before. So I wound up on, as assistant chief master at arms and I worked the rest of the time on the ship as master at arms, catching them with the dope or whatever else they might be doing wrong on there, taking the captain’s mast, and helping maintain order on the ship. That’s what I did ‘til about a month before about the first of March of 1980 I still had a month to do.

RV: This is your 20-year mark.

SC: Yeah. On the 20 year mark. So they transferred me. The ship was going overseas again. We’d just got back from overseas and it’s going overseas again. If you had less than 30 days, you didn’t have to go with the ship before the end of your tour. I had 28 days or something like that. It was about the 3rd or 4th of March 1980. So they transferred me to a barracks there in South Carolina and I stayed there for the rest of the month. Then I took my retirement.

RV: Did you move back to Lubbock at that time?

SC: No. I worked in Cross, South Carolina [?] corner area northwest of Charleston for Santee Cooper electric running a workboat maintaining navigation aids in Lake Moultrie, Lake Marion in the Santee river or the Cooper river. Then I did that for a year. Then I went to Pickens, South Carolina where the first wife was from. And I worked in a cotton mill for two years, nearly three years. About two years, I guess, before I came to Lubbock.

RV: Been here ever since.

SC: Yeah. I just settled here in Lubbock, came back to see my family. My mother had died in ’71, ’72. I think it was ’72 in a car wreck. I came back to see Dad and I’m just familiar with this area. My first wife died and I sold everything and came out here, settled here in Lubbock.
RV: So you took a long route from O'Donnell, around the world and back here to West Texas.

SC: Around the world several times it seemed like. Five years in the Caribbean, four months at a time, and three years in the Mediterranean, six, seven, eight, and nine months at a time, up and down the East Coast, a year in South Vietnam, California twice.

RV: Where was the most interesting place you traveled to?

SC: The most interesting place I traveled to, I would say would be in Italy in Sicily, mostly Italy. Italy and Spain. Italy because Mount Vecuvius, I’ve been to the top of it and read about it history books.

RV: You could actually be there.

SC: And I’ve been there. I’ve seen the ancient city of Pompeii ruins where they dig them up. I’ve seen the factory there in Naples, I went through it where the cameo jewelry is handmade from seashells there. I bought some cameo jewelry for different people there.

RV: Does your Vietnam experience seem like just a small dot on a long journey.

SC: It does.

RV: It doesn’t stand out as a big thing.

SC: It stands out as in being the most important part of my Navy career. I can put it that way because we were sweeping live mines. We were actually doing what I’d been training to do all those years. It was really the most important phase of my career in the Navy. I can say that.

RV: Was there anything else you’d like to add or say?

SC: I guess that’s about it. I’m getting a little hungry, how about you?

RV: Yes, sir. Alright, this will end our interview with Sumner Clayton. Thank you very much sir.

**NOTE: SC later adds: One important part of my job in Vietnam was to drive to Danang once a month to get message traffic, supplies, and pay for the men in my advisory unit in Qua Viet.**