Kim Sawyer: This is Kim Sawyer continuing an oral history interview with
Charlie Stallings on April 5\textsuperscript{th}, 2001 at 1:30 in the afternoon. We are in the Special
Collections library at Texas Tech. Mr. Stallings could you give us a little background
information, when and where you were born, where you grew up?

Charlie Stallings: I was born December the 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1944 in Portales, New Mexico.
Although I’ve never actually been there since I was born. I’ve never seen the place. My
family left there shortly after my birth and we settled in Abernathy, Texas where I
attended school and grew up. After I finished high school there, I got my college degree
at Tech, Texas Tech.

KS: What year did you graduate?

CS: 1967 with a degree in accounting.

KS: And what was life like in Abernathy growing up?

CS: It’s a small town, although it was a little bigger then, than it is now. Our
population then was probably about thirty-five, thirty-six hundred and it was the usual
stuff in a small high school, you know, sports and chasing girls and that kind of stuff, but
it was fun because in a small school you got to take part in everything, you got to be a
part of everything, whether you were that good or not, so it was fun, playing football and
rang track.

KS: Did you have a car in high school?

CS: Oh, yes I had a ’55 Chevy.

KS: Did you make lots of trips to Lubbock?
CS: Yes, Lubbock was kind of our base of operations since there wasn’t a lot going on in Abernathy, we’d drive to Lubbock and hang out. We didn’t really do anything, we just came over here.

KS: Okay, so you graduated Tech in 1967. I’m curious, were there anti-war demonstrations here at Texas Tech at that time? Did you see anything like that?

CS: No, if there were I sure don’t remember them, but really there wasn’t although everything seemed to revolve around the draft and the threat of knowing that you were going to be drafted.

KS: Did you have a lot of discussions with your friends about the draft?

CS: Oh, yes. It was kind of the way you decided things, and that may be a little studied part of that whole conflict is the effect that it had on a whole generation as far as career planning, marriage, family, a lot of stuff got involved and you didn’t have to be a service veteran necessarily for it to have affected the way you conducted yourself. There were lots of decisions that had to be made, that might have been made differently had there not been a draft, because it permeated every aspect of your life at that time, the threat of it.

KS: Did you have many friends that were drafted?

CS: Oh, yes I had several that got drafted. By the time that I graduated most of my friends either had already enlisted or had gone to and decided to graduate from college and go into some officer program or something, or they were not physically qualified.

KS: And what did you do directly after graduation?

CS: Well, directly after graduation, I’d been doing several, this is another thing about the decision making process, I had, let me backtrack for a minute. Let me backtrack to high school for a second. In 1963 when I graduated the whole thing in Southeast Asia was just kind of like there, you know. In the school library you saw a little bit about, this whatever is was going on in Vietnam in National Geographic or whatever, and of course they had the draft then, but really no one was being called up to any extent, so it really wasn’t big deal, but we had some Army recruiters that came through and were talking to us and one of my best friends and I decided, hey that sounds like a pretty good deal, because if you enlisted in the Army Reserve before you were
eighteen and a half, then you were guaranteed to only miss one semester of college and
then you came back and you could start in Spring instead of the Fall. I said, yes, let’s do
that. Well, it came along and I thought, we’re not going to get drafted, so I backed out on
him and he went, he’s really been mad at me ever since about that.

KS: What was his name?

CS: His name’s Leon. I haven’t seen him in a long time. He’s really not that mad
at me. He was glad he did it, because I sweated it out then for four more years, but right
after I graduated I’d had several interviews with CPA firms, etc.,etc. and the question that
was always asked what’s your draft status. I mean, they'd just ask you. You were not in
any way protected, some of them would make arrangements if they wanted you bad
enough and I had friends that did this, that took jobs contingent on them being able to get
into a reserve unit, so that they could go off for six months and then come back. That
was hard to do, because the reserve units, as you might suspect had a lot of, they just had
a line of people waiting to get into them. As a matter of fact, while I was at OCS, about
two months after I was in the Navy, I got a letter from a reserve unit in Dallas that told
me they had an opening if I was interested. I said no, not really, but I just kind of, well I
guess I don’t want to use the word bummed around, but I had already taken the
application for Navy OCS and so it was basically a holding pattern, waiting to see what
class I got in, had I known that it was going to take until January to get into that class, I
might have done something else. I had a part-time job as a bookkeeper that I just kept
and that kept me in beer money until I got to go.

KS: Why Navy? What made you decide on that branch?

CS: You know, that’s an interesting story too, I really don’t know, except that
I’ve always been kind of fascinated with it. For one thing I thought they had just
gorgeous uniforms and I saw a couple of movies, there were a couple of movies that
came out when I was in college, In Harm's Way, and The Sand Pebbles, and I thought
anything Steven McQueen did was probably pretty cool so, he was in the Navy in that
and so I thought, well I’ll just try for this and see. And it was, and I’m glad I did because
I really loved the, I still do, I just love the Navy, I think its all the tradition and stuff. You
know, its kind of a couple different cultures, it’s the military culture, but then you got the,
I don’t want to sound too super romantic about all this but its got the lure of the sea and
seamanship and all that, that’s kind of neat, and all the nautical traditions and everything that kind of fit in with the military, makes it a really neat thing. We have traditions that the other services just don’t have, that was kind of it. Although I will say that one of the things that I applied for, my whole entrance into the Armed Forces was kind of an interesting deal, I was going around trying to find these different reserve units because I really thought I needed a job because I’d asked for an extension of my deferment for one more year, so I could go to graduate school at North Texas State where I was accepted. So I met with my draft board, they were a bunch of illiterate farmers that didn’t understand why you’d want to go graduate school, so myself and a law student from UT both got turned down at the same time, so we didn’t get to go to graduate school.

Anyway, I went out to Reese Air Force Base here in Lubbock and applied for the Air Force reserve because it was one of those things hardly anybody knew about. It was a medical unit and so I just thought, okay I’ll say that, and then I’ll go to that and go to graduate school, and I’d already applied for the Navy so I was waiting to hear from them and the Air Force accepted me and I went back for my physical and took it and I’d already been accepted into this unit, and so for the only time in my life I had a scar on my lung. They said a shadow appeared on my lung in my X-ray. I said, “You’re kidding.”

He said, “Yes, we can even do it again.” I said, “Hey man, I’m about to get my draft notice,” I’d already had my draft physical, that’s another good story too, anyway, so I had my draft physical and so I came back up to Reese and I get my lungs X-rayed and it kind of scared me so I went to my private doctor and he said, “There's nothing wrong with your lungs.” I said, “Really?” He said, “No.” Well, in the mean time waiting to get the official X-ray from the Air Force, which turned out to be clear this time I got my draft notice and that guy said, “Sorry.” So, on November the 7th, 1967 I boarded a bus for my draft board in Plainview, Texas, went to the induction center in Amarillo, and did all the stuff up there they do right before they induct you into the Army, lunch came and it turned out that I was the only college graduate in this bunch and the guy said, “Okay college boy, you take everybody to lunch.” And they have me a little piece of paper, and I said, “Yes, sir.” I was all scared and I took these guys down to this place to eat and everything and we came back and they said, “Okay, you guys just wait around out here. We’re arranging transportation for Fort Polk, Louisiana for basic training,” and I thought
oh, good, so I’m sitting there all depressed and everything. This Sergeant comes out and
he says, “Is there somebody out here named Stallings?” and I said, “Yes sir.” He said,
“Get in here.” I said “Okay,” I thought haven’t even got in yet and I’m already in
trouble. I go in and it’s this Navy Lieutenant from Albuquerque, New Mexico on the
phone. He said, “Okay, you’ve been accepted to OCS, you haven’t actually joined the
Army yet have you, you haven’t actually raised your hand?” and I said “No”. And he
said, “Would you still like to go in the Navy?” and I looked around and I said, “Oh, hell,
yes” and he said, “Okay, as soon as I tell you to, give the phone back to that sergeant and
you go pick up your bag and walk out and don’t look back and stand on the curb and
there will be a sailor there in about five minutes in a van. Just go with him to the airport,
we’re going to fly you to Albuquerque, swear you in, then you’ll be back home in time
for supper.” And I said, “Okay,” needless to say, I’m a little overwhelmed and as I’m
walking out I hear yes, sir from the Sergeant’s and sure enough, this van screeched to a
halt, this guy says, “Jump in, we’ve only got about five minutes to get to the airport.” We
got out to the airport, flew me to Albuquerque, swore me in and gave me a bus ticket
home.

KS: And how long before you started OCS?
CS: That was November 7 and I went to OCS, January the 20th.
KS: Okay, and where was your OCS?
CS: Newport, Rhode Island.
KS: Could you talk a little bit about what that was like, and what kinds of things
you did?
CS: Oh, yes that was an experience. It was cold for one thing, January the 20th in
Newport. It’s right on Narragansett Bay and I guess its not there any more, I guess they
have OCS in Pensacola, Florida now. So, it was real cold, the wind blew in and the
second day we were there, we got to get up at like three in the morning to shovel snow, it
was like up to your waist. It was really kind of bad, but I checked in a hotel in Newport
with a guy that I met up with on the plane and the next morning we got on the bus and
headed out to the base and just as soon as it screeched to halt, here came the, they were
called, I can’t remember what they called them, OD’s something like that. They were
other officer candidates that were in charge of making sure you did all your drills and
stuff. They came over, telling us to button all our buttons and all this stuff. I had one friend that took his golf clubs -- he thought we got the weekend off. Its one of those recruiting stories though – he took his golf clubs and what they neglected to tell him was that you had to carry everything with you when you’re going around getting outfitted, so we were walking around. They bring us in and they assign us to a section and we started marching around picking up clothes and blankets and stuff, so you’re going deeper and deeper and he’ got these golf clubs slung over his shoulder, which he then had to send home, because as soon as you get to, they called it the hall, it was really a dorm, it was like a college dorm, a little room with two men in it, they make you put all your civilian stuff in a gear locker or ship it home, so he shipped his golf clubs home. They had a locker where you could put all your luggage and stuff in case you made it through, so that was the first day there. As we were marching along, I remember one guy names Frederichi raised his hand, so the MOD, that’s what they were, MOD, I think it stood for mate of the deck or some silly something, but anyway he said, “Yes, Mr. Frederichi, can I help you?” He said, “Yes, sir are we going to have time to brush our teeth?” He got right in his face and said “Yes, and you really need it.” So we spent most of the time when we weren’t studying, we’d get up in the morning at like 5:30, I think, was really when we got up marched to the chow hall, marched back, got our books, marched to class, marched to another class all day long until probably, three or four in the afternoon, then we’d go back and we had an hour super to write letters unless you were like me and you flunked the swimming test, then you had to go to swim class for extra instruction which I had to do, then would eat chow .And you have to study from like seven to ten.

KS: What kinds of classes were these?

CS: Navigation, tactics, engineering, seamanship, leadership of course, organization.

KS: Did you find any of these real difficult?

CS: Oh, yes some of them were really difficult, I mean navigation was like, what is this, but once I got into it, I loved it. It was really interesting, especially the celestial part. Of course I never used it because after I got out of OCS I went to the Supply Corps and I never got to use my navigation stuff, but the organization and all that stuff was really pretty cool. I learned a lot from that, some of the stuff I still use. They just taught
you how the Navy was organized and chain of commands and that sort of stuff. You also
learned the first thing about standing watch, which is kind of unique to the Navy too, I
guess. When you’re at sea, you’re not just working or sleeping, sometimes you have to
stand your watch, depends on how many sections you're in, which I guess I’ll get to in a
minute, but you learned how to do that at OCS because you might be assigned to be the
officer of the deck which meant that you stood down by the flag at the entrance to the
building, or the quarterdeck as they called it.

KS: So they would always have someone in that position.

CS: Manned twenty-four hours so they were four hour shifts, you might to get
up at, and that’s when you learned how to get up at midnight and work till four, or four
and work till eight and that kind of stuff. That’s where you first picked that up. I
remember that everybody was always sick too, because it was winter and we were in
close quarters and strep throat was all over the place and food poisoning once, so I was
going to come out the picture of health, but really hardly anybody did, we all came out
kind of pale and underweight and we were sitting around talking one night about
brainwashing techniques that they used in the Korean War and how they like to get you
sick and worn down, and we got to looking at each other, “Hey, that’s what they’re doing
to us.” It was interesting. I was glad it was over, I wouldn’t want to do it again, but it
was quite an experience.

KS: At that point, how close were you following developments in Vietnam, the
War?

CS: Well, real close because we were keeping a really good eye on that, the Tet
Offensive happened while I was there. Is that right? Yes, the Tet Offensive happened,
the Pueblo was captured by the Koreans while I was there, and of course that was more
fodder they used against us. We’d only been there about a week, and they said “Okay,
you guys better shape up because I don’t think any of you are going to finish. I think all
of you are going to probably have to go back home and go straight in the Army, because
of the Pueblo Incident, we can’t fight Vietnam and Korea both.” You know that was just
the rumors that were going around, so we were all scared to death and this was coming
from one of the guys in charge of us that had graduated from UCLA and Houston had
beaten UCLA the night before in a basketball game, Lew Alcinder and Elvin Hayes,
clash of the titans and he heard about it and of course, UCLA then was in the midst of a,
that was when they had their 88 game winning streak or something, right before it started
I guess. And he said, “UCLA lost last night, every one of you blah, blah are going to pay
for it,” so we commenced to clean everything. We scraped the deck and we cleaned the
head and all this stuff. That was just kind of fun stuff that went on, but we were, that
kind of made you wonder where you were going to go next, although by the time I got
there I realized I was going to go to supply school so my next stop after OCS would be
six months in Athens, Georgia. But some of the guys went, well hardly anybody out of
OCS would go directly to some kind of combat unit without a little more training,
whatever it might be. Some of them stayed there in Newport and went to gunnery school
or something, justice school was there, that kind of stuff.

KS: Anything else you remember about OCS in particular, did your commanding
officers have any trouble enforcing discipline among?

CS: Oh, no, we were all pretty much compliant. For one thing, it was really
pretty smart of them, a lot of the guys that came in, had already been in the Navy, they
were ex-enlisted. As a matter of fact, they had at that time, there were so many people
that were going in the Navy in OCS, they would assign you to a class, and in order to get
you in the Navy and protect you from the draft, they would assign you to a boot camp
class in San Diego and it was called an OCS holding class, so these guys were coming
straight from twelve weeks of boot camp into eighteen weeks of OCS. I’d really felt
sorry for those guys, they went through the head shaving deal twice. So some of them
didn’t any have leave, some of them came straight from San Diego to Newport. But I
think having them in there, and they also tried to assign to every section, they had a
program then called the NESEP program, Navy Education Scientific Education Program,
I believe, something like that and these were older guys that had been in the Navy
probably six to eight years and were in their middle to late twenties, so they were a real
stabilizing influence and they were usually in charge and so they tended to be less lenient
than you might suspect. That’s not saying we didn’t have a lot of horseplay going on, but
the discipline, I’m sure its nothing like the Marines Corps, it was just different, you had
to exercise a lot of self-discipline just to get your studying done so you didn’t really have,
one thing you just didn’t have any time to goof off, you just didn’t. You were either
studying or in class or cleaning urinals or something.

KS: They kept you busy.

CS: Yes, you were always assigned some kind of detail like sweeping the deck or
cleaning the head or something. I have a story about a deal. Four of us, myself and a
MBA from the University of Michigan and a Stanford law student and myself and then
there was another guy who had graduated from Ole Miss and we were all in the head
cleaning together and we just looked up at each other, God, I’m glad I went to college,
standing there with our bowl brushes. So anyway, that went on for eighteen weeks and
then you finally graduate and its kind of a big deal. They had a blimp, there’s an old
blimp hangar where they had it.

KS: Did your family come for it?

CS: No, not many of them did because it was just such along way. Some of the
guys had their family there, most didn’t. They just went ahead, because they were going
home. We got some leave, usually a week before we had to go, like my case, supply
school, but there was the deal just like you’ve seen in the movies, the enlisted guys
waiting outside to give you your first salute so the get their dollar and that kind of stuff.

KS: So, next you went to Navy Supply Corps School, is that right?

CS: Right, I came home for a week and then I got my car and drove to Supply
Corps School in Athens, Georgia, not far from the University of Georgia, actually. It’s
on the campus of an old women’s college. It’s really kind of neat, it’s that old, kind of
neat Southern architecture and lots of trees around and everything and that was really
something after being at OCS because you were now an officer and we were all Ensigns
and we were treated with a certain measure of dignity, as opposed to being dirt. And that
was classes on procurement, dispersing and computers at that time, which was pretty
rudimentary, I mean there wasn’t a lot of computer stuff to be interested in then. We had
a class, I don’t remember a lot about it and we had a pool and we’d go hang out at the
pool and we had the first introduction to the Officer’s Club and of course there were
college girls at the University of Georgia, so it was just fun. Getting there was kind of an
experience for me, because growing up in a small town, and you’ve got to take this back
to the ‘60s okay, late ‘60s and the Interstate highway system, which I had never been
anywhere, and so whenever I’d see an exit for like, Oklahoma City, I just took it because somebody said, “well you go north to Oklahoma City and you go through there and you go through Fort Smith and you go through,” and so every town that I was supposed to go through, I’d get off and go through it until about halfway there I figured out, you know, the Interstate runs all the way through the – I don’t tell that story very often, because you know, but its true, I was just that big a hick. I didn’t really know what I was getting into, but it was fun.

KS: How long did it take you to drive all the way to Georgia?

CS: Oh it took a couple of days. Yes I guess the spent the night in Arkansas, then went on. I was one of the few that had my car there. It was a ’65 Mustang by then, so we’d take it, we’d drive to Atlanta on weekends and things like that. We just went to class, and we did a lot of playing at Supply Corps School.

KS: How long was that?

CS: Six months. I was there from, I got my commission in May, May the 24th of 1968, went to Supply Corps school, reported about a week later I suppose, maybe, give or take, graduated from there in November and by then we had all gotten orders to where we were going to go, and because operational schedules and stuff, the unit you’re assigned to may not be around, easy to get to right at the time so I was put in a, what they called a pool and you’re just on the staff of, I was on the staff of the cruiser destroyer force Pacific in San Diego and you just stay there for a month or two until they find where your ship is. By then the Ashtabula was in the shipyards and I was just waiting for they guy to finish up his tour before I went and relieved him,

KS: At this point did you know you would probably be going to Vietnam, be in that area?

CS: Yes, once you get to the Pacific, once you got to San Diego, it was just a foregone conclusion of where you were going, there was no other place to go, I mean everybody in San Diego or Long Beach where I ended up actually being stationed, were home ported, you deployed to West PAC, you were going to go to an operation whether it was Market Time or the Tonkin Gulf and operated out of Subic Bay in the Philippines.

KS: Before we talk about that, how well do you think your training prepared you for your later experiences in Vietnam?
CS: Well, psychologically, probably not as well as it should have, although I
don’t know how they could have really done it any better. One of the things a war is, I
discovered then and I look back on it, we were all just kids. I was only twenty-three.
Which, I’d gotten out of college and stuff, but twenty-three and I was in charge of like
seventy people, and frankly I haven’t had anything since that approached that kind of
responsibility, you know. I’m sure it had but then it was just kind of pretty awesome, and
all the guys under me were just like me, they were just kids except for a few old salts that
had been in forever, you know, the chiefs, the non-commissioned guys. They gave a
little stability to everything, and the older officers. But there weren’t really on my ship,
there were only like probably three officers. There were fifteen officers usually on it, and
I guess probably only three of them were over thirty so we were a young crew. Most of
the guys on the ship were reservists, they were in the Navy two-year program. They’d
either just gotten out of college or they were in the middle of college or something and
we took a survey, and I think half the crew had had at least some college before they . . .

KS: Was that unusual?

CS: You know, I really don’t know. I think it might have been, I think it might
have been for the Navy at that time and I don’t know if its because of the kind of ship it
was or the circumstances of it being in the shipyard or what, when I reported aboard we
were only there about a month before we left after I got on it. But it’d been there for
probably a year or so. What they did is they pulled the Ashtabula into the shipyard and
jumbo-ized it. They made it into what we call a jumbo oiler, just put more storage space
on it so it could carry in addition to the fuel, we could carry ammunition, so we carried a
lot of ammunition.

KS: Where had it been prior to?

CS: Well it’d been operating in West Pac, but they decided that that was one
they were going to try an experiment on and try to convert it to a big oiler. I got there
shortly after she finished her sea trials and got everything; I was there for the load out,
before we left.

KS: This was in ’68 or ’69?

CS: This was in ’69. I’m talking about probably it must have been about April of
’69 and we got loaded out and I think we finally left the first of May, as I recall. We left
Long Beach, left the yard at Long Beach and went to Seal Beach, California and took on ammunition. That was kind of interesting, we had to do a big load out plan of where we were going to put all of it and all that stuff. That was the first time I’d ever seen, real honest-to-god bombs and stuff like that so that was kind of, holy cow.

KS: Do you recall what types of ammunition specifically?

CS: Oh, yes we carried all kinds of stuff. We carried primarily, I don’t know how big the bombs were, but they were primarily bombs we gave to the carriers in the Tonkin Gulf, Yankee Station, if you’ve heard of Yankee Station. That was where all the flight operations were taking place and that was our job was to support them, so we used to.

KS: So, you had to calculate the weight and where to put everything and?

CS: Yes, it was a matter of space and how to make sure we got the optimum load out and everything and they were all on pallets and it was kind of interesting, after a while they just became things, you know, guys sitting around on top of them smoking cigarettes and stuff like that. And we had to load out, we also carried provisions, we carried everything from . . .

KS: Was this for your crew or to re-supply other?

CS: Oh no, it was to re-supply others, although we supplied ourselves too but we supplied other ships. My ship had enough, somebody calculated, we had enough food and fuel, we could have stayed at sea for like three years without having to go in and of course ships make their own water too, so it was kind of interesting.

KS: Could you describe the ship and the living conditions on board?

CS: Sure, the Ashtabula was about six hundred and thirty feet long and it had a unique, well as all oilers did actually, it had two superstructure, a forward superstructure and an aft superstructure and what was at one time, what would be the open deck on most of the old-fashioned oilers had been closed in so that we could put the cargo space and the forward superstructure was fairly new inside and that was where officer’s country was, so I had a two-man stateroom. I was the bull ensign so I got it to myself most of the time, which was kind of interesting. I was only one there a few months before I became a JG, but most of the time I had it, and I’d have to share it every once in a while. We’d have a chaplain that was attached to the squadron so he’d rotate among the ships, we
called him our circuit rider, and so it might be the Catholic chaplain, it might be the
Protestant chaplain that would come through. They usually bunked in with me because I
had that extra space and sometimes a doctor; we had a doctor that did the same thing.

KS: Did you have a doctor on board or they were rotated as well?
CS: Yes, they’d rotate and it would usually be some guy from, sometimes it
would be Navy doctor, sometimes it would be Public Health Service, sometimes it would
be Coast Guard and they came in, we always envied them because the Public Health guys
had their hair down over their collars. And they didn’t have any care, they wore uniforms
just like us, but they didn’t have quite the grooming standards. We left, I guess we
loaded out in Seal Beach, and set sail and it took us nineteen days to get to Subic Bay.

We topped off everything in Subic to make our first line swing. That was my first
exposure to a liberty port. Subic Bay in those days was kind of like the wild west, lots of
activities going on, we went to the Officer’s club at Cubi point, which was a Naval Air
Station component of the Subic Bay complex and it was my first exposure to naval
aviation and their party styles which were wild to say the least. My favorite place there
was actually a place called The Chuck Wagon. Now anybody spending a fleet and was
over there on the ship, it was all about The Chuck Wagon, it was like an old Quonset hut
and it was just a dump.

KS: It was like a bar type?
CS: Yes, it was just a bar, which is basically all we were interested in.
KS: Any interesting stories you’d like to share?
CS: I don’t know if I want to release those to the Internet or not. Anyway, it was
fun watching the pilots, of course those guys would come in and they’d party because
they might be dead the next day, it didn’t take that long to leave and sail to the line, so it
took about three days I guess for us to make transit out from Subic out to wherever we
were going. But from then on until December, it was more or less a twenty-one day
rotation. We’d leave Subic Bay, we’d go to the Gulf of Thailand, we’d go just around the
tip of South Vietnam and there was a radar picket ship stationed there, and we’d give
them provisions usually, sometimes fuel and we’d come back up the coast on what was
called Operation Market Time. We’d run the coast for a few days until we got to the
Gulf of Tonkin and we’d go out to Yankee Station, which of course Yankee Station
moves, just always moving. That’s where the carriers were and as I recall there were
usually four carriers there, I think at any one time and we would, it was our job to keep
them in fuel. We carried, I think it was eighty or ninety thousand barrels of fuel oil,
Navy special fuel oil, which they don’t use any more, it was NSFO, that the ships burned
and seventy thousand barrels of JP-5 jet fuel and then five and a half thousand barrels of
Av gas, which, thank God, we never had to pump because that stuff is really volatile,
that’s what blew the bow off, that was what I was referring to earlier.

KS: Could you talk about that story?

CS: Yes, the Av gas was one of the things we were concerned about because of
course, the only things that use it are prop driven planes and it just so happened, no one
ever had a demand for it. When our turn came up because we really dreaded pumping it,
but in the ‘50s the ship had some kind of minor leak or something and had to be fixed, so
they pulled into the shipyards in Japan, I think it was in Yokuska and were going to have
it fixed and two Japanese welders went into the tank, which was dry and had been flushed
according to procedure with freshwater and saltwater while it was at sea and they struck
their torch and it blew up. It still had a pocket of fumes, it literally blew the deck plating
off the forecastle, so stuff was really dangerous from experience, that ship having
experienced it. Anyway, we’d go out and that’s what we’d do and we’d also transfer, we
had rockets, bombs that we’d transfer a lot of, frozen food, candy bars, cookies,
everything.

KS: Now would you always re-supply or refuel the same ships, how was that
scheduled or how did you know where to go?

CS: Our job, and we had a squadron staff that rode, there might be more than one
of us out there at a time and they would always ride one of the oilers, one of the
replenishment ships and it was just a matter of keeping track of all the cargo and the
demands of the carriers that were getting, this is all message traffic just going constantly,
constantly telling you what their load out is, what you’ve got left and that kind of stuff,
and sometimes what we’d do when we’d get low, before you got back to Subic Bay, well
you’d pump it off to another one and call it a consolidation, so that way you could keep
one on out there a little longer, you’d pump off what you had left, transit back to Subic
empty which on an oiler can be pretty interesting. Empty, is just like a cork when they’re
full, they ride low in the water and very stable, but when you’re empty its really bouncy.
We ran into Typhoon Tess one time on the way back to Subic from Yankee Station and it
was so weird because we were tracking the storm all day and the navigator kept getting
weather reports and looking at it and stuff like that and sure enough, it was just like it was
after us. We ended up going right into it, and boy it was amazing, we were in that storm
probably six or eight hours and it was the most awesome display of nature I have ever
seen and have you ever seen The Perfect Storm?

KS: Yes, is that what it was like?

CS: Yes, you could look down and there was water, our bridge was like sixty feet
above the water, and there were waves crashing in on it, and you’d dive down and you’d
come back up and water's just everywhere. We had a chaplain with us then and we have
a picture of the cruise book that we’d put together, you know it was like a little annual
and a picture in the cruise book because the old man’s out on the wing of the bridge and
he’s kneeling down in front of the chaplain and you can see the waves crashing in the
background and all that stuff, but we came out of it okay. We were all sick. I had a
midshipmen from the Naval Academy that was in my cabin at that time, they were on
their summer cruise. We had two Navy midshipmen and two from the Naval Academy,
one from Virginia, and one from Kent State and they were all coming out doing their
midshipmen summer cruises and I thought, “I’m going to lose it, I’ve got to go throw up”
and I came out to the bridge and came in to go to the head – that was one other thing, we
had our own private head, which most ships don’t – anyway, I came down and he was
sitting on the edge of his bunk, he said “oh, sir is it always this bad?” I just kind of
gulped it back and said, “no this is nothing,” like I was a big salt or something, but it was
pretty funny. It was kind of scary though because we kept thinking about all those fresh
welds that had been done in the shipyard; worried the rivets are going to pop or any of
that stuff.

KS: Were you wearing your life preservers at this point or what was the, did you
have to stay below or was there a procedure for this?

CS: No, well nobody went out on the weather deck, so if you weren’t below you
stayed out in your space inside, yes, the bridge was closed in and there’s a certain
watertight integrity that, there’s a coding system when all the fittings on a ship, what
needs to be closed when you have whatever condition might be, so you can button it
completely down, X-ray, zebra, yoke, I can’t remember them all but depending on what
your material condition is you shut these and it seals off different parts of the ship and
stuff, so that’s what we were doing and we had a little lookout that was in the eyes of this
ship, or the very point of the bow, he was there and when we first hit the storm it came on
us so quick that he had to literally crawl about probably a hundred feet to get inside and it
was really kind of sad. I was watching him and I thought, oh man, but anyway he got
inside and nobody had to run out and get him because he was okay but it was kind of
interesting that he couldn’t stand up and really the reason he couldn’t stand up was
because the wind was blowing so hard. We never lost anybody overboard or anything
like that. Well we did lose a guy overboard, we were getting ready to deploy, we were
filling up in Long Beach and then you had these humongous hoses that pump the fuel on,
one of the sailors named Beniciowitz was standing there and they disconnected it before
they should have, and the back pressure just catapulted him off the ship. Unfortunately, it
didn’t catapult off the side where the water, it catapulted him and he landed on the
cement pier, broke everything, it didn't kill him it just put him in the hospital for months
in a full body cast. That was really the worst injury we had and that happened before we
ever left. We did have a kid hurt with a shell casing that ejected and hit him the face,
broke his nose, cheeks, knocked out some of his teeth and we had to fly him out on a
helicopter, flew him to a carrier actually on the helicopter. Those were the worst injuries.
We had more problems with people going over the hill than anything, I guess, we didn’t
really have that many, the ones that went were kind of spectacular they just decided to
leave and they just stayed gone and disappeared into the Philippines someplace, and we
never saw them again, there were two or three like that, guys that.

KS: They would just never report back?

CS: Right, I did find one finally, he was in the brig and I went over to tell him to
write his parents, I didn’t get to see him. The Marine Sergeant at the brig assured me that
he would give him that message, and I thought yes, I bet you beat him into it. That was
the only one of my guys that did it, but it was just kind of like a mind-numbing, bored on
one minute and real exciting the next, but we do twenty-one day swings, we’d come back
to Subic and load up, and stay there two or three days and do it again.
KS: I’m curious about the refueling process, could you tell me exactly how that works?

CS: It’s called an “unrep” underway replenishment and shortly before we left one of the guys, one of my best friends on the ship as a matter of fact, he was also a junior officer like me and his name was Bob Woodrum, he married the daughter of one of Bob Hope’s writers, so shortly before we left – I’ll tell you what this has to do with the— shortly before we left he took his tape recorder and went out to visit with several stars, Bob Hope, Ernest Borgnine, Barbara Eden, you know Jeannie, we all got autographed pictures of Barbara Eden by the way, I still have mine, Natalie Wood, was it Peggy Lipton that was on the MOD Squad I think, or somebody like that, so anyway he got just different pair, Susan Hayward maybe. Anyway, he went around and got recordings of them, and they said, “Good morning, welcome alongside USS Ashtabula, stand by to receive shot line.” “Good morning, this is Bob Hope or whoever; welcome alongside USS Ashtabula stand by to receive shot line,” so we’d play that when they’d pull alongside.

KS: What was their reaction when they heard that?

CS: They’d just go, huh. Actually, we only did it once to all the ships and by the time we were through, everybody heard it, so the novelty wore off, but what happens is, if it’s a carrier, you approach it, that’s the rule, carriers are kind of like, they’re the snobs of the fleet, so you had to approach the carrier, take station on the carrier to refuel and it starts out the ship shoots you a shot line, its just a line gun, its like a shotgun, and they shoot it over and it just gradually get bigger and bigger, its attached to a bigger one, which is attached to a bigger one, you haul it across and rig up the hoses and there’s a whole system of lines that keep it above the water and you just hook it up to, I can’t remember, I should know, I can’t remember how big they were, probably eight inches, something like that, and then you just start pumping.

KS: How close or far apart were the ships?

CS: Well, you try to keep station, probably about a hundred feet, maybe, sometimes closer, sometimes farther, but its got expansion in it so you’re okay if you drift apart, but you’ve got somebody at, its called the Unrep detail, you’ve got a detail for everything, special sea and anchor detail, Unrep detail. Our operations officer who was
our best ship handler would usually be the Unrep OD, officer of the deck and he’d just
stand there and he’d watch the compass and make sure that we didn’t waver and a guy on
the other ship is doing the same thing so you keep stationary. And then for the pallets
and stuff, they either go across in a cargo net type arrangement or they’re just hung on a
pallet.

KS: Like a crane would swing it across.

CS: Right, well it’s not a crane; it’s just a line. Have you ever seen in movies, the
people in the chair that they transfer from one ship to the other? Its like that except its
cargo and the difference being with humans, you don’t use machinery to haul them
across, you actually man those with like fifty or so guys, usually have about fifty men in
a row, because you don’t want the machine to hang up and not be able to get him back
and theoretically all the guys are going to like him enough to not dump him, so we did
that two or three times once in a while. Yes, that's they way we transferred everything;
ammo and every thing went like that. The only difference being with the fuel of course it
had to go in through the hose.

KS: Were the ships in motion, or would you anchor?

CS: Yes, oh, no there were, yes, which was one of the things that the American
Navy is very good at, and at that time the Russians couldn’t do that, they had to stop. We
had it figured out where we could actually do it underway, that’s why it’s called
underway replenishment. If you get in trouble, you have what’s called emergency
breakaway and you just pull the plug on everything and you break away.

KS: Did small Vietnamese craft ever get in the way of this?

CS: No, a Russian trawler did. We didn’t see a lot of small Vietnamese craft
actually, you know, there were fishing junks and stuff but there was always a Russian
trawler on Yankee station, and she was always around the carriers of course, because
that’s where all the action is. We’d wave and they’d wave, we’d look at them through
the binoculars and they'd be looking at us through the binoculars and we’d take pictures
and they were taking picture and it was all very social.

KS: But they disrupted?

CS: Yes, they liked to get in front of you and make you change course and that
kind of stuff and at night, if you had one of the watches at night and you were on the
bridge you could watch on the radar, you could see two blips a lot of times and one
would be the trawler, and one would be a fleet tug that always maintained a collision
course with it, not with the intention of ramming him, but making it change course and
you could just see him, it was like a little movie. It was like a cat and mouse game, tug
would chase it all over the place and it would get in front of us and try to mess up our
unreps and stuff like that. Never did, we did have to change course a lot of times, a little
bit.

KS: Now would your course change with each twenty-one-day mission or would
you always go just about the same place?
CS: We’d usually go about the same place, of course Yankee Station moved
around a little bit. We’d always start in the same place in the Gulf of Thailand and come
up the coast and Yankee Station and fuel them and at that time they were flying pretty
much around the clock so we were refueling around the clock, and I just remember
everybody was just always real, real tired, you didn’t get a lot of sleep because if you
remember I said we were in watch sections so we were being, normally in a four section
watch which means that a fourth of the crew is always on watch during the day and
everything and when you’re not you’re probably out doing unreps or something and you
weren’t getting a whole lot of sack time, so it was kind of tiring and then by the time you
got back to Subic you didn’t want to sleep, you just wanted to go out and party and so it
was quite crazy. We did have one break, we got to go to Hong Kong for six days and that
was nice to get to have a little break. Ours wasn’t as tough as it could have been though.
These days the ships they’ve gotten spread so thin that I understand they’re at sea just
constantly. We’d be out, twenty-one day sounds like a long time, it seemed like a long
time then, but it’s not anything compared to like ninety or something like that.

KS: did you ever have any contact with the North Vietnamese Navy, or didn’t see
any of their ships?
CS: No, never did. The only time that we saw any thing was going in Vietnam
was we could watch air strikes occasionally, if we were close enough. We’d pull into, we
did get into the harbor at Da Nang, we took oxygen to the Sanctuary and Repose, which
were two hospital ships that were anchored in the harbor at Da Nang. That was just
another thing we carried, bottled oxygen, sometimes we’d give it to carriers, sometimes
we’d give it to the hospital ships. We had to go in and get close enough to them to put our boats out, that’s called a boat rep, boat replenishment, sent our boats over with the oxygen and while we were there, the channel was kind of shallow and we were full and so, the mud was, you could just see the mud coming up from the screws turning and we were pretty glad to get away without getting stuck but the whole time we were there, there were helicopters landing and taking off, bringing in wounded constantly, that was one of my most vivid memories was just standing there watching I thought, my gosh, because we were probably involved in that particular evolution for, I don’t know, a couple hours maybe, once we got in, and they just never stopped coming and going so something was happening. Anyway, that was just one of those things that was pretty touching, very emotional actually, to see that, you’d see them hauling the wounded in. We got out without a scratch of course, means we were glad, and a little guilt associated with it, anyway, we did what we were supposed to do. We had one major scare too, on one of the line swings, one of the cargo elevators shorted out while we were transiting to the Gulf and caused a fire in one of the ammo magazines so that was kind of exciting for a little bit. That was the only time we ever went to general quarters for real. When we weren’t sometimes we’d have swim call, we’d put a boat out with guys in it with rifles to keep the sharks away and the guys would go swimming and stuff like that, that was pretty neat, or we’d have gunnery practices, if we were going to be able to hit anything, we just had 3 inch 50s, which sounds kind of big, but they were just pop guns, they were really antiquated anti-aircraft guns is what they were and pretty much would have been worthless, but we practiced with them anyway.

KS: You never had to use them?
CS: No, we used them on a lot of barrels and that's about it, but we did a lot of practicing, that’s how that guy that I mentioned got his nose broken was at practice, But most of it was just spent with those lines over transferring stuff, that’s what we did. Market time was kind of interesting because we were used to the carriers, I mentioned you always approach a carrier, the little guys have to come up next to you and they’re out up their shot line then we’d run the lines over and stuff. We had everything from LSTs to minesweepers to Coast Guard cutters.
KS: So you could re-supply all these different kinds of ships, not just carriers.

CS: Yes, these were the ones that were running around in Market Time, coastal interdiction, stopping people, checking them out, that kind of stuff, so they were usually small ships. We had one that came along one time and blinked on its flashing light, interrogating ice cream. That’s all they wanted, so we sent them over a pallet of ice cream and they sailed off happy. It was a minesweeper, they said we don’t really need, you’re talking on flight, we don’t really need anything, we need ice cream. So we did that. We always carried a lot of ice cream, it was a big deal because it was always so hot, I always used to wonder how the water stayed there if it was so hot.

KS: Speaking of hot, you mentioned a typhoon, how much did weather play a part in your missions or did it disrupt your missions, or did you have to change your tactics because of the weather?

CS: Occasionally, if there was a, I don’t remember any big changes, but of course you always kept an eye on it, and I’m sure our schedule changed some because of that, probably unbeknownst to most of us. That would be handled at the squadron level or something; they’d divert us for this way or that way. That just happened to be when we were steaming back by ourselves and we just ran into it.

KS: Did you ever train any South Vietnamese Navy personnel?

CS: Yes, we did. As a matter of fact we did. We had four Vietnamese officers that were on board for a while, probably, they were probably with us a month, they ate with us.

KS: What specifically were you training them to do, do you remember?

CS: We were just training them in ship handling and some of our tactics and the whole replenishment process, how we got supplies from here to there and that kind of thing.

KS: Was language ever a problem with that?

CS: They spoke English, not very well. We didn’t have anybody on the crew that spoke Vietnamese so it did at times become a problem. Usually their English was not all that great, but it was good enough to get by. I just remember they were real small guys, but they seemed to have a good time with us, I guess.
KS: Was that standard practice at this time to train them to start to take over their
own?
CS: Yes, I think almost all the ships that were operating out there had them on, at
one time or the other, but I remember we had four.
KS: This is Kim Sawyer continuing the interview with Charlie Stallings. It is
April 12th, 2001 at 1:05 in the afternoon. We are in the Special Collections library at
Texas Tech. And Mr. Stallings you wanted to start with the moon landing.
CS: The moon landing was one day we were off the coast. We were doing
Operation Market Time so we were just off the coast and we were listening to the news
of the moon landing on the ship’s PA system and it was really kind of a surreal moment
because I was standing on the bridge and we were watching an air strike and we were
watching, I guess it was like one world was being blown up and the other one we were
just landing on. It was kind of interesting; I don’t know it just struck me odd that we
were landing on the moon at the same time we were blowing up acres of jungle. It was
kind of interesting watching it go on.
KS: This was July ’69.
CS: Yes, it was July. That was an interesting summer actually because we were
overseas and we were hearing news about not only the moon landing but the day that
Teddy Kennedy ran off the bridge and the Tate, LaBianca murders happened, so it was
kind of a lot of news we were reading about in Stars and Stripes and stuff. It was kind of
interesting too because when we came back everybody was wearing bell-bottom jeans
and when we left we hadn’t seen them yet so that was interesting too. Day to day it was
kind of, they all kind of ran together, but when you were on the line, the day started at
different times depending on what your watch section was, because as I mentioned earlier
we were normally in four sections which meant that a fourth of the crew was on all the
time, which meant a fourth of the crew was always actively involved in actually
operating the ship. The Navy’s unique, you actually have two jobs, you have your
professional job, in my case was the supply, so it might be gunnery, it might be
operations, it might the ships administration officer. In the case of the ship’s
administration officer taking care of all the crew’s service records and then when his turn
comes to watch, he’s actually up running the ship running the ship and so they needed an
OD, officer of the deck which means he's actually in charge in the captain’s absence, so you switch form something relatively mundane to something really not so mundane, running the ship so you have to be ready, to switch gears from one thing to the other, so you do that job, your normal working hours, at sea there really aren’t any, you just work from whenever to whenever, regularly you’d usually go about six in the morning and you’d have breakfast and we’d, generally have quarters, but sometimes we’d actually have them outside on the quarterdeck where the crew would assemble, and we’d get briefed for the days work. Or you have them on station and these are just things where you take muster to make sure no one’s fallen overboard during the night, and you could actually commence the day’s work, which just depending on what you were doing, in our case, in supply, we might be ordering things, we might be taking inventories, just depended, then you go on watch and you’d be there for four hours, but the work didn’t stop, you still had to come back and do your job, so even if that meant that you had to get up at midnight, at midwatch, your watches normally ran from midnight to four, four to eight, eight to twelve, twelve to four in the afternoon, that was the one we called a dog on the wing, four at night was normally called the dog watch because it broke into two sections, cleaning and chow and its only two hours from four to six then six to eight. When you hear the terms bells, eight bells that means the watch is changing.

KS: How often did your turn come up to go on watch?

CS: Every day. We would have twelve hours off, four on so during those twelve hours that you were off with that would be when you eat, sleep and work your normal day, so it got kind of tiring and if we were actually actively involved in replenishment, then all that went out the window and you had your replenishment detail which means, sometimes I could last up to ten hours so you’d be actually doing that because your evolution for about ten hours, usually though that was involved more directly with what you were doing. In our case we were out on the deck making sure the cargo was actually on the pallets like it ought to be, or the fuel lines were actually hooked up like they ought to be and making sure we were transferring the right amount, that kind of stuff. The unreps were really pretty intense, just lots and lots of activity, really not much time to think about anything, except just trying to get it all done. It was kind of, looking back on it, it was kind of exciting, back then it was kind of really, really tiring. That’s what I
remember was just being tired all the time. We were often concerned about the crew, says we were really concerned about the crew because you operate a lot of machinery, as well as your ship and you don’t like to do that in a fog.

KS: Were there any accidents due to people being tired?

CS: None really severe. We had guys that would occasionally stumble or something. Fortunately, we didn’t have anybody, usually you worry about someone falling overboard or something like that. We never had that happen so we were really lucky, but you know we were also well trained so, most of the guys knew better than to stand where they could get, like the pallet might swing into them from the line overhead and knock the overboard or something like that. Now the ships alongside we did have, one of the sailors fell off of a carrier one time when we were, he was never found, he was just lost at sea. He went over the side and we didn’t know it. They didn’t actually know it until they took muster. You don’t always see it.

KS: They would just check each morning to see?

CS: Right, that’s what the muster was for was to make sure no one fell overboard during the night, now the first thing to do when you see somebody fall overboard is they say that someone was overboard, announce it so everybody knows to run to assemble them so they can check heads to see who it is.

KS: What’s the process for trying to find someone that’s overboard?

CS: Well, if you see them go over, the first thing you do, is whoever’s conning the ship immediately gives the order, like if they fall on the right side, you say right full rudder and that turns the ship towards him. You think that might be backwards what you want to do, because you might run over him, what you’re really trying to so is turn it hard and kick the stern away from him, so kick the screws away from them so they don’t get sucked into the screws. You come around and you do what’s called a Williamson turn, you go sixty degrees and you reach sixty degrees off the base course, you shift to rudder, which means you kick it back hard the other way, which brings you right back down and you settle back on the base course. The reciprocal of your base course is so theoretically you’re coming back exactly the way you were going, and if everything works right you ought to run over him, except you don’t want to do that of course, but bring you right
back to him, so then you either pick him up off the side or you put a boat out and pick
them up.

KS: Did people wear lifejackets when they were working on certain things?
CS: Yes, we wore a life jacket when you were on the detail where you were out
on the weather deck you always had on a lifejackets, and a hard hat for some things. We
didn’t let them out there without that. It was, we were pretty much, safety conscious and
you get worried about it on watch too, you’ve got to always be aware if there's other
ships around, especially on Yankee Station because the carriers were so big and the
destroyer and the USS Evans the summer we were there was run over by an Australian
aircraft carrier, the Melbourne, and she turned to come back and get the wind to launch
aircraft and the Evans turned wrong so it presented itself broadside to the Melbourne who
ran right through the middle of her, cut in half and the bow sank and they lost, seems like
it was 54 crewmen killed, the captain was asleep at the time because it happened at night.
He woke up in the water; it tore right through and knocked him out of his bunk into the
water.

KS: Did procedures change because of this accident?
CS: No, they had a court martial though and I think the captain was court
martialed and the officer of the deck was court martialed, and this all happen in Subic
Bay. That’s standard procedure too, you have an accident like that, you know you are
going to have a court martial because it’s ultimately the captain’s fault, even though he
was asleep. We saw the remains of the ship, the stern they towed it back to Subic Bay
and it was sitting there the next time we came in and we saw it. It was pretty awesome to
see something cut in two like that.

KS: No close calls on the Ashtabula?
CS: Oh yes! We had them more than once. We had a destroyer come long one
side once, actually we all ran to the other side of the bridge because she came in so close
that we lost sight of her because we were so tall and we were braced for a collision,
missed us about, oh gosh, probably scraped paint. She’d go back out and just a real
nervous voice came over the radio, “Sorry about that, I’ll come around and try that again”

KS: Did the second time work better?
CS: Yes, the second time he hit it just right. You’re supposed to take station maybe fifty or a hundred feet away or yards, and it was a lot better the second time he did it. Then one night we were operating in, I don’t remember which carrier is was, I guess it was the Kearsage because that was one I remember was there a lot, but I was on watch and I left the bridge and we had a skunk aboard, an unidentified surface object is a skunk, unidentified air contact’s a bogey, so anyway we had this skunk, but we knew what it was, so we changed the skunk to the Kearsage, we were watching to make sure that we didn’t get in its way, so when I left the bridge, I was relieved, left the bridge, four in the morning it was, I left the bridge, seems like, something like ten thousand yards and opening, I wasn’t worried about it, we’ve got a guy that’s plotting all these things, so try to keep a course set, well its easy to get in them backwards and do the reciprocal, so this poor little kid that was doing the board dead he go the reciprocal of a course and so we turned and she turned to launch aircraft again, this always usually happens when they turned to launce a craft because they have to get into the wind. I came back down and the next morning, I woke up, and I didn’t know any of this has happened and they said, “oh, we nearly got run over.” They said it was close enough to spit on. They had to call the old man to the bridge, they called him up and, he came up, he said it was kind of strange, he was standing there in his underwear because he was just out of the rack and it was a real emergency and the captain of the carrier was screaming at him various obscenities over the radio about stay out of the way and that kind of stuff. But that could have been a really big disaster because we were probably big enough to have sunk it, if it would have hit us it could have sunk both of us so. Fortunately I slept through that, some things are just better to sleep through, but anyway that’s kind of the way the day went, you just got up and you did your thing and did your work, stood your watch and came back and did some more work and occasionally you have enough time to watch a movie.

KS: So you had a movie theatre on board?

CS: No, we didn’t have that, as a matter of fact if you didn’t like what the crew watching on the mess decks and the chief petty officers watching in their quarters and the officers would watch it in the boardroom, so we’d watch it in the boardroom which is where the officers eat and [?] around it, so we watch it there, and even there if you didn't want to watch what was being shown in the boardroom, just get an extra projector and
take it in your stateroom and watch it. As a matter of fact, I saw the Graduate hanging on
a sheet, it was shown on a sheet hanging from my upper bunk with two of my buddies,
but nobody else wanted to watch it, they were watching John Wayne or something, we
wanted to see the Graduate so we watched it one night in my room on a bed sheet.

KS: Did you have a library onboard?

CS: More or less. It wasn’t used very much because most of the guys brought
their own stuff but we had a really good pornographic library in the radio shack, radio
men for some reason always have that, but we did really have a legitimate one that some
of the guys would take turns reading, but usually everybody had their own stuff, usually
didn’t have much time. I read a lot, gosh I can’t remember, I read two or three James
Michener novels because they were really long and that kept me going pretty good, The
Source was one of them. I can’t remember the other ones, but anyway I read a whole
bunch of little stuff.

KS: You mentioned earlier the Stars and Stripes, was that your primary resource
for the news?

CS: Yes, we lived for that because every time we’d get the mail, which usually
came in by helicopter, that was another thing, our helicopter pad was on the [?] as
opposed to the fantail, so if its on the fantail you don’t worry about it so much because
the helicopter, usually one could land, on ours it couldn’t because it was on the front part,
also on the fantail if something went wrong, and the helicopter crashed, normally it
would be behind you, if it crashed on us it would come back into the bridge, so we were
always really, kind of antsy when we’d have a vert. rep, a vertical replenishment.. That’s
usually how I’d get it; they’d drop our mail and stuff like that?

KS: How often?

CS: We usually got mail just about every day, it was really good because we
were along side a ship every day and usually the carriers, of course they had the flights
coming in all the time from somewhere, so we’d usually get it from them, highline it over
to us, and mail just went everywhere. It tracked you down, it was kind of interesting, it
was really amazing how fast it got to us, usually seemed like just a matter of four or five
days.

KS: Mail from the States?
CS: Yes, I was really amazed at how fast it got there; they took really good care of it. I understand in Desert Storm, they couldn’t seem to do that. The guys in that outfit couldn’t seem to get their mail straight. They got it after the war was over, six months later, you know.

KS: How often did you correspond with people at home, your family and friends?

CS: Every day, I was engaged so I wrote my fiancée every day and I wrote my mom and dad just about once a week or something and I got mail back all the time it seemed. That made it pretty good. But its amazing how much you live for a letter, pretty much the thing. The *Stars and Stripes* we’d get that and we’d just pass that thing around and read all about it. That’s how we found out about all the stuff going on in the States, the Tay Long murders and that kind of stuff, Teddy Kennedy and the bridge and sports. Yes, that was also the summer that the Cubs blew like a ten game lead with just a few innings left and the Mets won the World Series that year, 1969. That’s another here we missed.

KS: A lot happened that year. I was just curious, I think this might have been before you arrived in Vietnam, what about following politics, what was your opinion of Johnson and what about his decision not to run for re-election, do you remember what you were feeling at the time?

CS: Well, actually I felt kind of, honestly I felt relieved that he wasn’t going to run again and I think that was kind of common among most of the guys because that happened while I was at OCS. I think most of the guys kind of felt a relief that he wasn’t going to run again because they felt like that meant the war would probably be over, big joke, and I voted for Nixon that year. That was my first presidential election, voted absentee and we thought that was really great because and again, I’m talking about the majority of people, we thought it was really great because we thought Nixon would get in and end it real quick, and da, da, da, da, da, we’d get out and we’d all be home and talk about it to our grandkids when in fact it went on for what another five years or so, that’s kind of what we thought about that. We really didn’t understand or at least I didn’t, we didn’t understand all the different attitudes about it. I guess mine was kind of simplistic, I just felt like it was something we were in and we just had to be there, I
happened to be on the ship because that’s what the Navy told me I was going to do. I had 
lunch, the day after our last interview I had lunch with my best friend from high school.
He was a Marine Lieutenant the same time I was over there, he was in Da Nang. He 
went over expecting to be a combat hero and he ended up running the Armed Forces 
police in Da Nang. He said, “I felt kind of bad for a while, living in a hotel in Da Nang, 
just keeping street side,” but he said “actually often I thought about it, that’s what the 
Marines told me to do, so that’s what I did and I didn't really feel heroic about any of 
that, but that’s what they told me to do.” He said I felt pretty lucky that I was alive, 
because a lot of people he went to training with didn’t survive I don’t know. That was 
also, a lot of other stuff happened that year, Bobby Kennedy was murdered, Martin 
Luther King was murdered, it was a big year.

KS: Did you feel that the news that you received while you were there was, did 
you feel you got the whole story in Vietnam?

CS: No, probably not. So much of our stuff came from military sources that I’m 
sure it was biased. Of course I didn’t really think it was because that’s the way I was 
thinking too, but I’m sure it was from looking back on it that, it was slanted that way. I 
mentioned movies earlier, we were allowed to see MASH, but I know that I can’t 
remember if it was Army or Air Force banned it, they wouldn’t let it be shown, but we 
got to see it.

KS: What was your opinion of MASH at the time?

CS: Oh, I liked it. I thought it was great, but evidently a lot of people didn’t 
think, because it was kind of military, I guess. That was just one of the things, they did 
exercise some censorship I suppose, kind of like a Good Morning, Vietnam, the kind of 
music you listen to and stuff.

KS: What about Armed Forces radio?

CS: Yes, we listened. The main thing I remember about Armed Forces radio was 
Chicken Man; Chicken Man was one the wildest. It was kind of funny.

KS: Some more general questions, was racial tension a real problem on board, 
you hear stories?

CS: Racial tension, that’s a good question. You hear a lot of stories about that, 
and personally I grew up and graduated from a segregated high school and not because I
thought that was right or wrong, or anything else, I never thought about it, it just was, okay. It wasn’t the kind of thing anybody sat around and dwelled on or anything, it just, my high school I guess didn’t integrate until probably, I graduated in ’63, it was probably in ’66 or 7 or 8 or something I guess, I don’t really know. So I never had really been around anybody but white guys, for that matter I never had really been around anything but Protestant white guys, okay, all of a sudden I was in here with Jews and Catholics and black people and Asians and everything and I’m going, it was kind of an experience and I don’t really remember thinking any of that was really odd, I just thought well these guys are okay and I hadn’t been around for that matter I hadn’t been around yankees that much either, but we all got along pretty well. I think you get thrown into this situation and when we finally were really moving too fast to really have much to think about at OCS but when we finally got to our ship, when we got on our ship, I don’t know what percentage of the crew was minority, I really don’t. But there was absolutely none that I can remember while we were deployed, everybody pretty much was always so busy pulling together and stuff and you saw guys of different races, going on the beach together and stuff and I guess its easy to say because we didn’t have any black officers either until probably halfway through the cruise when a fellow named John Robinson came in here and he turned out to be one of my best buddies in the Navy. He was a graduate of Brown University; I thought, “Gee whiz, somebody from the Ivy League is actually talking to me that’s nice.” He was a really good guy. But there really wasn’t any. We got back to the States and for some reason, when we got back to the States, there got to be some. It was another of those deals where we, I guess we try to fix things, I don’t know. The captain, bless is heart, he didn’t really have the smoothest delivery I guess, but they wanted to, of course everybody had heard about the racial tension and things, even though we hadn’t really had the problems whatsoever, and I mean really, whatsoever. I really honest-to-God can’t think of any time that there was ever a problem, but on the other hand everybody was just a sailor and hey, you know, this is what we do, but they decided that all the black sailors needed to be spoken to, so the old man said, “I want to see all the black sailors” and we all, okay, we’re trying to remember, you know is Johns black or white, because you, so you start thinking about your differences or something. Anyway, he talked to them and one of them came out and he said “man I
don’t have any idea what he just told us but it was the strangest thing. We’re not
supposed to get out and spend our reenlistment bonuses on Cadillac’s, stuff like that.”
Well, from that moment on it just immediately polarized everything. First of all, all the
black guys were mad because the old man was targeting the black guys, the black guys
were mad because they’d been so patronized about the big black father and of all things
he told them to take care of their money and not go out and blow it like they were used to
doing, and things like Cadillac’s and stuff.

KS: And that was back in the States?

CS: Yes, it was back in the States, and about the same time they came out and
they more or less, they loosened the uniform regulations where you could have afros, but
you couldn’t have it over your ears, so if you were a black guy you could wear your Afro,
but if you’re white you couldn’t have it over you ears.

KS: Was that a problem between?

CS: It got to be, yes, that was a problem more than once, when the guys, “how
come I can’t wear my hair?” But that was a big, you can’t imagine how a big deal the hair
thing was, because all the civilians at that time, had real long hair and all the kids on the
ship wanted to wear theirs that way. It was really kind of a bone of contention, but
anyway other than that, and then about that time I got out so, I don’t know what
happened after that, but it that was my time there that it got to be a problem. It was just
kind of strange that we just decided to go ahead and recognize there really was a
difference and talk about it and no one really ever thought about it. We were just kind of
all there.

KS: What about, you also hear stories about soldiers, I’m not so sure about the
Navy, but excessive drug use or alcohol use?

CS: Well, to my knowledge there was no drug use on my ship. Now, if there
was, and I’m sure that some of them smoked pot, but I don’t know that. I can’t say that
for sure, however I can tell you that I had more than my share of drunks to have to deal
with including myself I might add because officers weren’t immune from that. But one
of the other things you’ve got to draw on, coming into port, everyone knows that you
draw your ship would draw shore patrol duty, so that means you had to like form a little
patrol, go around and make sure everyone was getting on the right boat and all that stuff,
so they got pretty wild and crazy. It was kind of a point of pride at that time to maybe to, especially you could do all this drinking and still be under way and all that stuff, before we got a little more educated about that kind of stuff, I’m really amazed that we didn’t have guys miss movement more that they did, but everyone seemed to always get back aboard, in bad shape, but they’d get back aboard and we’d get underway the next day. My ship being so big, we usually got to carry, we carried the guys that didn’t make it on their ship, we’d carry them back out to their ship, where they’d be. . . Drug use, I don’t know, I just don’t know whether there was that much or not. If it was, it was going on on shore.

KS: Last time you mentioned R & R; did you go to Hong Kong?
CS: Yes.
KS: How long was that trip and do you recall any?
CS: Yes, well actually we pulled in there twice, three days each time.
KS: Your whole ship pulled in?
CS: Yes, and so that meant that two-thirds of us got to go at one time, out of that three you’d get two, that’d eventually go in and mess around and we had a good time.

We didn’t do anything particularly spectacular we just went and stayed at the Hong Kong Hilton and ate well, so it was pretty nice. I had short patrol there too, in Hong Kong. I lucked out because I got the lobby of the Hilton Hotel, just kind of hung around the lobby, we might go to a little white shore patrol thing.

KS: Did you ever have any serious problems?
CS: No, I didn’t but some of the guys did. They’d have to go out and walk some of the bad areas of town. They had to bring guys in occasionally; usually the guys know they’re going to get in really big trouble if the next week. That didn’t stop some of them.

KS: Is there anything else about your time at the Ashtabula that comes to mind that we didn’t talk about?
CS: No, not there. We pretty much covered the Vietnam thing, pretty much, it was like I say just a steady routine of refueling, going back out, running the coast, back out the entry station, re-fuel the carriers, back to Subic, load up again, go back and do it. We did that, probably seven or eight times I guess, while I was there. It was, right at twenty-one days sometimes a day less, sometimes more. I guess the longest time was
twenty-six days and we got called up actually, we got called away early from our
scheduled stay there, oh it must have been early December of ‘69 we were called away
from the line and we went to Korea to the Sea of Japan, the Koreans had shot down a
Navy surveillance aircraft, I don’t know, it might have been Air Force, anyway it was one
of the big Constellations with the huge radar dome on it, they shot down one of those.
So, we were having tensions in the area so they sent us up there to take care of the task
force that was operating in the Sea of Japan so we spent probably, I don’t know, I guess
we were there about three weeks, maybe not, so we got to go to Sasebo, Japan then, and
operate out of there.

KS: Any particular incidents, you recall?

CS: No, it was really kind of strange because we were equipped to be in Vietnam
where it was so hot and we went to the Sea of Japan and it was so cold and most of the
guys didn’t really have any really cold weather stuff with them. Fortunately I did, I did
have a toboggan that I wore. It was kind of nice, but most guys were just really frosty but
of course they’d issue you a foul weather jacket so it wasn’t that bad, nobody had like
long underwear and stuff. But it was a radical difference between what we were used to
and all of a sudden being pulled into that kind of cold weather.

KS: Did you have any people get ill from the weather change?

CS: No, not really, we had guys with colds. I had a cold and stuff like that but
nobody, we didn’t really have anybody get seriously ill the whole time we were gone,
fortunately.

KS: And after your time in the Sea of Japan, where did you go, did you go back
to Vietnam?

CS: No, we came home, we came home straight from there.

KS: So this was 1970?

CS: We left there right before Christmas in ’69.

KS: And what about when you came back to the United States, how were you
treated? Did you encounter any anti-war demonstrations or any thing of that nature?

CS: No, I didn’t because we got back and we pulled back into home port and we
were at Long Beach, and I flew in to get married and we had a band meet at the dock and
all that stuff and the next morning I was gone, on out to the airport. I flew home. It was
kind of interesting when I got home; it was kind of like a big yawn of indifference. “What
have you been doing?” “Oh, nothing.” So no one was really seriously impressed with
what I’d been doing for the last several months, or for that matter what any of the other
guys were either.

KS: Did people ask you questions about what you did?
CS: No, they didn’t. It was mostly, when are you going to get out and get a real
job. It was kind of disappointing, not that I expected a brass band, but I did expect to be
treated with a little more appreciation, I guess and I think that’s probably true a lot. There
just didn’t appear to be any appreciation for what anybody had done. It was just like,
“Gee, poor slob you were just one of the unlucky ones that got called.” I don’t guess I’m
bitter about that, I’m just kind of, disappointed I guess more than anything. There were
demonstrations, I saw one after I came home and got married, I went back to California
and deployed again, although this time all I did was transit over, my relief was aboard,
this was summer of ’70 and my relief was aboard so he rode across with me, I rode with
him, to get him up to speed so that I could be relieved, and as soon as I got to the
Philippines, the next morning I got off, flew back to the States, flew into Travis Air Force
Base, there was a demonstration going on at the gates when I left to go into San
Francisco, to Treasure Island where I was out-processed.

KS: Could you describe that demonstration?
CS: It wasn’t anything violent; it was just a bunch of people with signs. I didn’t
even hear them because, I was in a Cab and I had the windows up and they were flashing
signs, “No more war and yada yada yada.”

KS: How do you feel about your participation, your service in the Vietnam War?
CS: Well, I would certainly hate to have to go through it again, and I would
really hate for any child of mine, well I don’t have any but I would hate for any child of
mine to have to go through a situation like that. But I have no regrets and I’m glad I got
through it, I’m glad I had the experience, so I don’t regret that. I learned so much from
being in the Navy; I don’t think the Vietnam thing really shaped me as much the Navy. It
was just really, it was a, and I don’t want to sound really corny or hokey about any of
this, but it was really a privilege to serve with some of those people, they were just so top
notch. I don’t think that a lot of people realized that the absolute cream of the crop that
was like in some of the Officer Corps. We had people with Harvard MBAs and Stanford
law degrees and Texas Tech Degrees, seriously it was just a really a rare group, and even
the enlisted guys were college people. Some of them were graduates, some of them were
right in the middle and were doing their reserve duty and so it was just an outstanding
group of folks. By and large to get to deal with and I look back on that with a lot of
fondness. I really do and getting to be responsible for them. I wasn’t really sorry to get
out. I sure did, it took me a long time, but several years, but I learned to really appreciate
the experience I’ve had. I wish, when you’re young and stupid you don’t realize that
you’re having the adventure of your lifetime, I’ve read that all these things that shape like
World War II veterans and stuff, that was the defining moment of your lives and nothing
else has ever come close and there’s really a lot of truth to that. I guess there’s nothing
like, I don’t know maybe your senses are heightened when you’re in a war or whatever
and I can’t imagine what it must have been like to be shot at every day, that must have
been really something. Yes, I have some really bad memories about it, but as far as being
in the service, I just, I have fond memories of that and getting to do that, of coming out of
it too.

KS: What about the United States involvement in the war, how have your
feelings changed with what you thought then as opposed to now?

CS: Well, now I would be really, I mean I don’t ever see us getting into
something like that again. I mean, that was almost ridiculous, I mean the whole thing
that something could take ten years and cost that many lives for nothing basically and so I
just wanted to see if we ever have to get into something, that’s why I get concerned about
things like Bosnia and Kosovo and Central America and wherever, if we’re going to do
something like that then let’s go ahead and decide what we’re going to do before we ever
get into it and I think that’s probably what shaped Colin Powell and Norman
Schwarzkopf’s tactics in Desert Storm. They were both Vietnam Veterans and they
wanted a clear cut objective and so they did and we did it and got out and unfortunately
they’re still there but at least they fulfilled their mission as assigned and I don’t think we
ever really knew what it was in Vietnam. I think it just kind of took on a life of its own,
at least it appeared to me it did.
KS: After you came back, how close did you follow developments in Vietnam, the United States pulled out and then later the fall of Saigon?

CS: Not very close at all. I just really didn’t want to, because I just felt like it was folly, but I did follow the news about the fall of Saigon quite a bit, just out of some perverse interest in knowing that finally it was confirmed that we’d done all this for absolutely nothing and that was kind of sad, as a matter of fact it was real sad, I was pretty depressed over that deal so that just ended horribly. That wasn’t a good feeling at all.

KS: Now are you involved in any Veteran’s Organizations or do you have contact with any of your crewmates?

CS: No, I lost touch with most all the crewmates, we kept in touch for a while, but it’s like a lot of things, I still keep up with all my reserve buddies though, none of which I was on active duty with.

KS: You were in the reserve for thirty years?

CS: Thirty years, yes.

KS: Could you briefly just talk a little bit about what than entailed?

CS: Oh, yes I was in several different kinds of units and actually you didn’t see Vietnam service ribbons very often at a reserve center. We talked about that, a lot of the guys that were in during Vietnam just didn't want to mess with it at all, ever, but there were a few and I enjoyed it. It was fun because you got away for two weeks every year or more and go somewhere different. I got to go to the Pentagon and I got to go to San Francisco and I got to go to Japan, back to the Philippines and do some stuff, almost got called up for Desert Storm as a matter of fact, but just missed it. I put my name in the hopper if the needed anybody to let me know, I guess they didn’t any over-the-hill captains at the time so they didn’t call me up, but I did go to the Philippines during the operation right at the end of it and was involved in the rally with convoys back in Murr, routed cargo back from Saudi Arabia and we had a lot of gear in there we had to get back and of course it was all being done with military CDUC command so that’s that I was assigned to at the time, so we were helping to, they were calling Joe’s into help do that. That was kind of interesting, see what ship had what and who had room to put something else on them, bring them back. I was in a contract unit that took care of government
contracts, that was kind of bring but at least I got to go to Washington DC. By then I was senior enough that you weren’t going to do anything real exciting, but at least you got to go places but it was fun.

KS: When did you retire, what year?

CS: It must have been ’98, I guess ’98. I got out in May of ’98. I gave thirty years of commissioned service, that’s right. It was May of ‘98; I was commissioned in May of ’68 and got out in May of ’98. Yes, that’s thirty years. They give you thirty years as a captain.

KS: Is there anything else that you’d like to add?

CS: No, I guess that’s about it. It was a pretty good experience; I enjoyed talking about it, it was kind of cathartic.

KS: Well this concludes our interview with Charlie Stallings, thank you.