

Interviewee: Shaye Goodwin
Interviewee: Jim Crout
05/28
Oral History Interview Transcript

S: Alrighty, I'm sitting here with Jim Crout. Would you mind telling me a little bit about yourself, like your age and things like that?

Jim: Okay, at the present time, I am 79 years old. I was born in Mississippi in a little swamp area called Talebog swamp, right in the heart of Scott County.

S: What was your branch of service?

Jim: Well I actually served 8 years in the army and 22 years in the Navy.

S: What made you want to go from army to navy?

Jim: upward mobility. I considered the navy having better schools than the army. Plus, the army was more of a meritorious promotion type-stuff and the navy was competitive exams.

S: What year did you go to the navy?

Jim: 1965.

S: What years did you serve in Vietnam?

Jim: I served in 1966, 1967, and 1968.

S: Where were you stationed at when you were in Vietnam?

Jim: Well the first time I was in a little town called Van Long, that's in the heart of the Delta.

S: And what about the second time?

Jim: I was on a river assault group and it was home-based in a place called Dong Tam which was a cooperative between the air force, army, marines, and navy.

S: Do you remember your first days in Vietnam? Touching down and things like that?

Jim: Well we flew in from--we left San Francisco and flew in to Saigon to the air force base and then they farmed us out to different areas from Saigon.

S: And you went to Van Long?

Jim: Yeah that was the first tour there. It was the home of the 123rd rag group. A Vietnamese river assault group.

S: What was it like touching down in a completely different country like Vietnam?

Jim: Well I wasn't absolutely 100% new to going into different countries because I had been on ships and I had been in the army which I put tours in Germany. Vietnam was a tropical thing. It was all tropical. it was never really cold. Van Long was a delta, more of like an equator-type place where it was a constant temperature most of the time. So it wasn't really ever really, super-hot and it was never cold.

S: What was your most memorable experience in Van Long?

Jim: Putting up mine nets. *laughs*

S: What about in Dong Tam?

Jim: Excursions up canals in different rivers and going to different places in the assault boats that we – the common name for the units that we were with were called the Riverine Divisions.

S: What was your job assignment in both places?

Jim: In Van Long we were more in support than anything else. We supported the Vietnamese navy in Van Long. There to help them and advise them. Assist them in their endeavors. And then in the American river assault group, we participated directly into river assault, canal assaults, and stuff like that.

S: Tell me some stories..

(he had previously told me he had thought of some he wanted to share)

Jim: A couple really jumps into your mind when you're talking about stories, ya know light-hearted stories. When you first go to Vietnam, everybody has a snake story. I mean everybody. Everybody tells you about snakes. And I think their ultimate goal is to insert a certain amount of fear and it really worked for me. But we were out—this was the first time I was there—we were out in the river in a craft called “mike boats”. We had let the ramp down and the hospital personnel was navy core men and army medics both combined. We were right in the middle of the river, and we were treating sick people that came to the boats and they would pull their little sampans or whatever alongside our mike boats and they would get on ours and the core men and medical people were giving them shots and treating things like – well, some wounded, mostly bad colds and stuff like that, you know. For kids mostly. Well I was standing on a ramp as kind of a security guard and I had a 12-gauge shotgun with me, and this snake crawled up on the ramp and well I jumped down and walked over to it and kicked it back into the water. Well the little sucker didn't take to that. He crawled up on the ramp again and I kicked him again and then, by George, he come back and crawled up on the ramp a third time and I blew him away with a shotgun. Of course, that scared everybody, and I went over to the doctor and said, “I'm sorry I

frightened everybody,” and he said, “well they weren’t really frightened of you, they were scared of the snake. But we was all wondering why you didn’t do that the first time.”

S: What kind of snake was it?

Jim: I’m not too sure. They were poisonous everybody thinks. They call them three steps. They bite you and you take three steps and it kills you. Like I said, everybody had a snake story and they would just do that to, I think to instill fear and make you stay away from them, is what they really do that for. Another story is, this was in Dong Tam and our favorite past-time when we weren’t doing things was killing rats. And what I was doing—what most everybody was doing—we would unload our shotgun shells and put rock salt in the shotgun shells and (they had some huge rats in Vietnam) and when rats would come on your boat you would shoot them with the rock salt and throw them in the river. Well I ran out of rock salt, so I said, “Man I’m out of rock salt, what am I gonna do?” So, I saw a thing of table salt and I took my shotgun shell apart and put that table salt in there and I said, “well this do just as good.” And I shot a rat and there was a big hole in my boat about that big around *James puts his hands in a circle about an inch and a half-two inches wide*. Had a heck of a time explaining to the maintenance officer why I got a big hole in my boat from the inside out.

S: How does rock salt help shooting rats?

Jim: Well, rock salt is crystal. It’s like pellets more than anything else and when you put it in there and it doesn’t dissolve. Well table salt, when it gets damp it’ll clump together and make—instead of pebbles, I had just a big slug that came out of there.

S: Were you constantly staying on a boat when you were in Vietnam?

Jim: yes, the second tour there. We had a home base on the first tour. But the second tour, we lived on our boats. They had mother ships that we tied alongside when we wasn’t active, but I seldom went on the mothership. I stayed on my boat.

S: How big were the boats that you stayed on?

Jim: Mine was a 50ft assault craft. We called it an alpha boat. It was heavily armed and low to the water. It didn’t provide too much for target, but it was more of a target than you really want, but not too much of a target. I’ll show you a picture of one.

We stop audio and Jim shows me a picture of his alpha boat, which is named Jewell after his wife of 50 years

S: What was your rank when you were in Vietnam?

Jim: I was a second class boatmate.

S: Where is that at on the rank?

Jim: That's an E5. Well, I was a 2nd class, I was a 1st class. The very first time I went over there I was a 3rd class.

S: Did you ever receive any medals or awards?

Jim: Yeah

S: What kind?

Jim: Just things they give out for doing things. *laughs*

S: Did you stay in touch with family while you were over there?

Jim: By mail. That was pre-cell phone and internet days, ya know.

S: How often did you mail out letters, or could you mail out letters?

Jim: As opposed to the marines, we did have a pretty good mail service. It came in at least once a week. The army and marines sometimes would go weeks and months without any kind of contact with mail service.

S: What was the food like?

Jim: Well, I kinda got to liking it. They put a sauce called nuoc mam on almost everything that they ate and when you first use it, it's really, really salty. But you develop a taste—or at least I did—a lot of people didn't develop a taste for it. But it was a lot of rice, ya know. Rice, whereas American staple mostly is potatoes, theirs is mostly rice. Which they can't live without rice. I don't know if you've ever seen a movie called 'Never so Few' with Frank Sinatra, but it was in there that it was reinforced the fact that if you grew up eating rice, your body system would not develop to any other kind of staple. You had to have rice. The one thing about the food is the nuoc mam and I developed a taste for it. The way they make nuoc mam is these stone vats. They would put screen wires on the vats, and they would put a layer of fish, a layer of salt, and a layer of spices, layer of fish, layer of salt, layer of spices, for about six layers of that. Of each thing and then they would put these huge cement slabs on top of that and they would just go away and let it rot in the juice from all that was strained through down into the vat and that's nuoc mam.

S: Sounds good

Jim: Well yeah after a while it did taste good. It tastes a lot better than it sounds like its going to be when they're making it. The smell is what gets you. While its making of course it's just rotting fish, ya know, so the smell is what gets you.

S: How often did you eat it?

Jim: Pretty near on everything I ate. Had the salt on it and it kept you pretty much going into heat.

S: How often did you eat rice over there? Every day?

Jim Every day. *laughs*

S: Are you sick of rice now?

Jim: No, I actually like rice.

S: Rice is delicious.

Jim: Rice and fish. I'm one of the few people that mix sardines and rice together and eat it.

S: Sardines are good too though.

Jim: Yeah.

S: Besides killing a bunch of rats, what was some other stuff you guys did to entertain yourselves?

Jim: Uhhhh.. Well, I dunno too much about entertainment. We listened to radio Saigon to listen to music. I always liked to listen to music, so that was pretty much what I did. When we wasn't working, I was always laying around listening to music somewhere. Played poker. Played a lotta cards. *laughs* Pinochle was a favorite game back in those days.

S: What is that?

Jim: It's a card game. Pinochle. Stop and I'll show you what Pinochle is.

we stop audio and try to look up the rules for pinochle, but we couldn't get YouTube to load and decided we'd try again after the interview

S: So what, I guess, a regular day for you like when you were stationed in Vietnam? What would you do from the time that you got up to the time that you went to sleep?

Jim: Well, I dunno. Mostly, keep your equipment clean. Mostly, secure your guard duty, we called it. Working with the Vietnamese, helping them do things.

S: Like what?

Jim: Like tearing down weapons and cleaning them and putting them back together. Taking care of the area surrounding where you were stationed. Constantly making sure there was no weaknesses. Cleaning your own weapons, making sure they were top notch. Bettering the environment that you were living in, like if you were in a compound you would make sure the sandbags were okay, constantly stacked. Just different things to tend to. We had our own tour housekeeping duties which if—well I always was a petty officer in Vietnam or NCO, and there

was a private or seaman—so I never really had to pull mess duty, but I had my turn at being in charge of people that did mess duty and did housekeeping and stuff. Ya know like three days out of the month it was your job to do that, so. It was just journal run of things, you get up, you go to work, you did what you had to do and you got off at night or if you had night ops you just worked and then you'd just get off, you went to bed, you played cards, or you went to the club and drank. We always had, above the barracks were, we called them enlisted clubs. The officers never went.

S: You said you did two tours. What was that time frame in between the two tours?

Jim: I went over in the latter part of '66. I spent 67 over there. Went back to the states. Went to an inshore operation school for 3 months.

S: What did you do at inshore operations school?

Jim: It was over in California. We mostly took boats out into the, we called them slews some people called them bayous, out into the waterways and trained on how to conduct river assaults and mine operations and stuff like that.

S: And then when you came back from your second tour, where did you go from there?

Jim: I went to Norfolk, Virginia. I was on a—we call them LPA's— they were big assault ships.

S: Did you immediately go straight to North Virginia and get back to work once you got into the states or did you have some off time? (I assumed during my interview that he had told me North, but it is corrected later in the interview)

Jim: Yeah, I went straight from Vietnam. 30 day leave of course, and then to Norfolk. It was a USS Chilton LPA 38. I was aboard and I was in charge of the—I was the division officer in charge of small crafts.

S: So, while you were in Vietnam, what is the funniest story that you can remember?

Jim: Well I already told you about the snake. Actually, there is one that—it really didn't happen to me, but it happened to a friend of mine and he told me about it. He said they were in route in convoy and they got ambushed and—of course in Vietnam, there were rice patties, really narrow roads and the rice patties on each side of the road and you can't get off the road in rice patties or the trucks would sink. He said they got ambushed and they pulled over to the side of the road and everybody jumped off and they were laying down with his face in the rice patty and he said, "I didn't come to Vietnam to lay in the rice patty." He said, "I jumped up, put my weapon on full automatic and went *pew pew pew*[Jim makes great gun sound effects] like that," and said "out in the distance I could see the farmers' cows going *blump blump blump*[Jim also makes great sound effects and arm gestures to show cows falling] just like dominos falling"

we both laugh

S: Alright so while you were in Vietnam, how did you feel about the situation going on with the war? What were your feelings about everything?

Jim: I try not to have feelings. I really, really, super liked the Vietnamese people. And I kind of understood that they were, in their mind, they were defending against an aggressor. Which in our mind, and it still in my mind that they were wrong about us being the aggressor? We were there more as a—at the request of the Vietnamese government, which was—not to them—was not a recognized government. Then a full-out “let’s go to war with Vietnam”. In fact, I don’t even think they ever declared war on Vietnam. Pretty sure they didn’t—well I take that back, I think Johnson did declare war on Vietnam. President Johnson did declare war on Vietnam. It all started out as an assistant. We were mostly advisors under Eisenhower and our first really, super action in Vietnam, of course, was under Kennedy with the organized special forces and the, uh, military advisors as a group—as a Mac V group. It really was the first really, super action we had was with Kennedy, but it actually started with Eisenhower when we’re trying to assist the French.

S: You said you loved the Vietnamese people. Do you have any specific people that you remember in your time in Vietnam?

Jim: I’m still friends with them.

S: Who are they? Tell me about ‘em.

Jim: Well Bobby and Jessica are Vietnamese. They adopted American names, but their father was chief of police—well Bobby’s father was chief of police **in Da Nang**. Of course, at the fall of Vietnam he got sent to prison. He stayed in prison for 16 years, but Bobby and Jessica are—were really, super great friends of your grandmother and I. In fact, they called us mom and dad. And little Kathleen, their daughter, calls us grandma. We went to a lot of her grandma days at school when she was—they would have grandparent days at school and Jewell and I would go to a grandparent days at her school. All of their brothers and stuff called me uncle and call—yeah, I still have Vietnamese friends. Lots of Vietnamese friends.

S: Do you have any unusual stories, like any strange things that happened while you were there?

Jim: The whole situation was strange. *laughs*

S: That’s true, yeah. *laughs*

Jim: War is strange. War can be brutal, but to me it’s a strange and eerie situation.

S: So when you got back, when you were in North Virginia, what did you do after North VA—how long were you in North VA? (Again, I misheard the first time, but he corrected me).

Jim: Norfolk? We stayed in Norfolk for a little over a year, then we went to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. That was our first tour in Guantanamo Bay.

S: How long were you in Cuba for?

Jim: Well, two years. The first tour and then the second tour we were in Cuba was a little over two years.

S: Do you have any more stories you would like to share before we close out?

Jim: Uhh, that's all I can think of *laughs*

S: Alrighty, well I think that's all.

I stop the tape *I call Jim for a follow-up interview a few days later to ask him some more small questions and to say hi and thank you*

before I begin recording, I ask if he is ready, and he says yes

Jim: And Julie said she's ready too

laughs

S: At what age did you join the army?

Jim: Seventeen.

S: What was boot camp like?

Jim: I didn't go to boot camp, I went to Army basic training.

S: Oh, well how was it?

Jim: Oh, it was alright to me. Ya know, we'd run a lot, did a lot of push-ups and stuff like that.

S: Did you have to do any basic training when you swapped to the navy?

Jim: I didn't go to boot camp after I went to the army—not when I went into the navy, no.

S: What college did you attend?

Jim: Southern Illinois University.

S: What year did you attend?

Jim: Well, the think is, I attended the outreach programs. I went to a military academy for junior college and then I finished up in Jacksonville—I finished up in 1986.

S: What was your—did you have a major?

Jim: Yeah, it was education—with criminal inves—criminal justice was the minor.

S: What do you miss the most about Vietnam?

Jim: *laughs* I dunno. Nothing, probably. The Vietnamese, but they're mostly in the United States now.

S: Did you visit any other countries while you were in Vietnam? Just in Asia?

Jim: Uhhh, well I went over to Hong Kong briefly, but I came back.

S: Did you like it?

Jim: Not really. It was like—I was married to your grandma and I didn't do the things other people did, I just kinda looked around. And I posted most of my money home, so I didn't have much money to spend.

S: Did you get to fish while you were out there?

Jim: Yeah.

S: How often?

Jim: Anytime we wanted to; we lived on the river.

S: What kind of fish did you catch out there?

Jim: Uhh, there was mostly catfish.

S: What did you use as bait? Did they have any? Or did you just have to kinda--

Jim: We kinda made do, ya know. We got sea rations to use for bait mostly. And, actually in our emergency kits, we had fishing line and stuff like that to use, and little things to use for bait too.

S: Did you throw the fish back or were you cooking it and eating it too?

Jim: No, we lived on sea rations and lurps.

S: Did you see any cool animals while you were out there, besides snakes and rats and stuff?

Jim: Oh yeah, monkeys. There was a bunch of monkeys.

S: Did you like the monkeys or were they just annoying?

Jim: Well sometimes they were kind of annoying. Once you try to go to sleep, they would kind of—

S: What did you miss the most while you were in Vietnam?

Jim: Your grandmother.

S: What year did y'all get married?

Jim: We got married in, uhh, '66.

S: Y'all met in Mississippi or Alabama?

Jim: We met at Atlanta, Georgia at the airport.

S: Oh, okay. I had no idea why I thought it was Alabama. Do you still talk to anyone you toured with in Vietnam?

Jim: Yeah.

S: How often do you keep in contact with them?

Jim: Well, I don't really keep in contact—they call me occasionally.

S: How many people?

Jim: Well, usually its, uh, just Raymond right now. He's about the only one left. I think everybody else kinda passed on except me and him. Oh, Mark the mailman. He was in the army but he wasn't----

End of interview