

**Roberts Library, Middle Georgia College  
Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project  
Interview with John Roland**

**May 22, 2012**

**Paul Robards:** The date is May 22, 2012. I am interviewing John Roland about his Vietnam experience. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. What were your dates of service in Southeast Asia?

**Roland:** My in-country time aboard a Swift Boat was August of 1968 thru August of 1969. Plus, my first tour of duty, after graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy, was on board the U.S.S. Perkins, DD877. We provided gunfire support off the coast of North and South Vietnam on at least two occasions.

**Robards:** Why did you join the military?

**Roland:** I was interested in a military career; I wanted to serve my country; my father was a retired U.S. Navy Chief Warrant Officer; and I desired to be a Naval Academy graduate.

**Robards:** What was your job description or your MOS?

**Roland:** For my time in-country in Vietnam, I was Officer in Charge (O in C) of a Swift Boat, a PCF—a Patrol Craft Fast.

**Robards:** What was your rank during this time?

**Roland:** Lieutenant JG (Junior Grade).

**Robards:** What events or engagements were you involved in?

**Roland:** Initially the Swift Boats were set up to prevent resupply by North Vietnam and Viet Cong forces, and to combat the VC forces in South Vietnam. We were set up as strictly a coastal patrol, initially, when I got there. Then a few months after that, we started conducting “Sea Lords” raids, which were in to all rivers of the Mekong Delta. My Coastal Division 13 was based at Cat Lo (C-a-t-l-o), and we not only did our off-shore patrolling, but also conducted numerous Sea Lords raids with support from either Navy Seals and/or provincial reconn unit’s (PRUs) crews headed by a Navy Seal, or occasionally transporting a few South Vietnamese troops. As to specific campaigns, gosh, I really don’t remember. We then took over patrol areas in the Delta, in the rivers. Operation Slingshot went into effect, and PBRs (Patrol Boat River), which had assumed these patrol stations, moved up near the Cambodian border to support these operations. So we had patrol stations in the rivers and off the

coast.

**Robards:** Did your training prepare you for the duties required of you in Southeast Asia?

**Roland:** Yes. My crew, which consisted of five American enlisted men, and myself, received Swift Boat training at the amphib base in Coronado, CA. I want to say it was between six and eight weeks.

**Robards:** What kind of weapons were you trained in the use of?

**Roland:** Well, we had small arms on board, and the Swift Boat itself was armed with a twin 50 caliber machine guns in a gun tub over the pilot house, and a single 50 caliber machine gun over a 81 millimeter mortar on the fan-tail. I think we had a .38 caliber revolver, a shot gun, an M-79 grenade launcher, which I used on missions, and an M16.

**Robards:** Did you volunteer to go to Vietnam?

**Roland:** I was an eager volunteer. I wrote my detailer, who handled personnel duties for all Navy Officers, on at least two occasions. I still have a carbon copy of one of the letters I sent him. So, I was an eager volunteer to go, and I wanted to go to Swift Boats. And fortunately, I got my choice.

**Robards:** How did your family feel?

**Roland:** I'm sure it worried my mother, and I'm sure my parents had some concern for my safety, but they were able to survive my tour of duty.

**Robards:** Were you in a combat or combat support unit?

Roland: I was in a combat unit.

**Robards:** Describe your first encounter with the enemy.

**Roland:** My first raid was off an LST [Landing Ship Tank], stationed down off the Ca Mau Peninsula, which served as a forward support base for Swift Boats. Three or four boats were transferred down there from our base, and my first raid was down in that area. We didn't see the enemy on any occasion during my raids, because they were either hidden or didn't choose to fight at the time. I don't recall any return fire from that very first encounter. We shot up any sampans, huts, whatever—anything of military value. That was my first raid.

**Robards:** Evaluate the enemy's overall fighting ability. What were there overall strengths and weaknesses?

**Roland:** They were definitely a dedicated force, and I don't think I'm qualified to say just how proficient they were in their operations. They were obviously a well indoctrinated fighting unit, when

they chose to fight.

**Robards:** Describe the bravest action, either friend or enemy, you witnessed while serving in Vietnam.

**Roland:** I guess, the action I was involved with, [along] with another Swift Boat, for which I was awarded the Navy Cross, in the rescue of the Officer-in-Charge of another Swift Boat and his Leading Petty Officer who were blown off the boat due to a rocket hit, and the rescue of them. The award is easily found on the Internet; I've been told by my Academy classmates and some family members who have looked it up. I haven't even bothered [to look], but I've been told by some that it is readily available on the Internet—the full citation.

<http://militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=4019>

**Robards:** What is your evaluation of South Vietnamese fighting units and the military and civilian leaders?

**Roland:** I can only comment on what I have read and my first-hand contact with South Vietnamese Naval personnel. On my first ship assignment, we would occasionally have a South Vietnamese Junior Officer on board for indoctrination—to show him what we were doing. The ones we had, which was only a couple, were not very impressive, dedication wise or professionally. For each patrol (Swift Boat), I had a South Vietnamese enlisted man to serve as an interpreter. Some were good; some were terrible; some got seasick and wanted to go back to port, which I refused to do. So, it varied. The most impressive South Vietnamese military person I can recall was a policeman from the provincial capital of Ben Tre. I even remember his name. He was excellent—thorough, because we would stop large sampans carrying cargo and civilian personnel, primarily women and children. We would search the boats, the sampans, and check IDs, and he is the only one that I could really rave about. He always did an excellent job.

**Robards:** What is your evaluation of American military leadership in Vietnam, and of your immediate commanders in the field?

**Roland:** My commanding officers, of which I had two, were okay. One was a lieutenant, a mustang. The other was a Lieutenant Commander. My division, which was one of the two divisions conducting Sea Lords raids, was invited to Saigon for a briefing / pep-talk from Admiral Zumwalt, who was in charge of U.S. Naval Forces in-country at the time. I think everyone was fairly impressed with him. As for comments on anybody other than those, I can only say that my opinion is influenced by what I've read.

**Robards:** What do you remember most about combat?

**Roland:** It was a busy time. I never felt overly concerned for my welfare. I was more concerned

about doing my job, and hopefully getting my crew and boat back to base safely, and to conduct our mission properly.

**Robards:** Describe the most difficult challenge you faced as a Swift Boat commander.

**Roland:** I think leadership of my crew, and during the monsoon season it was absolutely miserable out there for a Swift Boat, which only had about a four foot draft. We just got pounded to Hell and back during monsoon season, when we were going against the seas. Coming back after we got to the end of the patrol area and turned around and headed back with a following sea, it was a much smoother ride. Heading out to sea in a monsoon season in the South China Sea is absolutely terrible.

Also, getting into the river mouths during that time was probably some of the most white-knuckle experiences I had, because of shifting sandbars in the river mouths. It was so shallow in there, and our depth finder was adequate mostly, but [we] would just come rolling in with the following sea trying to get into the river mouth and just hope we didn't hit an unseen sandbar. [That would] have been a mess. When we had those following seas in shallow water, we absolutely lost steering control on occasion while surfing the waves. We were just doing the best we could to avoid white caps that were breaking over sandbars and try to get into the river mouths, so that we could get to our patrol station [to] relieve the other boat that was there either waiting for us or had already passed us heading back to base.

**Robards:** At the time you were serving in Vietnam, did you think you understood the "big picture" and politics and diplomacy of both the United States and Vietnam?

**Roland:** I doubt it. I've read a good deal since then. I and my crew believed what we were told: that we were there to support a South Vietnamese government that wanted to maintain democracy, and give them a chance to be a democracy, [by] helping them fight a communist country, and to prevent a communist take-over of their government. With all the other reading I've done, it looks like we were supporting at times a very incompetent and corrupt set of leaders, on the South Vietnamese side and some less than impressive U.S. military officers. I hope that doesn't take away from all the valor and excellent dedication and professionalism by a lot of other U.S. military officers that served there. Sometimes you just remember the knuckle-heads more than anybody else.

**Robards:** What did you think of the native population of Vietnam?

**Roland:** We saw the peasants, and I came to the conclusion that in the Delta, the only thing that they were interested in were fishing, farming, and fornicating. They really didn't care what was going on in Saigon, unless it directly affected them. They would be most willing to go with either side if it was going to give them peace and help with their prosperity.

**Robards:** What was your daily routine while in Vietnam?

**Roland:** We started out with coastal patrols [that] were 24-hour one over-night patrol; then we returned to base. We departed in the morning; went to our patrol station; and then returned the following day when relieved by another boat. Then, when we picked up river patrols, because of the transit time, the distance between our base and the patrol stations, we would be out for two nights and two full days and then return on the afternoon of the third day when we got relieved. When we got back to base, the first thing we did was refuel, rearm and get ready to go out again, or we might turn the boat over to another crew.

The boats we had were the Mark I's, the oldest boats that were in Vietnam, and they were just being worn out. Sometimes boats would be in repair having mechanical problems taken care of at the base. We had a maintenance crew there. We didn't always keep the same boat; I must have used at least three different boats during my time there, because we were swapping around. We had a little galley on board, so we did the best we could with meals, which were absolutely paltry. [We would] head on out on patrol with nothing but a hunk of baloney, some cheese and a couple of cans of soup or tomatoes or something like that, and a loaf of bread, and we'd just make do. The c-rations which we had on board, I would not allow my crew to use at all. That was kept for emergencies. In fact, c-rations were an absolute luxury.

On patrol, we would stop anybody that was coming through our patrol area. [We'd] board, search and check IDs. That would be done for both coastal and in-river patrols. Our days off, we'd do anything that we had to do for our boat if we were going to be keeping that for a while. Then we'd have some time off. If we were doing a coastal patrol, we'd come in, in the afternoon [and then] we may have had a patrol to go out the next day. During my year in-country, I had kept a count of the number of patrols, and I think I was up over 120 patrols during a one year period.

**Robards:** Describe the most memorable event that happened during your tour.

**Roland:** That would be the ambush and rescue of the Officer-in-Charge and his Leading Petty Officer out of a canal while suppressing enemy fire. His boat was hit with a B-40 rocket or an RPG, and so was mine. We were able to rescue them under fire, and Medevac them out, and no lives were lost.

**Robards:** Describe the most humorous event that happened to you.

**Roland:** I don't recall much humor—at all. I can't recall a single humorous incident during my tour. We had a couple of USO tours come through, and one was a Korean army [show] with a couple of female Korean dancers. I remember that little show more than anything else. For humor or entertainment, we'd go into Vung Tau, the provincial capital of Phuoc Tuy Province, where we were located. That was one of several in-country R & R (Rest and Recreation) centers. I would go in with some other O-in-C's and maybe go in by myself, and go around and check out the bars and the bar girls. Other than that, we didn't have much {entertainment}—we did have an R & R options. The

most desirable one was to Australia. You had to be in-country 10 months before you could go there. That is where I chose to go, and I even went back [to Sidney] just prior to leaving Vietnam for another one-week R & R.

**Robards:** Did you notice or encounter any type of social, racial or rank discrimination?

**Roland:** No.

**Robards:** Were you aware of any illegal drug use by any American soldiers in Vietnam?

**Roland:** No. I wouldn't even allow my crew to drink a beer while on patrol. In fact, I made them wear uniforms instead of looking like a bunch of rag-tag slobs. I had them in their regular sailor dungaree uniforms.

**Robards:** What song or music reminds you of your service in Vietnam?

**Roland:** Can't think of a thing.

**Robards:** Did you correspond with family and friends during your tour?

**Roland:** I wrote my parents. That was it.

**Robards:** Did you keep a journal or diary?

**Roland:** No, I didn't, which I deeply regret.

**Robards:** Did you bring back any souvenirs or pictures from Vietnam?

**Roland:** Yes, I did. I had a little Instamatic, Eastman Kodak camera that I took pictures with and I have over a hundred slides that I took, plus some that I had been given. I left my good camera back in the States.

**Robards:** How did you feel about your experience when you left Vietnam?

**Roland:** I was convinced that South Vietnam was going to lose the war within five years, and it took them 6 years to lose the whole thing. They were not dedicated; they really didn't care, the personnel that I could see, they just didn't care. They were perfectly willing to let the Americans do all their fighting for them. As long as they could continue with the three "f's" of life. I was very disappointed in the South Vietnamese Navy, who received the brand new MarK II Swift Boats, and I never saw one on patrol. What I did see was them tied up to a fishing stake, just doing nothing besides fishing, having punched a hole in the quarter inch aluminum hull, which made them useless. That was a very sore point. We were doing all the operations and patrols, and we were using the old Mark I's, and they were just being absolutely worn out. The speed was supposed to have been 25 knots, but if I ever got

21 knots out of my boat, I felt that I was doing pretty good. Of course, it is slowed down if you got a full fuel load and ammo load. But the poor things were just worn out.

**Robards:** How did you feel after you arrived back in the United States?

**Roland:** Great! Well, I was relieved to have completed my tour of duty with a little bit of success, safely, and none of my crew was wounded. I thought we had done our job as best we could. I can recall on the flight, when we left Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base in Saigon. I think it was Braniff Airlines and every seat filled with enlisted and officers, we were all in khakis or some other uniform. In fact, I even had at least two of my Naval Academy classmates on board with me, who had served in some other capacity in country. Just as soon as the wheels were drawn up into the aircraft and off the Vietnamese soil, we all let out a big cheer. Plus, when we landed in California we all burst out with another big cheer. We were quite happy to be home. (I'm sure we stopped probably in Midway or Guam for fuel, and then I know we stopped in Honolulu for a short time for more fuel).

**Robards:** How do you feel now about your service in Vietnam?

**Roland:** I'm glad I volunteered, I'm glad I served. I don't have any regrets. Well, I regret I couldn't have done an even better job than I did, but I'm glad I served. I'll leave it up to the politicians to determine whether or not it was worth it. It is highly debatable.

**Robards:** Do you feel that the war affected your marital status?

**Roland:** I was single at the time, so it had no effect.

**Robards:** If you had your Vietnam War experience to do over, what would you change, if anything?

**Roland:** After one year with Swift Boats, I was physically worn out. I think I was down to about 121 pounds; so I was glad to get a break, but...I also volunteered to go back. For my post graduate education, we were promised by our detailer that all Swift Boat O-in-Cs could get any billet that we asked for. Well, they had assigned me to a post graduate school in an engineering curriculum at the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, CA. Well, my first tour after graduation was in the engineering department, and I was bound and determined that I was not going to be an engineering officer and make the Navy my career. They had already sent me these orders, and I went and replied back and [told them] I would rather go to intelligence school. I came back, and they gave me orders to Defense Intelligence School in Anacostia Annex, Washington D.C. I got a nine month post-graduate equivalent education there, and I specifically volunteered, in fact I even tracked down the Navy Seals over in Alexandria, VA in special operations, and said, "Please ask for me. I want to go back and serve as an intel officer

for a Seal unit.” The Lieutenant Commander said, “Well, Lieutenant, that is a collateral duty among the Navy Seals, so I can’t do that for you.” But I was eager to go back to Vietnam in that capacity, if I could have served with a Navy Seal unit as their intel officer. So, I was ready to go back.

**Robards:** Is there anything that I’ve not asked you about that you would like to add about your Vietnam experience?

**Roland:** No, I think that that is fairly well inclusive. I’m glad I went; glad I volunteered; glad I served. At the time, I had five or six fairly idealistic reasons for going there. I know that one of them was so that my brother, who was graduating from West Point in 1970, might not have to go. But he did go and my mother survived his tour of duty also.

I don’t recall all the reasons, but it was a time of testing and a time to prove what you could do under a combat situation. I thought it was going to be exciting and adventurous. We were given the option, at the end of Swift Boat School, of choosing what corps area we would like to go to and serve at one of the bases. We had Swift Boat bases in all four corps. I specifically chose the Mekong Delta area. I thought that would be more interesting. I just couldn’t see spending a whole year doing coastal patrols. That just seemed to be boring. I thought there would be more action [in the Mekong Delta area]; it would be different; it would be better, than just simple one year of coastal patrols. Good gracious, that would bore you to tears. I got my wish, and I informed my crew. I don’t recall consulting them in any way. That is where I wanted to go; I got Mekong Delta, Coastal Division 13, based in Cat Lo, and I’m glad I got that.

**Robards:** Thank you for your service, sir, and thank you for participating in this project.

**Roland:** My pleasure.