

Vietnam Oral History Project

Interview with Russell Davidson, Cochran GA.

Interviewer: Paul Robards, Library Director

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The date is March 14, 2012. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library. I'll be speaking with Russell Davidson from Cochran Georgia today about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

Robards: Mr. Davidson, what branch of the service did you serve in?

Davidson: U.S. Navy

Robards: Why did you join the military?

Davidson: To keep from being drafted was the main reason. I had been going to school at Middle Georgia College, and things weren't going as good as I had hoped, and I was really afraid of getting drafted so I decided to go ahead and join.

Robards: How old were you when you joined the military?

Davidson: I had just turned eighteen

Robards: Where did you go to receive basic training?

Davidson: In Orlando, FL at a Naval Training Center there, which is no longer there now.

Robards: Where did you attend advanced training and how long did it last?

Davidson: I only went to...I went to Rhode Island for some very basic gun-mount training. That was down the road some.

Robards: Did this training sufficiently prepare you for your duties in Vietnam?

Davidson: No. Not at all.

Robards: What was your occupation code?

Davidson: I was a gunners mate. GMG

Robards: Did you volunteer to go to Vietnam?

Davidson: No. Absolutely not. I had joined the Navy to hopefully keep from going to Vietnam, but I got drafted to go over there. My stepfather had died in December of '71, so I came back home for that and was stationed in Norfolk VA. I tried to get them to let me stay in Norfolk where I could come back home to support my mother, cause she was about 45 years old at the time. Anyway, "no we've got to have you back" [they said]. This was back when the United States was playing games with Russia at the time, so they flew me to Rota, Spain. Spent 30 days in Rota, Spain. The ship was out on special ops chasing the Russians. They flew me to Naples, Italy, spent thirty days in Naples, Italy—ship was out on Special Ops. They flew me back to Rota, Spain, and I caught the ship the day it was coming back to the states. On the way back, they said they needed volunteers. I found out I had made E-5, second class gunners mate, and they said "we need E-5s to volunteer to go to the ship that is going to Vietnam." I said "no way. That is why I joined the Navy—not to go there." So we got back to port and I came home to Cochran for two weeks, got back on a Sunday night, when I crossed the bridge to get on the base or on the ship, they said "guess what? You've been drafted. And so, that was it and I got sent to the USS Mulinex. So they flew me to meet the ship.

Robards: What was your first encounter with the enemy?

Davidson: Well, once I got on ship, we were shooting pretty much 24/7. They would call in for gunfire support, so my first day on the job, we would be shooting, and I would do whatever my duty was for the day, whether it was loading ammunition, running the gun mount, or whatever it was. We would be constantly shooting normally anywhere from 10 to 15 miles inland. Sometimes we would be shooting right on the beach, just according to what the situation was. We were shot at a couple of times, but they didn't have good radar and stuff, so they came within about 100 yards of us, I think one time.

Robards: Describe the bravest action you witnessed during the war.

Davidson: Well, it is hard to say from the Navy side of it. You know, we just did our thing. Just being able to do our job and not be killed from it was pretty brave, because the guns would get hot; the shells could actually cook off in the barrel, if you didn't shoot it within less than a minute. We've had other ships where sailors got killed on a gun mount, where that is exactly what happened—the gun cooked off. It wasn't the same from our perspective as if I was a troop on the ground.

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

Davidson: Well, in 1972, when President Nixon had started the B52 campaign—the war was in a sense winding down, but there was very intense fighting during those years. We had a running joke that every morning at 8 o'clock (I think this was in Stars and Stripes Magazine) everybody would jump up so that the President could say that there were no troops currently on the ground in Cambodia. The leaders on my ship were great. The captain of the ship, his name was Ace Cannon; his nickname was Ace. I don't remember what his first name was. But he wore an old hard pith helmet, as they called it. Never wore a shirt, he was gung-ho. On the way over there, the ship pulled into Pearl Harbor, and they dropped anchor and hit a main power line. He said "Cut the damn anchor. I've got a war to fight. I don't have time to wait for this." That is no joke. The ship had been top gun the year previously, and he had a good reputation. He was in Newsweek Magazine, I believe it was, and it was like "We're going to show them how the big boys play." Our weapons officer was from Texas, Lt Shrope and he always wore a cowboy hat. He was a true cowboy. There was one time that when we were getting ready to go up north to North Vietnam to do some shooting, our mount number three's barrel was worn out. Mount number three was named Yosemite Sam. That was the shootingest gun we ever had. Mount number two was named "Have Gun Will Travel" after the show Paladin [on CBS]. It [number two] stayed broke most of the time. The Captain wanted us to take a part off of mount number three to get mount number 2 fixed, because the barrel was better, but we knew that we didn't have enough time to do that. So him [Lt. Shrope] and the Captain argued for a while, and he finally gave the Captain a salute and told the Captain: "Yes Sir, Captain, we'll do it. As soon as the Captain walked off, he said "Boys, don't touch a damn thing." And the good thing was that the next morning we came under fire, and so number one mount messed up, so if we hadn't had Yosemite Sam, we would have been in real trouble. Yosemite Sam pulled us out of trouble.

Robards: As a young serviceman, did you understand the politics and diplomacy that landed you in the middle of a war?

Davidson: Not really, I mean, I knew what was going on and it was just like, you know, what got me the most was we would be out there shooting, like I said it could be inland or on the beach, but the Vietnamese people would be coming out in their boats to go

fishing, and that told me that they could care less if they were communist, they just wanted to live and eat. To me that really hit home that they just didn't care. They didn't care what was causing it, they just wanted to live, and they just wished it [the war] would go away.

Robards: How did your understanding of the situation effect how you did your job?

Davidson: It didn't. I had my job to do, and I did it daily. Whatever I was supposed to do, I did it.

Robards: Describe your living conditions, housing and food in Vietnam.

Davidson: Of course, I lived on the ship. The ship was about 400 feet long, but you've got about 300 people on it. So you have about a six foot long bunk that you sleep in. and the biggest thing was, you would be on the gun-line for about 45 days, so you wouldn't get any mail, any food, so if you ran out of food, tough luck. Towards the end of those 45 days you would be down to duty-ham or duty hotdogs. The day I got there, I weighed 185 pounds; thirty days later, I weighed 145 pounds. A lot of that was lack of food to eat. Stress—we worked about 12 hours on and maybe 10 hours off. So you were constantly working, constantly under pressure. I would wake up in the morning, I slept right under a gun mount, and I'd say, "What did you all do last night." They would say they shot 200 rounds; I didn't hear the first thing. You get so accustomed to it, that you just tune it out. It was hot. The temperature over there was 110 degrees plus. You were able to take a Navy shower: go in and put water on you for about 10 seconds, soap up and then have 10 seconds of water to rinse it off, and you are done.

Robards: Did you ever do anything just for the fun of it?

Davidson: Probably, but not there. Once we left the gun line we did get to go to Japan and Hong Kong. That was a great relief to get to go there. As we were leaving, we got to go to Japan. I bought a brand new Sansui stereo—4 channel, which was the latest and greatest thing. I paid \$1500 for it, and when we pulled into San Diego, California, that same thing was \$3500 in the states. But the only thing you could do on the gun line was maybe hope you weren't shooting and sit down and relax for a minute. That's about it.

Robards: Could you tell me about the most memorable event that happened to your ship?

Davidson: I guess that would be when we came under fire. That would get your attention. Other than that, it was doing your job and worrying about things and witnessing things. One time we pulled into port, I think it may have been when we went to get the barrels changed on the gun that needed it, and we pulled in next to a ship where one of the barrels had blown up, and we went over to see that. That was an eye opener seeing that.

Robards: Do you think Vietnam vets were discriminated against when they returned to the United States after their tours in Vietnam.

Davidson: Absolutely. Lots of people called them baby-killers. You didn't want to wear your uniform, but you had to wear it when you left the ship most of the time. When I got out of the service in 1973, I had a hard time finding a job, especially at Robins Air Force Base. I kept applying and kept applying. I did wind up getting a job in Macon at the Armstrong Ceiling company as my first job. Yeah, they were absolutely discriminated against in my opinion.

Robards: Have your views about the war changed over the years?

Davidson: No, I didn't really understand, or half-way understand what we did. We felt like the U.S. government didn't want us to win the war. You could only do so much. You could go here, but you couldn't go somewhere else. You were limited to what you could do. I was glad when it was over. I was glad that the people who were able to get out, got out. But we left/lost lots of good people over there.

Robards: Would you repeat this experience if you could do it over again? Why or why not?

Davidson: Well, I wouldn't volunteer again. I didn't want to go there to start with, but I've always believed in serving my country, and if I was called upon to do it again, yes I would, absolutely.

Robards: Is there anything else you would like to share about your Vietnam War experience?

Davidson: It was a time in my life. When I first heard the news that I was getting drafted, it kind of upset me, because I had just lost my step-father, and my mother was at home. She was about 45 years old. My sister had just turned 16, so I had a real fear that I'd never come back, because so many of my friends had gone and never came

back. So, it was a real fear. It is just one of those things just like today with Iraq and Afghanistan. I wish we'd get our guys home as quick as we can, because bottom line—those people don't care about us. Whether we're there or the Taliban's there, all they want to do is live. They just don't care—that was the same way with the Vietnamese people. Vietnam today is thriving. Nike shoes and a bunch of other things are made there. It is what it is: it is part of military service, and when I came along, you did your duty to God and Country, and I still believe that today.

Robards: Mr. Davidson, thank you for your service to your country, and thank you for participating in this oral history project.

Davidson: Thank you very much.