Interview with Robert Ritter

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Interview # 1:

Interviewers: Cassidy Williams and Kimberlie Kranich

A Note to the Reader

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Ritter: My name is Robert Ritter. I live in Monticello, Illinois, and I am 69 and a half years old.

Williams: Are you originally from Monticello?

Ritter: Originally from Farmer City.

Williams: When did you move to Monticello?

Ritter: 1967 is when I moved, when my wife and I got married.

Williams: When and where did you serve in the military?

Ritter: I served from 1967 until ’69, so approximately two years.

Williams: Where did you serve?

Ritter: I served in Vietnam, actually off the shores of Vietnam in the Navy.

Williams: Why originally did you join the Navy?

Ritter: Well, basically I had at that time been through DeVry Tech and had electronics background. I knew that I wanted to get into some type of field that had electronics. So I was thinking either the Air Force or the Naval Reserve. The Naval Reserve had a position for me because they could take me for the same amount of time that the draft could. So I decided to go with the Navy rather than being drafted into the Army.

Williams: What made you want to choose the Navy over being drafted into the Army?

Ritter: Well basically I was going to have the opportunity to use my education in the Navy because they had electronics I could work with and take care of. Where the Army I figured I probably would end up in the infantry there and that wasn’t going to give me much as far as training with my education and training.

Williams: What did you do on that ship with that training and electronics? What was your job?

Ritter: My job was actually maintaining the gunfire control equipment and also operating the gunfire control equipment. I did both ends of it. I was actually in

charge of two, 3-inch gun control systems on the ship and worked with two others. So there was actually four systems I was in charge of, and two of them I actually worked on.

Williams: If you were to explain this to someone who doesn't have an electronics background, or doesn't know much about the Navy, what was your daily job with that gunfire control equipment if somebody doesn't know what that means?

Ritter: Well the first thing that we did after we had quarters in the morning was we would go up and turn our equipment on, check it out and make sure that everything was working like it was supposed to. We would be actually setting up the computers and the guns would actually go into automatic or operation, and then they would move as we moved. The gun directors, they would move to follow it. If they didn't, we knew we had a problem. That was our first thing we did in the morning was we checked all our equipment out and make sure everything was working and doing what it was supposed to.

Williams: What else did you do with the equipment? What else was your job?

Ritter: Well, if anything broke down or we had a problem, then it was part of my job to correct any problems that we had and to get the equipment so that it was working like it was supposed to and would be able to perform if we were actually using it to fire guns or whatever. The radars they had to be able to track a target, and your guns had to follow. It was a coordination between our radar and our gunfire control computers and the guns.

Williams: What were these guns used for? What was this equipment's function?

Ritter: The guns were actually used, the 3-inch and the 5-inch, were used in the dual purpose. They could be used to intercept or take out a boat or whatever was on the water. They also could be used to shoot down aircraft. Fortunately, the North Vietnamese had no aircraft, so we didn't have that very much to worry about. It was mostly just the small, what they call "gook" boats, that used to come out from the Vietnamese shore at times and observe or ship or try to find out what was going on. We never actually had any of them that ever gave us real problems where we had to actually shoot a boat out of the water. We were very fortunate in that respect.

Williams: What else did the guns shoot at, at least when you were on the ship?

Ritter: Their main objective was to take on targets that we had that were on shore which could be anywhere from 5 miles, 10 miles. Our maximum range in both cases was about 25 miles that we could shoot from our ship to the target. We basically were in support of the infantry that was on the shore: the Marines and the other armed services, Army. We would fire in support of them either to neutralize or to take out a target.

Williams: What were these targets exactly?

Ritter: They could range from a bunker that was where the Vietnamese were hiding. A lot of our job, especially when we were in North Vietnam, was intercepting the little supply boats that were coming down from North Vietnam to South

Vietnam. That was our job to take these boats and actually sink them so that the supplies that were on them were destroyed and that they couldn't use them against us in South Vietnam.

Williams: Did you ever sink a boat, or did your ship?

Ritter: We've sunk several boats. I wouldn't have any idea what the total number was that we actually took out. Probably one of our biggest times that we did the most firing of any time we were over there was when the city of Hue was under siege by the North Vietnamese. We actually were able to shoot from our ship into the city of Hue, and we basically destroyed most of the city around it.

Williams: Did you ever think about that what that meant? What you were hitting? Could you see the effects of the shooting?

Ritter: Well, we couldn't see it because of the foliage that was over there. Everything was heavily foliated. It was kind of like a forest or whatever. As I said we were shooting anywhere from 10 to 25 miles from our ship to the target. So no we couldn't see what we were actually hitting. We had spotters that were on shore, both in the air and on the ground, that were helping to direct our fire into the targets and do what they needed to do to destroy it.

Williams: Even if you couldn't see it, did you ever think about what your targets were hitting or what the effects were of the ship you were on?

Ritter: Well, we knew we were shooting targets that probably had live people around. That was something you just didn't take into consideration or think about because you knew it was a case of either you destroy their target or they were going to attempt to destroy or kill our people. It was kind of a case where we were actually the ones that were in charge I guess of saying who was going to do what as far as the war was concerned.

Williams: Did you ever worry that any of the gunfire hit civilians or anything?

Ritter: That was one of the things that the United States government, they tried to keep from hitting civilian targets as much as possible. But sometimes it's an inevitable situation. It was especially hard over there because the Viet Cong would infiltrate into the villages. We had no idea who was the enemy and who was the good people. That was part of the infantry's job was to go in and sort these people out and identify the targets that were actually Vietnamese targets. Then we would destroy them from that information that we got from spotters that were on the shores.

Williams: So were you the one that was actually firing the guns?

Ritter: That was one of my jobs was we had what they call a stable element which was connected to the guns. We had just like a gun pistol in our hand. We would get orders from the operations department that we were supposed to fire so many guns, so many salvos. We would actually be the ones that when the guns were ready and loaded, we actually did the shooting.

Williams: What was it like to shoot the guns?

Ritter: It was just like sitting here in the chair pulling a trigger on a gun. There was no, you didn't feel the concussion of the gun or anything like that as far as where we were located on the ship.

Williams: Did it ever mean anything to you to fire a gun? Even if you didn't physically didn't feel anything, did you feel anything or did it just become routine?

Ritter: It was part of my job as the fire control technician to do that. That was my step in the sequence that took place as far as making the guns shoot.

Kranich: Describe the atmosphere in the ship when you were shooting. What was the tone? What was the mood of people?

Ritter: Well, basically everybody knew that this was their specific job that they had to perform. That's what you thought about it as, was it was your responsibility and your job to perform. Not necessarily, you weren't concerned about or thinking about other things. It was just like going to work every day. You had a certain job and a task to do, and that's basically the way you looked at the responsibility on the ship.

Williams: We talked about the guns and the shooting, what else was part of a typical day on the ship?

Ritter: Well, we basically woke up in the morning about 6 o'clock. We had to get up, eat breakfast. Then the first thing that we did as soon as we got through with

that was we went to what we called quarters. At that point in time we met with our commanding officers and got information from them as to what our duties were going to be that day. Once you found that out, then we went and checked our guns systems out, made sure that everything was working. As soon as that was done, then if anything showed up that wasn't working properly, you had to immediately get started and get it repaired, so that it would be ready to go. The rest of the time we were on what they called a rotating watch system, where we would be four hours on watch, four hours off, and then four hours you could use as sleeping time. Then you would start the process over again.

Williams: You said you couldn't see what you were hitting when you shot at land. How about when you sunk a ship. Could you physically see that ship sink?

Ritter: More than likely not because we never actually got close enough to those ships. Most of them would hang within about 2 to 3 miles from the shore. As I said, especially if we knew they were just small ships that were carrying supplies down, we wouldn't actually get on top of them. We would shoot from a distance. We didn't actually see those boats that we were actually shooting or hitting, at least I didn't. Now, some of the radar operators that were up in the radar gun directors, some of them possibly might have seen it. I'm not sure that they did. It just depends. If it was at night, no wouldn't see it. During the daytime you might see it. The only time that would see it at night is if you hit a boat that had a bunch of ammunition or something like that on it, you would see the explosion. But that was it.

Williams: Did you ever know if you were being accurate or not? If you hit the right target or the wrong target? How did you know?

Ritter: We had the spotters that were in the airplanes and also on the ground. They were telling us 'you did what you were supposed to do, you hit what you were supposed to' or 'no, you need to make a correction in your gun direction so that you would actually hit the target'. The spotters were our eyes on shore as far as telling us what we had or had not hit.

Williams: Did you ever miss a target that you know of?

Ritter: Well, there were times when they would give us a spot. Like you needed to go up so many yards or down so many yard, right or left, and we knew that we were close but we weren't exactly there. They could walk us right in to the point where we knew we were hitting our target.

Williams: So there was never a time when there was a mistake?

Ritter: I would say no. Once we were assigned a target, it was our job to destroy that target.

Williams: I saw something in your book about Operation Sea Dragon. Can you tell us a little about that?

Ritter: Operation Sea Dragon was the operation that the Navy participated in. We went from well basically just south of the DMZ, north as far as, well the farthest north that I ever get was Haiphong harbor which is just outside of

North Korea. That was only in support for when they picked up the *Pueblo*. Basically Operation Sea Dragon was assigned to cover and patrol all of North Vietnam, and like I said about probably 20 miles into South Vietnam.

Williams: And your ship was part of Operation Sea Dragon?

Ritter: Right, we were part of Operation Sea Dragon. The Seventh Fleet was in charge of the whole area, but we were just one ship of probably about 10 or 12 ships that were part of that group.

Williams: What ships were you on over the years?

Ritter: I was on the USS *Canberra* which was a heavy cruiser. We were basically a gun, and we had missile launchers on the back of the ship. But we never did use the missiles.

Williams: Were you on the *Canberra* the whole time?

Ritter: Yes, I was on the *Canberra* from the time I went abroad ship which was in July of ’67 until I got out in January of ’69.

Williams: Did you ever get breaks off the ship?

Ritter: Yes, I think the longest period of time we ever spent out at sea was 30 days. During that period of time we were out there firing and shooting targets. Most of the time our average was probably 15 to 20 days on the gun line. Then we would go back into Subic Bay which was in the Philippines for either repairs that we couldn’t take care of while we were out at sea or would go to ports of

R&R I guess they called it for the personnel on the ship to get off and relax a little bit and get away from the war situation.

Williams: What would you guys do in the Philippines to relax?

Ritter: Well in the Philippines we didn't have a whole lot. In Subic Bay there wasn't a whole lot there. There were some facilities there that were military controlled, but most of our time that we would spend there, we had some miniature golf courses. We were actually able to play golf. We had an island that was called Grande Island which was basically just an island off of the Subic Bay area. We could go out there and spend a day and have a lunch and do whatever we wanted to do out there. Swim if we wanted to. Then we would come back in that night and go to the ship, and that's where we would spend our time.

Williams: We described a typical day on the ship and your life as a sailor. How was this different than life back home?

Ritter: Well, when you're home you can come and go more or less as you want to. Of course you have your job that you're required to do. When we were on the ship, you pretty much had a routine that you were going to be going through. You were going to be eating your meals. You were going to be doing any necessary work that needed to be done to maintain your equipment. Then you were spending three to four hours at a time on what they called watch where you were at ready to perform your task for whatever you needed to do or

whatever your jobs were that you had to do in regards to the ship's mission of taking care of support to the soldiers on shore.

Williams: Did you ever witness any death on the ship?

Ritter: No, we did not. We were very fortunate in the fact that we never got hit by enemy fire. They basically didn't have any guns that would reach out to us. I wasn't on the ship, this happened the cruise right before I got on ship, that they got in too close to this one island in North Vietnam, and they did actually fire back and hit up on our ship and did some minor structural damage. But that was it. No one was actually injured on the ship.

Williams: Knowing that you had that potential of maybe being fired on again. Were you ever afraid of enemy fire? How did that affect your mindset?

Ritter: Basically, my mindset was that I would be there, and I felt like the ship was going to be our protection, and we would be able to withstand any type of conflict that the North Vietnamese would give us. Whether it be from shelling from the shore or whatever. Their accuracy was not that great because they didn't have the same sophisticated radar that we had. Consequently, they couldn't do as good a job of bracketing or targeting our ships as what we could do of getting back to them.

Williams: You said the ship was your security. Where did you get this confidence from that you were going to be ok?

Ritter: Well, I guess you'd have to say that comes from training. You're trained to do the job that you do. You know that if you're doing your job, chances are that you're not going to run into any difficulties. As far as if they start to shoot back at you, you have the potential and the firepower to basically go back and destroy anybody that would shoot at you.

Williams: Can you tell me a little about this training you went through?

Ritter: Well, basically I went through the same as what a regular military or navy person would do. I went through boot camp which in my case was a two-week boot camp. We went to the Great Lakes and got our training there which included both physical training and classroom training. Then I went to FTA school which was where I got my actual training for being a gunfire control technician. That was a 60-week school of basically telling me what I needed to do and how I needed to take care of what I was going to responsible for when I got on the ship.

Williams: How did you do in the training?

Ritter: Well, fortunately I was the number one person in my class. I graduated number one in my FTA school. I think part of that was due to that fact that I had prior electronic experience because a lot of my training that I got in FTA school was maintaining electronic equipment and operating.

Williams: So did your other classmates not have electronic experience?

Ritter: A lot of them didn't have. A lot of them were just people that graduated out of school. They went to either picked by the draft or they just joined the Navy on their own. I would say a good portion of them did not have additional electronics training.

Williams: Let's go back to before the war. You said you chose the Navy because you didn't want to be drafted. Did you feel like those were your only two options?

Ritter: At that point that in time it was my only two options because I had my draft papers in my hand which meant I was either going to go into the Army or some branch of the service such as that or go into the Navy where I could utilize the electronic training that I had.

Williams: So you were drafted? What was that like?

Ritter: Basically I wasn't drafted because I was due to be drafted. That meant that I was going to go into service one way or the other. Because I made the choice of going into the Naval Reserve that was the route I followed.

Williams: How did you feel about the draft at the time?

Ritter: Well, basically my feelings on that were being an American you need to support your government and your military. After having gone through it, I look back at it as it was a super good training for me as an individual. I think it's something that every young man should at least consider. I'm not saying that everybody has to do it, but it's something they should at least consider.

Williams: Would you support a draft today? What are your feelings on the draft now?

Ritter: Well, I think it's been proven that our military has suffered because we don't have the draft. Because we don't have the numbers of people. The good thing about is the people that we do have in the military right now are there because they want to be. Where if you had the draft, you're going to have a situation where some of your people may not be happy with the fact that they are in the military. But the training that you can get from it and the experiences that you get from it, I think are life forming.

Williams: That training and those experiences, how did they change your life?

Ritter: Well, I was married for four months before I left for service on active duty. I got to know my wife, but I think we actually developed a closer relationship after I was in service because we were writing letters back and forth every day. We wrote back and forth and communicated. When I was in the states, I would usually call once a week and talk to her maybe an hour, hour and a half, at a time. You learn, especially for people who had not lived by themselves, you learn to live by yourself and support yourself, but you also develop relationships with your fellow shipmates, and you become part of a team. I think that's something that's very important.

Williams: Talking about you wife, tell me a little bit about her, how you met, and why you decided to get married before you left.

Ritter: My wife and I, we dated for approximately two years. We actually met through our church. She went to the same church that I did. We developed a relationship through the church, and then we just basically decided that we wanted to live together. So we got married. I was in the reserves when we actually got married. In fact, I had just finished FTA school when we got married.

Williams: How did having a wife back home maybe affect your mindset or outlook on the ship compared to a single guy?

Ritter: Well, I would say that it gave you something to look forward to. It gave you that will and desire to say, "Hey I'm going to do my job. I'm going to get back home and get back with my wife as soon as I possibly can." I think in that respect it gave you a confidence and a hope or something to look forward to to come back home.

Williams: What was it like getting those letters or opening them up? Describe for me what it was like to get one.

Ritter: Well that was something that you kind of got to the point where you looked forward to it. Linda has said the same thing. She looked forward to getting letters from me. Usually she got one about every other day or maybe closer. Like I said we wrote every day, so sometimes they wouldn't all get there at the appropriate time. They'd be grouped together, but at least it kept us in communication or in touch with each other. I looked forward to getting letters from her because it kept me abreast of what was going on back here at home.

Williams: How did those communication skills and the experience of being away from each other shape your marriage today?

Ritter: I think it's made it stronger. I think we developed, like I said, developed the communication and the feelings for each other. We were married for four months. We had basically just got started in our lives. Then I had to pick up and leave. At first, Linda wanted to go with me. I said there was no reason that she needed to go with me because I knew I was not going to be in California very long. I knew I was going to go overseas someplace. I said you might as well be at home with your family and your friends rather than being in California where you basically knew no one.

Williams: Do you guys have any children?

Ritter: Yes, I have two boys. My oldest one is 40 years old, and my younger one is 35.

Williams: Did either of them serve in the military?

Ritter: No, neither one of them have been in the military. In fact, there was no draft by the time they got old enough to be eligible for the draft. They had already disbanded the draft, so neither one of them went into the service.

Kranich: Back to the letters. What did you guys write about? Did you write about feelings? Did you write about the war? What were some of the things you guys talked about in the letters?

Ritter: Well, basically we just wrote about what was going on in our lives at that particular time. Of course I knew that I couldn't put everything in my letters to Linda that I would have liked to because that would have been information that they would have basically said was censored information or secret information that would allow people, if it was intercepted by the wrong people, to track what our operations were or something like that. So no, I didn't write everything back to her. Although there was never a time I don't think when there was any information that was disclosed that would have been detrimental to the ship or to myself.

Williams: Do you still have these letters?

Ritter: Linda still has some of her letters, and she kept some of that letters that she wrote to me. But we don't have them all, no.

Kranich: Do you mean that your letters were read before you sealed the envelope?

Ritter: The ones coming from me back to her, there was the possibility of censorship there. Although I don't know of any of them that were ever censored or read.

Williams: Other than that you couldn't give specifics, was there anything else you were ever afraid to share in the letters because you didn't want someone else to read it?

Ritter: No. No, writing a letter was just like you and I sitting here talking back and forth. We were just carrying on a conversation between the two of us only it was a written conversation instead of a spoken one.

Williams: When you were talking about your time in the service, you mentioned what it was like to be a part of a team and how important that was. Can you tell me a little about that team atmosphere?

Ritter: Well, the team atmosphere in the Navy, or any part of the military for that matter, you have to develop the team relationship in order to be able to survive. Individuals can have a very hard time of surviving if they are not part of a team. That's part of what your training and your learning is. You learn to function as a team rather than as an individual.

Williams: Other than the actual working together, like the team camaraderie and that kind of thing. What was that like?

Ritter: Well, a lot of the relationships that you develop with your shipmates was there were people that you basically their feelings and thoughts about life and your feelings and thoughts about life were very similar. Those were the people that you learned to associate with, and you had fun with them when you were on R and R and things like that. You went out and enjoyed life just like you would here at home except it was just a different individual.

Williams: Do you keep in contact with any of these Navy friends now?

Ritter: Yes, I've got one person that I definitely keep in contact with that was in my same division that I was in on the ship. I've got a couple others that I would like to make contact with, but I haven't been able to make contact with yet. I would like to keep in contact with all of my shipmates if I could do it.

Williams: How do you think Navy friendships are different than friendships you make back home?

Ritter: Well, I think you have the trust aspect of you learn to trust the people that you are with because you know that if you ever run into a situation there, you're going to have someone there that can basically have the same thoughts, same feelings, and same training as what you have. So you can develop that trust between the two of you, and that goes for the rest of your shipmates too. You learn to trust because it's a way of survival when you're in the service.

Williams: Did you find it hard at first to trust these people? Did it develop or was it just kind of automatic?

Ritter: Well, of course everybody was in the same situation that was being brought together. Everyone had a certain amount of training, so you knew that their feelings and their thoughts were very similar to yours. I would say that you probably developed a little quicker relationship of trust being a service person than it would've maybe for a person who was in regular civilian life.

Williams: So we mentioned that being in war strengthened your relationship with your wife, you gained how to work as a team. Is there anything else you think you gained from the military that you think someone who didn't serve wouldn't have?

Ritter: Well, I would say that I have covered pretty much everything that I can think of as far as the military and what it has taught me. It basically taught me a real

appreciation of life and what I have. It also gave me, as we were in some of the ports overseas, we got a chance see some of the living conditions and stuff of people over in foreign countries. You get an appreciation for what you have here in the United States because a lot of those people over there have nothing compared to what we have here in the United States. We need to really appreciate and protect everything that we have here because we don't know how good we have it until you've actually seen what has been in some of those foreign countries. Their lifestyle, their quality of life, is not what it is here in the United States.

Williams: Can you describe those living conditions that you saw for me? What did you see?

Ritter: Well, in a lot of the countries that we were in, and of course we were not in that many of them, we were in the Philippines, Japan and in China, Hong Kong, and in most cases the best living conditions over there were maybe about a step above what we have in some of our slum conditions in the United States. You learn to appreciate what you have here based on what you see that people over there are living in and experiencing.

Williams: I guess just take me there. I'm having a hard time visualizing it. What did you see in these countries? What were the living conditions specifically?

Ritter: Well, a lot of the people, especially in the Philippines in the area that we were in which was around Subic Bay area, a lot of those people there they didn't have paved streets. There were no sidewalks. Basically you saw a lot of

poverty. People were poor. Maybe for their country, I guess you would say that some of them might have been in the upper class. But they were still in relationship to what we have here in the United States, they would be considered poor people.

Williams: What were they living in?

Ritter: A lot of them were living in shack-huts or shack-homes. We didn't have homes like we see here in the United States. They weren't brick homes. They weren't nice-sided buildings. A lot of them were just kind of piecemeal put together, and people were living and surviving in those. Some of the homes you could tell they didn't even have wood floors or anything like that. They were living on dirt floors.

Williams: Did you ever interact with any of these people or did you just see it?

Ritter: As far as actually interacting with them, no I didn't. The one time that we probably saw the most of any time was when we went on one of our R&R trips. We went up to the Air Force base at Baguio in the Philippines. As we were traveling from Subic Bay up to Baguio, we saw and went through a lot of towns, and like I said they were basically just slum towns. In relationship to what we had here in the United States, they had not near the quality of life that we have here.

Williams: Seeing that kind of poverty, did it affect your life or change anything when you came back home for you?

Ritter: It basically made me appreciate what I had when I got back home. I also learned to develop a feeling for some of the people here in the United States who live in sort of slum conditions but maybe not what you would call real heavy slum.

Williams: Have you ever been back to any of the countries that you visited on the ship?

Ritter: No, I haven't. I haven't been overseas any.

Williams: Specifically, what aspects of your life did you appreciate?

Ritter: As far as military life?

Williams: Life in America.

Ritter: Life in America. Well, for one thing I had a good job when I got back home. I continued to have a good job clear up until the time I retired. Living conditions have been good. The one thing that probably disturbed me more than anything was that when we came back from service, it didn't seem like there was the appreciation of our soldiers coming back home that we have had in other wars. Some of the boys I think had the same situation that were in Iraq and Afghanistan. They basically put their time in. They came home, and the people back home weren't appreciative of what they had committed and what they had done for them.

Williams: Personally, was there anyone that made you feel unappreciated?

Ritter: No, I don't think there is anyone who has actually made comments or contact to me that has tried to discourage me or change my line of thinking as far as how I feel versus how they feel.

Williams: You talked about having a good job when you came back. What was that job?

Ritter: Well, when I got back from service I was working for Magnavox Corporation here in Urbana. I was working on military contracts for Magnavox at that time. I knew I had a good job when I was there. Unfortunately, Magnavox plant closed here, and then I went into regular civilian life as far as civilian jobs.

Kranich: Bob, when you came back how were you received? Did you wear your uniform in public, you know that kind of thing?

Ritter: Basically when we were traveling, anytime we were in route from one location to another we had to wear our military uniforms. But like anyone else once I got back home my military uniform came off, and I tried to blend into the population just like another individual.

Williams: Why did you feel like you had to blend in?

Ritter: Well, I didn't want to have my military uniform on and stand out as 'hey, there's a soldier.' I just basically wanted to be a common ordinary person just like everyone else.

Williams: Why? Why didn't you want to tell people you were a sailor? Why did you just want to be a common person?

Ritter: Well, that's just not my nature. I guess you'd have to say that I'm not a proud person that likes to boast about what I've done. I just want to be part of the regular population, and do what I do because of what I know how to do.

Williams: So you didn't feel pressure from anyone to blend in, it was just you personally?

Ritter: No, it was just my choice.

Kranich: Bob, when you talked about the draft you said it might be good it might be bad because people would serve who didn't want to. Did you ever meet any of those folks? If so, what do you remember?

Ritter: Basically, I can't say I've run into anyone that was openly opposed to the draft. I think there were a lot of them who maybe didn't think they were draft material. I think a lot of that has proven out in the last few years in the fact that people aren't rushing to join the military. They are just willing to let the other person to do it. That is one of the things that I think is going to maybe come back to bite the United States is the fact that we're not going to have the qualified people that we need or the people that want to be in the military.

Williams: If there hadn't had been a draft, would you have considered joining the military?

Ritter: I think as long as I had a good job here I probably would not. Of course once I got married I knew that was going to change things too. Because when you are in the military, unless you're in a service that you're basically land based someplace, your wife cannot be with you. In that respect I would say that a lot would depend on the circumstances. I had one cousin who was a life career person in the military, in the Navy. In fact, he was one of the people that had a lot of influence on getting me to go into the Navy because he said that you will experience things in the Navy that you probably will never get to experience in your life otherwise. He said, "Therefore, I think if you can you need to take advantage of it, but it needs to be your choice to go into the military and not feeling like you're forced to go."

Williams: Do you feel like it was your choice to enter?

Ritter: Yeah, I would say it was my choice to do what I did.

Williams: What was your opinion of war and the Vietnam War before you actually went?

Ritter: Well, basically I don't know if I had an opinion because the war was going on before I actually went in. In fact, I think the Vietnam War actually started back in 1955 which at that point in time I was only ten years old. Being at that age, like any other young child today, that was something that was the least in my thoughts or worries at that point in time. As I grew older and the Vietnam War began to escalate and get bigger, then I started to become a little more involved. But until I actually got out of high school, I don't think I was ever

that concerned about the military or what the military was actually doing. I just thought they were there as our protectors, and that's basically how I looked at it.

Williams: How did you get these views? How did you develop those views of the military?

Ritter: Through my upbringing, my parents, what they taught me, and how I basically approach life. As far as when you're in school, you study history a little bit. You learn that there are places where there's oppression. Therefore, you have to learn to live with that. That's just basically how I look at life I guess. It's just part of it.

Williams: Were either one of your parents in the military?

Ritter: No, I had several cousins that were in the military. Most of them were in the Korean War. I think they were all in the Korean War. A couple of them were in World War II, but that was it.

Williams: So then you said before you went to the war you didn't really have an opinion on the Vietnam War. Once you got there, did you develop an opinion?

Ritter: I would say no. I think that there again it was just part of my life experience. I knew I was in the Navy. I had a job to do. That's pretty much the way I approached it. I never felt bitter toward the world. I never felt bitter toward the Navy or the military, either one.

Williams: Did you ever think about the purpose of the war or what you were fighting for? Or was it just your job?

Ritter: Basically, I thought about it in the fact that I knew what the United States was trying to accomplish. We were trying to keep a country from being overrun by the Communist regime of North Vietnam. It would be just like if somebody came in and tried to take over the United States. We basically were there to help them protect the South Vietnamese against the North Vietnamese.

Williams: I want to start with that I saw while scanning through your book before this something about a friend and you making a donation to the memorial. Can you tell me a little about that friend?

Ritter: You mean the one that was killed during the Vietnam War? Well, he was actually a year younger than I was, but we were good friends, grew up together and went to school together. He went into the military right after he got out of high school I think. I basically was rather shocked when I got the word that he had been killed over in Vietnam.

Williams: Where were you? Where was this when you found out?

Ritter: It was probably, I think he was killed in early ’67. That would have been when I found out about it.

Williams: Was this when you were in the tech school?

Ritter: Yeah, this would have been when I was going to FTA school.

Williams: How did you find out? What was it like to find out?

Ritter: Well, I think, of course being from a smaller town, when word came back to the town that he had been killed over in Vietnam of course everybody was a little bit saddened and concerned. How did it happen, and where it happened, and all that kind of stuff. I wouldn't say that it changed my life or anything. It was just one of those unfortunate things that you lost a friend, and you knew why you lost a friend. And that was it.

Williams: Since at this point you hadn't been to the war yet, did it change your view on the war or on going to war or anything?

Ritter: I wouldn't say it did, no.

Williams: How did you find out? Did you get a phone call?

Ritter: No, I didn't get a phone call on that. It was just, like I said, we were a small town and word got back to Farmer City. We knew about it. His brother and I went to school together, so we were friends. Of course everybody pulled together and helped each other through the situation.

Williams: The paperwork that was in that book, can you describe what that was exactly?

Ritter: Which paperwork was that?

Williams: It was the thing with his name on it, said something about a donation I believe?

Ritter: No, it wasn't a donation that I made. It was anybody that wanted to donate to this. It's actually part of the traveling Vietnam War wall that they had. You can make donations to that in memory of someone who was killed during the Vietnam War.

Williams: So did you make that donation or did someone else and you just found that?

Ritter: No, that was just information that I got. I have not made a donation to that.

Kranich: Can you tell us the name of your friend and the circumstances of his death?

Ritter: His name was Fred O'Malley, and he was basically an infantryman on a tank and was shot by a sniper while he was on the tank.

Williams: Have you been to the memorial or seen the traveling wall at all?

Ritter: Yes, I have seen the traveling wall of Vietnam. It's very similar to the actual wall except not near as big, and it's not made out of the granite wall like the real thing is. I forget now exactly how long, but it's probably 100 to 150 yards long the wall that they have. It only stands about probably two and a half to three foot tall. They have it stretched out just like the actual Vietnam wall is.

Williams: What was it like seeing that? Walk me through what was going through your mind when you were there.

Ritter: Well, it's very saddening to see the number of names that are on that wall and know that these were people that gave up their lives for a cause that they felt was good and that they were there to support. You don't realize the scope and

the enormity of it until you actually see the wall and see all these names of young men and women that lost their lives.

Williams: Moving on to a little more happier memories, the buddy who have that you say you still keep in contact with from the Navy, can you tell me a little about him? A good story from him on the ship or anything?

Ritter: Well, Larry and I, we spent a lot of time together. We got to know each other because we both went on the ship at the same time, and we had a lot of alike interests between the two of us. We got to know each other very well and were very close. He was the same rate as what I was: FT. Everything just pretty well clicked together. For one thing, he was a pilot. He liked to fly or he was an instructor as a pilot. So he took me up for an airplane ride while we were out in San Diego. We just basically developed a real close relationship between the two of us.

Williams: Do you have any funny or good stories about your friendship? Something on the ship that comes to mind?

Ritter: Of course he wasn't married at the time, so he was always giving me a hard time about Linda and I and the fact that I was married and he wasn't. He liked to give me a hard time about being married. He used to call me 'old grandpa'. He said, "Old grandpa has to get ahold of mom and talk to her." He would give me a hard time about that. He got married shortly after he got out of service. We still, like I said, communicate back and forth.

Williams: Does he live close to here?

Ritter: He lives in South Carolina, so he's not real close.

Williams: Speaking of your wife again, tell me a little about what it was like to come home?

Ritter: Well, there was one piece of paper that was in that book there that the chaplain on the ship basically passed these out to all the people as they were leaving the ship. It was basically a list of ten things he said you do and don't want to do when you go home. He said, "If you follow these rules, I think you will have a re-entry back into civilian life, and it will work out very well for you." It was a good guidance. He said, "You've been gone for in some cases, a lot of us had been gone for ten or twelve months at a time." He said, "Things are going to be different. Your wife has been taking care of things back at home, and you come back in. Don't try and take over everything all at one time." He said, "Just kind of ease yourself back in and let yourself get readjusted to be backing in civilian life versus military life." He said, "I think everything will work out great for you."

Williams: Did you take his advice? How was it readjusting back to being home with your wife?

Ritter: I would say that it was very good. Being back home, it was good to be back with her for one thing. It wasn't like I hadn't talked to her or hadn't written to her or seen her because she came out on two Labor Day weekends when we

were between cruises. She came out to see me in San Diego. Well, I would say it was just the transition from military life to civilian life was the biggest difference because you do things in the military a little bit different than you do when you're in civilian life. You're on a little more rigid schedule in the military than you are in civilian life. So in that respect, I think making that transition was probably harder than anything as far as getting back together.

Williams: When you came home, was she waiting for you? What was the process? Did you get on a plane? How did you get back home?

Ritter: Basically, we sailed back into San Diego on the ship. A lot of the wives were able to, their husbands or wives that lived there in the San Diego area, were actually able to meet the ship when we came in. In Linda's case, she was back here, and she didn't want to go clear out to California to be there. She said she often wished that she had been there for at least one of the returns that we made. The first cruise I got home, we landed and within a day and a half I was on a plane coming home on 30 days leave. I got home as quick as I could once I got off the ship.

Williams: Was she waiting for you at the airport?

Ritter: She was waiting for me at the airport.

Williams: What was it like to see her again?

Ritter: That was something that was great. Like I said, it had probably been 8 months or so since I seen her. She met me at the airport. I remember one instance

where the first time that I came home I was calling on the telephone to get ahold of her to tell her I had gotten into Chicago. Here I see her coming down the aisle in the airport, coming down to meet me because she knew approximately what time my plane was supposed to get in. I was in such a hurry to see her that I walked off and left my billfold laying there by the telephone. Fortunately, I got the billfold back. I didn't get the money that was in it back, but I got the billfold back about three weeks later. It was a real joy just to get back home and be able to be with her again.

Williams: You talked about how you exchanged letters. Was there any specific letter or a specific day where you remember getting one because you really needed it? And specific instance with that.

Ritter: No, I wouldn't say that there was any one letter that stood out in my mind more than others because I was always anxious to get letters from her, and she was anxious to get letters from me. In that respect, I would say it gave us something to look forward to when we got our letters. Not always was the mail delivery for the military, especially when you're on the ship, is not quite like what it is with the postal service today. Although the postal service probably is not perfect, they're a little more accurate and on time than what it is when you're on board a ship.

Williams: Do you guys still write to each other ever?

Ritter: Basically no, because we're together and we can actually sit and talk and communicate back and forth and not have to write letters.

Williams: In that case there were medals. What were they for?

Ritter: Actually I had four medals. One of them was the National Defense Ribbon. One was the Republic of Vietnam Ribbon. I don't even remember what the other two were now, but they were connected with the Vietnam War.

Williams: What did you get them for specifically?

Ritter: Well the National Defense Ribbon, every soldier that goes into active duty has that ribbon. Then depending on what branch of service you were in and where you served you get ribbons based on that from your branch of service.

Williams: What did it mean to you to get those ribbons? What does it mean to you to have them?

Ritter: Well, I would have to say it identifies you as a military person. Over the years it will identify you as where you served and how you served or what you served. That one ribbon that I've got has three gold stars on the ribbon which means that we spent three cruises over in Vietnam.

Williams: I don't think we touched upon this. Do you know any Vietnamese now?

Ritter: No, I don't.

Williams: Have you ever been to Vietnam since?

Ritter: No.

Williams: When you came home or maybe even before you left, did you witness any protests?

Ritter: No, most of the protests were going on during the time I was actually over in Vietnam on the ship. I didn't actually get involved in any of those that were taking place back here in the states.

Williams: Has the entire experience changed the way you view war in general?

Ritter: Well, I don't think it's actually changed my views on war. I guess the one thing that really disturbed me more than anything about the Vietnam War was the fact that we spent all of the time, invested the money and the lives in the Vietnam War, and basically came home with nothing. Because of the anti-war sentiment that was going on here in the United States, people didn't want to support it. Therefore, we basically said ok we're going to pull out and we left. It was really too bad because we basically had control of that war. There should have been a declaration of we won the war and that was it rather than getting out the way we did which I think was kind of a backward way.

Williams: What did you think of those people that were anti-war and the protestors? As a veteran, how did that make you feel?

Ritter: Well, it kind of makes me feel a little bit disturbed about what these people really value here in the United States. I don't think very many of them realized, what those of us that were serving over there, they didn't realize what we were investing and what we were trying to accomplish. I think the

only thing they were looking at was hey we were spending money over in Vietnam, and we weren't accomplishing anything. That really wasn't the case. We were in control of that war when we basically pulled out. I think it was a big political situation that we pulled out of, and we should have never ended it the way we did.

Williams: Why do you think people had the wrong vision of the war, well in your opinion you thought it was wrong?

Ritter: Well, I don't really know why people feel the way they do. As I stated earlier, I don't think people really realize what we were trying to accomplish over there. If they would have just followed through on it, I think could have accomplished a lot of what we were working to do. That was to show the people of North Vietnam that they could not come in and take over a country and say we're imposing our lifestyle on you. We want to let you to develop your own lifestyle. I think that in almost every circumstance, especially in the Vietnam War, the Afghan War, and the Iraqi War, I think all three of those were cases where we were trying to keep a country from having a government imposed on them that they didn't want. That was our whole purpose behind why we were involved.

Williams: Going back to your time on the ship, you said you shot the guns a lot. Was there any one day that there was a lot of shooting or something happened with the guns, or anything that was memorable? Any day that sticks out?

Ritter: Well probably one of the longest days that we had, there were actually two of them. One of them was the day that we basically took out an island that was off of the coast of North Vietnam. They had gun emplacements on this island that they were shooting back out at our ships. They were fortunate enough to hit two or three of our ships. Fortunately, we weren't one of them that got shot at, but it was our duty or job to go in and basically take out this island. We spent one whole day just basically shooting at this island and taking out the gun emplacements that they had on this island. Probably the other most memorable time that we had, this was right before we came home, we were down right next to the DMZ and there was a Navy pilot that went down in this airplane. He flew back out over the ocean and got back down and landed it in the water and was actually there. We got called in to give him support because the North Vietnamese were firing, trying to destroy him or kill him. We got called in to go in and we got some counter-fire off of that because getting in close and trying to save this pilot.

Williams: Two things. What do you mean by take out an island?

Ritter: Well basically they had a bunch of caves in this island that they had fixed up, and they had their guns on rollers so they could roll them in and roll them out. What we did was we used our 8-inch guns to actually fire into these caves and explode them, so that when we left the island that day it was actually smoking. That's basically what I meant when I said we destroyed the island.

Williams: You said you went in to save that pilot? Did you actually end up saving the pilot?

Ritter: Yes, the Air Force flew in and picked him up out of the water with a helicopter. Because of the fire that they were getting from the shore, from the Vietnamese, they needed somebody to silence those guns on shore so they could get their helicopters in and pick this pilot up. Yes, they did pick up this pilot and rescue him.

Williams: Did you ever find out or was there any way to know what ever happened to this pilot or who the pilot was?

Ritter: I don't know exactly. As far as I knew, he probably had minimal injuries because they were actually able to pick him up and take him into the helicopter and take him to the hospital or wherever he had to go to get taken care of.

Williams: What was the atmosphere on the ship like that day when you saved the pilot?

Ritter: Well that happened one afternoon when we were getting ready to go the evening meal. All of a sudden we had shells actually exploding, and we could hear them coming and hitting the side of the ship under water. We knew that we were taking fire from someplace. We didn't know what it all was about or anything, but we knew that it was serious. Within about ten minutes, the ship went to general quarters which meant that we were in a full military or war

status where we could do whatever we needed to do to take care of our mission.

Williams: Once the pilot was saved and you were out of enemy fire, what was that atmosphere like?

Ritter: Well, it was a feeling of relief, and everything just kind of settled back to normal. Everyone went back and finished up their evening meal. We went about our business just like normal.

Williams: Can you describe for me what did it sound like, what did it feel like when the ship was under fire?

Ritter: Well, I don't know how you actually would describe it, but they were small shells that were exploding in the water next to the ship. It was just kind of like a "plunk", and then you would hear the metal from the shell hit the side of the ship. That's basically all we heard.

Williams: Did you feel it at all?

Ritter: No. When you've got a ship as big as we had, you weren't going to feel too much through the water other than just the noise.

Williams: Was it really loud?

Ritter: No, it was very muffled.

Williams: Is there anything else that you think I've missed that you would like to share, or a story that means something to you about the Navy you would like to tell or anything? Anything you can think of?

Ritter: No, I think we've pretty well covered everything I've felt when I was in the service, and all my feelings of why I feel the way I do about military service in general. I really don't think there's any things that we haven't covered.

Kranich: You just gave us two really good stories. Was there ever a time when you were afraid?

Ritter: Probably the one time that I was more afraid than any I guess was the day that we went up and shot that island off of North Vietnam because that was my first really big mission that the ship had been on. I'd only been on the ship about probably a month and a half or two months when we went on that mission. It was a new experience for me to go through that type of mission and do the things that we had to do and take care of.

Kranich: That's awesome. So pick the story up from there. Tell us how you got notified of that mission. I know you told us some of the details, but take us back to that. How you got notified of the mission, and then what happened after that?

Ritter: Well we basically found out that morning when we went to quarters that that was our mission for that day was to go up in conjunction with about two or three other ships to go in and attack this island and take out these gun emplacements that were on the island. That was basically the way we got our

information was when we went to quarters that morning they told us what our mission was going to be. At that time, they didn't have any idea how long it was going to take, but they said we were going to be there until such time as we felt that the island was no longer a threat to the naval ships that were in and around the island.

Williams: When were you afraid exactly? If you could again walk me through it. When did you know the mission was over?

Ritter: Well basically we went to general quarters meaning the ship was at full readiness to go in and do whatever we had to do. Everybody had their own working spaces that we were assigned to for general quarters, and we were in those spaces. We were at ready. We had our equipment all up and working, had our radars on. We were basically ready to go. Then the one thing that they did during the time that we were in the mission, if you were not in part of the ship where you had to be on the outside part of the ship, they took everybody and moved them inside the skin of the ship so that there was protection in case we did receive counter-fire from the shore. People wouldn't be exposed to the shelling and stuff like that. We basically stayed at that condition until that afternoon which was about 3 or 4 o'clock I think in the afternoon when we finally finished up. Then of course they took us from our general quarters back to our regular standard watch conditions. Everybody went back to their normal routine.

Williams: What was it like going back to your regular routine? Tell me about that transition.

Ritter: Well, your normal routine was basically you either went on watch or you were ready at your equipment, ready to do any shooting or anything in case we got a call from the shore for some protection. The rest of the people were either going to go eat or some of them if they had watches later that night, they went down and got in their racks and went to sleep. Just like I said, you basically you got into your normal routine when you came off of general quarters.

Kranich: This is your fist big mission. You've got a little bit of fear. Then you bombard this island and take it out, and then you just go back to normal. How do you transition from that adrenaline? Is there an adrenaline that happens when you're doing that? If so, how do you transfer out of that adrenaline to more normal life on the ship? Was there a chaplain on the ship? Did people get a chance to sort of process this? Take us through the emotional and the adrenaline part of what you did and then going back to normal.

Ritter: Well, as far as the chaplain, we had a chaplain there if anybody needed to talk to a chaplain during any time, his door was open 24/7. You could go and talk to him any time you wanted to. As far as transitioning from the general quarters back to our regular time, I would say when we first started the mission there was a little bit of apprehension on all the crew's feelings because we didn't know what we were going to encounter once we started shooting on this island. As the day went on and we found out that we weren't

going to be receiving a lot of counter-fire from the shore, then people just kind of settled in. Everybody went about doing their job. That was pretty much the way life went the rest of the day. I'd say there was a point, when the mission first started, that there was a high point when everybody was sort of apprehensive. What are we going to encounter? Then as the day went on, things settled back in, and everybody went back to normal.