

Interviewer's Notes: This interview was done over a cell phone, so the tape recorder sometimes made noises from the static of the cell phone.

Transcriber's Notes: In the interview there is a pocket of accidental erasing. Since the interview was done over a cell phone some of the interview is inaudible.

Q: Today's date is November, 5 of 09. What's your birthplace?

A: Franklinton, Louisiana.

Q: And what's your name?

A: Uh, Dorten Clyde Bicham Jr.

Q: And my name is Amber Gosch. And this project is connected to the Veterans History Project at the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. And these will be placed, the recordings will be placed in the library at USI and the Library of Congress. The material will be used for scholarly and educational exhibition, presentation, and publication. What war or wars did you serve in?

A: Vietnam.

Q: Okay, what do you recall about the events leading up to the war? ¹

A: Which war?

Q: Any war, both, all wars.

A: Oh, all wars, World War II (inaudible) people in America were very content with their livelihood until Hitler decided to uh invade all of Europe and then after the bombing of Pearl Harbor (inaudible) we entered in the war and defeated the Communists.

Q: Okay, did it seem to be expected that every person would join the military?

A: Well as far as World War II the patriotism was everyone of age wanted to defend the country uh, uh, or this country the homeland. And so, there was a lot of pro-military during World War II.

Q: At the time were you in a relationship?

A: No

Q: Can you explain how you become involved in the military?

A: The draft.

Q: That's how you became involved?

A: Exactly. The selective service system.

Q: Did you pick the branch of military?

A: Yes, the Navy.

Q: Why did you pick the Navy over the other ones?

A: At that time, I had other relatives that were in the Navy and the Marine Corp and that was the thing I wanted to do.

Q: How did you mentally and physically prepare for the war?

A: Actually, after playing sports in high school and at a young age, I was in a rural area. I was hunting and fishing and at that time young people were more athletic than they are now. I was fairly physically fit to enter the military.

Q: Were you stationed with any of your friends or family members?

A: No.

Q: What were your first days of service like?

A: Very frightening. When you are a civilian and then you come into the military and where they want to conform you into a military structure, all your values and things like that. And all the military wants IS you to be a one force and so if you had different values and you became a military person; your values and your political ideas and things of this nature were secondary, and the military was paramount.

Q: Tell me about boot camp training and your experiences.

A: Well, when I arrived in San Diego, California, in 1965 at 2 a.m. after being on a flight from New Orleans from 5 hours, and we were allowed to sleep. Then, we laid down at 2 a.m. and approximately 4:30 a.m., the drill sergeants came in and turn over trash cans and holler making themselves known that we were no longer civilians, that we had to conform to military standards, and so it was quite frightening and eye opening.

Q: What were your instructors like?

A: Very meticulous and very authoritative and hinge. But yet they did have some compassion when some would fall shorter than others because we were 60 people from different parts of the United States, and so the different lifestyles of different people were totally different, and so they had to give us a little psychology as well as discipline.

Q: Can you tell me about the others in your platoon?

A: Well some were from Texas, some were from Arizona, some from California, and then there was a large number from my home state of Louisiana. And after the frightening experience of having your head shaved and fitted for uniforms that you have never worn in your life before, we all pretty much settled down to shining boots and shining belt buckles with brass things of this nature. We realized that we were all in this predicament together, and so we bonded, and we really became really good friends and comrades.

Q: Where exactly did you go?

A: I was in the Macon Delta uh in a place called uh Sa Dec which was spelled S-a-d-e-c, and I was a radio operator on a river patrol boat in River Division 573.

Q: Was there a place that you liked best?

A: Vong Tau which was an in-country R and R center, which stands for rest and recovery or recreation, and after 3 months I went there. And then after 11 months, we had one out of country R and R, and I went to Sydney, Australia, and I thoroughly enjoyed the Aussies because they loved Americans.

Q: (laugh) Describe arriving. What was it like to get there?

A: Well, the women where we landed, there was a lot of Australian women at the airport, and they enjoyed our company.

Q: What was your job assignment?

A: I was a radio man, which was communications, Morse code and voice communications.

Q: What kind of equipment did you carry?

A: The only equipment I had was an M-16 and a 45 automatic, and then I had a radio which was considered a voice transmission- [cough] It was a PRC 25.

Q: Did you see combat? What do you remember about combat?

A: Yes, I did see combat. And it was a hard learning experience. Because your values—or instincts I should say, not values—but your instincts are to survive so there's things that when I returned, I had a lot of nightmares and a lot of sad feelings. And so, it was a terrible experience.

Q: Was it different than what you expected?

A: Very much so. When you are young and going to combat even though you're trained and all and know what to expect, you never realize that it will turn out the way it does until you know you are actually faced with it.

Q: Were you or others that you know treated differently because of gender, race, ethnicity or other factors?

A: No. Not at that time, no.

Q: Tell me about some of your most memorable experiences.

A: In the military or in more... ?

Q: In the military.

A: Well, I've had after spending an entire career in the military of over 20 years, I enjoyed the travel, I enjoyed the people, I enjoyed the camaraderie of people with the same values and the same drive as far as protecting our values and our sovereignty in this country. And it saddens me at this time in my life that there are so many people that really don't respect the flag or "In God We Trust" or things of this nature, and so it is a very puzzling thing this late in my life.

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Q: How did people move up in the ranks?

A: Totally by performance. It was considered, they call up or out. Either you moved up or they (inaudible), and so you always had to give 110 percent and 24/7, and your life was really the military during that time and still is.

Q: Did something happen to cause you to think you might die?

A: I beg your pardon?

Q: Did something happen to cause you to think you might die?

A: No, I didn't understand what you were sayin.

Q: Did something happen to cause you to think you might die?

A: Oh. A number of times. There were occasions where we were almost overrun, and the numbers were far more than ourselves. But fortunately, we had weaponry that, ya know, could suppress the numbers that were trying to overrun our position.

Q: Do you recall where you were when the atomic bomb was dropped?

A: I wasn't born.

Q: How did you stay in touch with your family?

A: Totally by letters, and then towards the end of my tour at Vietnam there were people—it was called Mars, m-a-r-s, and it was a short-wave radio that people were hand operators and they connected telephone calls from Vietnam to back in the states. Very similar with the internet now, and what is going on in the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Q: What was the food like?

A: It's not worth talking about. It was very bad.

Q: (laugh) Since you were in a different country, how did you communicate?

A: Totally by letters.

Q: What was it like communicating with the civilians?

A: We had a number of Vietnamese civilians¹; it was a cooperative effort between the military system's command at Vietnam and the Vietnamese government that allowed civilians to come on station. Barbers, the people that worked in the chow hall that helped cook the meals and things—they were called "hootch maids." Because your hootch was where you resided, or they would come in and clean up your place, and they did laundry and things like that. Overall, most of the people that came in contact at Vietnam were sincere, and they just wanted to be left alone to do their job or be a farmer or whatever the case might be, and war was really disruptive to them.

Q: What were your uniforms and clothing like?

A: We had war tiger greens, which was a battle dress uniform, and it was camouflage but it was the type of material that was to hide you. But they were somewhat comfortable, in the extreme heat of Vietnam, you know, you sweated through your clothing and so it's kind of like, you know, after a while they wear out, so they were more and more comfortable than originally because at first, they were pretty stiff.

Q: How did people entertain themselves?

A: The main thing we used to do was play dominoes, play cards. Some shot darts, others back then in the club they had shuffleboard, it was like a board game or whatever. But then others would shoot basketball; others would work in the weight room as far as free weights because there wasn't the types of machines they have now. Like universal machines; it was strictly free weights, uh you did things to keep you alert and physically fit.

Q: What did you do to take your mind off of the war?

A: Most people choose alcohol, but others reflected depending on their religion or whatever would have devotions and things like that. I normally wrote letters as much as I could and did devotions. I did go to the club and drink but since we were on call 24/7, you couldn't really get drunk because you were on, you could very well go lay down and then have an alert, and then have to go out on patrol again. And so, it was pretty much, you know a sobriety thing.

Q: What did you do when you were on leave?

A: Had a lot of fun. (laugh) Ate, ate a lot of extravagant food and bought a couple of cameras and enjoyed the female companionship.

Q: What did you think of the other soldiers?

A: Oh, well, we all were in the same situation and so some were better friends than others, but there were cliques even in combat where some would stick together, and it really depended on personality. Some were like you were saying earlier, some were a different ethnic group, so they tended to stick together. Others stuck together because they were from the same part of the United States, like a state or a region like the southeast or the northwest or the northeast, and so it really depended on, you know, what cliqued between you and someone else.

Q: What did you think of the other officers?

A: Well, again it's the same thing. Some officers, you know, were more conscience than others. Some were more out for their own game, and others were, you know, acceptable to the other people in the unit.

Q: Describe the relationships you developed.

A: Well, I have to this day some fond memories and some fond friends, though I don't really keep in contact with. I think where they are and what they're doing now, and I know that some were originally from Virginia, some were from Iowa, and others were from Texas and Oklahoma. They were

approximately my age, and I'm sure grandparents and things of this nature, but I've thought of going on the internet or whatever as far as finding some of the people that I recall.

Q: Describe the day your service ended.

A: Actually, it was a very joyful time. Especially when I returned for Vietnam because that's when I actually separated, and so it was a happy time being the fact that I was home safe again. But when I returned to San Francisco there was a lot of anti-war protest, and so I had to endure a lot of animosity; civilians that thought I was nothing but a militant or a soldier of fortune. And so, I did have mixed emotions because of the fact that they thought I was just a government killer, and I was really just, you know, a human being.

Q: What was it like to come home?

A: It was the grandest feeling I ever had to see my folks again, to get back to my roots, my hometown. It was it was a very, very memorable time and a very enjoyable time. My family embraced me, I was just so thankful that I did survive, and I returned home safely.

Q: What did you do in the days and weeks afterwards?

A: Well, I had some post-traumatic stress disorder which is now they call PTSD. And which I had sometimes, where all I could see whether I was awake or asleep was what I endured for a year. And some of the things that, ya know, that I'm not proud of but it was just part of survival. And so, I, fortunately enough, I was raised in a rural area and my family had a number of acres of land and during the day I would just walk in the woods and just get away, but it was a very, very hard time.

Q: Did you go to school or to work?

A: Actually, when I came back, I worked a little bit, ya know, and then I said maybe the next thing is to go back to school. And so, I reentered college and stayed a year, and all the people I was going to college with were, ya know, 45 years younger than I was. At that time Vietnam was still known and there were so many people that disagreed with what I valued or whatever, and so I reentered the military and then stayed 20 plus years until I retired.

Q: Did you stay in contact with other soldiers after the war?

A: No

Q: In what ways did the service affect your life?

A: It made me really a better person, more confident, realize all my faults and my inequities or whatever the case may be, but it made me realize how short life is and how to love life each day and take each day at a time and not worry about yesterday or tomorrow.

Q: How did your military experience influence your thinking about the war or military in general?

A: Well, as long as it's a war that needs to be fought. When were attacked we should respond. We should always defend democracy if it's here at home or anywhere in the world, and we should never

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allow people to overrun other people and to make them captives or the type of people like slavery. And that's what the military is all about, defending the people that, in fact, can't defend themselves.

Q: What differences do you see in terms of how people thought about war then in comparison to the war now?

A: Well, World War II was very positive, Korea was also positive to a point, Vietnam was terrible, a president's war, at that time it was Lyndon Baines Johnson from Texas. And it was a very unpopular war. The war since then, the Gulf War and the current war in the Mideast, whether it be in Iraq or Afghanistan is necessary because we were attacked at 9/11, and we should never allow that ever to happen again in this somber country.

Q: Okay, Uncle Dorten, is there anything else that we did not cover in the interview that you would like to talk about?

A: One thing I would like to talk about is the state of this country now. There are so many people now that are confused about our foreign policy in Iraq and Afghanistan and also the all the domestic issues here in this country, and it seems that we have lost sight of what this country really stands for. And that all people should be unified, and we have lost sight of that because of special interest groups and whether it be situations on a preservative or a level basis. But the main thing is we're one country under God indivisible with unity for all. And when people lose that, then we're doomed for disaster.

Q: Are there any other people we should interview for this project?

A: No.

Q: Okay. Thank you, Uncle Dorten, for taking the time out of your evening to interview. Do you have any questions?

A: Well, I want to be on O'Reilly after this interview.

Q: (laugh) Okay, I'll see what I can do.

A: Okay.