

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
VERNON L. CARLSON
U. S. M. C. and U. S. C. G.

2002

Carlson, Vernon L., (1941-), Oral History Interview, 2002

User copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 70 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 70 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Vernon Carlson discusses his Cold War service in the Marines, and later enlistment in the Coast Guard. He talks about trying to join the Navy, enlisting in the Marines, basic training at San Diego (California), joining an incentive platoon, and transfer to Hawaii. Carlson relates his duties with the 4th Marines as a wireman, military life in Hawaii, participation in the Marine drill team, and lining the road when President Eisenhower came to Hawaii to play golf. Stationed in Taiwan, Carlson touches upon war games with Chang-Kai-Chek's Marines, interactions with the Taiwanese, and military police duty in California. Upon his discharge from the Marines, Carlson moved to Milwaukee where he worked for several months before enlisting in the Coast Guard. He comments on his duties with the Coast Guard including cleaning the guns, radio and sonar operation, search and rescue, drug patrol, and work as a LORAN operator. During his second Coast Guard tour, he was on boarding crew which meant that whenever his ship stopped a boat, he had to board it. He speaks of one occasion where he boarded a Russian boat and then spent the night on board socializing. Carlson mentions his involvement in the Marine Corps League, use of the GI Bill, and the speed of promotions in the Coast Guard.

Biographical Sketch

Carlson (b. April 20, 1941) served with the 4th Marine Division and the Coast Guard during the Cold War. He was honorably discharged from service after two tours with the Coast Guard as a sergeant and eventually settled in Janesville, Wis.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2002.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, 2002.

Transcript edited by Abigail Miller, 2002.

Interview Transcript

John: All right, this is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, and we are doing an oral history interview here in Delevan, Wisconsin. I am sorry, in Janesville, Wisconsin. I am in the wrong town. And, this is with Vern Carlson, who will be telling us about his time in the Marine Corps and in the United States Coast Guard. So, Vern, do you want to start at the beginning: where were you born? Take it from there.

Carlson: Yea, I was born in Roosevelt, Minnesota, April 20, 1941. And my father was a, I guess, lumberjack and farmer, in them says. We moved all over the state. He finally ended up the last six months of the war, he ended up in the Navy CB's, over in the Philippines. And then he came back. I have two sisters. He got us. My mother was out of the picture.

John: I see.

Carlson: So, ah.

John: When did you come to Wisconsin?

Carlson: When I was in the Marine Corps, my folks moved to Wisconsin from Minnesota. My step-mother's relations lived down here in Milwaukee. So they wanted to find a better life here in Wisconsin, I guess.

John: How about school? Early school? Grade school, high school, things like that?

Carlson: Well, I remember going to a country school, one room school. Probably I had it in kindergarten or first grade, or something. It was very brief. And then--

John: Where was this?

Carlson: This was in Minnesota. Up by Thief River Falls. And I went to eleven schools in ten years, so. My dad worked on the railroad, too. So we were all over the place.

John: Oh, which railroad?

Carlson: Sioux Line, Great Northern.

John: My folks worked for the Eire, and we moved.

Carlson: Yea. Okay. I lived in North Dakota and Minnesota. For all my childhood. And I actually came, went into the military from Minnesota. But I went in the Coast

Guard from Wisconsin.

John: High school?

Carlson: High school, I went to the tenth grade. And my dad married a younger woman, for the second time. And the day I turned seventeen, I went into the Marine Corps.

John: Okay. And where was this?

Carlson: This was in St. Cloud, Minnesota.

John: Okay. Why the Marine Corps?

Carlson: That is a story. I wanted to go in the Navy, and I went down to the Navy recruiter. And he had that stupid clock on the door, that said, "I'll be back in twenty minutes." And I waited an hour. And I walked down the hall. There was a Marine sitting at the desk with his dress blues on. "Come on in, boy, Sit down." Okay. He says, "Well, what are you doing here?" I says, "I'm waiting for the Navy recruiter to get back." "Ah! Well, come on in and sit down. I'll talk to you. What do you want to go in the Navy for?" I says, "I want to be a frog man." "Well, we got them in the Marine Corps." And I says, "Oh, yea?" "Yea, we're better than the Navy." And he showed me a picture of an Ontos. It's a, almost like a, yea. 106 recoilless rifles. "How would you like to play with one of these?" I was seventeen. Or I was sixteen when I was in there. "Oh, yea!" I says. "That is a nice looking uniform you got, too." Then he started talking to me, telling me about the corps. And I wanted to be a sailor, but, well he said, "Come back and see me." And that Navy guy never did show up. So I went back and saw the Marine guy, and he finally talked me into going in.

John: Now, when was this? When you enlisted?

Carlson: This was in 1958.

John: 1958. Okay. Where did you do basic? Where did you go from there?

Carlson: Hollywood Marine. San Diego.

John: San Diego. Okay.

- Carlson: Flew out of, oh, I had my physical in Minneapolis. Flew out of Minneapolis on one of them big old TWA's. I think it was an eight hour trip at that time. Landed at San Diego. And I had read a lot of the military books while I was in school about destroyers and all the camaraderie, and all. My first time with the Marine Corps, I said, "What did I do here?" We got in the back of a six-by, at the airport. And the guy said, "Sit down, look straight ahead. Throw out the chewing gum and candy." I said, "Whoa!" Took us over to the base in a truck.
- John: I went through electronic school on the base. At the Marine Corps Depot at San Diego.
- Carlson: Oh, okay.
- John: I went through boot at Parris Island. Then to Great Lakes. It is a beautiful base. Of course, they have a lot of cheap labor to keep it looking nice.
- Carlson: Yea. Especially when you rake the grass. Know what that was? That was dirt. Quonset huts.
- John: How long was basic?
- Carlson: It was three months when I was in.
- John: And then after that? Up to Pendleton?
- Carlson: No, well, I had a little trouble in basic. If you want to hear it.
- John: Yea, sure.
- Carlson: At the rifle range, I made it, I started with Platoon 134. Went to the rifle range. And, you know how spunky young Marines are.
- John: Oh, yea.
- Carlson: The guy didn't give me the Lubriplate for the M-1 rifle quick enough. So I grabbed it away from him, and he smacked me. And I twisted around and sat on my ankle. And I broke the little bone in my leg. So, there I was, hobbling around. Going to see the DI and saying, "Sir! The private has a broken leg." And he gives me that, "What the hell do you know? You the doctor, or something?" I said, "Well, it hurts." I walked around three days on that, going back and forth to the doctor. And they put me on light duty, anyway. Put me in another six-by, take me

to Balboa Naval Hospital, in San Diego. I am walking three days on a broken leg, and all of a sudden the corpsman run out with a wheel chair, and “Boy, you got to sit down. You got a broken leg!” “Oh, yea? Thank you.” First thing out of their mouth: did the DI kick you? I said, “No, I was fighting.” You can’t say you were fighting. I said, “I fell down the stairs in my tent.” Right!

John: That locker box.

Carlson: Yea. I spent three months at Balboa Naval Hospital. I watched my platoon graduate. That hurt. Mentally. I was sitting there. “Aw, man I got to go back through this?”

John: I am laughing. It’s not funny, but I understand it.

Carlson: Then I started on the way back. I got to the rifle range, so, I think I had to complete that when I got back. But, first thing they do is give you that damned M-1 rifle, and you are supposed to memorize the number right away. And keep it with you. So, later, I got my sea bag, and went in to the office to do the paperwork. And I come out, and there is no M-1 rifle.

John: Oh, boy.

Carlson: I come back. “There is no rifle out there.” And this guy: “You lost your rifle? You are dead meat! What is the number?” he says. Boy, they gave me an hour of hell just for that. I left the rifle out there. And then they put me in another platoon, and I ended up in an incentive platoon. I struck a right guide right after I got back. Because I was senior. Three months. And, believe it or not, I enjoyed that platoon. They had crusty old sergeants, from World War II. They would tell you bed time stories. You studied history every day. And you did a five mile run in the morning, to start off with. And everything, it was the gung-ho-est, it got me, by the time a month went by and I got out of there, I was, we sang the Marine Corps Hymn every night before we went to bed. We were so gung-ho. And so I finally graduated with Platoon 187. And then we went to ITR [Infantry Training Regiment] at Pendleton. And I did okay in ITR. And the staging regiment for overseas. They put that right by the brig. So you can hear what goes on over there, and you are a good boy.

John: Yea. Yea.

Carlson: And I went to Hawaii. The beaches of Hawaii. I spent two years in Hawaii.

John: With the 4th Regiment?

- Carlson: First Marine Brigade. It's a regiment and an air wing. Supposed to be fast deployment.
- John: Okay.
- Carlson: So I was there from '59 to '61.
- John: What was your MOS there? [Military Occupational Specialty]
- Carlson: I was 0311 when I got over there. And then I got into 2511 which is a wireman. Climbing telephone poles, and the EE-8 telephone, and the switchboard. I liked that. I really did. I was in H&S Company, but I was attached to Foxtrot Company, infantry company. And I was their wireman, along with radioman, and stuff.
- John: You had two of the most precious things. You had a TL-29, the pliers and the knife, and you had all the comm wire you could get to tie stuff up with.
- Carlson: People would use my comm wire to tie stuff. I'd be stringing it, and "Hey, the phone is dead!" Some dummy needed the comm wire.
- John: So you were in Hawaii for two years?
- Carlson: Two years.
- John: How long did you enlist for? How long was your enlistment?
- Carlson: Four years. There again, I think it was a three year enlistment, and the guy says, "Well, if you go for four, you're liable to get a better duty thing." They still gave me a rifle and 0311. I wanted to be a sea-going Marine. I wanted to be on a ship. I still have a lot of sailor in me. But I liked the military, too. I never did get to be sea-going. And, okay, in Hawaii, it was kind of boring. I mean. Nothing to do. Rifle inspection every day. And we never went to the field that much. I don't really enjoy going to the field. One of the more, well, two things happened in Hawaii that really stick with me. And one was a little girl had cancer in her home town back here, sent her to Hawaii with her folks. And, for some reason, she wanted to see a Marine drill team. That is the first time I ever volunteered for something like that. And so we drilled for about two weeks. Did the Queen Anne salute, and everything.
- John: I remember that.
- Carlson: And they wheeled her out, just like an officers' platform. And a tear came to my eye while I was doing it. This little girl was sitting there, looking at us. And we

are going through that.

John: That's great.

Carlson: And the second thing is, we all had to line the road for Eisenhower when he came over to play golf. Stood with our present arms, both sides of the road. And he drives by with his entourage. To play golf.

John: I never got to Hawaii, except for breakfast. We dropped in there to get gas and breakfast, flying back from Japan. How expensive was it. I heard a lot of guys say it was expensive.

Carlson: I got paid \$40 every two weeks, and I probably went on liberty and went through that in one night, and spent the rest of the time in the barracks. And, it was really expensive. And then we were way out in the middle of nowhere. The Marines are always, you have to go over the mountain to get to the town. So, once every two weeks, you would get a limo with the rest of them.

John: What was the base there, the camp?

Carlson: Kinehoe. Marine Corps Air Station. And we went out in the field once in a while. Place called Wyconne. I don't know where that is at. And in the Marine Corps, it's funny, you always got to look pretty. And when we, we used to go out for the day, and come back. And we'd put milk cartons in the pack, so they were nice and square and looked good. Okay. So, we got out there, and "We are going to stay overnight, guys." Bring out your shelter-halves. And everything. And we go, "What?" And over there, we are on the rainy side. So we had ponchos. Lucky. Ten of us had ponchos. And we strung those up as much as we could. And I couldn't get in. I was on the outside, and it rained all night. And I'd just flop over into a mud puddle. And try to get back where it was dry. I thought, heck with it. I gave it up and I just laid there, right in the mud puddle, and slept all night. Rifle got all rusty. And this was close to a pineapple field. And the night before, the farmer drove up with his trailer load of pineapples. He said, "I know you guys are probably going out in the field and get them, so we're going to cut them the right way, and give them to you here. So please leave the field alone." No problem. So we had pineapples. And then they used to take us to the beach and have a little beer once in a while.

John: Beach party, beer party. I remember that. They'd give us two cans of beer, but then you would go after the guys that didn't drink and try to get theirs.

Carlson: Yea. I didn't drink that much. Well, it didn't take much, anyway, when I was that age.

John: And then, when did you leave Hawaii?

Carlson: I left Hawaii in 1961, I think. The Berlin Wall was just, I had a year to go and they were extending everybody, so it didn't make any difference to me. Berlin Wall. I got a little nervous at the end. I think I had a month to go, and that doctor over in Laos was having problems. I think his name was Carlson. But we got called up, all on the tarmac, full marching gear. We had the field marching packs. M-1's. Everything, ready to go. On airplanes, to head out. And I got a month to go, and I am, "I don't believe this." They are going to start shooting at me and with just a month to go. And they called it off. Now, I belong to the Marine Corps League down here. And I have a friend of mine that is the same age as I am. And he was in Okinawa. And we got to talking about it. And he went instead of us. The people from Okinawa went over there. So, instead of taking them all the way from Hawaii.

John: That would have been in--

Carlson: That was in '61.

John: Okay.

Carlson: So, I figured, he went instead of me. Then I went back to California. Oh, I missed one big deal. We had a big war game with Chang-Kai-Chek and his troops. Over in Formosa. This would have been '59, I think. And we were out there, well, we were aggressors. We put the red patch on our utility hats. Played in the jungles, and stuff. Like we woke up one morning and there were ships from horizon to horizon. Spooky, just looking at it. Those guys are for real.

John: You were with the Nationalists?

Carlson: Yea. We were with Chang-Kai-Chek's Marines. They had grease guns and we had regular stuff. And that was real interesting. We set up ambushes and stuff. We did a, and the people were fabulous. They didn't live, they had those little grass huts and a hibachi, or something, in the middle. And they would let us come in there and sleep. And eat.

John: This was on Formosa?

Carlson: Yea. We gave them stuff, too. And the little kids would fight over the cans. And we had one little kid cut his hand. And our corpsman went up and took care of him. It was pretty neat. And our one battle problem, I suppose, I never been shot at in war, but for a young guy, it was pretty interesting. Fun. We set up a

perimeter. We built a house in the middle of a highway and camouflaged it enough to that when the column came up, we could see them looking at their maps, and saying “Where in the world are we at?” And we made it so that they went on the wrong road, and they were all lined up, and we opened up on them. They just went crazy. And we had the umpires up there, too. They couldn’t believe it, we put a house right in the middle of the road. And that was one of the big deals. And, I got to give it to the corpsmen. We were cut off from our water for like two days. And I was thirsty. We were all getting ready to go down to this nasty old river where they were washing their clothes and peeing in the river. And he says, “Don’t drink that water. You are going to be sicker than a dog.” And we had a big, black corpsman, and he had two canteens. And let everybody have a sip or two. And he kept us from going, we almost just went down there. It was that bad. And then we finally got the water. You know. And he kept us from getting sick.

John: Yea, they were great. Corpsmen were, most of the ones I saw were about twelve years old, I think. But they were great.

Carlson: We had a little short guy. We’d play games with him. “Corpsman, to the front! Corpsman, to the back!” He’d be running up and back. And he loved to shoot the machine guns. He’d get up there and shoot the machine guns.

John: So, then, when you left Hawaii, and came back to--

Carlson: To Panama City. Well, actually, to Falbrook, California. I was an MP at a naval ammo dump.

John: Okay. Okay.

Carlson: And that is what kept me from shipping over. We had R&R in Japan, and I loved it. I was going to ship over for Japanese, duty in Japan. I’d have been in Viet Nam, of course. They put me in those MP’s but I didn’t like that. It was, I was on the main gate for six months because you had to have a secret clearance to guard there. The tower guard, and the guy walking the perimeter, and I was a lance corporal by then. Lance corporal was up in the tower. And the roving patrol. I didn’t have my driver’s license, so I couldn’t do roving patrol. And I was on the main gate for most of the time. And what I did, I had a friend of mine that was in jail. I wanted to get out of it so bad. I hated it. All the spit and polish. So it took me six months before I got me up in the tower, and they must have thought I was pretty honest by giving them a guy that was in prison to contact. And then I got out, from Falbrook, California. That was on the backside of Pendleton.

John: You were, then you were in for four years?

Carlson: Four years.

John: Okay. Okay. Then, this would have been about--

Carlson: '62.

John: Okay. What did you do when you got out?

Carlson: Well, I came to Milwaukee. Where my folks were. The first time. Got work in the factory, worked in a foundry. Up there in [Unintelligible] that was a tough life. Always had it in the back of my mind that I wanted to be a sailor. So, I went down, you had to go to the Coast Guard to get your seaman's papers. To be a merchant seaman. So that was the second mistake. And there, the guy says, "Well, you being a Marine, and all, you can't get any seaman's papers without being a seaman for a while," or something. He says, "You got to talk about going in the Coast Guard, and in there you can get your papers, and stuff." And so, well, there wasn't too much else to do. So I says, "Well, I'll give it a try." And I signed up with the Coast Guard.

John: How long between when you got out of the Marines and--

Carlson: That was three months. I had spent the summer goofing around. I had just turned twenty-one when I got out. I was never twenty-one in the service. Then they sent me to Cape May, New Jersey.

John: Was that their boot camp?

Carlson: Oh, and then they had one at Treasure Island. I didn't go that way. And I got, I got a little, there was a paratrooper, actually the Marine Corps kind of set that up. But they screwed it up. It was similar to a Marine Corps boot camp but former servicemen didn't have to do the whole. I only had to do three weeks. Because I was in the Marines.

John: Marching and saluting, and all that.

Carlson: That was what you had to learn, what is a davit, what is a boat? This is a boat. So, like, you take a test and when you pass the test, and you know what a square knot is, and all that, you got out of it. And I had a guy from the 101st Airborne, he was in there. And he was a little jealous because I only had to do three weeks. When he came in, you had to do the whole nine yards. So, I got into photography there. I should have stayed. I wanted to get on a ship. Dummy. They sent me to Florida, out of there. And I got to Myrtle Beach, that is the life boat station. And there my

Marine Corps training came in handy. They used M-1's for shooting, they call it a monkey fist. They shoot a line to rescue a boat, a small line. Well, they used an M-1, or, well, they had the M-1's. And he was showing us how to take one apart and put it back together, and he couldn't get it back together. He was a first class. And he started puzzling over it. And I raised my hand. "Hey, I had four years of putting those things together." And he said, "How would you like to be in charge of all the guns? Clean then and stuff. Keep you out of chipping and painting." "Well, give me that job." And that was it. And whenever there was an inspection or something, they had me out drilling the troops. So. And then I went to Key West sonar school. I was a sonarman in the first hitch in the Coast Guard. Put me aboard a ship in Portland, Maine. Out of Cook Inlet. It was the flagship. We had three ships there. This was the flagship.

John: This was a cutter?

Carlson: Cutter. Three hundred and eleven feet. And we did ocean patrols. Like ocean. And then they didn't have the satellites, so we did weather patrols. Twenty-one days. I think it was about thirty days. And then we'd go to Bermuda for search and rescue. And we worked with the Air Force down there. In Bermuda. Whenever there was a problem, they would run a vector out for us to go on, and then an airplane would go back and forth across the ship, looking. One day we went out, there was fifteen foot seas. And a guy in an open boat had lost his engine. And he came up missing, officially. You know. Local guy. And he was smart enough, he threw the engine over the side and then the boat was under water, but it didn't sink. He stayed in the boat. And he had been out there for six days, or something. And we figured, oh, let's go out and come back in. If he's out there, he is going to be gone. And we get going down this vector and it was the change of the watch, right at noon. And the bosun's mate of the watch was heading up to the bridge, and we almost run over the guy. He had a blue shirt on inside of a boat, and fifteen foot seas, it is hard to see. And he just happened to look up at the bridge as he was walking in. And that was the most Godly guy I ever met in my life. He couldn't believe it. And we figured he was a gonner, you know. We were just going to go through the motions. And we picked him out of there. He was a lucky man.

John: When you say, when you went out on search and rescue, that was mostly fishermen and commercial?

Carlson: Yea. And both. We also went out. There was dentist had bought a forty foot sloop, right? And evidently, he didn't read the book right. And what he did, first of all, it got stormy, and he didn't take the sails in fast enough, so they blew off. Then he let the lines go over the side and started the engine. Lines got in the engine and stopped the engine. So he didn't have any power. And then he calls the Coast

Guard. Second mistake. First of all, we can't go under ten knots, when we are towing something. And we got him. Towed, we sent over two guys in wet suits to be aboard with him. And they had flares, just in case anything else. And we tried to go as slow as we could. And these were fifteen fouts. And we tried to go as slow as we could, but it was breaking him up. And so, ten o'clock at night, two flares went up, and we had to go over and bring them in. We brought the boat alongside and it banged into the ship. It broke up. We got everybody aboard, and the boat sank in ninety foot waves.

John: They say you don't have to be smart to have a boat, just rich.

Carlson: Yea.

John: You see that a lot.

Carlson: But it's just unbelievable why he would do that. Let the lines go over.

John: How long did you enlist in the Coast Guard for? What was the tour?

Carlson: It was four years. But I did two four years tours.

John: You did two. Okay.

Carlson: That first tour, I was a sonarman, right. We worked on the radar most of the time. And like on ocean station, we would do like air controllers do. We wouldn't control the airplanes but every airplane coming in to the United States we would contact, and talk to them. Get their air and speed, and send the info back to the coast. And if we missed a guy, then they would send out a bogie. They would have to go up and check him out. But most of the time, it was, we couldn't keep up with it. I don't know how those air controllers can do it, but I would lose one. "Whoops! I lost that one!" And then we would talk to them, and they let us talk to the stewardesses once in a while. And then we had the Royal Canadian Air Force fly over and they would talk to us some times. I think I got some cards. I sent some cards home to my wife. I'd give them the message, "Will you take a message?" We'd give them the message, and they'd send cards to our family.

John: Hey, that is great.

Carlson: Our own Navy was the one that wouldn't talk to us. Well, I don't know. They had those strange planes. I don't know if they were out sub hunting, or something. But they'd drop a Sunday paper and a Playboy to us once in a while.

John: Oh, that is good.

Carlson: Yea.

John: How long would you be out there?

Carlson: Thirty days. Twenty-one day patrol, and it would take about five to get out and back. And we were off Greenland, up in the Arctic Circle. Go on watch at midnight, and see the sun. Come out and see the sun. And see the icebergs. And the weather got a little nasty in the winter time. But luckily, I never was up there in the winter. They were out there with baseball bats, getting the ice off. Caught a subMarine one day. Evidently, he couldn't get down fast enough.

John: Oh, yea? Ours, or theirs?

Carlson: I think it was ours. They don't like to talk to you, either.

John: No. Especially, a Coast Guard ship.

Carlson: We snuck up on them. So, that was the first four years. There wasn't too much. A couple life saving deals. The second, I got out for seven years, and went back in.

John: To the Coast Guard?

Carlson: Yea. I went in as an electronics technician second. And I went to school at Governor's Island, New York City. And, funny, we would look at those tall towers there, the World Trade Center, right from Governor's Island. We looked at them all the time. They used to have cannons. We'd look at the cannons and say, "Man, what if one of those went off?" So, went there. And then they sent me to isolated duty right off.

John: What is isolated duty?

Carlson: I was in LORAN. That is long range aid to navigation. As an ET. It is like a radio station where you send out a signal for navigation. I went to the missile range in Eniwetok. In the Marshal Islands. Kwajalein, and Wake Island. There were three stations. And, actually, they used us for missiles. For back-up for the missiles, just in case something went wrong, because we were an antiquated system. I was there for a year. That was right at the end of Viet Nam, when I got out of there. History lesson for the Marine Corps. We landed at Eniwetok and they had a big sign up. They showed us everything. They left everything there. Old tanks, bulldozers. They just pushed them into the reef. Big old plane engines laying there. Everything.

John: I remember they had a desalinization plant on one of the islands down by Iwo Jima, when I was on Okinawa. And they were fueling it by going around to the islands and picking up tires. Just stacks and stacks and stacks of rubber tires that had just been abandoned there, and that was what they were burning in the plant that they were making fresh water from.

Carlson: There was a lot of metal out there. Yeah-- if I ever decide to do that.

[End of Side B, Tape 1.]

John: The other services for the most part are just practicing, but in the Coast Guard, you are earning you pay every day of the week.

Carlson: I enjoyed it. Probably better than I did before. I think I was too young for the Marine Corps. There were probably things I could have done. I read books on people that were there the same time I was, and they were doing all kinds of stuff. You know.

John: Well, what did you do those seven years between hitches in the Coast Guard?

Carlson: I worked at Power and Light, here. I am just part gypsy, I guess. And I leave that, and now I am a truck driver.

John: When you, well, toward the end of the time in the Coast Guard, what were you doing? Still doing the same thing, the ET?

Carlson: Yes. Well, I got off of Eniwetok and I went to North Carolina. On a life boat, no, we handled all the light houses. The beacons. No, we don't have light houses but beacons out on the ocean. And all the small boats from North Carolina. We did Wilmington, North Carolina, all the way up to almost the border up there. And we did New Smyrna Beach. No, that is in Florida. What the heck was the name of it?

John: In Carolina?

Carlson: Yea.

John: New Berne?

Carlson: Yea. New Berne. New Berne. No, Morehead City.

John: Morehead City.

Carlson: Morehead City.

- John: I sailed out of Morehead City on a Med cruise. Sort of a flat, not much there.
- Carlson: I used to get my hair cut at the Marine air base there. And we had to do, I'm not real high on heights, but those babies are out of the water pretty high. Lightning hit a fifty-foot antenna, right on top of one of those towers, and we had to go out and replace it. First of all, getting up to the tower was something else. Put us on an eighty-five footer and we went out there with our antenna. There was two of us. We had to take like a rope ladder. They sent down a rig to get us up to the tower, and then we had to climb another fifty feet in the air. And then put a fifty foot antenna on it. And, man, that boat, that eighty-five footer looked like an ant down there. And the wind is blowing. And we're sitting there, taking the antenna off, the broken one off and putting the good one on.
- John: I wouldn't have been able to do anything. I would have had my hands frozen to the ladder.
- Carlson: Yea. Well, I was a little nervous. And that was one of the spookier jobbers. We did a lot of drug patrol over that way. And I was on a forty-footer fixing the radio while they were out. What they would do, they would let these fishing boats bring in a couple of bales and then they'd get cocky, and they'd be loading them bales up so you could hardly see the boat. And they brought one in one day. Now, the military doesn't touch the smugglers, so they were all federal agents. We were out there to help. You know. Just to patrol.
- John: Then, the Coast Guard, you were military?
- Carlson: Yea.
- John: Okay. Because today they are--
- Carlson: Oh, yea. Well, they were under the Treasury when I was there.
- John: Treasury, okay.
- Carlson: Department of Transportation, now. The first time it was Treasury. I had a little problem with that. I went on leave from Eniwetok. I had to pay for my room because I wasn't DOD, Department of Defense. I was a third class, I was a petty officer, just like in the Navy. So, like I say, the Federals, they all had Thompson subs, and everything. They needed the radio, and we whipped up there on them. And all of sudden, they pulled their guns on us. We said, "We are coming over to give you our radio." You know, all excited. We gave them a hand-held radio they needed.

John: So, in total, you did what, twelve years in?

Carlson: Twelve years.

John: Yea. Yea.

Carlson: My last part in the Coast Guard, I was on a ship out of New Bedford, Massachusetts. And we were--

John: A cutter?

Carlson: Yea. One of the World War II cutters. The Bib. A three hundred and twenty-five footer. The Bib. It was, it had a couple of runs in with subs in World War II. And we were guarding a two hundred mile fishing limit, off the shore. And we would go check all the Russian boats and everything.

John: Oh, okay. Sure.

Carlson: As an ET, I was part of a boarding crew whenever we would go and check and make sure what kind of electronics they had. We boarded, we had a captain that was getting ready to retire, and he wanted to go out with glory. And Carter was having talks with the Russians at this time. Peacetime. This would have been in what? '76. So we boarded this Russian fishing trawler. The big boat. That had the little boats out there. And they put down the plank. We walked up there. And they were all wondering why we were carrying M-1's, or I mean M-16's, at the time. And they give us quarters. And we went up to the bridge. Felt sorry for the captain. He was an older guy, pulling his hair out. And he didn't have any authority. The commissar had the authority. So he had to wait for the commissar to come from the fleet. And what had happened, they had checked his books and they didn't have the right i's dotted and t's crossed, basically. And our guy wanted to bring him in to Boston, just for the glory of it. So it got late and they put us up. Real nice to us. They gave us blankets and sandwiches. And they rolled out a movie, even. In Russian.

John: In Russian?

Carlson: It was a detective movie, of some kind. And they were eating potatoes through the whole thing. And it was strange. Then they wondered, they kept asking us why we were bringing guns over. And we said, it was just part of the deal, you know. And the next morning, then, we left. And it was just funny, bring right in there, how the Russians were, you know.

- John: Because you hear about them.
- Carlson: Yea.
- John: But, to go on board. That would be something.
- Carlson: Spent the whole night there. Treated us pretty good, actually.
- John: Then, when you came out, you mentioned the Marine Corps League. One of the questions I ask everybody, did you get into any other veterans organizations? We'll get to the Marine Corps League, in a minute.
- Carlson: No. I've never been a joiner, as far as these things. Because I've never been around. I have always been gone. And I just happened to drive by one down here. Pretty fancy building.
- John: What, this is an ex-Marine asking a question like this, but what is the Marine Corps League like? The only experience I had, I bumped into a bunch of them having a party when I was at Great Lakes, and they were in Waukegan, and they invited us along, and we got an awful lot of beer to drink. What is the Marine Corps League? Is that like the VFW?
- Carlson: I suppose. But it's basically just for Marines.
- John: Just Marines. And do they have a post here in—
- Carlson: Yea. Right down by Beloit. And, in fact, I was going to give you a name of a guy that you can talk to. He was a radioman in Korea. He had three officers shot out from under him, while they were talking on his radio.
- John: Oh, wow. Bill Landers? Okay, I'll give Bill a call. Yea.
- Carlson: Well, it is just an organization, we all get together. We join, you get a card. They got a higher-up, they call the Devil Dogs. That is, the inner part, like the Masons. So, you got three grades of that, a Pup, and the a Dog, and then a Pedigree. You got to go to conventions to get them. Local is a Pup, and the middle one, you go to state, and then you go to Federal. And I went to a Federal once, and they do like Toys for Tots, the just got done doing that.
- John: Oh, yea. That is a great thing.
- Carlson: And then they re also involved in Fishing Has No Boundaries, for crippled people.

- John: Oh, yea. That's great.
- Carlson: Yea. We have scholarships, and that stuff.
- John: Getting together, and things like that. I write, and I was looking up, I want something, I was raised a Catholic, and I wanted something on a Protestant church, and I looked up Anglican on the computer. And that took me to Anglico, that was the Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, that I was in. And I see every now and then on the Internet that they are having meetings now.
- Carlson: Well, I am going on the first thing in March, fourteen of us are going back to San Diego. That will be the closest I've ever had a reunion.
- John: Now, this will be the guys from boot?
- Carlson: The guys in the Marine Corps. Going back to where we went to boot camp.
- John: Oh, that will be good. I haven't been to San Diego since--
- Carlson: Well, I guess they don't live in Quonset huts, but they said they got a few of them up so you can go see, look at them.
- John: Yea, I remember, we were in the stucco barracks, and the boot camp was across the parade field. I remember one morning, I was sitting there having breakfast, and I thought someone had grabbed the back of my chair, and was pulling it. And I turned to tell him, quit that, and there was no one behind me. And I looked out on that parade field, and they were having an earth quake. It turned out, for me, it was a big quake. For them, it didn't even break any windows. But it sure scared me. But that was a big base.
- Carlson: That was east coast?
- John: No, at San Diego. I went through boot at Parris Island. But I was an ET also. I went to Great Lakes, basic, and then San Diego for advanced. So, you are going back to San Diego to a reunion? That is great. Did you get the GI Bill?
- Carlson: Yea. I went to school. Truck driving school.
- John: Okay, okay. Did that cover most of your costs? Was that worth while?
- Carlson: Yea.
- John: It was. Okay.

- Carlson: Well, the school wasn't that good, but it got me a job.
- John: Well, yea.
- Carlson: At Sun Prairie, up there.
- John: Oh, yea. That black and, or red and white truck driving school up there?
- Carlson: Yea.
- John: I go by there a lot. That place has been there a long time.
- Carlson: I would have stayed in electronics but I wasn't that good, and back here, all you can do is fix TV's.
- John: Yea. The tubes and the soldering irons are gone.
- Carlson: Yea, you got to be updated all the time.
- John: This is interesting. I have done a lot of these interviews, but I have never talked to someone who has done both the Coast Guard and the Marine Corps.
- Carlson: One of the reasons I heard about the Coast Guard, when I was in the Marine Corps, I met two Coast Guards in Hawaii. And I was amazed at how fast they made rank. I mean, I was an E-3 when I got out of the Marine Corps. They were E-5's in two years.
- John: It was a small outfit. We had friends who lived next door to us. We lived in Virginia. Right when we first got married. And he was a ranking officer. He wasn't an admiral in the Coast Guard. I don't even think he was a captain. He may have been a commander. Which was still fairly senior. That was a very small outfit. And his wife was in real estate. She was a Realtor. And every time they would be transferred, they'd buy a new house, and fix the house up, and put in a patio, and do all this, and they'd live there whatever his tour of duty was. And they'd get transferred. And they's sell the house, and make quite a bit of money out of it, and they would just keep. I can't remember his name, but I think he was a commander. The Coast Guard wasn't that big an outfit.
- Carlson: No. I think it was as big as the New York police department. Yea, we had a guy, a first class sonarman, that bought houses in Maine and rented them out. By the time he left, he had a bunch of rental houses.

- John: Okay, this is quite a story. This is different. This is a different story. It is interesting. Ah, any thing you want to throw in there before we wrap up? Any stories, or anecdotes, or tales you want to get on the record?
- Carlson: Oh, I think most of the stories we did. But, you know, the military is kind of monotonous, and all of a sudden you get--
- John: How was boot camp back then?
- Carlson: Boot camp? It was tough. We used to duck walk, and that was illegal, but they did it anyway. You know, to strengthen your legs.
- John: I remember that. I remember I thought I was getting smart. I'd lag back, and they'd yell at me, "Hey, get up there!" And I'd say okay, and then I could stand up and run about three steps. But that didn't last long. They'd start hitting you with those swagger sticks.
- Carlson: Yea. They'd give you those little rabbit punches. When they'd get close to you. We had one DI that would give us father-son talks, and he'd have his saber out when we were doing it. At your Adam's apple. He'd say, "When do you think you are going to get married, son? You'll be eighty-four before you get married!" And we'd be, "Yes, sir!"
- John: Okay. And, now, you are driving. Do you do cross-country?
- Carlson: I do both. Local and cross-country. I even delivered to the old Balboa Naval Hospital. Used to deliver x-ray machines.
- John: Oh, yea? Out of Milwaukee?
- Carlson: Out of Milwaukee. GE. And I have one little story. When I started trucking, when I left the Coast Guard the last time, about three years later, I stopped in Kansas. Leavenworth, Kansas. At a mall, well, a shopping center. Had a big grocery store. I stopped to get my groceries sometimes with my semi. And I jump out of the semi, and I am headed up to the store, and a guy says, "Hey, Vern!" And I don't know anybody in Kansas. Yea. I walked up to him, and I recognized his face. He was an engineman on the last ship I was on. And we get, amazing as it is, start talking. He's based on the river up there. There is Coast Guard on the river, too.
- John: Once, the kids and I were on the Pennsy Turnpike, going somewhere, four or five or six, well, six or seven years after I got out. And we stopped at a rest stop. And the first sergeant from the comm company in Okinawa was there. Cecil Callaham was there, with his family. They were doing a pit stop. We were doing a pit stop.

Small world. Okay, well, that is it. This is interesting. You know, we have so many stories, well, especially guys from World War II, and those are interesting stories, but they all are very much the same. And this is different. This is very different.

Carlson: Oh, and another thing, the ship, the Cocannon that I was on, all those ships went over to Viet Nam, you know. And when I was getting, well, they was all hush-hush when I got out. If I would have stayed a little longer, I would have taken it, it was getting ready to go to Viet Nam when I got out.

John: Yea, they used a lot of Coast Guards there.

Carlson: Well, I didn't know it was going to Viet Nam. I would have stayed with it. I got out and I talked to some people back in Portland six months later and they said, "Nah, it went to Viet Nam."

John: I missed Viet Nam. I remember one day. I went in in January, '55, and I had eight years, four years active and four years reserve. And I came home from work one day, in January of '63, and my wife was pregnant. And she was crying. And I asked her, what was the matter. And she took this envelope and just threw it at me. It was from Headquarters, Marine Corps. A big brown envelope. Now, this was '63, and they were starting to call up the reserves, and I figured, Damn! They got me! So I did the bright thing. I had a bunch of drinks. And when I woke up the next morning, I opened it, and, here, it was my discharge. I should have opened it the night before. Okay. I'll take this back to Madison and they'll have one of the gals there type it up, and they will send you a copy. And this will go in the archives there. They've got several hundred of them, and they are interesting stories. I've got three WAAC's lined up, the next two weeks.

Carlson: I've got a neighbor here who was a Woman Marine during World War II, but she isn't feeling very good. I'd tell her about you.

John: Oh, that's too bad, because that would be a rare story.

Carlson: By the way, I do remember one thing. The end of Viet Nam, when I came out of Eniwetok, spent a year of isolated duty there. And I spent a year and a day, because of all the refugees coming to, they brought them to Wake Island. And the plane I was on, they were going to commandeer the plane to take the refugees. So we exchanged food, there was a lot of food on the plane, and we left the food and we took dangerous cargo, which was LP gas tanks, and that is how I got off. I can't believe, after a year, that they were going to hold me up and leave me out there.

John: Eniwetok can't be that big a place.

Carlson: It's two hundred feet wide and two miles long.

John: And you were there a year?

Carlson: One year. Me and the goonie birds. That is where they did atomic testing.

John: Yea. How many other guys were there?

Carlson: There was twelve Coasters - - Coast Guard, and about eighteen civilians. Run the power plant and clean the water.

John: That would be hard duty.

Carlson: I was the bartender out there, too. They'd bring in all the brass and I'd be sending the drinks and stuff.

John: Okay. I appreciate this, and I will--

[End of interview.]