

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

THOMAS HOWARD

Radioman, Navy, Vietnam War;  
Career, Navy Reserve.

2006

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**Howard, Thomas**, (1948- ). Oral History Interview, 2006.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 54 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 54 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Thomas Howard, a Westfield, Wisconsin native, discusses his career in the Navy and Navy Reserves, including service as a radioman during the Vietnam War. Howard tells of struggling to balance work and college at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, becoming eligible for the draft after dropping a class, and deciding to enlist in the Navy. He portrays some of the anti-war protests he saw on campus. At the induction center in Milwaukee, Howard states enlistees were arbitrarily split into groups bound for Great Lakes and San Diego, and he tells of sneaking to the San Diego side. After boot camp at San Diego, he tells of going through radio school, high-speed Morse code school, and a few months of teaching typing at the Naval Training Center San Diego. Assigned to an LST home ported in Yokosuka (Japan), Howard discusses bringing supplies into Vietnam and returning with homeward-bound Marines. He details doing duty aboard LCVPs [Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel] near Binh Tuy, supporting various operations in the Mekong Delta. He comments on the reconverted landing crafts, communications duty, being accompanied by “the Thumper man,” who handled an M79, and being vulnerable to hit-and-run attacks. Howard talks about checking river traffic for contraband: throwing rice overboard, frustration at being unable to communicate with the natives, and being shot at from the shore. Married a few weeks before starting duty on the LST, he recalls the anger of his captain at the news and having his time aboard a foreign-based vessel reduced from twenty-four to twelve months. Howard touches on evaluating Pinang (Malaysia) as a possible R&R location. He characterizes a civilian Chieu Hoi translator who, one day, jumped overboard and swam away. Howard mentions transporting Vietnamese prisoners and talks about picking Navy SEALs out of the river to give them hot meals. He states he tried not to make close friendships on the boats due to casualty rates. When his time was up in Vietnam, he tells of being sent to Saigon and spending the next two weeks sleeping on the floor of the airport at Tan Son Nhut Air Base because he didn’t want to stand guard duty in the city. Howard talks about the plane ride home, getting showered and deloused at the airport, and being surprised at how much war protests had escalated. Assigned to Naval Amphibious Base Coronado (California), he tells of working in Beachmaster Unit One, Alpha Team, to train amphibious squadrons deploying to the Western Pacific. After his discharge, Howard talks about getting his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, drinking with the student veterans club, and joining the Navy Reserves. He speaks of spending his two-week blocks of yearly active duty at Military Affiliated Radio Systems stations around the country, in Hawaii as a flag writer to Commander in Chief Pacific, and as a classified court reporter at courts-martial. Howard reflects on the monetary benefits of being in

the Reserves, being promoted to chief, and being forced to retire. He details honing his skills as a “comshaw artist,” someone who works around the rules to procure extra stuff. Howard comments on being uninterested in veterans’ organizations and being hesitant to discuss his experiences in Vietnam. He discusses the psychological repercussions of his time in Vietnam: having recurring nightmares, becoming an alcoholic, and disliking crowds. In Vietnam, he tells of using concussion grenades to fish and trading the fish to villagers for pigs, which he was in charge of cooking. Howard portrays a Reader’s Digest reporter who had to be medevaced out after seeing a ship captain killed.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Howard, born in 1948 in Chicago, lived on a series of farms in Illinois and Wisconsin and graduated from high school in Westfield, Wisconsin. He enlisted in the Navy in February of 1968, was on active duty until January of 1972, and served in the Navy Reserves for an additional twenty-three years. Howard worked for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and eventually settled in Dodgeville, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2006

Transcribed by Alis Fox, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2007

Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

**Interview Transcript:**

Jim: Today is February 6th, 2006. My name is Jim Kurtz, and I'm sitting in the sunny cook's room, back room, interviewing Tom Howard about his experiences in the military and other sundry things. Tom, when and where were you born?

Howard: I was born in 1948 in Chicago.

Jim: And the date?

Howard: On the 16th of February.

Jim: Okay. In Chicago. And did you grow up in Chicago?

Howard: No. I lived there for six years, and my parents—or my mother remarried and we moved to a rural farm. My dad was a hired hand on grain farms and after a series of farms in Illinois that we moved to, it seems like every year or two, we eventually moved up to Central Wisconsin by the time I was in seventh grade. I was on a dairy farm for several years until my dad got a bad heart, couldn't farm anymore, and we moved into town in Westfield. I went all the way through high school in Westfield and from there—

Jim: What year did you graduate from high school?

Howard: I graduated in 1965.

Jim: Okay. And at this time when you were growing up in Westfield, were you familiar with what was going on in Vietnam, the Cuban missile crisis and any of that type of thing?

Howard: Only peripherally. I wasn't really too much interested in world events at the time. It is a very rural area, kind of economically depressed. My parents were pretty economically depressed, and I spent most of my spare time running a trap line in the countryside and working on dairy farms after we moved off the farm, about the time I started high school, just to help support the family. So I didn't really know much of what was going on in the outside world.

Jim: Okay. What did you do then when you graduated from high school?

Howard: I went to college in Stevens Point, and at that time if you could spell your name correctly you were allowed admission to a state university, as long as you had graduated from high school. And I got some student assistance in the form of a work/study program, so I was working my way through school. By the time I was a

sophomore I was holding down three jobs at the same time and taking a full credit load and it was wearing me pretty thin, and I would work all summer doing one thing or another. I went back to school again my junior year, and halfway through my junior year I could see that things weren't going well. I was taking a full credit load and I was working all night long every night and part of the days sometimes, and I couldn't keep up with everything, so I dropped a five-credit physics course, figuring that that would take a little bit of the pressure off, but I didn't know at the time what I'd done to myself, and what I had done is removed my status for myself as a full-time student. Twelve credits is the minimum credit load for a full-time student, and by dropping that five-credit course I went down to eleven credits. Well, there was no way to undo that, and I became eligible for the draft. The University notified my draft board that I was no longer a full-time student, and it was just a matter of time before I'd be drafted. So I went shopping to the various military branches, seeing if I could cut a better deal than becoming cannon fodder in the Army through the draft, and after investigating what the various branches had to offer, I voluntarily enlisted in the Navy for four years.

Jim: Why did you select the Navy?

Howard: Because by that time I had been in college for a couple of years and I fully understood what was going on in Vietnam, and I also understood that most of the casualties were Marines and Army, and I figured I would ride it out on a big gray tub somewhere and not have to get involved in Vietnam at all.

Jim: Did you have any opinion about the Vietnam War at that time?

Howard: Not really. Like most young kids that are eighteen, nineteen years old, I was pretty self-centered and not much into politics or world events.

Jim: Was there any unrest on the Stevens Point campus at that time?

Howard: Yes, there was. In fact, while I was a student there I can recall Nixon came to speak at the University of Stevens Point and it just shocked me the huge turnout and the protesting that was going on. There were several university professors that their weekend mission in life was to protest on the main street in Stevens Point, and those things kind of brought it forefront for me that there was things going on in the world that I probably should know a little bit more about.

Jim: So when did you go into the Navy?

Howard: The semester was over with in, oh, late December, early January, and I went into the service in February of 1968, and probably one of the last guys around that can say that he went into the service on a train. I had to take the train to Milwaukee to

an induction center. I went in in Wisconsin Rapids and rode a passenger train to Milwaukee. There was an induction center there that was a huge barn of a room with several hundred people in it that were all going into the Navy at that time, and one thing I recall there is that we had all our paperwork under our arms and they asked us to count off one, two, one, two, one, two, one, two, one, two, and all the ones on one side of the room, the twos on the other, and the guy in charge said, "All you ones are going to boot camp in Great Lakes and all you twos are going to San Diego." Well, I was a one and I was slated to go to Great Lakes, and here it was February. Well, if there is one thing that two years of college taught me is to be a little bit self-sufficient, so when the guy wasn't looking I walked across the room to the twos. [Jim laughs] So I went to boot camp in San Diego.

Jim: Hey, that's a good story. So how did you get to San Diego, by train again or—

Howard: No. I was flown out there. I was given an airline ticket to fly to San Diego.

Jim: And how long was the boot camp?

Howard: I can't remember exactly, but it was somewhere in the neighborhood of about eight weeks. It was an abbreviated boot camp because they were rushing them through as soon as they could because they needed more people out in the fleet.

Jim: Did anything stand out in your boot camp experience?

Howard: Only the fact that I was the only guy in my boot camp company of sixty guys that had gone to college at all, and some of these guys while we were sitting around in the evenings in the barracks, they would ask me to write letters for them; they were functionally illiterate.

Jim: So how did they get in the Navy if they were functionally illiterate?

Howard: Beats me. I mean, they could block print a little bit, you know, but aside from that—and I'm sure that I could string a sentence together a little bit better than they could, too.

Jim: After boot camp what happened?

Howard: Well, because I had more than two years of college—I had five semesters—I was given the rank of E-3, which is seaman, directly out of boot camp, and I was also awarded a Class A school.

Jim: What is a Class A school?

Howard: That is a trade school, so to speak, and I went to see career counselors several times to determine which school I was gonna go to, and I had a few ideas in mind, you know. I wouldn't have minded becoming a postal clerk or a yeoman or something where I could use my head a little bit. I certainly didn't want to become a bosun's mate or a gunner's mate. But I had to go back several times, more than anyone else in my boot camp company, because they kept turning me down for anything I'd put down on paper. I even opted to be a heavy equipment operator. Well, it became apparent to me that after a series of tasks that they give to you, that what they wanted, what the Navy wanted me to do, was to become a radioman. I didn't want to become a radioman and I even volunteered to become a medic. I mean, I had a few biology courses and that was the closest thing the Navy had to offer to anything smacking of biology. But, nonetheless, I was told that you will go to radioman's school. So I went to Radioman Class A school, and that lasted for, oh, several months. And I graduated at the head of that class so I was awarded a Class B school, which is a more focused school dealing with the radioman rate, and I was thinking that perhaps I would get something like Teletype repair or learn some useful skill. Well, instead I was sent to high-speed Morse code school, because you have to realize that we're talking many decades before the advent of the cell phone and satellite communications and other things like that. Well, we were still into LHF and VHF frequency communications, much of which was done with Morse code. So I went to high-speed Morse code school and I picked up thirty words a minute Morse code. You can only write about fifteen words a minute, but I would copy it on a keyboard, on a typewriter keyboard or a Teletype keyboard. So I became pretty handy at that, and when I was done with that I awaited my first set of orders to a permanent duty station or my first full-time duty station. But at that time if you were to become a disbursing clerk, a storekeeper, a yeoman, a personnel man, a radioman, you had to type twenty words a minute before they would even send you to one of these Class A schools. Well, I could always type sixty, seventy, eighty words a minute with no problem, so they asked me if I would teach typing school at San Diego at the Naval Training Center, and I thought, well, that beats going out to sea. So I did that for several months until it got to the point that I thought maybe the Navy has forgotten about me and I'm gonna set here for the remainder of my four years and teach kids how to type, but somebody caught up with me somewhere and I was given a set of orders to a ship.

Jim: Okay. And what kind of a ship were you sent to?

Howard: The ship I was sent to was an LST. That's a landing ship tank, and it was home ported in Yokosuka, Japan. And I think the reason I was sent to that ship was because it had very poor communications capabilities and they relied on Morse code for quite a bit of their communications and they needed code operators. Well, there was only five radiomen aboard that ship, and the ship had a complement of about a dozen officers and about ninety to ninety-five enlisted people, and its

mission was to be a resupply vessel to Vietnam, bringing supplies from Japan or from the Philippines or from Okinawa into Vietnam and returning with Marines who were getting out of Vietnam after their tour, and we would bring them back to Okinawa.

Jim: Does anything stand out about the experience of seeing these Marines that are coming back after their tour?

Howard: They certainly could not handle the rigors of a flat-bottomed ship that would stomp on the waves, because an LST has a flat bottom, unlike a Destroyer, which has a sharply canted bottom, and instead of diving up and down in the waves this thing would go up in the air and then slam down and shake and it would take rolls in heavy seas that were thirty degrees from vertical in either direction, so it's a full sixty-degree roll. And for the most part they kept to themselves down in the troop berthing spaces and threw up everything we ever gave 'em to eat, so I didn't have too much to do with them. I was working port and starboard watches all the time anyway. It was somebody else's job to baby-sit the Marines while we were transporting.

Jim: What is a port and starboard watch?

Howard: Twelve on/twelve off.

Jim: Okay.

Howard: For days and days and days.

Jim: Is there anything that stands out about your experience on the LST?

Howard: Well, yes. I had only made two such trips with Marines until we were at Binh Tuy one time and one of the squadrons of boats down there—we resupplied—the LST also resupplied the small boat squadrons in the delta, and they were short of personnel, and I didn't understand why they were short of personnel. It seems that everybody was short of personnel all the time. So the captain of our ship, who was a Lieutenant Commander, would loan out his sailors. And the only ones he would loan out were the nonrated sailors, meaning that they were E-3 or below. So after having been on this LST for not much more than sixty or seventy days I found myself off the LST and riding small boats up and down the rivers and canals of South Vietnam. I had no idea where we were all the time. I became accustomed to recognizing some of the fuel depots we'd stop in at or ammo depots we'd stop in at from time to time but—

Jim: What kind of a boat were you on?



Howard: It was a reconverted landing craft. If you can imagine watching the old movies about the storming of the Normandy beaches and these boats that would slide up on the beach and the bow ramp or front end would drop down and all the Marines would run up into the sand and attack the beach, they would take these boats and convert those. They would weld the front end shut so it was no longer capable of being opened, put extra armor around them, mount a .50 caliber on it, give it a crew of eleven. They had sleeping spaces for six. And most of our mission down there was to support various operations that were going on.

Jim: So essentially it was a river gunboat?

Howard: It was, but not in the traditional sense. I mean, when you think of a river gunboat in the traditional sense it's one of the swift boats, but this was just a top-speed eight-knot, square box of a scow.

Jim: Did they have a nickname?

Howard: LCVPs [Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel]. They were just called LCVPs. They were just personnel.

Jim: Yeah, because see we—in my experience we called them rag boats—

Howard: I had never heard that name, but I wouldn't—

Jim: —for a lot of different reasons.

Howard: I mean there were monitors down there. There were variety of different kinds of boats.

Jim: So what was your duty on this boat?

Howard: I was the communicator. And I think the reason that they wanted a radioman aboard these things is because we could read light. We could read flashing light. And we also had voice communications with PRC-25s, which are a backpack-mounted radio that was quite in vogue at the time. We had no cryptographic capability, so all of our communications were over nonsecure nets. And in addition to that, because I had no formal training in the arms, so to speak, I was told that I would be the Thumper man. Well, the Thumper man is the guy that handles the M-79, which looks like a break-action shotgun with a bore on it about two and a half inches across and has a variety of types of rounds, from HE, or high explosive rounds, to white phosphorus rounds or flare rounds. And whenever we'd take fire my immediate job was to radio our position in and then go back on deck with the

Thumper, and by that time ninety-nine percent of the time it was over with because usually what happens is somebody tossed a couple rounds at us, you know, and then run and hide somewhere and there's nothing to shoot at. We always felt pretty damn vulnerable because there's nowhere to hide, you know, when you are in the middle of a—

Jim: So did you—what other kind of weapons did they have on the ship? Were they M-16s or M-14s?

Howard: M-16s. We did have M-16s, and as I mentioned earlier there was a .50 caliber mounted aboard it, and that was about it.

Jim: Were you cross-trained on the .50 caliber and stuff like that?

Howard: I was. I mean—although I'd never used it. I mean I'd fired it a number of times, but I never really fired it—or fired a shot in anger with it.

Jim: What was a typical duty day like on this boat?

Howard: Well, to begin with, we had a crew of eleven and sleeping space for six, so you had to be—quite tight quarters. And for the most part what we would do was check river traffic, all the little sampans and small Jons that would be plying the river trade, and that's the route of transportation in that whole area. There's nothing to speak of for roads and everything was all on water. And we would check them for contraband, and contraband meaning that they were hauling more than the allowed amount of rice, certainly no arms or ammunition. If they had more than the allowable amount of rice aboard any of these vessels we would cut the bags and dump them over the side, and it to me was pretty sad because sometimes these people would have just two, three bags of rice and I could just imagine that that was half of their harvest and they were putting along with, you know, about a knot and a half and here we'd stop 'em and we'd hand 'em a leaflet telling them what they were doing wrong. They couldn't read. So—

Jim: And you couldn't speak Vietnamese.

Howard: We couldn't speak Vietnamese. They couldn't speak English. All we knew were a few phrases and what the rules were, so we cut the bags, tossed it over the side. But then I'd start second-guessing myself and thinking, well, the dirty shits, you know, maybe what they're doing is hauling it two, three bags at a time rather than the allowable amount of one bag at a time. So, you know, what's a guy to think?

Jim: So were there any confrontations that got messy when you were stopping these boats?

Howard: No, because for the most part we had the guns and they didn't. We never got into a firefight with any other vessel all the time that I was doing that. However, people were shootin' at us from the banks all the time. The only other nasty thing that—as far as a firefight is, they used to use tugboats as floating buses I guess, you know, ferryboats or personnel ferryboats. And there was a tugboat, I even remember the name of it, the Tugboat Kangaroo, and it took a recoilless rocket round and was sinking, and people were still shooting at it from the shore, and we were over there fishing people out of the water and laying down suppressing fire at the time. But other than that, you know, you never really interacted that much with other vessels.

Jim: How long were you on this boat?

Howard: Well, I'd be on it, and there was—it was various boats. I'd be on it a couple weeks at a time, and then I'd wind up back at the LST for an overnigher or I'd wind up in Dong Tam at a refueling depot for an overnigher where we would pick up fuel and ammunition, and that lasted until a month prior to my twelve months being up. See, my tour of duty aboard that LST was supposed to be two years, but I had gotten married just a few days before I reported aboard that LST. I went home on leave after these schools and got married. I was home on twenty-day leave, got married, never saw my wife again for twelve months. But when I got there the ship didn't know I was married and they raised hell with me and said, "Well, who gave you permission to get married?" You know the old saying, you know, if the Navy wanted you to have the wife—

Jim: They'd have issued you one.

Howard: —they'd have issued you one. Yeah, right. So what they did was they reduced my time that I had to serve in a foreign-based vessel to twelve months rather than twenty-four, otherwise I'd have been stuck on that ship for a longer period of time. So a month prior to my twelve months being up I went back to the LST for good this time and stayed aboard it and made one more trip to the Philippines, one more trip back to Vietnam, and then from Vietnam got off the boat, got off the ship, took some boat rides and chopper rides, made my way down to Binh Tuy where there was—I had a guy with me that was wounded in the foot, and there was a field hospital run by the Air Force at Binh Tuy, dropped him off there. And then I caught a ride from Binh Tuy to Saigon, and then from there I went back to San Francisco.

Jim: Okay. Now, let's do some of the things. When you were in Vietnam did you get an R and R?

Howard: No.

Jim: Did not get and R and R?

Howard: No. I wasn't eligible for it.

Jim: Why was—

Howard: I was assigned to a ship.

Jim: Oh, okay. So ship people didn't get R and Rs?

Howard: No. However, one of the little trips that I took while I was aboard that ship was to Pinang, Malaysia. And we went up the Straits of Malacca to Pinang, and we had some Army R and R observers aboard and they were looking to take some of the heat off Thailand and Hawaii and Hong Kong and other traditional R and R places, and they gave us a lot of questionnaires, and when we got there we had a port call of six days.

Jim: So it was just like R and R then?

Howard: I had two days off, you know, during those six days, and we'd fill out all these questionnaires, you know, were you ripped off by a taxi driver, was the food good, you know, and then were people properly respectful, all this jazz. Well, I'm sure they knew the big American dollar was on the way and we could do no wrong no matter what we did. So it was great for a couple of days.

Jim: Okay. Let's go back to your experience riding around on this converted landing craft. Did you have any contact with the South Vietnamese Navy?

Howard: Not with the South Vietnamese Navy, but we did have a Chieu Hoi observer or a translator with us from time to time.

Jim: And was this Chieu Hoi a boat person or just a person that they—

Howard: He was a fifteen-year-old kid with one eye with a penchant for stealing everyone's cigarette lighters, and he could speak both Vietnamese and English, and I had no idea where he came from and one day he disappeared, jumped over the side and swam away and we never saw him again.

Jim: So in other words, you probably didn't trust this guy fully?

Howard: Not very much, no. In fact, we weren't quite sure all the time that he was telling people what we told him to tell them when he was doing his translation duties.

Jim: Did you have any contact with any Vietnamese civilians other than the fishing boats that you stopped?

Howard: We would transport prisoners from time to time.

Jim: And where would you take them?

Howard: To a refueling depot like Dong Tam, or in a couple of instances we took 'em right back to the mouth of the river where there would be the SATYR or the Bien Hoa, which are floating barracks ships that the Navy had there for the brown-water Navy folks and they had facilities there to keep prisoners. I don't know what they'd do with them.

Jim: Okay. So, in other words, if you were going up a river and an infantry unit captured some prisoners, you would take them back to where they'd be—

Howard: Well, most generally it wasn't an infantry unit, it was other Navy people who had to stay out and we were on the way in, so we were just carrying them on the way in. Also, it was kind of a standing rule that if we ever picked up any SEALs that were out working—and they'd just show up, I mean they'd be out bobbing around in the middle of the river and we would pick them up, give them something to eat. And they'd have one mission to do this, mission to do that, whatever they were up to. We didn't ask them any questions and they didn't give us any particulars of what they were doing or why they were doing it, but there'd be three, four, five, sometimes six of these guys. We'd give 'em a hot meal and when they were done and they wanted to leave, they'd jump over the side and they'd disappear again. And they always tried to put the dog on us a little bit about how tough they were. You know, one guy would reach his hand into a pot of stew and shove it into his buddy's mouth, and he'd chew on it for a while and spit it into his buddy's mouth, and he'd chew on it for a while and swallow it. And I'm sure it was done just for shock value on us, you know, but on the other hand they were some mean-looking guys.

Jim: Did you resupply them?

Howard: Yes. Yes. We gave them all the ammo and cigarettes and—

Jim: So you'd carry supplies that would be designed specifically to resupply these—

Howard: Oh, we always had more than enough for ourselves.

Jim: Yeah. Did you have any contact with larger Navy ships or swift boats or anything?

- Howard: Yeah. Well, we'd see them all the time. The only contact we'd have with them is for the most part when we stopped at a resupply point for more beans and bullets, but actually working on missions with them, no.
- Jim: So you were just kind of independently going out to—
- Howard: Well, we usually worked in tandem with two boats.
- Jim: Okay. Two boats.
- Howard: Yeah, because one thing that we had to do after a while was toss the line from one boat to the other and drag it under the keel of these sampans because we got wind that they were dragging contraband on the bottom, in a net bouncing along the bottom.
- Jim: Did you ever get any contraband?
- Howard: Oh, yeah.
- Jim: What a type of stuff would they put on them?
- Howard: Rice. It was always rice.
- Jim: Always rice. Does anybody that you served with on this boat stick out in your mind?
- Howard: No. To tell you the truth, not. The boat captain was a first class petty officer; he was a black guy. I can't even remember his last name. His first name was Jake. But I tried not to make close friendships down there. The original eleven guys when I first got on one of these boats, five of those guys got killed.
- Jim: When you were on the boat or—
- Howard: No. One got killed while I was on the boat, but I'd be on the boat, off the boat, as I mentioned earlier.
- Jim: Okay.
- Howard: And what happened to what's his face, well, he bought the farm, you know. So I made no close friends. I keep in touch or in contact with none of them. In fact, the only single guy that I've talked to that I served with in country over there was the leading radioman off that LST, and that's only because I was looking at a website one day and that LST was mentioned and there was a log book sign-in type of thing

on the web and I recognized the name and his e-mail address was there. He'd retired from the Navy and was living in Arizona, and I corresponded once or twice with him via e-mail and that was it.

Jim: Were these people that were killed on the boat from sniper fire or mines or—

Howard: Sniper fire and one guy from a bunch of shrapnel. Another boat was hit with a recoilless rocket round and killed several of them, and some of the shrapnel got him because he was on deck in the first boat.

Jim: When you would get hit from the shore, would you ever call—get any air support or were you just—

Howard: It was immediately over with right away. I mean they'd sneak out there, shoot a couple times, and then disappear. So there wasn't any point in doing it. We'd radio our position in all the time but for all the good it did—I think about all the good it did was to tell other people this is a bad place to be.—[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

Jim: Okay. So we were kind of just winding up talking about your Vietnam experiences. You said you really didn't stay in any contact with any of your friends that you made during the service.

Howard: No. Well, I had two more years of duty to do after I was over in Vietnam, and my next duty station was with Beachmaster Unit One in Coronado at the amphibious base, and there we worked with underwater demolition team folks and SEALs and Marines at Camp Pendleton and we would train them on amphibious landings. And within Beachmaster Unit One there were five teams: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie Team. And every time a PHIBRON, or amphibious squadron, would deploy to WestPac, or Western Pacific, they would embark the Beachmaster Team, which consisted in part of one radioman. So I became the radioman for the Alpha Beachmaster Team, and these PHIBRONS would deploy about every eight months to a year, and they would take the Jeeps, the Larks, like the DUKWs that they drive around in up in Wisconsin Dells, the whole works would be embarked on these ships and off we would go. And the only people in that entire command who did not have to embark with a PHIBRON when their number came up, when their turn came up, was the commanding officer, the executive officer, the unit master at arms, and the second class signalman, who was the operations yeoman for the entire command. And I got to looking at his job and I thought, shit, I could do that. So about the time that my turn was up to deploy with a PHIBRON I started working with him, and he was ready to be discharged. So I took over his job as the operations yeoman and never had to deploy back to WestPac again. So I spent my remaining time in the service with the Beachmaster Unit.

Jim: And did they talk about your—did anybody ask you about your Vietnam experience or anything like that?

Howard: Yes. In fact, when I got back, you know, I knew there was a lot of antiwar sentiment back here, but I had no idea it had escalated to the point that it did during the year that I was gone. And when I came back I was aboard a big Braniff airliner, didn't have to come back in a boat, they flew me back. That's a hell of a deal, you know, go to war in a jet plane, come back in a jet plane. The entire plane was full of Air Force with the exception of myself and one other Navy guy sitting in the back seat, and I had the same clothes on that I had worn for the previous two weeks. I was hidin' out in Saigon at a place called the White Elephant. It was Navy transit barracks with the front end blown in with satchel charges, and the second night I was there they woke me up in the middle of the night and said, "It's your turn on the roof." Well, I didn't know that we had to take turns standing guard duty on the roof. So I said, "What time is it?" you know, and the guy told me the time. I said, "Shit, my plane leaves in a couple hours," and I was lying through my teeth, you know. So I grabbed my sea bag, and I had an M-16 at that time. I left it there in the White Elephant transit barracks; for all I know it's still laying there in the corner. And I went down to Saigon to Tan Son Nhut to the air base there, and I slept on the floor of the airport for the next two weeks rather than stay in Saigon.

Jim: So what did you do during the day?

Howard: Well, I hooked up with a couple other sailors and we would take turns; one guy would set there and guard the three sea bags while the other two went out on the town.

Jim: So you had your duty anyway?

Howard: I was in not good shape by the time we finally crawled on that plane to get back, and when I got back to San Francisco there was a big crowd. They didn't take us right to the airport, you know, where you walk down the runway and you're right in the building. We had to deplane out on the runway and then walk across a big concrete area, and these people were throwin' rocks and wavin' signs and raisin' hell and "baby killer" this and "baby killer" that, and I was just amazed at what was going on. Of course I was still half in the bag. And the shore patrol met us when we came into the building and he took me and the sailor aside and made us go to a delousing and showering station, which is pretty demeaning I thought. You know, they took all my clothes, got rid of them, gave me some ill-fitting—an ill-fitting uniform with no insignia at all on it, and I wore that until I could get to the first restroom, took it off and trashed it and got something out of my sea bag to wear. But I was just amazed that, that antiwar sentiment had escalated to that point.



Jim: How did that make you feel about the year that you'd just spent?

Howard: Well, I wasn't happy about it to begin with. I was a little pissed off because the thought kept passing through my head that the best year of your life when you're the healthiest and the toughest is when you are in your late teens - early twenties and here I'd gone and squandered that year, the year that I was twenty years old. I had gotten married and a week later got to go overseas for the next twelve months, so there went the first year of my marriage. I've been trying to make up for that ever since. So I thought it was a big waste of time, a waste of my time. I could not understand the political climate that had caused this or had caused it to be extended as long as it had. In fact, I got out of the service a couple months before I really should have, before my enlistment was going to be up, because they had a program then if you were accepted back at a university you could get what they called an early out up to ninety days. I took full advantage of it. I was supposed to get out in February, and I got out thirty days before the semester—before the January semester started. And that policy was put into effect under Nixon's administration, and I thought, well, I owe you something, so I voted for him.

Jim: [laughs]

Howard: But I didn't keep track of anybody while I was there or—

Jim: Well, before I go I'll ask you some end game questions. You said you had joined the Navy Reserve. Why did you do that then, because you already had four years in or—

Howard: Well, I wasn't any richer when I got out of the service than I was when I went in, and now I was married. I had saved a few bucks; I mean I was able to get back into—and in the meantime my wife had finished college. In fact, she was able to come out and live with me for the last year that I was on active duty in California. And I wasn't home or out of the Navy for a week before I found a part-time job doing book work for a furniture manufacturer in Stevens Point because I knew I would have to find some kind of work, even though I had the GI Bill to go back to school with, you know, I've still got to live and pay rent and all this jazz. And then I found out after talking to a few guys in the vets club in Stevens Point that, hey, have you checked in to get unemployment yet? I said, "What's that?" Well, if you get out of the service and go back to college you are eligible for unemployment compensation for, God, for months. Well, I had shot myself in the foot again because you can't quit a job and then get unemployment.

Jim: [laughs]

Howard: So by working I was making an extra \$3 a week or something than by not working. Well, another thing that these guys told me—and the vets club in Stevens Point was just a group of guys from all branches of the service that got together a couple of times a month for the sole purpose of drinking themselves into oblivion. It was kind of a quasi-fraternity without any of the Greek bullshit, and we were all a few years older than most of the students, you know, and felt we were far above them anyway.

Jim: How did the students feel about such an organization?

Howard: Well, they didn't mess with any of us. They thought we were all crazy to begin with. And at that time they would sell beer right in the student union at Stevens Point, it was an eighteen-year-old beer state, and the middle of the student union had several tables that were dedicated to the vets club members. We all wore little red sweatshirts. I mean that was on party nights anyway. And we would sit there and drink beer all day.

Jim: Did this give people some kind of emotional support?

Howard: I think so, yeah. Particularly when they were in their cups, which is the only time they talked to one another about what they'd been doing.

Jim: Did you think that helped you any?

Howard: No. In fact, they had a program where you could receive free counseling if you thought you needed it type of thing, you know, and well, I never thought I needed it. Although my wife tells me that I used to talk a lot in my sleep and she knew what I was talking about, she could hear me, you know, and she was convinced that I needed to go see one of those counselors, but I just wanted to put the whole thing behind me and get on with the rest of my life. So anyway, back to the reserves, I joined the reserves because it was extra money and at that time they only met on Tuesday nights. Well, a few hours out of my week on a Tuesday night, you know, and it was pretty good money. You didn't really have to do much and you got a two-week vacation every year courtesy of the military. You got to go out on a ship and fart around, but the good part of it was that you knew that you were only there for two weeks and then you could say the hell with it, you know, and go back home. Well, I stayed in school long enough to finish a bachelor's degree, and then I got into graduate school, and I stayed with the reserves all this time and finished graduate school, and by this time, gosh, I was almost halfway done with a twenty-year requirement necessary to get a retirement benefit out of it. And I was assigned to shipboard units here and there, although I didn't have to go necessarily to a shipboard unit. When I did my active duty I would go to MARS stations, military affiliated radio systems stations, because I was a high-speed Morse code

operator. So I'd go to South Carolina or to Oregon or to the State of Washington or someplace and have a good time for a couple of weeks and work in a little two-man naval communications station and go back after my two weeks. Well then I decided I'd better—if I'm going to stay for twenty years I'd better start getting serious about it, and technology by that time had ushered in satellite communications and the old transceivers that I used to use that were as big as a refrigerator could now be carried in a briefcase and today, in fact, can be carried in a shirt pocket, and technology passed me by, I didn't keep with up it. Although I did keep up with the advent of computers and my typing skills and organizational skills and filing skills and writing skills. So I changed rate to yeoman; when I was a Second Class radioman, I changed over to a Second Class yeoman, and then I made rate to First Class, and then I made Chief, and once you make Chief in the Navy your life is on easy street a whole lot more than it used to be. But the nicest thing was that I picked up a new billet, and that was as a flag writer to Commander in Chief Pacific, who was a four-star admiral in Oahu. So the Navy would pick my young butt out of Wisconsin every year and send me to Hawaii where I would pick up a motel room on the oceanside and they'd issue me a rental car and I'd drive up the mountain every day to work and shuffle a few papers. And for nine years in a row I went to Hawaii every year, sometimes twice a year, sometimes on other trips because I picked up a few other skills along the way, such as I was a classified court reporter for courts-martial. Many people don't know, in fact, that the plural of court-martial is courts-martial. But I was able to go to Denver to the Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs actually, and to various other places, you know, and be the court reporter for courts-martial.

Jim: So did you report any notorious court-martials?

Howard: Well, I'd tell you, Jim, but my entire military career from the time I made my first command until the time I was discharged I had a top-secret clearance and if I told you I'd have to shoot you right away.

Jim: Okay. [laughs]

Howard: No. I'm just being facetious.

Jim: I know you are. I know you are.

Howard: Some of the things were classified for a number of years and then declassified, such things as before the Navy's don't ask/don't tell policy the Air Force Academy had a few folks that were cashiered because of their sexual proclivities and I would do the paperwork at a summary court-martial there.

Jim: So did your employer give you accommodations to do all this defending of the country?

Howard: Yes. I was fortunate in that I worked for the State of Wisconsin and that they could not do otherwise than to let me off for as much time as I wanted. Actually the rule was thirty days a year; they'd let you off up to thirty days a year and in fact would make up the difference in wages between your base pay and what your state wage was. Well, most of the money I made was not in state wages. When you go to Hawaii it's not the low-rent district, and I would be given well over \$100 a day to feed and house myself and of course I could get by on much less than that. So it was some extra bucks. I stayed with that until I had a total of twenty-seven years in including my four years active duty, at which time the military was downsizing both on the active as well as the reserve side. This is before the Gulf War incident came along, and any chief petty officer with more than twenty-six years in was told thank you very much and the door is over there. So I was more or less forced to retire.

Jim: Yeah. Where did you pick up the skills that you showed when you worked for the state about being able to work around rules?

Howard: Well, the Navy calls that a comshaw artist.

Jim: Yeah. So did you get that training when you were on active duty or hone it when you were in the reserves?

Howard: Well, I could see how some of the guys were operating in Vietnam and from the little things like, you know, everybody would get two beer ration tickets a day, but of course there was never anyplace that you'd get any beer unless you were at a fuel depot, so they'd have a pocketful of beer ration tickets, and some of these guys would just—you know, they'd lose 'em, they'd throw 'em away, whatever, somebody else would scoop them all up, and then they'd go to Dong Tam, you know, and, hell, we'd walk out of there with case after case after case of beer and then go hide the boat somewhere, chop a few trees down and hide it, and go on a three-day drunk, you know, and get away with it. But what impressed me is when we would stop in Dong Tam. You know, you have to realize that it's muggy out and it's a hundred degrees out or ninety or whatever and you're just dying, you're sweating all the time, and you walk into a Quonset hut and it's fifty-five degrees because every four feet in that Quonset hut there is another air conditioner stuck in the wall. How did the air conditioners get there? That way when the beer is free and they don't charge for the beer because you've got the free ration tickets—that's because every Tuesday the beer would cost you a nickel. They would save all the nickels and then they would buy air conditioners on the black market that somebody else had stolen from the Navy and put on the black market. And just

little things like that, things like it was illegal for you to have any green American currency on you when you were in Vietnam. We were issued script currency instead. Every so often the script would change. You had a certain number of hours or days to change that money over to paymaster for the new script. And my grandmother sent me a birthday card with a five-dollar bill in it, which I took downtown in Saigon and traded for fifty dollars worth of piasters. Now the person I traded, that got the five dollar bill, probably demanded gold from the United States for it, which is the reason I think why they didn't want any green money circulating over there. But it was how to get things, how to destroy the paperwork afterwards, how to go to—even after I was in the reserves, huge warehouses full of Navy paraphernalia down at Great Lakes and we'd take a truck down there and pick up transceivers and receivers, bring 'em back and install 'em in the reserve center. And while we were there, here for a doorstep was a brass sea strainer. It weighed sixty-five pounds and it was solid brass, and they're using it for a doorstep. So the chief of the detail I was with put a brick there for a doorstep and took the brass sea strainer, which strains seawater as it comes into the evaporators on a ship, and took it to a salvage yard and sold it for the metal content and paid for the entire liquor bill for the Christmas party for the reserve center that year.

Jim: So it was good training.

Howard: It was good training, and later on after I worked for the State of Wisconsin some people would call some of the things that I did circumventing state purchasing procedures. I would call them being innovative with the resources that you had.

Jim: I think we won't go any farther than that on that. So now, how would you assess how your Vietnam experience affected the rest of your life?

Howard: Well, I never wanted to have anything to do with groups like the Vietnam veterans organization, and there's chapters of that around here and I've had various people come and contact me and want me to join those chapters. And they march in parades and wear their cast-off uniform chonks and all that jazz. And as far as I was concerned it was an unhappy and bad period of my life and once it was over I was—the only good thing that came out of it was I got a real fat GI bill and I used it to every red penny that was available to me. I did become a card-carrying member of both VFW and American Legion only because they needed members in order to keep afloat, or keep their charter. You can see around the countryside now all the World War II vets are dying off. There are not many Vietnam guys that are actually getting into or being active with VFW and American Legion. I just didn't want to have anything further to do with it. I didn't want to talk to anybody about it. In fact, I've told you more today than I think I've ever told anybody about what I did in Vietnam. Even my kids would ask me, "What did you do?" "Well, we rode a little boat around, you know, and I delivered food and water."

Jim: Well, this is one of the purposes for doing this because you will have a copy of it and you can either give it to your kids or hide it.

Howard: Oh.

Jim: When you worked at DNR was there any group like the vets group at this college? Did you have any association with Vietnam veterans there?

Howard: I did. I knew a couple of guys that were in Vietnam at approximately the same time that I was, and it was one of those cases where we didn't discuss that but he knew that I knew that he knew that I knew type of thing, what it was all about, and little inside jokes. You know, you could look at one another and think—or look at somebody and say, "Didi mau" [Vietnamese: "Go quickly"], you know, and the other guy'd know what you were talking about right away, but nothing that would result in any deep, you know, camaraderie type of thing.

Jim: Do you think it had any long-term psychological effects on you? You mentioned your wife said you talked in your sleep.

Howard: Yeah, I think it did, and in that respect I probably should have done something about it, but I became a drunk later on. You know, I used to have, I guess you'd call them nightmares. You know, I'd see dead people and fishing body parts out of the water and shit like that. You know, it would just shock the living hell out of WASP America, you know, to—I mean it's the type of thing you don't even see on the evening news. But I did, I became an alcoholic to the point, Jim, that it worked on me more and more and more. And even many, many years afterwards, you know, I'd still dream about some of this shit, and I don't know if that was a contributing factor to being an alcoholic. An alcoholic is just a person who can't control how much he drinks when he does drink, and people around me would drink like sane people but I wouldn't, I'd always have to get my share and then more. And it got to the point where it was controlling me. You know, I wouldn't drink socially with anybody. I'd buy beer and go hide out in the woods, sit on a log for half a day and drink a twelve-pack of beer and try to think about nothing, and it got to the point in fact that I wound up getting three DUIs before I finally decided that I needed some professional help with it, so I actually went to a drying-out place, although I was dried out at the time, but it was a counseling center, an inpatient center, stayed there for a week, did some outpatient counseling. I joined an AA group, been to hundreds of AA meetings. Most people don't know that about me, but I—

Jim: Do you think that Vietnam had something to do with that though?

Howard: I know it did.

- Jim: Okay. And it's not—when you were out there wanting not to think about things, that was—
- Howard: Oh, that's the way I would not think about things. It was pretty anesthetizing. And, you know, I read about people who claim to have what they call flashbacks, you know, and they see things that weren't really there or something would trigger—or trip a trigger in their brain or something. I can't say that such is the case with me, but I do know that after I came back from Vietnam I could not stand to be in a crowd anywhere. I couldn't stand to go to shopping malls. The first time I went to a Fourth of July celebration where they shot fireworks off—it was a small town in Central Wisconsin, for Christ sakes, you know, and after the first two or three fireworks went off I got my wife and I went back to the car and I left, and all I could see was parachute flares. That's what they were to me was parachute flares.
- Jim: I had the same experience. Is there anything that we haven't covered that we should, Tom?
- Howard: Yeah, fishing in Vietnam.
- Jim: Tell us about that.
- Howard: We used to use concussion grenades. It beat the hell out of hook-and-line fishing, and we would net the fish up that we'd roll up with concussion grenades and put 'em in a barrel, and then we'd go to a hamlet somewhere and we'd trade 'em, fifty-five gallon drum full of freshly killed fish for one suckling pig. Well, I was the only farm boy and the only hunter and the only one smart enough to know what Trichinosis was, so I would prepare that fish and I would toast it on the back of the boat in a burner that we made out of some cut-up barrels until it was black and crusty on the outside. It was well, well done. I used to catch a lot of heat for cooking the pork too much, but again, I was the only one that knew what Trichinosis was. So the fishing was great, but it tasted like pork.
- Jim: Did the wardens like that?
- Howard: In fact, one of the organizations that I've read about since then that formed after I—well, you know, in the last couple dozen years, was called "Game Wardens of Vietnam," and I'm eligible to join that if I want to. I always thought that was kind of a kick, you know.
- Jim: Well, for the record the Game Wardens was an operation inland as I remember it to interdict transportation like what you were doing. Is there anything else that we haven't covered? I wasn't smart enough to ask about fishing.

Howard: Other than Reader's Digest sent a guy down there one time to do a little story on the boats, and they put a guy from Reader's Digest—well, they put this guy in one of the boats—and you asked earlier if there was other boats that we would work with from time to time. Well, there was a half a dozen of us monitors and junk boats that were leaving, and the boat that he was in took a recoilless rocket round right in the pilot house, and it took the boat captain, smeared him around like a sponge, you know, so we were picking little chunks of him and putting him in a bag, and that guy freaked out and he got the pukes and the screams so bad that we had to Medevac him. And Reader's Digest never sent anybody down to see us anymore after that, which is too bad because the guy brought a couple bottles of good booze with him.

Jim: Yeah, that was disappointing.

Howard: No, that's about it.

Jim: Okay. Then I think we'll just wind her up. It's a good one. Thank you.

Howard: All right.

**[End of Interview]**