

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
KENNETH MILLER
Engineering Petty Officer, Navy, Vietnam War
2003

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Miller, Kenneth, (b. 1934-). Oral History Interview, 2003.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 94 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 94 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Kenneth “Ken” Miller (b. 1934), a Middleton (Wisconsin) native, discusses his service during the Vietnam War as an engineer on the *USS Hissem* and as a member of the Naval Advisory Group, part of the MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam). Miller grew up in Mount Horeb (Wisconsin) and joined the Navy in 1953, shortly after high school graduation. Miller explains that after boot camp at Great Lakes Naval Training Center (Illinois), he was assigned to the *USS Peterson* in Key West (Florida) where he became an apprentice diesel engineer. He mentions going to Havana and Guantanamo Bay (Cuba), Scotland, and Portugal with the *USS Peterson*. Miller recalls that in 1956 he was reassigned to the Fleet Reserve Facility in Philadelphia Naval Shipyard (Pennsylvania) where they repaired and guarded defunct “mothballed” ships including the *USS Tennessee* and *USS California*, that had been sunk in Pearl Harbor. He tells a ghost story about a young sailor convinced he heard a piano playing on one of the mothballed ships. Miller’s next duty was as a refrigeration man on the *USS Keppler*; however, in 1959 he was transferred to the *USS Hissem*, a destroyer radar ship based in Newport (Rhode Island). By this time, Miller was the Leading Engineering Petty Officer in charge of the engine room. He tells several stories about engine failures and how he helped fix them. Miller describes Operation Deep Freeze in detail. During 1963 and 1964, the *USS Hissem* acted as a weather ship for scientists on Antarctic expeditions. Miller tells a funny and ribald story about scientists in the Antarctic Circle leaving beer at various points on Campbell Island for the sailors to find while on tours. He also recalls the ship doctor performing an onboard appendectomy on a New Zealander. Miller mentions that after Operation Deep Freeze, the *USS Hissem* made a world cruise, which he implies was finagled by the Captain. They began in Australia and New Zealand, where Miller describes eating mutton with some New Zealand civilians. Miller visited Tasmania, Australia, Singapore, Bombay (India), Aden (Yemen), the Suez Canal, Greece, Rome (Italy), Cannes (France), and Barcelona (Spain). Miller mentions visiting the Vatican and the Coliseum; seeing part of the Cannes film festival; attending bullfights in Barcelona; and catching glimpses of nude sunbathers on the beach. In 1965, Miller states that the *USS Hissem* was deployed to Vietnam. He describes engine failure in the Panama Canal and encounters with Panamanian hippies on the way there. In Vietnam, Miller reports his ship was part of Operation Market Time and Operation Game Warden. He explains that the ship patrolled the coast from Cam Ranh to Da Nang (Vietnam), inspecting Vietnamese boats for contraband. He states humorously that the Navy provided no training for the inspection teams. Miller also points out that the inspection teams would ask for the identity papers of the people on the boats, but since the sailors

could not read Vietnamese, they never knew if the papers were authentic. He reveals that the inspectors were mostly looking for weapons, but recalls an incident in which a Vietnamese boat tried to outrun the *USS Hissem*. The sailors pursued this boat all the way to Hong Kong where they discovered the boat was full of marijuana. Miller discusses various types of American weapons as well as the differences between boats. He compares the American *Swift boat* and the *Patrol Boat River (PBR)* on with *sampans* and *junks*, which were Vietnamese boats. Miller clarifies that Operation Market Time involved dragging the river for drowned pilots; they “found two parachutes, but no bodies.” Miller mentions that most of the boats they inspected during Operation Game Warden belonged to fisherman and ordinary people. He describes encountering refugee boats full of women and children. Miller characterizes the plight of the refugees as “terrible to see.” Miller touches upon visiting Bangkok (Thailand), Formosa (Taiwan), and the Philippines for rest and relaxation. In 1966, the *USS Hissem* returned from its tour in Vietnam. Miller tells a story of sharing a hotel room in Los Angeles (California) with an African-American sailor who was concerned that they would not be allowed in the hotel because of segregation. Miller reportedly said: “If they don’t let us have a room, there’s gonna be all kinds of hell to pay.” Miller states they were not bothered at the hotel, adding that the sailor took home the *Bible*. Miller asserts that there were no racial tensions between sailors. He mentions that the *USS Hissem* had the first African-American Limited Duty Officer, who eventually became a Lieutenant Commander. Miller says he learned most of what he knows about engineering from this officer. Miller criticizes younger sailors in Vietnam for using derogatory language and ethnic slurs towards the Vietnamese. He contends that when they were replaced with older, experienced sailors like himself, relations between the Americans and Vietnamese improved. Miller touches upon drug use among young sailors and a lieutenant; unfortunately, part of this story is missing from the tape. In 1971, Miller underwent SERE (Survive, Evade, Resist, and Escape) training at Camp Pendleton (California) before redeploying to Vietnam. Miller explains that this was part of the Vietnamization program. He also took Vietnam language classes; however, it was difficult for him to master Vietnamese because of the many different dialects. Miller describes in detail the SERE training which simulated prisoner of war conditions. According to Miller, he had to forage for food, resist water-boarding, and spend eighteen hours in a metal box. When he returned to Vietnam, Miller was part of an MACV Naval Advisory Group in Binh Thuy, teaching the South Vietnamese how to repair boat engines. Miller states that when he arrived the engines had a 50% failure rate, which was reduced to five-tenths of a percent by the time he left. He describes taking boats out to test them on the river but states he never went on strikes and did not see much combat. Miller discusses relations between the V.N. and the U.S. sailors; he mentions attending many social events like funerals, weddings, and New Years. He adds that sailors often went drinking in Binh Thuy and stayed overnight. He touches upon religion, portraying the Vietnamese as superstitious. Miller states that the Navy learned not to force V.N.s to go on a patrol if they said Buddha didn’t want them to go. Miller attributes the positive relations between the Navy and the Vietnamese civilians to the fact that his ship had regular collections to support the Vietnamese orphanage in Binh Thuy. He mentions briefly that the “dust kids” (children of mixed white and Vietnamese heritage) were treated badly by the orphanage staff. Miller goes on to describe cultural differences between the Americans

and Vietnamese, stating that Vietnamese sailors held hands to show friendship and shared beds on cold nights, which upset some homophobic American sailors. He also comments that Vietnamese people were fascinated by Americans with hairy arms. Next, Miller discusses entertainment. The Navy had regular movie nights and invited V.N.s and civilians who either entered the base or watched from boats on the Mekong River. Miller briefly mentions seeing drummer Buddy Rich, pool player Willie Mosconi, and entertainer Phyllis George on shore-leave or in USO shows. Miller tells a story about V.N.s putting a smoke bomb in the ladies' dressing room before a "floor show," causing the women to run out of the dressing room naked. Miller's interview is full of humorous, often bawdy anecdotes, including: the overreaction of a V.N. ensign whose radio was stolen; several stories about officers neglecting their duty or showing cowardice; and a burial at sea where a breeze caught the ashes and blew them back onboard, covering the sailors' white uniforms while the widow looked on aghast. Miller reports he retired in 1973 and settled in Colora (Maryland). He belongs to the VFW, the American Legion, and the Fleet Reserve Association. He states he went to Washington D.C. for the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Biographical Sketch:

Miller (b. 1934) was born in Middleton and grew up in Mount Horeb (Wisconsin). After high school, he joined the Navy and served two tours in Vietnam. For the first tour (1965), he was a Leading Engineering Petty Officer on the *USS Hissem*. For the second (1971), he was part of the MACV Naval Advisory Group, training South Vietnamese sailors in engine repair. After retiring from the Navy in 1973, Miller moved to Colora (Maryland) where he continues to live today. He has participated in the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and the Fleet Reserve Association.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2003
Transcribed by Joseph Dillenburg, 2007
Transcription edited by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2009
Abstract by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2009

Interview Transcript:

Kurtz: Jim Kurtz—I'm interviewing Ken Miller. This is June 12, 2003. Ken could you tell us where you live presently?

Miller: I live in Colora, Maryland.

Kurtz: And where were you born and when, Ken?

Miller: I was born in Middleton, Wisconsin, 1/1/34. Ok.

Kurtz: And where were you raised in Wisconsin?

Miller: I was—we moved to—from Middleton to Mount Horeb in 1940 and I went through grade school and high school at Mount Horeb.

Kurtz: OK. And what did you do after high school?

Miller: I worked for—first of all I worked for Home's Tire Company for a couple of months and then I worked—I forget the construction company I worked for until the time I joined the service.

Kurtz: Were both of these companies in the Madison area?

Miller: Yeah, Madison.

Kurtz: And what year—

Miller: I wasn't fin—I forget—

Kurtz: Ok. What year did you graduate from high school? I didn't—

Miller: 1952.

Kurtz: 1952.

Miller: May 1952.

Kurtz: So the Korean War was going on.

Miller: Going on, right.

Kurtz: And were you eligible for the draft?

Miller: Yeah, yeah.

Kurtz: So, and then you joined the Navy, when?

Miller: February 15th, 1953.

Kurtz: And where did you report when you went into the Navy?

Miller: Great Lakes.

Kurtz: Great Lakes.

Miller: The Naval Training Center.

Kurtz: Ok and how long were you at Great Lakes?

Miller: For boot camp—what was it? Three months I believe it was.

Kurtz: Three months. And then after you got done with your boot camp, what was your next duty assignment?

Miller: My first airplane ride was from Chicago to Key West, Florida. Picked up the USS Peterson, DE 152.

Kurtz: Do you remember what kind of an airplane you flew on?

Miller: I don't remember.

Kurtz: Was it a military aircraft?

Miller: No, no, it was a civilian aircraft.

Kurtz: So you flew to Florida and were assigned to a destroyer escort. What were your duties on this destroyer escort?

Miller: I was a fireman apprentice, diesel, diesel engineer.

Kurtz: Diesel engineer. And how long were you on the Peterson?

Miller: Two and half years.

Kurtz: Two and a half years.

Miller: I transferred--I think it was 1956--I left the Peterson.

Kurtz: Ok and where did the cruises that the Peterson go on when you were—what area were they assigned to?

Miller: Oh, we were in Havana, Cuba twice—Gitmo [Guantanamo Bay, Cuba], ah—Scotland—ah—Portugal—that’s all I remember.

Kurtz: Ok, you were in Cuba before the revolution so you don’t really have any experiences there.

Miller: Ya [Laughs] that was nice.

Kurtz: Yes.

Miller: That was a nice tour down there.

Kurtz: So what did you do after you left the Peterson in 1956?

Miller: I went to the Fleet Reserve Facility in Philadelphia Naval Shipyard.

Kurtz: Ok, what did you do there?

Miller: We repaired—well—took care of a—maintained the mothballed ships. We took care of the dehumidifiers and all that—And was involved with preserving the machinery.

Kurtz: Ok. Was the USS Wisconsin there at that time?

Miller: No.

Kurtz: Were there any famous ships there mothballed that you can remember?

Miller: Well, here’s one—this was in the wintertime—we had to stand well over four hour watches. And they would take us around on a truck and drop us off at each nest of—mothballed ships and the Tennessee and the California were about a mile away from the accommodation ship. And they dropped this one kid off to assume his duties and by the time they go back to the accommodation ship, the kid was standing on the quarter deck waiting for them. And they asked him what happened. And he said “Well, somebody’s down there playing the piano.” [laughs] So they took him back down there again and tried to pacify him or whatever—trying to talk him out of what he was going through. And they turned around and come back to the accommodation ship and he was standing there again. So they finally got someone else to relieve his duties. They figured out it was the—the lines were being taught and singing in the wind. And he got all wound up on that.

Kurtz: That’s interesting. Were the—the Tennessee and California were both at Pearl Harbor, weren’t they?

Miller: Yeah, but they were in mothballs.

Kurtz: Yeah, but they were ships that were at Pearl Harbor.

Miller: Yeah, they were sunk at Pearl and they were raised and well they—this was in 55—56.

Kurtz: Ok then. What did you do—how long were you in Philadelphia?

Miller: Two years.

Kurtz: Two years. In 1958 then, what was your next duty station?

Miller: I went to the USS Keppler.

Kurtz: Can you spell that?

Miller: K-E-P-P-L-E-R.

Kurtz: Ok.

Miller: DD 765.

Kurtz: So that's a destroyer?

Miller: That was a destroyer right.

Kurtz: And what were your duties on that ship.

Miller: I was an air conditioning and refrigeration man. I didn't really have too much to do in that. Well—and auxiliary emergency generators, three banger 268As.

Kurtz: Ok, how long were you on the Keppler?

Miller: I was only on a little over a year.

Kurtz: Ok, and what, ah, where was the Keppler?

Miller: Newport, Rhode Island.

Kurtz: Newport.

Miller: Newport, Rhode Island.

Kurtz: And then does anything happen there of note?

Miller: Nah, there wasn't too much going on on there.

Kurtz: Then where did you go after that in 1959?

Miller: I was transferred to the USS Hissem, DER.

Kurtz: What is a DER?

Miller: Destroyer Radar. A radar picket ship.

Kurtz: And what was the name of that ship again?

Miller: Hissem, H-I-S-S-E-M.

Kurtz: Hissem.

Miller: Hissem, H-I-S-S-E-M. He was killed at the Battle of Midway in Torpedo Squadron 8.

Kurtz: Ok.

Miller: I have all that down.

Kurtz: Ok, great. Ah and where was the—

Miller: That was 400, DER 400.

Kurtz: Ok, and what, what,--where was this ship operating?

Miller: That was at Newport, Rhode Island.

Kurtz: Again at Newport?

Miller: Right.

Kurtz: And how long were you there?

Miller: Oh, I was on that baby for almost six years.

Kurtz: Six years, so that takes us to 1965?

Miller: Yup.

Kurtz: And ah, you had the same duty on the Hissem the whole time?

- Miller: No, this—well I advanced my rank, two ranks, and I was the leading Petty Officer on, for all the engine rooms. So I assumed all the duties--
- Kurtz: So you were the Chief Petty Officer then?
- Miller: No, I wasn't chief then, I was first, I was E-6 then but I was in charge of all the engine rooms, I was the leading Petty Officer. So I was the troubleshooter for all the casualties that--that we had. One of the—one big casualty that we had that we were coming back from Scotland—it was Scotland again—and we blew a liner on Number One main engine and—actually when you were in a ship yard it would take shipyard workers a week to overhaul or lift the crank and install a new liner, and we were in the North Atlantic, and we raised the crank, had all the repairs done and back online in less than twenty-four hours.
- Kurtz: Now how do you explain your efficiency at sea as compared to efficiency onshore?
- Miller: Had a ball on shore. [laughs] Had a ball.
- Kurtz: Had a ball. Ah, when you say “casualties” that means engine—
- Miller: Engine failure. The engine fails. Engine failure.
- Kurtz: Right. So we're at 1965 and something was going on in 1965 is that accurate?
- Miller: Well, before that we went to Operation Deepfreeze in '63 and '64. We went on Operation Deepfreeze.
- Kurtz: What was that?
- Miller: Well, we were a weather ship for the Antarctic expeditions for the scientists. We maintained a wea—
- Kurtz: That was '63-'64?
- Miller: '63 and '64.
- Kurtz: Is there anything notable about that?
- Miller: Oh, I got a whole book on that—we a—well we crossed—well we crossed the Equator of course and then a—we were the first ship to—they high-lined a sailor over from a Kiwi ship.
- Kurtz: Kiwi, is that New Zealand?

Miller: New Zealand ship and the doctor operated on this kid for appendicitis, in them rough seas. And we were the first ship to transfer, get fuel transferred to us from the ice breaker Glacier. They had lost a screw and they transferred fuel over to us. And I—I stood—I was an engineer in the engineering department and I stood bridge watches. I was under training for the LDO, Limited Duty Officer Program, and Warrant Officer Program. I was being trained to see if I could make advancement to the officer's ranks.

Kurtz: Ok. Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us about that?

Miller: Oh, let me see. Well, we were [laughs]—we were at Campbell Island.

Kurtz: Where's Campbell Island?

Miller: It's just below the Antarctic Circle. Some of the scientists were there and they maintained the offices and all that stuff for other scientists. And they stopped—well we stopped there—and this—was this over Christmas?—it was right around the holidays period. And they invited us over for a dinner and everything. But, in the meantime that day they took tours around the island. And what they did, they put beer at various stops along the way. Well, the first batch drank all the beer. Second batch peed in the bottles. And the third batch got mad as hell [laughs] when they come along and got stung. [Laughs]

Kurtz: That's a good story.

Miller: I'll never forget that one. [laughs] Oh, Lord.

Kurtz: So, anything else? There's probably nothing to top that I guess.

Miller: Oh, I guess. It's difficult trying to remember some of them things. Let's see—we didn't really have—oh yeah, we a—I have a film that I give on that too. We were taking on water in our two back fuel tanks, and we couldn't figure out why we were getting water in there. And they took us into the dry dock up at a, Christchurch [New Zealand] and we had about a foot crack in the keel. Between the fuel tanks and they welded that up successfully. And a we didn't have no more problems after that. Then we went up—I forget what that other town was—those people were really, really nice. They come along and they invited all the sailors that were on liberty to their homes for dinner. Well, this friend of mine [laughs] we were going on out and you ain't seen so many sheep in your life. There were sheep on both sides of the road and we were going down the road and he says "What do you think they're gonna have for dinner?" I says "What have you seen alongside the road?" [laughs] He said, "I don't—I'm sorry I don't like mutton." So anyway we got out to the place and they set us up tables. And they did the dishes up in the kitchen and they set them on the table. Big piece of mutton—and he said—he was about

ready to throw up, and I said “Charlie,” I said “just fuck with it, and have a go at it.” So we got through that.

Kurtz: Were these people Caucasians, er?

Miller: Oh yeah.

Kurtz: Were they English?

Miller: New Zealanders.

Kurtz: New Zealanders, ok. We are I think done with Operation Deepfreeze and all. So what did you do in 1965 after that?

Miller: Well, let’s see. We went on a world cruise. We went on a world cruise.

Kurtz: Oh ok, so then where did you go?

Miller: We were in Tahiti [laughs] and we were in this big open air, open bar and restaurant, we were sitting there drinkin’. And there was a bunch of civilians behind us. And this one guys says, “look at this shit.” He says, “We paid” I forget how many dollars, “to come to Tahiti, and there’s some God damned sailors sitting there next to us.” [laughs] And this friend of mine, Charlie, I keep talking about Charlie. A tall skinny guy, he weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds maybe—About six foot three.—and he went to the bathroom, and old Tom and I were there, we said “let’s fix Charlie up.” So we had this all set up. When Charlie come back and pulled up his chair at the table, we said “Charlie, did you hear—you shoulda been here. You shoulda heard what this guy said. He said, “Hit that skinny guy first.” [Laughter] Oh, Charlie jumped up from the table, he was like a bandy rooster. I said—I looked at him and grabbed a hold of him and set him down before we got in trouble. [Laughter] Oh and when we were in New Zealand, the CO [Commanding Officer] told all his junior officers, not to go ashore with me, Tom Mainy(??) and Ken Kimball(??). We used to get ‘em bombed, and then we’d leave ‘em. [Laughter] And then—and let ‘em find their own way back. Captain told them that they weren’t supposed go out with us anymore. [Laughter]

Kurtz: Ok, anything else on your world cruise that you’d like to relate?

Miller: Well—well we were in Tasmania. Adelaide, Australia. Perth, Australia. We just didn’t do too much there, went mostly sightseeing and then we were in Singapore, and we went sightseeing there too. Oh yeah, I was there when they was—England was getting ready to turn that over to the Singapore Government. And I was on Shore Patrol. And I was with the local police. And they said “don’t sit next to the window, cause somebody might throw a hand grenade through it.” I said “Oh my God.” So I had a tour of duty with

them for about eight hours and nothing really happened there. It was pretty good. We were in Bombay, India. Rats were over there as big as—as big as the cats. And the only place that we went on that world cruise, that all the sailors were back aboard ship before dark. [Laughter]

Kurtz: In Bombay.

Miller: In Bombay, yeah. [Laughter] That was terrible. I don't care who likes it or not, that was terrible. Then we went to Aden [Yemen]. To go up the Suez Canal, and from there we went up to ah—Athens, Greece, Piraeus, actually is where we tied up. Went to see all the—the coliseum, and all that stuff—nothing eventful there—then we went to Naples, and then we went up for a tour, tour up in Rome—Saw the Vatican, and all the—the Coliseum— and all the museums—

Kurtz: What was the purpose of this tour? Not just to give Ken a sightseeing tour—was it?

Miller: Well, it was a—they had a choice—either—when we come back from a—Operation Deepfreeze, once it was over—go back the same route we came—the Captain, he was a good captain—he, he got his way around the world cruise. This cruise was the first ship of this class to go unescorted and unaccompanied or unsupplied around the world cruise. And no problems.

Kurtz: Well, and then you were responsible for making the engines go.

Miller: Yeah.—What I—yeah—I—but prior to the getting underway we had to sit down and order all the parts that we thought we were gonna need for this deployment, for a year. And we had no problems. The only thing we picked up was fuel and oil along the way. So we did a hell of a good job. And no problems.

Kurtz: Ok, where in Italy, did you—

Miller: Well Rome—sightseeing in Rome and enjoyed the food and all that stuff there. And then we went to a—Cannes, France. We were there when the film festival was going on. We had—had a chance to see all the nude bathers on the beach. [Laughter]

Kurtz: That wasn't bad. Definitely.

Miller: Not too bad. [Laughter] From there we went to a—Barcelona, Spain. Saw the bull—

Kurtz: And this was all in 196—

- Miller: '64 or '5. Sixty—yeah—'63 and '64. Barcelona, Spain and we saw the all bull fights. Oh and then we went through the canal—we stopped at the a—the Azores to pick up fuel and then we were [noise] back to Newport, Rhode Island.
- Kurtz: Well, what happened when you got back to Newport? Did you get reassigned then or?
- Miller: Well let me see, ah—no, I was still on there. They were gonna decommission the Hissem when we come back from the world cruise. And then the Vietnam Conflict heated up and changed their mind. They refitted us and us all ready to deploy to Vietnam in 1965.
- Kurtz: Ok, did you deploy to Vietnam with the Hissem?
- Miller: Yeah, yeah, I was there, what, almost six years. Then we went, we went through the Panama Canal. And I had shore patrol again there.
- Kurtz: Where you in Panama City or Colon?
- Miller: Balboa and Colon. This was when all the hippies were running loose. These kids were down there with their git-fiddles going through these back alleys and that, and I was with this cop. I was so close to him, if he'd a stopped I'd a been in his billfold. And he's telling these kids to leave this area because they were in deep trouble. And they mouth off to the cop and they say "We don't want to." And he says, "Well, we'll come back and pick you up in a couple hours, because you'll probably be dead." [Laughter]
- Kurtz: Git-fiddle? What is that? Is it—
- Miller: A guitar.
- Kurtz: Oh, a guitar. Oh, ok.
- Miller: They had guitars on their back and just—yeah, old slang. [Laughter]
- Kurtz: Yeah, ok—well no—we need to know that because a hundred years from now somebody might not know what we're talking about.
- Miller: Yeah, and what happened on the—on the passage out of the canal, No. 1 main engine goes ploowie. God we went down and couldn't figure out what it was. Pulled off the inspection plate of the front end drive gear, and the bolts had all broke off of the front end drive gear, and fell down on the crank shaft. Oh, my God. So anyway we were already deployed and going on out, so they--we had to tear it all down. And Roy—the Roy O. Hale [DE 336] was being

decommissioned. And they had to take their No. 1 main engine apart and give us the parts that we needed from their engine to fix ours.

Kurtz: Where was this?

Miller: This was coming off—just leaving the Panama Canal heading for Hawaii. And then they had to airmail all them parts to us so we could—

Kurtz: Ok, so were the repairs done in Honolulu?

Miller: Yeah, yeah.

Kurtz: Ok.

Miller: So it was about a week's job, and all that stuff.

Kurtz: Ok. So you kinda just limped into Hawaii with—with the power you had?

Miller: Hawaii—and got her fixed up and then--

Kurtz: When was that in 196--?

Miller: '65. Then we stopped—after that we stopped in Guam. Uneventful there, just a fuel stop.

Kurtz: Ok.

Miller: Then we stopped in the Philippines, Olongapo--another fuel stop. And then we headed for Vietnam, and Market Time and Game Warden. [Operation code names]

Kurtz: Ok, when you were in Vietnam—when you got there did you dock at Cam Ranh Bay?

Miller: Yeah we were at Cam Ranh—Well first of all we—we went all the way up to Da Nang and we fired some rounds up around the DMZ.

Kurtz: Ok what kind of weapons did you have?

Miller: Three inch, all we had was three inch. We were in close and fired some three inch rounds for whatever ground support they needed then. Then—we were just up and down—lets see—a few guys went ashore at Da Nang, well they would—it's really a—oh—confusing on a lot of this stuff cause we were at Da Nang and then we were down at Cam Ranh. I mean we were up and down the coast all the time. And then we were assigned a Game Warden—this is a trip and a half.

- Kurtz: Ok, can you kind of explain what Game Warden—
- Miller: Well we were inspecting junks and sampans for contraband. And a--I was assigned to—one of the inspection teams. Well we only had one inspection team aboard. And we—we had to a—get all our stuff ready to go. I was—was given—well my flak jacket, I had a Thompson—
- Kurtz: Ok, explain what a Thompson is.
- Miller: Thompson machine gun.
- Kurtz: Ok.
- Miller: And I had a bandolier of clips, a .45, a canteen, my K-Bar, boots, and a life jacket and XO says,—this was our first attempt at boarding party, he says, “Now if somebody throws a hand grenade in the boat, jump over the side.” [Laughter] I—
- Kurtz: You mighta sunk!
- Miller: [Laughter] I said—I said, “Are you crazy?!” [Laughter] That’s my exact words. I said: “Are you crazy?”
- Kurtz: How many people where on this boarding party?
- Miller: Yeah, there was five of us.
- Kurtz: Five of us.
- Miller: There was the coxswain, the engineer, and well the XO, and—and—well yeah, five of us.
- Kurtz: Ok, now you were on there to keep the engines running on the boat, or?
- Miller: No, I was on the inspection team, we had another—I was one of the inspectors.
- Kurtz: Ok, you were one of the inspectors. Did you receive any special training for that?
- Miller: Hell no. Just give us a gun and a helmet and said “Go and look for” whatever. We didn’t know what we were looking for. They just said—well actually it was guns or you know weapons of some sort.
- Kurtz: Now, can you describe the difference between a sampan and a junk?

Miller: Oh a junk is a bigger boat, it's about 30 some feet and they haul the bigger loads, and a sampan is just a small family boat that they buzz around with.

Kurtz: And were they sail powered or motor powered or both?

Miller: Ah, junks were combination sail and engine. And the sampans were—they coulda been—some of them mighta had an outboard on them but most, the majority of them were sail powered.

Kurtz: Now on the sampans, did they have the motor on a long stick out—

Miller: Some of them did, and some of them had the regular short shaft. It was really wild. Now we used to chase—chase some of them little sampan down in along the shore, there musta been a thousand of them—going—how we gonna get 'em?

Kurtz: And did you feel that was part of their strategy, to get in shallow water where your ship couldn't get?

Miller: Get into shallow water, where we couldn't go and then we would have—

Kurtz: and then mix in with the other—

Miller: with the other ones, right.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Miller: And then—well—one of our first trips out—yeah that had to be the first one—we were up around Da Nang, God, we were out there, its so, so black. People don't believe how dark it, it gets on the water. You—you had to touch your hand to your nose to realize how dark it was. Anyway, we come along and it was starting to crack down, and here comes a big power boat. It—all you could see was that bow was way up in the air and that thing was just a flyin'. God it was moving. And our radios go dead, can't get ahold of the Hissem.

Kurtz: I wanna stop you here because the tape—

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Kurtz: Continue with your story.

Miller: Anyway, this power boat was coming, it was flying and a—our XO he was a limited duty officer, he had over twenty years in, and a—

- Kurtz: What is a limited duty officer?
- Miller: He's got limited duties in a specialty rank. Could be engineering or operations or—
- Kurtz: Ok, so he wasn't like—
- Miller: He was the XO, the Executive Officer of the ship. And he was aboard—and a he was getting—well like I say, he had his twenty years in to retire and this boats comes screaming on up towards us, and we lost communications. And he hunched down in the engineering compartment and he said, "Oh God, please don't let this be the V.C. I don't wanna die."
And I said--I stood up, [Laughter], I put that Thompson right between his eyes, and I said "If you ever breathe one more of them words," I says, "you're dead." And that's my exact words. I don't care what anybody says. He got pretty ticked off at me and I said "well, that's the way it goes." I said "We're here not to be crybabies or whatever. We're here to do a job."
- Kurtz: What kind of a boat were you on when you did this?
- Miller: Whaleboat, [laughter] an old 16-foot whaleboat. We were—
- Kurtz: So can you describe what a whaleboat is for people that don't know?
- Miller: It's about—it's a—well actually it's an emergency life raft, about 16 foot with a six cylinder Detroit Diesel engine in it. It can't go very fast. It's just something to get around with.
- Kurtz: So when you went to a junk or sampan to inspect it, you put the whaleboat in water and you'd go over there. Did you have an interpreter with you?
- Miller: No, not at that time. We just were—this was '65. We did this—later we would have an interpreter come aboard and be alongside for—
- Kurtz: Can you describe how you would—the Hissem would stop a—?
- Miller: Just go alongside and stop and wave at 'em. And holler at 'em and tell 'em to pull on over. They'd see us loaded with weapons and everything and they would stop and show us their papers. None of us at that time could read Vietnamese or speak Vietnamese. And we just were—a bunch of dummies, just stand there and looked through their stuff and look for weapons was all we could do.
- Kurtz: What if they had rice or medical supplies, you let those go?
- Miller: We were just looking for weapons.

- Kurtz: Just looking for weapons. Now did you have any of these occurrences in which you found weapons?
- Miller: No but we found or trailed a junk all the way from—now I forget, I can't tell you exact spot in Vietnam—a whole junk full of marijuana. We followed him all the way up to Hong Kong. And they, he got arrested when he pulled into Hong Kong.
- Kurtz: How did you know there was marijuana on it?
- Miller: They told us that, when they apprehended him. Cause he wouldn't stop.
- Kurtz: Oh so you kept following him and he wouldn't stop?
- Miller: He wouldn't stop, he just kept on truckin'. And we followed him all the way up to Hong Kong.
- Kurtz: Did you have any orders on when you could shoot?
- Miller: No, just follow. And let him, let him go and see what would happen.
- Kurtz: And so the British in Hong Kong arrested him?
- Miller: Arrested him. He had a whole load of marijuana. We found this out afterwards. Then we were—Game Warden and well Market Time we were looking for downed pilots and all that stuff.
- Kurtz: Market Time was looking for downed pilots?
- Miller: Yeah, we found two parachutes and that, but no bodies. I got pictures—that's in—well I have a VCR.
- Kurtz: Ok, but what happened is, is that you'd get an assignment when a pilot got shot down, and thought that he went down in the ocean. So you'd look?
- Miller: We'd go out there and look for him. Well, they know when an air strike or something was going on, so did Walker. I shoulda shot him. [Laughter]
- Kurtz: Could you tell us who Walker is?
- Miller: Well, Robert Walker was a renegade Chief Warrant Officer in the United States Navy that was a spy for the Russians. And he did it for a number of years before he was apprehended. And now he's doing time in Illinois, Marion.

- Kurtz: Did you ever run across him in your--?
- Miller: No, un-uh. No I've never run across that clown. I just—
- Kurtz: So, you were involved in Game Warden and Market Time for how long?
- Miller: From May—June of '65 until June of '66, when I got transferred to shore duty at Bainbridge.
- Kurtz: Now, when you were involved with Game Warden did you notice any reduction in the number of boats coming from the north to look at?
- Miller: Not really. They were just—they were daily fisherman as far as we could figure out. Just ordinary people, you don't know one from the other. You see 'em coming down the road and you don't—hell they turn around and they got their little hats on.
- Kurtz: They had the conical straw hats on out on the water?
- Miller: Yeah, they had their stuff and away they go.
- Kurtz: How were they dressed?
- Miller: Well, they all had their black pajamas on. [Laughter] That you couldn't—and five foot three and black pajamas, and conical hats and all smiled and had black hair. Couldn't tell one from the other.
- Kurtz: And was it a mix of males and females?
- Miller: Yeah, families. We rescued a number of refugees on boats. I got that, that's all on my tape and all that stuff.
- Kurtz: Now how did you know they were refugees?
- Miller: We knew that they were overrun. They come along and there was a couple of junks—oh it was terrible to see that.
- Kurtz: Where there so many people on it?
- Miller: Yeah, they were just overcrowded with people. Ninety-five percent of them were women and children. The only men aboard were line handlers and the engineers. All the rest of them were women and kids, babies.
- Kurtz: On your inspections did you ever have an occasion to fire your weapon?
- Miller: No.

Kurtz: No warning shots or anything like that?

Miller: No, we were as careful as we could be.
I fell over the side. [Laughter] We [Laughter]

Kurtz: That's not a definition of care.

Miller: [Laughter] No, I. We didn't really fire any warning shots. We never, ever had any—

Kurtz: Did anybody ever actually resist you when you boarded their--?

Miller: No, cause there were just too much of firepower, just too much. A lot of time the ship, the ship was always, well, when you wanted them they weren't there but they were within sight, or supposedly, radio distance.

Kurtz: And what kind of radios did you have?

Miller: [Laughter] I don't know the number of them all I know is the radiomen had their radios and they didn't work half the time.

Kurtz: Were they the ones that you carried on the back? P-R-C 15 or 20 or the big one. Prick 25's is what we called 'em.

Miller: They just didn't work.

Kurtz: Ah, did you ever work with aircraft or anything like this to spot ships, to tell you anything?

Miller: No.

Kurtz: So this was just, you were out there and what you saw visually--?

Miller: What you saw was what we got.

Kurtz: What flag—were many of these ships flying flags?

Miller: Well, they all flew the South Vietnamese flag.

Kurtz: Whether they were good or bad, huh?

Miller: Good or bad didn't make any difference. It's their country and we were just there to try to pacify some of this stuff. I don't know.

- Kurtz: Now when you were operating on this, you were there for about a year, did you ever go back to the Philippines to get refitted or did you do that in Da Nang or Cam Ranh Bay or?
- Miller: Let's see. We left—well I ain't—I wanna tell you that I fell over the side down in the delta. We were chasing a sampan, and he took off into the shallow water. And I was sitting on the gunnel on the whaleboat and we were chasing him through the swells, all of a sudden the front end of the—the bow went up in the air and I went over the side. With all that weight on they had to reach down and pull me out of the drink.
- Kurtz: Was this like in the mouth of the Mekong River?
- Miller: No this was way down on the—I can't remember.
- Kurtz: Way down at the end of South Vietnam?
- Miller: Yeah, it's right, all the way down, I'd have to look at the map. It's all the way down on the point. I can't think of the name of it. It's down on the point and we were down, down past the Mekong. We were in a bad area.
- Kurtz: Was this swampy mangrove?
- Miller: Yeah, it was really—
- Kurtz: A lot of interconnected waterways?
- Miller: Yeah. Well we went in as far as we could with the whaleboat and we got grounded out. So you know how shallow it was. No, we had to turn around and come back.
- Kurtz: When you were in the whaleboat down there in the delta, did you ever get shot at from the shore?
- Miller: No. No.
- Kurtz: Did you stop any, actually stop any boats down there?
- Miller: Not in the delta we didn't. No, everything we stopped was up along from like Cam Ranh Bay up to Da Nang and when we go down south they, we didn't stop anything.
- Kurtz: So did you see any ships coming from Cambodia or around the other way coming into the delta area?

- Miller: I was an engineer and the only time I was involved was when they called up to have an inspection party to deploy. That's all.
- Kurtz: So how many times a week would you do this?
- Miller: Oh boy. It was once or twice a day. It was pretty grueling.
- Kurtz: And you still had to do your other duties?
- Miller: You had your other duties to take care of too.
- Kurtz: Now, did you, what kind of uni—did you have the regular navy uniform on?
- Miller: Yeah, just plain old dungarees and all that stuff. We wore berets and Aussie bush hats.
- Kurtz: Were they issued to you or did you?
- Miller: Hell no. [Laughter] Some of them P-B-R's and Swifts would come alongside and we'd give 'em ice cream or whatever supplies they needed. A lot of times they just wanted to go in the ship's store and get some toiletry articles. And we'd give them ice cream then they'd take a list of hats that we wanted and next time through they'd stop us and give us our hats. I got all that stuff my tape.
- Kurtz: Ok, there's a couple things I want you just to define. What is a swift and a?
- Miller: A Swift Boat is a little bit bigger than a—a swift boat is offshore more than a PBR. A PBR is inland and shallow water.
- Kurtz: What does PBR stand for?
- Miller: Patrol Boat River. That's for shallow water and the Swift Boat was out along the coast in deeper water because the PBR had Jacuzzi pumps for propulsion. And the Swifts had screws.
- Kurtz: So that was a whole different part. That was what they called the Brown Navy?
- Miller: Yeah, Brown Water. The PBR was Brown Water Navy.
- Kurtz: And so the Swifts were kind of complimentary to what you were doing.
- Miller: Yeah, they were with the Coast Guard.

- Kurtz: And did you have some experience with any Coast Guard units down in that area?
- Miller: No, just intermingled when they come alongside for fuel or supplies or—
- Kurtz: Cause you were a bigger ship, that you had the ability to resupply them?
- Miller: Right, they didn't need much. Just comfort stuff.
- Kurtz: Were any of these Coast Guard ships that you ran into Reservists? In '65?
- Miller: I have no idea. I really don't know.
- Kurtz: You really didn't get to know any of them or anything?
- Miller: No, they just come alongside and do their trick and they were gone.
- Kurtz: Did they ever deploy any like, SEALs or anything like that off of the Hissem?
- Miller: Not off the Hissem, no. We were down in the delta when I was in [unintelligible].
- Kurtz: We'll get to that. So that type of stuff, this assignment was just basically patrolling for boats?
- Miller: Contraband and stuff like that.
- Kurtz: And so was there any rhyme or reason to where you were in Vietnam?
- Miller: Just assigned. Well there was a whole string of DE's and DER's, and we'd just up and down. They'd go up and we'd come down and vice-versa. Or whatever. And sometimes they'd go offline—well we went to—where'd we go? We went to Bangkok for R&R.
- Kurtz: The whole ship?
- Miller: Just the ship, yeah. The Hissem went to Bangkok.
- Kurtz: So you took R&R as a group like a regular peacetime shore thing?
- Miller: Right. And then—did we go to—I think, yeah we went to the Philippines. Philippines once and yeah, Philippines. And we were up in Formosa once of R&R.
- Kurtz: Ok, so three different times that you left?

- Miller: Yeah, well we were there a year. I mean that isn't much time to go in. I think we stayed about a week at each stop.
- Kurtz: Did you ever go up the Saigon River and go to Saigon?
- Miller: Oh yeah, I was in Saigon. Oh the ship? Yeah, we anchored there a couple of times. We were right to the mouth of the Saigon River. We didn't go all the way up.
- Kurtz: So, you didn't go into Saigon.
- Miller: Not the Hissem. Well we went in the Saigon River but we anchored right there.
- Kurtz: Ok, by Vung Tau?
- Miller: Yeah we were off of there. That was a recreation center but we never went ashore. We just, get your binoculars out and take a peek.
- Kurtz: So in the Saigon River did you ever have any, did the V.C. or anybody ever shoot at any of your?
- Miller: No, no.
- Kurtz: So you didn't have any experience of getting any enemy fire from—?
- Miller: No, we just fired at them a couple times. Shore bombardment. Well, once up in Da Nang and then there was one time down in the delta where we went in for fire support.
- Kurtz: Was that an American unit or South Vietnamese units or don't you know?
- Miller: I have no idea. I just know we fired. Went down there and that was it.
- Kurtz: So in that fire mission, your duty mission was in the engine room?
- Miller: I was an engineer, yeah.
- Kurtz: Ok, and where you the—what rank were you?
- Miller: E-6.
- Kurtz: E-6. And so continued as the lead engineer on—
- Miller: Yeah, Engineering Petty Officer. Leading Engineering Petty Officer. I was in charge.

- Kurtz: Have we covered everything on the first tour, Ken, that we should talk about?
- Miller: Let me see, I a, yeah. We came back, we stopped at Guam, Hawaii.
- Kurtz: So you came back to the United States as a ship?
- Miller: Well, we came back to Hawaii and I got transferred then. They kept the Hissem there and I think maybe within the next year it was decommissioned cause they were going through all this decommissioning program. One thing I think is important. This black Chief and I left Pearl Harbor together. This was when civil strife [rights] and spitting on everybody and everything. And we landed in L.A. And he says "Where are we gonna stay?" I said, "We're gonna go into this hotel right here, Holiday Inn." He says "They won't let me in." I said "The hell they won't. If they don't let us have a room," I said "there's gonna be all kinds' hell to pay." And he said "Oh, I don't wanna cause any trouble." I said "Chief, there ain't gonna be any trouble. If there's any trouble we're just gonna stand back to back and we're gonna handle stuff right then and there." I said "I don't care." And we went in, got a room. He took the Bible home with him. [Laughter] He says "I don't believe this, and my wife won't believe this." So he took the Bible home to his wife. And I said "Great."
- Kurtz: Where was this Chief from?
- Miller: Someplace in Pennsylvania. I lost track of him. I looked up in the Navy Log to see if he put his name in the Navy log but I can't find him.
- Kurtz: So he wasn't a Southern Black, so he received this type of discrimination being a northerner.
- Miller: Because it was—'65 or '66—'66 it was really in a turmoil. I mean it was bad then. And I said we gonna go down together. We went over together, we're gonna go back together.
- Kurtz: As a follow-up on that, was there any racial difficulties or anything like that on the Hissem during the time you were there?
- Miller: Hell no, we got along great. We got along great. There was never any racial overtones one way or the other. In fact, here's another one I forgot to tell you. On the Hissem we had the first black Limited Duty Officer, Engineering Officer aboard. We never—and he was great. Hell, he came from the subs, he was great. He knew all his—that's were I learned the majority of my stuff from. He was—he really knew his engines.
- Kurtz: Was he a regular Navy guy?

- Miller: Yeah, yeah. He was a Chief Petty Officer, then he went to Limited Duty Officer. And then he was Ensign and he retired as Lieutenant Commander. So this is pretty good for—that's as high as, at that time, that's as high as an LDO could go is Lieutenant Commander.
- Kurtz: And they could never command a ship either, could they?
- Miller: An LDO? No, they were—that LDO is a limited, specialty rank. They could be an XO or something else but they couldn't be commander. But he was great, I'd like to meet him again.
- Kurtz: Did you have any opportunity to go to any schools?
- Miller: You know the only school that I went to was air conditioning and refrigeration and Class C Fairbanks (??) school down at Great Lakes. That's all I, everything else—I was just a dumb farm boy from Mount Horeb and I learned everything on the job and I—it was my way or the highway. And I—well it's all in my records. I never had any problems with anything. If you didn't do it my way, you was in trouble.
- Kurtz: And that worked for you for your career?
- Miller: And that worked for me. I was junior—everyplace I went I was the junior man but I was in charge. Not too bad for a farm boy.
- Kurtz: You mentioned before that you were in a program that might get you to be a Warrant Officer, and that just didn't work out?
- Miller: I was [Laughter] I had too much balls. I couldn't, I couldn't be an officer, I couldn't be a yes man. I just couldn't say yes to everything. No. I was on the list for both of them but I wasn't selected so I said "Thank God." I could not handle that. I'd had to turn it down.
- Kurtz: Ok, that's interesting. Having been an officer I'm not gonna comment on that.
- Miller: Well, I'm just telling you like it is.
- Kurtz: I understand what you're saying. I understand exactly.
- Miller: I'll tell you another incident about, this was on the Newport. We ain't got to the Newport but do you want to hear it?
- Kurtz: Well why don't we go there?
- Miller: Newport, a new LST.

Kurtz: What is a LST?

Miller: Landing Ship Tank. I was the first Chief Engineman aboard, first man to reenlist aboard.

Kurtz: So how long did you reenlist for that time?

Miller: I think six years.

Kurtz: Six years. And that would--?

Miller: That brought me on up to twenty years when I retired in '73.

Kurtz: Ok.

Miller: And I was first, first enlisted man to stand a quarter deck watch upon commissioning, first man to report a death aboard. There were a lot of firsts.

Kurtz: Yeah. So how long were you on the Newport?

Miller: Three years.

Kurtz: Three years. So that would be like 19—till 1969?

Miller: No, I left there—we put her in commission in '68 and I left there in 1971.

Kurtz: Oh ok, so we slipped a couple of years there. That's alright.

Miller: Well I was on shore duty up in Bainbridge, Maryland after [unintelligible]

Kurtz: So that's where you ended up retiring?

Miller: No, no. I retired on the L.Y. Spear.

Kurtz: I mean, that's where you live now, isn't it?

Miller: Yeah, right because of the bases. But here, what I was gonna get to, the Newport. We were commissioned and everything, well I—yeah—we had a casualty. Line shaft bearing went out on the engine. We didn't have the tools aboard to pop the cap and roll the shaft over to get the bearings out. So the Captain went over to the AMSU, it's a maintenance support unit for the amphibs, Amphibious Maintenance Support Unit. So they got together and they had a work order all signed by this four-striper, an engineering officer. He comes back and he gives me the work request to take over to repair shop. This is on Friday. "What the hell, ain't no problem." So I go in there and this

W-4 he's sitting there and he's got his chair tilted back and his feet up in the chair and he's got all his lackeys around. So he says "What's your problem?" Didn't acknowledge me for nothing, just said "what's your problem?" I said "Oh, I got a work order here for you." He said "Ha, Ha, you see what you do with these clowns when they come in with a work order on a Friday." Bam. "Disapproved." And he hands it back to me. I saluted him and I said "Thank you sir. You just made the biggest mistake of you military career." And I turned around and I walked out. And he said "Where you going?" I kept on going. He sent this E-8 and E-9. They said "What do you mean walking out." I says "I wanna tell you something, buddy. If you guys wanna stay on his bandwagon, you're in deep trouble. But if I was you I would just forget it." So I went back to the engineering officer and I laid the work request on his table and he about went into orbit. He said "Who in the hell disapproved this?" And I told him what happened. [Laughter] And man, that phone was ringing and you could hear him hollering and screaming, then [he] says come with me. Then here we go, there goes the Captain, the XO, the Engineering Officer, and me, we're going down the pier. And we get into there, to that four-striper's office and there wasn't any of this "mister would you please" and all this other stuff, report to the officer. It was umpty-ump right now! Man, he come in there and he looked at me and his eyes was big as saucers. And they told me to get the hell out. I said "ok." I'll stand out there and look through the window, right? Man, boy, that was just gnawing and chewing, and he come on out and he had orders, personally, for him to go to the ship and get that part himself, bring it back to the repair shop, and stay until it was repaired and reinstalled and tested. And he come along, was walking over to the ship. And he said "Would you give me a hand with this?" I said "In a pig's ass." I says: "You dug your own grave, pal." So anyway it was all done by the time we got ready to get underway on Monday. So we were gone for about two weeks. Smart ass, I said well, I'm gonna go back and see this guy. I went back in there I said "Where's the warrant officer umpty-ump?" They said "Oh man, he was forced to retire, two weeks ago." I said "I fixed that sucker."

Kurtz: Yeah, teach 'im to not do it. Ok, so did anything happen in shore duty? We skipped over that.

Miller: Well, let's see, I saw— Willy Musconi came up and put on two pool exhibitions. And a—what was his name—a drummer—

Kurtz: Gene Krupa?

Miller: No, a Buddy—

Kurtz: Rich?

Miller: Buddy Rich. [laughs] Somebody stole one of his drum sticks. And lord have mercy, he was really ripped. And anyway when he left there he got picked up in Elkton [Maryland] for drunken driving. [Laughter] Bainbridge was a good duty station. How many people you had was how many people had in a duty section. And you didn't have to come in and muster in the morning!

Kurtz: Oh boy, what a good deal that is.

Miller: Yeah. Some guys were complaining. I says "Where have you people been? You say this isn't a good duty station?" I said "This is great!" Anyway, that's when I got transferred to the Newport.

Kurtz: And then after the Newport, what happened?

Miller: Well, on the Newport, we were down in Gitmo. And they were, electricians were a, cleaning the switchboards and three generators. And I was on watch, midwatch. And all of a sudden, all the power goes off. They come up to the quarterdeck and they said "Hey chief, we ain't got no air." [Laughter] And I said "My God didn't you reset those air compressors, when you were shifting?" "No I guess not." "Oh my God," I said. Anyway, all the lights are off, except for the battery operated things. And the Captain comes down, he's hollering and screaming, and I said "Jeez sir, what do you want me to do about it?" I'm in whites, on the quarterdeck. So I go down there in the engine room, he comes down there, engineering officer. We got, you know, the whole parade. And I said "Jesus, what are you gonna do?" So I took the CO2 bottle and I told them guys "Get a couple of wrenches." So we popped them fittings loose, and the discharge valve on that air compressor matched up perfectly. I isolated everything but one bottle. Captain says "You ain't gonna shoot CO in my engine!" I said "CO isn't gonna go in your engine. Even if it was in your engine it would go [noise] and on the first stroke. We're just driving the piston out." "You ain't doing it, you ain't doing it." I told the engineering officer: "Would you just take him out, and get him outta here for a minute?"

[Tape 1, Side B Ends]

[End of story not on next tape]

[Tape 2, Side A begins]

[Beginning of story not on tape]

Miller: —every time he'd have duty on Friday or Saturday he'd take off his good glasses and he'd put on some purple glasses. And I says "Oh my God." Here he, whatever drugs he was taking, we'd have to wrastle with him for a couple hours and get him over to the sick bay. And every time we took him over to sick bay it was the same doctor that was on duty. And this Lieutenant was doing drugs with these kids. Can you imagine that? Whew.

It was terrible aboard there cause these kids were cutting the fire hose and setting fires, they set three fires while I was on there. Yeah. It wasn't very much fun.

Kurtz: Ok, anything else there, Ken?

Miller: Nah, not on the Newport, no.

Kurtz: Ok, then what happened after the Newport?

Miller: That's when I was transferred to a, Coronado for ah, SERE School.

Kurtz: What kind of school?

Miller: SERE. Survive, Evade, Resist, and Escape. And language school and weapons handling and all that.

Kurtz: Ok, how long was that training?

Miller: That was three months.

Kurtz: What language training?

Miller: Vietnamese. They had so many different dialects that it was difficult trying to educate everybody in all these different dialects. I used to be able to speak it but I just know a few slang words anymore. It was really difficult.

Kurtz: So they didn't focus on like the dialect that they spoke in the delta or the central--?

Miller: They didn't know where you were gonna be. They just, you were in language school. And even those instructors that were there, you know, they all spoke different dialects. And I says well how in the world can this be? But we made it through. We, they had a, a prisoner of war camp. Did you know that?

Kurtz: Yeah?

Miller: Outside of Camp Pendleton. It was the real thing, they had the old flag up there and we were trucked—First of all, I'll start from the beginning. After the school, they took us out to the beach and you had to forage for your food. And then after you were good and hungry and didn't sleep all night, then they trucked you out to Winter Springs—or Warner Springs, up in the mountains where it's nice and cold, and you had to forage for your food and everything else again. And then they had the prisoner of war camp. Well, first of all they let you loose. If you got up to this cabin, there was an apple and a sandwich there that had been there for years. [Laughter] It was yours, if

you got it. Anyway, after that—I spent eighteen hours in a little box, a little metal box. And some of these other bad asses, they actually put them on the water board and put the old test, the water test to ‘em. A rag over their face and poured water on. They said now, this is what you can expect if you’re captured. And they said if you don’t think you can run an extra mile, you better put that extra mile on.

Kurtz: Was this training because you were gonna get a special assignment?

Miller: Yeah, Naval Advisory Group.

Kurtz: In other words, anybody who was going to be an advisor to the South Vietnamese Navy, at this point in time, was getting this training?

Miller: Yeah, it was only about, I think about six thousand of us that went through that school. Because we were getting up—I was thirty-six years old when I went there. Everybody was in their thirties. See this was the time of the Vietnamese program, because they had all these young sailors over there, calling all these Vietnams, dinks, dorks and slope-heads and slant-eyes and these derogatory names. Then they wanted us old timers to go over there and appease these, try to smooth things over. And all—

Kurtz: What year was training?

Miller: 1971, started February of ‘71—

Kurtz: And is it accurate, this was part of the Vietnamese, Vietnamization program?

Miller: Right

Kurtz: Because we were in a draw-down at that time.

Miller: Right, we were going down fast. Yeah.

Kurtz: Ok, is there anything else? So then from that school you were assigned to Vietnam again?

Miller: Yeah, with MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam], NAG [Naval Advisory Group], well automatically was NAG when I finished the school. And when I got to Saigon, that’s when I was sent down to the delta, and everybody else was dispersed.

Kurtz: Ok. So you flew from San Francisco?

Miller: Right, all the way. Our first stop was the Philippines. That’s a long flight, that was on a 707. That’s a long flight.

- Kurtz: Yes. And then you landed at Tan Son Nhut?
- Miller: Tan Son Nhut, and then I think we went down to—
- Kurtz: Did the Navy have something like the replacement company?
- Miller: Yeah right, we went downtown for that—I forget—well it was MACV was the office were we went. And then we got our orders and—
- Kurtz: And how long, where did you go in the delta?
- Miller: Down to Binh Thuy. On our flight down there they had that C-23 Bronco [OV-10 Bronco] short take-off and landing plane. Oh my god, we're sitting in the back and [sighs]—I mean have you ever been on one of them things?
- Kurtz: Yes.
- Miller: Come in straight down, and they back off the engines and it scares you to death.
- Kurtz: How many people did this plane seat?
- Miller: Oh God, I don't remember. I think there was about 25 or some of us on there. You look through the cockpit and watch all this stuff is going on and look out the back and you said "oh my God."
- Kurtz: But this was a Caribou [C-7 Caribou] wasn't it?
- Miller: Ok, Caribou, or C-1—
- Kurtz: Two engines. It was a Caribou.
- Miller: Yeah it had two engines. That was a Caribou? I'm—scared me to death.
- Kurtz: So you flew from Saigon to Binh Thuy, and then were did you live in Binh Thuy?
- Miller: Binh Thuy, that's Naval supply, support activity.
- Kurtz: So there was a base. Was it on a river?
- Miller: Yeah, right there on the Mekong River. Naval support activity was on the right side of the road and the naval air was on the other side and the rangers down the road and the VNs were on the other side.

- Kurtz: What are those?
- Miller: The Vietnamese troops. So we were in a pretty heavily military area.
- Kurtz: What kind of a facility did you live in?
- Miller: I had a barracks. And a—
- Kurtz: Did they have a regular mess hall?
- Miller: Oh yeah. We had a good mess hall. We ate over with the Airdales. When I first got there they started building up a barracks for the VN, Vietnamese sailors, and they, we had our own water plant, distilling plant. And we couldn't figure out, we were just losing water, losing water, losing water, our tanks were going down. The VNs come along and took off all the shower heads and toilet basins off the wall, and they were sitting outside with their little buckets taking a bath. [laughs]
- Kurtz: What were your duties at Binh Thuy?
- Miller: I was in charge of the repair facility.
- Kurtz: So your job was to teach the Vietnamese Navy how to—?
- Miller: How to overhaul the engines.
- Kurtz: And what kind of boats are we talking about?
- Miller: We're talking about Patrol Boat River, heavies, that was the LCMs, LCRs, they had rocket ships, you know they were all landing crafts, they were converted into—
- Kurtz: The World War II ships that were converted?
- Miller: Yeah, converted into missile, rockets, and zippos, you know flame throwers and all that stuff. We maintained all that stuff.
- Kurtz: Oh, you maintained them or did you teach people how to maintain them?
- Miller: Well, when I got there I had a hundred and twenty-five VNs and about seventy-five Americans. And when I got there I had an E-7 and an E-8. The E-7 was a drunk and the E-8 wouldn't come out of his hootch. So when I got there the engine failure rate was about 50%. I says "God." I about went crazy. What I did, I assigned, every time a boat came in, I assigned two sailors to a boat, along with their Vietnamese counterparts. And they stayed with that boat until that sucker was in the water, underway. And the failure

rate within one month was less than five tenths of a percent. That's all documented in my records. And then we had—got there they wanted to bring a heavy or whatever it was into the dry-dock, they'd have to call out half the guys to pull it in by hand. I said, "This is the most stupid and ignorant thing I ever seen in my life." I says, "All these things, they got winches on 'em." I took this boson's mate, he was and E-8 boson's mate, I said "come here." So we went and we got two winches, them anchor winches. Welded them on there, on the end of the piers. Two men, pulled the boats in. I says, "Wow." And then the boiler crapped out over at the mess hall. And the Chief come over, he was crying, he didn't know what he was gonna do for a meal. And there was an old boiler over there in the middle of the field, and I said "Come on, let's go look." And by God, if there wasn't a switch on there, just what he needed. Took that sucker off, and took it over there and poof, underway.

Kurtz: Did you ever take any of these boats out yourself?

Miller: Yeah, we had to take 'em out and test 'em up and down the river and all that stuff. I never went on any of, I never went out on any strikes or nothing. I just, I was there to maintain, and we did a good job. Then another thing on the maintaining of these boats: when they would come in, they'd say "You're gonna be here for two weeks, don't cut 'em off for one hour." Because they would get out there and they would drain the oil out of the engines, or drain the water, cut the hose. Because we cheated them out of one hour of in-port time. And then if they come along and said—

Kurtz: Were these Vietnamese?

Miller: Vietnamese yeah. This was when we were turning the stuff over to 'em. If they said "Buddha said not to go," don't send 'em. Because they'll go right around the corner, right around the bend and have an engine failure. And here they are, back in the yards for two weeks. So when they said, "Buddha say, 'don't go,'" just leave 'em sit. And the officers would say the same thing, just "Ok."

Kurtz: So you never, on this tour, never took a boat up or down the Mekong River?

Miller: No, just out to test. That's all.

Kurtz: What kind of relationship did you have with the Vietnamese people?

Miller: Great, I went to—I had to—went to VN weddings, funerals, parties, New Years, Thanksgiving. I got invites from all that in Vietnamese.

Kurtz: From the ones that you worked with on the base?

Miller: Yeah.

- Kurtz: Now did they have civilian laborers too that you were involved in?
- Miller: Yeah. Not too much in the repair, they had 'em in the shops, I mean the barber shops and the, you know, other, laundry shops.
- Kurtz: Did you ever feel that the Viet Cong had infiltrated your area there?
- Miller: I, I really don't, I don't think so. Because we really never had any trouble at Binh Thuy. First thing, I forgot to tell you the first thing that happened to me at Binh Thuy. Got there, were there about two days and the mortar attack alarm went off. I said "Geez!" I fell down and pulled my flak jacket over my head and just lay there. This was at night, and a few minutes later the ground attack alarm went off and I says "Oh my God!" And I had to go about a hundred and fifty yards. I got out the door and all the lights went off and I says "Oh my God." So I knew which way I had to go, so I was running down the road and I went off the road right into a honey ditch. My helmet went one way and my gun went the other way.
- Kurtz: What kind of a weapon did you have?
- Miller: M-16. And a .38. And I sat there and I was so angry. I said "God." And I could see through the drainage tunnel I could see the river. And I just sat there and I said "I'm gonna kill the first sucker that comes through here. [Laughter] I just sat there and I said "I'm gonna kill that first sucker that comes through there. I don't care if I gotta strangle him. I got him." [Laughter]
- Kurtz: That's a good story. So you had a perimeter position assigned when there was a ground attack.
- Miller: Ground attack, yeah.
- Kurtz: Now did they have bunkers on the perimeter?
- Miller: Bunkers, yeah. And then they had watchtowers and wire and Claymores.
- Kurtz: Were you ever actually mortared or rocketed?
- Miller: No. Well we had, we had a guy across the river, if we didn't send up illumination, on time. He would sit over there and fire a couple of rounds at us. To wake us up. But that was up to the VNs to throw up the—
- Kurtz: But this was a V.C. that was gonna do this?

- Miller: Yeah, I kept saying “why don’t they go over and get this guy?” They said “why, he’s been there for years. I guess he’s just keeping us on our toes. If we go over and get him, we don’t know who they’re gonna send.” So they just let him go. All he’d do is just fire a couple rounds and make certain we were on our toes, that’s all.
- Kurtz: Did the SEALs do any operations out of Binh Thuy?
- Miller: Yeah. We had a SEAL team, I don’t remember which one it was. They went out on strikes. Mostly to—these guys that I was with, they—pardon me—they knew or had info when the couriers were coming through with payday and all that stuff, and they would go out and get the paychecks or gold or silver, whatever they were carrying.
- Kurtz: Did you ever have any personal interaction with these SEALs?
- Miller: Yeah, yeah there were a couple of them there in the barracks with us.
- Kurtz: Young?
- Miller: No, hell, they were my age. And you knew when they were going out on a strike. Nobody’d say anything, you’d come along—[unintelligible]
- Kurtz: They’re gone.
- Miller: Am I missing something here? And then all of a sudden, they showed up. It was really interesting.
- Kurtz: Did they ever tell you anything about what they did?
- Miller: Just that they were going out on strikes, and for the couriers and that.
- Kurtz: And so they never gave you any details.
- Miller: I said “where’s the money?” [Laughter] That’s what I kept asking this one guy.
- Kurtz: So, so the focus was basically to disrupt the Viet—
- Miller: The flow of the money.
- Kurtz: Where there any other Americans, like the Phoenix Program, that you had any familiarity with.
- Miller: There was a couple of weirdoes there, I can’t say yea or nay on some of that. Some of this stuff it just flowed through—some of these guys, the advisors,

they had so much freedom, you didn't know exactly what was going on. They're here today and gone tomorrow. It just—some of that stuff was really weird. We could go in town. We used to ride the jeepneys through town, into town. This was over five miles through the jungle. And we'd stay overnight, get drunk or whatever. Then come back in the morning.

Kurtz: No problems, nothing with the roads being mined or anything?

Miller: Not a drop. Well what we did, with that outfit I was with, the reason we didn't have any trouble, we supported the VN orphanage.

Kurtz: Ok. Tell us about that.

Miller: We paid, every payday we took up a collection for the electric, for the VN or the Vietnamese orphanage. And then at least two or three times a week, we'd take food, extra food would be cooked, and taken down to the orphanage. And if there was extra medicine or whatever that was available, the Corpsman would go down and do what he could do for the sick or whatever. And—

Kurtz: Who ran this orphanage? Buddhists or nuns or?

Miller: It was civilians. I don't, they weren't nuns or anything. All I know is we went down there, well I went down there a couple times with this E-8, and he was in charge of taking the stuff down there. We took stuff down there for Christmas—

Kurtz: Was it run by the Vietnamese?

Miller: They were just VN people, just some VN women there.

Kurtz: And were these military orphans or just orphans?

Miller: Just orphans. Yeah them dust, dust kids had a tough time. Do you know why these women wanted American kids?

Kurtz: So they could come themselves?

Miller: Not really, they were bigger, stronger. Because when they got older these kids could do more work for them. These dust children, mixed race, colored. They had a tough time.

Kurtz: I was in Vietnam in 2001 and didn't see but one the whole time I was there for two weeks. I saw one.

Miller: Is that right?

- Kurtz: They're all somewhere else.
- Miller: But they were really, really mistreated there.
- Kurtz: How were the relationships with the Americans at this time? I mean the war was really winding down, were there drug troubles or racial troubles where you were?
- Miller: We didn't have any problems. We didn't have any troubles with any of that stuff. Just what, what the biggest stink or problem was, was these young sailors and all their derogatory remarks. Well, once these younger sailors were all transferred and gone, us older guys were there, we didn't have no trouble. We didn't have no trouble. Oh I got this all written down here about that, you want me to tell you about it?
- Kurtz: Yes, please do.
- Miller: The Vietnamese—well you—the gold tooth. You know why they have a gold tooth?
- Kurtz: I do, but let's tell the people.
- Miller: Ok, the gold tooth, that's to pay for their funeral. The more gold they got in the more expensive a funeral they'll have. And then they had the, what they call Saigon Cowboys. These are the guys that rode around on their jeepneys with their git-fiddle, or guitar on their back, with long hair and all that other stuff.
- Kurtz: And these were draft evaders often, aren't they?
- Miller: Yeah, probably. But they were riding up and down the road and whatever.
- Kurtz: All military age, and not in the military.
- Miller: And then a—we always showed movies at night. And the biggest movie going, was a western! We would post up when they were gonna have a western and these kids would put up bleachers and seats, and when it would get dusk for the movies, the traffic would stop on the road, traffic would stop on the river. And it was dead silence. I said "Why don't they show these twenty-four hours a day?" It was really great. I—
- Kurtz: Now what kind—describe how they have a screen set up?
- Miller: Yeah, the Americans would set 'em up. For our own troops and all that stuff and they'd invite all the VNs.
- Kurtz: So they invited the Vietnamese onto this American base? I mean obviou—

- Miller: Well, there was sailors—the VN sailors were already there. So that was no problem.
- Kurtz: Were there any civilians come?
- Miller: Oh yeah. Yeah.
- Kurtz: So you let civilians in the base area after dark?
- Miller: Yeah.
- Kurtz: So that means it was relatively secure?
- Miller: We were pretty secure. We had girls that come in there for, do the hootches and clothes and all that stuff.
- Kurtz: And so on the river it would be like here in Madison they've got Bluesfest, people listen to the music out in boats. They watch the movie from—
- Miller: Yeah, they watch the movie from out there. And it was great and I said "Show 'em twenty-four hours a day!"
- Kurtz: That's good.
- Miller: And then another thing what happened on this Vietnamese program, or prior to it, if a VN— male, doesn't make any difference— liked you, he would hold your hand. And that really upset the young sailors. They figured that you were gay or whatever if you held hands with these dudes. And then on the boats, no heat, cold, they would crawl under the blanket together, and again the young sailors thought they were gay, and everything else. Then the GIs hated that. And then they would—[if you had] long hair on your arms— didn't make any difference, man, woman, kid— they'd come up and [laughter] they kept rubbing their hands on your arms 'cause they couldn't believe all that hair that you had on them. It's just one of them quirks.
- Kurtz: Because they don't have hair on their arms.
- Miller: They don't have hair on their arms. And then they—it was just another form of showing their friendship to you. And that didn't bother me. I held hands with them, and I did this and I went along with—I ate meals with them that I really didn't know what I was consuming. To be friendly, that's what I did. And then, we'd have a [laughter] floor shows. They'd send the girls out to put on their strip acts and all that stuff. And we had a chiefs' club and all that stuff there. And of course the young sailors, they didn't show these or invite these young VN sailors in to see these floor shows. So what they would do—

they had all this time—how long it took these girls from the time they went in, until the time they started their show. Smoke grenade! [Laughter] They'd throw a couple of smoke grenades over into the dressing room, and these girls come running out naked. And these sailors were just a hollering and a screaming and raising hell. That was really great. And they had to assign someone outside the gate—outside the barracks there when it was going on, or the room. And I just said “Hell with it. Let them go, let them have a good time. Let everybody enjoy it.” [Laughter] I did too ‘cause I just liked to watch ‘em run out. [Laughter] And then they fished with their concussion grenades. Then I saw, what? Phyllis George was there with her entourage.

Kurtz: That was a USO show, right?

Miller: Yeah a USO show. And then—music. Every time they had a program they played *Leaving on a Jet Plane*, *Green, Green Grass of Home*. I got so sick of that, I could just about throw up. Yeah. Then we had a girl was mute; she was a collaborator, and the VNs, VC cut her tongue out. But she would come around the base every couple weeks or month or whatever. And boy when you heard here holler or making all kinds of noise that she was making, you'd better go out and look, cause she'd show you a Claymore Mine that was turned backwards, or a hole in the fence. Then we'd always give her some money or something when she come around.

Kurtz: But you had these things happen, yet you really felt pretty secure?

Miller: Yeah. I didn't have any problems. Here's another one, we had trouble with those hydraulic hose on these patrol boats. And they, when one would break they would have to send all the way back to the United States for a replacement. So I run into this E-9 over in the base, over in the airbase. I says “How do you guys repair all these hydraulic hose on these helicopters and jets and all that stuff?” He said “Well hell, we got a machine.” I said “You got a machine!?” [laughs]. So we got together and anytime we had a broken hose, man I just run that sucker on over there and them VNs didn't like that. ‘Cause you'd get that thing fixed and they'd be back on the water. So we got that one straightened out. And then when they got downsized, I got ‘em to bring that machine over to the base so that they would have all that stuff there. I did all this shit on myself [on my own]. Here's another one. This E-8 that was there that I was relieving; he wouldn't leave his hootch. One day he come out and he was ripped, he was really ripped. I says “What's the matter?” He says “They stole my radio.” I said “How could they steal your radio?” They cut the screen and they snatched his radio on him. And he come down there and he was hollerin' and screamin' to this VN officer and all this and everything. So he wanted the person caught and apprehended and punished and all that stuff. And the VN officer says “Ok.” He says “I'll line up the sailors.” I said “Don't be a fool. Don't make a fool out of yourself.” So he come along and he says “I'm gonna find him.” I says “You ain't gonna

find him.” He lines up about a hundred and fifty sailors, and I went and got him. I said “Well, they’re all right [here] for you to check.” He went down there and he looked at the first group and he said “I screwed up.” And I said “Yeah, now you’re gonna have to really make an ass out of yourself and walk through all this crap.” I said “Why didn’t you just go and buy yourself another radio and forget it?” [Laughs] I always remember that one too.

Kurtz: Ok, I’m—[End of Tape 2, Side A]

Kurtz: [Beginning of Tape 2, Side B] –your Vietnam tour when?

Miller: In February of 1972.

Kurtz: Ok, and was that a full year?

Miller: No it was about eight months. I went over there in June, June/July of—

Kurtz: June of ’71?

Miller: June, July, August, September. Yeah, about eight months.

Kurtz: Ok.

Miller: They were downsizing, and they wanted to know who wanted to leave. And I says “Well, me!” What happened, we had turned everything over to the VNs. Everything had already been turned over to ‘em. And I didn’t have nothing else to do. And I said “Hell yes. Let me go.”

Kurtz: You mentioned that you had a story about burial at sea, before we wind down.

Miller: [Laughs] This was on the USS Newport, LST 1179.

Kurtz: This was before Vietnam?

Miller: Yeah, this was before Vietnam. And they lined up—we were out at sea. They had the widow and everything. We lined up for the ceremony and the preacher gets out there does a prayer and everything. Instead of just dropping the box over the side, they took it and they threw it up in the air, and it made an arc. And the ash, just when the ashes started falling out, a breeze blew. And we were standing there in our whites. And couldn’t—jeez, it was just terrifying. ‘Cause you touch it—and the dust—and your whites are ruined. So anyway, here comes the deck force with fire hoses, and swabs and brooms. And the widow is standing there all aghast; she didn’t know what to do. [laughs] All that’s all that. I had to tell that one.

Kurtz: Ok. You left the Navy when?

Miller: 1973, March 1st, 1973. Twenty years.

Kurtz: Ok, twenty years. And then you retired out in Maryland?

Miller: Out in Colora, Maryland.

Kurtz: Now, were you involved at any veterans groups or anything like that?

Miller: I belong to the VFW, the American Legion, and the Fleet Reserve Association. I was there when— I went down to D.C. when they dedicated the [Vietnam Memorial] Wall. I was in that and I got all the pictures for that. I turned them into the museum.

Kurtz: Well, is there anything else you'd like to tell us, Ken?

Miller: No, that's about it.

Kurtz: Ok, well this was quite a good interview. Thank you very much.

Miller: You're welcome.