



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Interview of **JONATHAN COLLOM**

Conducted by **WILLIAM THIESEN**

Thursday, April 15, 2010
Fairfax, Virginia

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INTERVIEWER: This is William Thiesen. I am the Atlantic Area Historian for the U.S. Coast Guard, and we are here in Fairfax, Virginia, on April the 15th, 2010, at the residence of Jonathan Collom.

Sir, if you could spell your name, your last name, let us know where you are from, and some early history, how you got in the service, how you decided to get in the service, that sort of thing.

MR. COLLOM: Sure. And I will spell my first name because you are bound to spell it wrong otherwise. J-o-n-a-t-h-a-n, no "h" in there. The last name is Collom, C-o-l-l-o-m.

We are here in Virginia, and I'm a -- you wanted me to start with how I got interested in the Coast Guard, or what do you want?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, just a brief background on why you decided to join the Coast Guard --

MR. COLLOM: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: -- and just a little brief, your career, early career and Academy, that sort of thing.

MR. COLLOM: Sure. I actually grew up not far from the Coast Guard Academy. I was born and raised in Warwick, Rhode Island, and spent a lot of time on the water, had a little 14-foot outboard, a 14-foot skiff with a 25-horsepower outboard, powerful thing, and I did a lot of sailing.

And I was interested in going to an academy. I was particularly interested in the Air Force Academy. I didn't get a political appointment to it, but the way I became -- I knew about the Coast Guard [because] my brother is a Coast Guard Academy graduate, and so I knew --

INTERVIEWER: Older brother?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, my older brother. He is actually five years ahead of me, so we didn't overlap when I went to the Academy. However, that's how I became aware of it. I don't think he was the one that talked me into going there, but that's what made me aware of what was going on.

I applied, took the test, and got in, in 1962, started at the Coast Guard Academy, graduated in '66.

INTERVIEWER: So you were in the same class as Merle Smith.

MR. COLLOM: Merle Smith was my roommate.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

MR. COLLOM: Yes, during part of the year. We were both on the regimental -- it was during one of those nights when we were both on the regimental staff. I don't recall what my job was or what his was at that point, but he was a roommate of mine, and I have known him throughout the years, a very close friend because we were here in [Washington] D.C. at the same time.

INTERVIEWER: I would like to ask you to give us some background on that, too, because I am actually working on some research about him for the *[Alumni] Bulletin*.

MR. COLLOM: I would be happy to talk about that later. Merle is a good friend.

But, anyway, graduated in '66, did the typical -- at that time, everyone went to sea, and that meant even if you were going to be a pilot, you went to sea.

We had a very nice way of choosing ships at that point. It was not based upon class standing. It was upon cutting a deck of cards, and you put up lists on the wall of all the billets that were available, and you signed up on these lists. And if there were five billets in San Francisco -- various vessels may be involved, but five billets -- and there were four people, then those four people went. If there were seven people, you would cut cards and the highest cards went, and then you couldn't sign up for next "go" until everyone had the first round down.

So I lost in the first two rounds, and I decided that since I didn't want to end up in engineering -- because I didn't, because I was a deck guy -- I chose the next round and went to Boston and then to Massachusetts.

My experience of going to sea actually -- I should say a little bit more about that at the Coast Guard Academy. I was a sailor. I was the captain of the sailing team my last year, the dinghy team, and during one of the summer cruises, during a portion of my last summer cruise, I was the cadet sailing master of the *Eagle*.

John Shkor, who you know, was also a sailing master of the *Eagle* in his time when he was there. That is something I really never regretted, that whole *Eagle* experience. In fact, I am reading a wonderful book now called, "The Way of a Ship," that describes very, very accurately crawling the ratlines, doing the work, doing the things, of course, a lot harsher than it was there, but I just brought that up just to say, you know, I had a fair amount of seagoing stuff.

I ended up going to Boston, doing ocean station patrol on a 311 [foot cutter], the *Humboldt*. We got transferred to Maine almost immediately, so I really spent -- Portland, Maine --

INTERVIEWER: What size vessel is *Humboldt*?

MR. COLLUM: 311 WAVP. Used to be a seaplane tender for the Navy, and then we took them over. It is now a reef for fish someplace off the Florida Keys that I am aware of, but it is sunk out someplace.

So I did a year there, and then I started what was known then as "Vietnam pipeline." And I asked to be considered for a 95-foot patrol boat as CO [commanding officer], and, in fact, that was the pipeline. If you got that, you knew you would do one year on a 95-footer and then a year in Vietnam on an 82-footer. That was just a standard progression.

INTERVIEWER: If we could digress for a few minutes and then we will get into Vietnam in a larger way, but I wanted to ask you a few questions about the Academy too.

MR. COLLUM: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: First of all, I want to talk to you about Merle Smith, but I also have a question about --

MR. COLLUM: Let's do him later.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, that's fine. Maybe we could do that after Vietnam, then.

MR. COLLOM: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I would like to ask you about John F. Kennedy, and I understand that he actually used a sailing vessel from the Academy for a time.

MR. COLLOM: I think it was the *Teragram*. I am not sure.

INTERVIEWER: Do you recall anything about that?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, he didn't use it. No, he was not alive when I -- you know, he wasn't.

INTERVIEWER: He wasn't?

MR. COLLOM: No -- you are right. He was, but he never used the vessel while we were there, but we had one -- at that point, now they are beyond the 44-footers. They are going into the next phase, but at that point, we didn't have a fleet of, let's say, 40- to 50-foot sailing boats down there. Everything that was in the "yacht squadron," as it was called, were donated vessels that were private boats that had been donated to the Coast Guard for whatever they wanted to use them for.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

MR. COLLOM: And so one of those -- actually, I said it was the *Teragram*. I don't think so. I think it was the *Manitou*.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I heard the *Manitou*.

MR. COLLOM: It was the *Manitou*.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

MR. COLLOM: And we had -- what was his first name? Lieutenant so-and-so Tewksbury, III, was the guy.

INTERVIEWER: The CO or skipper?

MR. COLLOM: Well, no, no. He was in charge of those boats down there, but we always thought that was so funny because he obviously was from a moneyed background.

INTERVIEWER: Blue blood.

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, blue blood. And I believe he had something to do with that, though it might have been prior to his time, too, but he was in charge of the yacht squadron down there.

INTERVIEWER: So JFK probably didn't ride that or --

MR. COLLOM: Oh, no, no, no. I am saying he didn't while I was there.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

MR. COLLOM: That's all I am saying.

INTERVIEWER: That was before your time perhaps or after?

MR. COLLOM: I honestly -- I can't give credence to that story one way or the other. It wouldn't surprise me because he was a sailor, but I don't know.

Also, those stories sometimes get blown up, and what happens is he might have come down and visited it, you know, and that was it. I don't know if he actually sailed on it or went out in the Sound or what happened. No, I don't know much about that.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you a few other things about the Academy.

MR. COLLOM: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: Now, Otto Graham was the coach when you were there?

MR. COLLOM: He was.

INTERVIEWER: Could you talk to that issue as far as he was coach and the football team he coached? Did you know much about that?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, except that every time that he was coaching, I was sailing. I was the captain of the sailing team, and we were a two-season sport. We started early fall and went through the fall and -- on Thanksgiving was the last sailing regatta that we had, and that was on Lake Michigan. So it was pretty doggone cold, and then in the spring, we started as soon as the ice was off the Thames. We were out there sailing again.

So did I go to football games? Sure. And did I know of Otto? I certainly did. I had a lot of classmates who knew him extremely well. He was probably the best thing that happened to the Coast Guard football program and even just the general PR [public relations] program. He genuinely enjoyed what he did. He obviously didn't need the money. There wasn't anything there. It wasn't a job.

I think he just enjoyed working with young people that wanted to work back. For years, they were absolutely zero in terms of anything, and, of course, while he was there, they became very, very good, but I don't know him that well. But I have got to say he didn't affect everything that was going on, but he certainly was the public -- a public image of the Coast Guard, and he wasn't at all shy about saying that. So I think he was a great asset. No, I don't know him [personally].

INTERVIEWER: So what can you tell us about your days with the sailing team and overseeing the team for the Coast Guard? A good experience, and how did you do, and can you speak to that at all?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, I can. I was very fortunate in that I had a lot of good people around me who were better sailors than I, and the sailing team was really a great thing. Everybody had to sail the first summer you were there, and some of these guys had never even seen water, saltwater before, that came to the Coast Guard Academy.

You have to remember the times too. I mean, we are back in the early '60s. People didn't travel as much as do now, and so their experiences were quite different. We were small. We took 220 in our original class, and we graduated 113. So there was a pretty good attrition rate that was going on at that point, but everybody in their first summer had to go out in what they called the "dinghy dunking," going out there and sailing in dinghies, and some of us who knew how to sail were paired up with people who didn't or not. You might have two that didn't know, and they were always going over.

My crew that I sailed with from the beginning, from at least the spring of my fourth class year, my swab year, stayed with me the whole time, Denny Freezer. He is here in this area, and we had a good time. We did capsize. It was cold and wet. We had not real foul weather gear in those days. We had, you know, a lot of things like that, but, you know, it was a lot of fun.

All the major regattas were either at the Coast Guard Academy or MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] because they had the two biggest fleets of boats on the East Coast. Some usually, we were at one place or the other, and we got to go to Boston a lot. I knew Boston very, very well. We would go up there on TAD [Temporary Duty]. We had *per diem*, we were getting [money] when we were there. It was really interesting.

The other teams were big. They had budgets, but we were just a handful of guys that were going someplace. Was it a good experience? You betcha. I think they need -- if they are not doing that now, they need to continue to do that. I think they need to put more people on the *Eagle* than they do now.

I mean, I think a lot of people opt out for whatever kind of specialty program they have, but learning to sail or to navigate and propel yourself with the wind has a heck of an effect for when you are sailing a Coast Guard vessel later when you have engines that can help and all of a sudden they crap out. But it's a fantastic experience.

I sail today, though I have now graduated to larger vessels. But it was great. The summers on the *Eagle* were wonderful. I remember the first summer, the first time we went out, and I knew that I had to go up those ratlines and go do some work up there sometime, but I think this was about the first day out, somebody said, "Mr. Collom, we need you to go aloft." Okay, all right. I got to do it. Here I go.

INTERVIEWER: And you don't have any safety harnesses when you are going up the ratlines.

MR. COLLOM: Oh, no. You have got three points, or when you are up there, you don't have any --

INTERVIEWER: Really? You didn't have any harnesses up there?

MR. COLLOM: Absolutely not.

INTERVIEWER: What about gloves or any safety gear or anything?

MR. COLLOM: No.

INTERVIEWER: So it was old school.

MR. COLLOM: It was old school.

INTERVIEWER: Because today they do use harnesses, I think.

MR. COLLOM: Yes, they do. They are wimps, these days -- no, they are smart. They are not wimps.

No, there wasn't any, but they told me I had to go up and unfurl or clear the admiral's flag, which was up at the top of the mast. I didn't even know how to get there.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a fear of heights?

MR. COLLOM: You know, you crawl up. No, you get over that pretty quickly. I don't think I did, but it's just -- still, it's intimidating, and then had to go up and clear that. And then after that, I learned, just like every other cadet, the

higher you go, the easier the work. The sails are smaller. When you are furling them, it's easy.

INTERVIEWER: You have got a big one that's blowing in the wind --

MR. COLLOM: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: -- that can hurt you or be dangerous.

MR. COLLOM: And up there, it's just easier. It's lighter work. And no, we did not have any harnesses. We went out on -- oh, gosh, I can't even think of them now, but the footropes, and then there was the Flemish horse at the end.

INTERVIEWER: What is a Flemish horse?

MR. COLLOM: The Flemish horse is the one-foot rope that's by itself at the very end of the yard.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, the loop at the end.

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, but it's a separate line. It's a separate line.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, really?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Wow! So you are way up at the top perhaps at the very end?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, yeah. What you find out -- what you find out is that, you know, when you are a little guy like me, it's okay when you are standing there, but somebody else comes along, they are heavy, and all of a sudden, you are popped way up above the yard, or if they get off, you are now hanging on by your chin.

So, what you had -- and I am sure you have heard this many times before, the old adage, "One hand for yourself and one for the ship." Actually, when you are furling sail, it takes two hands for the ship. Your hand for yourself is hanging onto that sail.

But you really had three points of contact. You had your two feet and your gut, and the gut was on the yard, and so you tried to lay out almost, you know, horizontal to the extent you could to keep that on, but --

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever have any close calls?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, I am sure we all thought we did, but the answer is no. I can't recall any close calls except other people getting on and off the footropes that --

INTERVIEWER: You were a hundred feet up in the air.

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, yeah. And it's 150.3 feet to the top of the main-mast -- and then 132.0 on the mizzen. So do I remember any of that stuff? Yes, obviously, I do.

INTERVIEWER: Let me just ask you this quick question. I want to talk a tad bit more about the Academy. Right now I'm doing research on the racing stripe-slash-emblem of the U.S. Coast Guard. How did you feel about Operation Sail (OPSAIL) when the slash was painted on the hull of the Barque *Eagle*?

MR. COLLOM: We hated it before then, when it was first done, because it just looked like a bunch of -- it looked stupid. It really looked stupid. And, in fact, when I went to my first -- to my 95-footer in Bodega Bay, the stripe wasn't on it, and then it was put on it.

INTERVIEWER: '66, '67?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah. And I was there '67, '68, and it was during that time when we went into the yard that the stripe was actually put on. It probably was the best thing that was ever -- another one of those best things that the Coast Guard ever did. It really identified the Coast Guard, and, of course, now it's come to identify law enforcement agencies -- not identify, but it's used by a lot of them in a similar manner.

We really thought it was absolutely -- "we," I shouldn't say that. I did and a lot of my contemporaries thought that it really looked bad, and we really hated it on the *Eagle*. And I still don't like it on the *Eagle* because that's an old square rigged training ship, and that kind of modernizes and doesn't cheapen it but has affected it in a way that I'd just as soon not see.

Is it a highly effective PR tool? You bet your bippy. It's just fantastic.

But, anyway, no, we had some real problems with that, and I was at both the OPSAILS when my brother was on Governors Island. Then later, when I was on Governors Island, we had the Statue of Liberty rededication, and so we had a whole bunch of people in for that, and that was another OPSAIL. Yeah, it's a good PR thing. We hated it when it came on.

INTERVIEWER: Going back to the Academy, we talked a little bit about the activities there and your experiences. Overall, did you have any mentors that you can point to that really influenced your life? What about your experiences?

Did you have any real highlights there, or was it really just kind of another educational experience without any real influence on your future?

MR. COLLOM: Well, it had a hell of an influence on the future, but I can't say that there were any mentors that I really --

INTERVIEWER: Nothing stands out?

MR. COLLOM: Nobody stands out in that manner. I certainly had mentors later on in my Coast Guard career, but I can't say that there was a particular upperclassman in any way that was influential more than any other.

First year you were there, in our days, were tough, physically tough. Hazing was not gone. Hazing was, in fact, what happened. So you didn't have a lot of relationships with anybody who was senior to you, and by that, I mean even by one year senior to you. And the second classmen were the people that were driving you all the time, and first classmen really didn't care, but they were like God. You didn't talk to them.

Where you did get those relationships was in your sports activities. Clearly, those people, no matter what the sport was, they would become friendly and know their upperclassmen better.

Even later in the time that I was there, there still was a real class identity. That's not going far enough. A class break. You became closer to those other people but not very close, again, except for those people that you recreated with or had sports activities with, but there was a real distinction between the classes.

I think -- and I don't know this because I've never served at the Coast Guard Academy since I graduated -- I've been there a lot. I go there every five years for the reunions, but I think it's kind of the fourth class and everybody else. You know, the rest are pretty collegial. In fact, I think it's fairly collegial with the fourth class after the swab summer.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean "fourth class"? That would be the entering class?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I'm still --

MR. COLLOM: I'm sorry. They've changed everything. It was fourth class, third class, second class, first class. Now we call them -- I don't know what you call them these days. They've changed. Instead of fourth class, it's C-4 or something like that.

INTERVIEWER: Right, right. I understand.

MR. COLLOM: They've just changed what it is. So the third class is a sophomore, second class is a junior, and first class is the senior.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

MR. COLLOM: But there were certainly a lot of things. You learn to survive. I won't go into the details, but just prior to the Christmas leave time, there was a particularly heavy hazing period that I won't mention the name of because somebody might take offense. But when you were done with that, I mean, it was sort of like you had arrived, and that was important.

I remember going home and talking to high school classmates, and talking about our experience of the last year -- the last six months, I should say, and they were all out wine, women and song, and having a great time, maybe having a good educational experience, but I found that they hadn't grown much, where my contemporaries all knew how to do things because we had seen hell and survived.

INTERVIEWER: So it matured you faster?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, without a doubt. I think it broke a bunch of people. That's why we had 113 out of 220 that graduated. That wasn't all academics. I mean, some was academics, but for the most part, people would say, "I don't want this way of life," and certainly some left at later stages, too, but most of them left in that first year.

But it was a great experience. I encourage people to go there all the time. I suggest to them that it's much better than going where I wanted to go, the Air Force Academy, which wouldn't have been half as good as what I did here.

INTERVIEWER: Really? I was going to ask you about that, if you regretted the fact that you weren't able to go to the Air Force.

MR. COLLOM: No, I didn't. I didn't regret that. It was just, you know, that that was almost brand new at that point, just zoom, zoom, zoom, seemed real, like a lot of fun, like it would be something.

I think where we suffered a little bit in those days was that we didn't have any real academic -- especially freedom, that's the wrong thing. It's academic choices. You were in an engineering program. You had to take every course there was. You couldn't opt out of a course.

I took the same calculus course at the Coast Guard Academy that I took in high school. You could take overload classes, but they were all very much

focused in engineering, and there wasn't a specific engineering. It was just general engineering. It was a great backdrop; there's no question about it. But that's where if you had been at one of the larger institutions, having a greater student body, therefore a greater faculty, then they have more numbers to produce more courses. Well, the Coast Guard Academy has gone through that evolution. They went through many, many, many, many majors, and they've cut back down again, but they still have quite a few compared to my time. Hundreds -- well, not hundreds, but tons more, you know.

But wonderful experience and it certainly was a good thing to do. And I don't regret having gone there. I think if I hadn't gone there, it probably would have been Dartmouth or -- I even -- I really didn't care about going anywhere else except an academy. I'm not really sure why.

My father was in the Army during the Second World War and stayed in the reserve for years and retired as a colonel in the Army Reserve, but I don't think that was really it. And he was a doctor, and all we knew as the three boys in the family, did not care to become a doctor.

INTERVIEWER: Well, after you finished up at the Academy, maybe you can talk a little bit about some of the experiences you had. Because you finished up in '66, so you really were only serving for a year or two before you went overseas, is that right? From '66 to '68?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah. Two years.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a little bit about some of the experiences you had? You said you were in New England there on board the --

MR. COLLOM: I was on a 311-foot. I know. That's so ancient, you can't understand it.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. There's so many different ones.

MR. COLLOM: It was ocean station patrol, so we would go out and sit and float in the middle of the Atlantic for 30 days at a time.

INTERVIEWER: That was out of Boston or Portland?

MR. COLLOM: It was out of both. It was out of Boston for about two months, and then they shifted to home port, up to Portland.

INTERVIEWER: Which ocean station? I'm still trying to get the names of each one. Which one was that?

MR. COLLOM: Well, there was Bravo, Charlie, Delta, and Echo were the ones that we did. I can't remember where Alpha was. It is there someplace, but I don't really know where. Bravo was the coldest; it was the most north. Charlie was -- Charlie and Delta were basically in the middle of the Atlantic. Echo was where everybody wanted to go because it was out in Bermuda, so it was nice water. I'm not sure we ever pulled an Echo or not.

And the original purpose of the ocean station programs was twofold. One was to send up weather balloons. We always had a -- usually, you had a weather guy on board, and we would send up balloons and take observations.

But the other thing was really there in case planes ditched. Well, by the time, 1966, '67, planes didn't ditch anymore. And, in fact, we were supposed to be there in case they ditched, A, and, B, to be a navigational beacon for them. Their navigational systems were so far superior to ours. We'd call up and we'd say, "Where are we?" you know, because we'd know, but we were using LORAN-A. We were using, you know, a lot of things that they weren't. At that point, they had good guidance systems. But that's what we did. We went out there and went out for about 30 days at a time.

INTERVIEWER: How was that experience for you? I mean, was it horrendous, or did you learn a lot, or did you --

MR. COLLOM: I learned a lot about managing people. I was the radio officer and communications officer, and there was a crew of radiomen who worked for me.

In those days, we were right at the end of Morse code. People still had to do that; it was still in their rate. It was mostly doing things by teletype. We had these big huge teletype machines. And then I would sit in the back room in my little crypto room decrypting messages that came in, but we did have -- we were just getting online, crypto communications gear, but I still --

INTERVIEWER: Was it because of the Cold War, or was it just standard operating procedure?

MR. COLLOM: No, no. There's still things done that are secret. It wasn't that. Oh, that wasn't every message. Please don't -- maybe I gave you the wrong impression. I'm just saying that part of my job was the security officer, and we had a number of -- every now and then, we would get classified traffic.

You know, today, things are classified for political reasons. I didn't say that. But they're done all the time. Well, things were classified then for political reasons too. They might have been different political reasons. I'm using small "p," not big "P," partisan politics, but the other side. And so you had to decrypt

those things. They can't be sent in the clear. You know, you talk on secure phones, so it's the same thing.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you were also just an early warning picket vessel, no?

MR. COLLOM: No.

INTERVIEWER: Not really?

MR. COLLOM: Nah.

INTERVIEWER: So it wasn't really a cold war application?

MR. COLLOM: No. And we didn't have any -- I don't even think we had -- we might have had an air search radar on there. Yeah, I guess we did. We did have air search because we had to see those guys up there, but it wasn't, no. Even if that was said to be the reason -- and maybe it was -- it's just like the ditching. Nobody had ditched since Admiral Earl, you know, went out and picked up the -- well, I don't even remember what it was.

So we did that. But what it taught me was, with those communications guys, is they knew things that I never would. I mean, not just the chiefs but the radiomen, the third class petty officer that was there, and you had to learn to rely on people and to lead people that you didn't really know what they were doing.

If you were the first lieutenant -- and I didn't want to be the first lieutenant, but if you were, you kind of knew boat handling, you knew lines, marlinespikes, seamanship, things like that. You knew something about their craft. I didn't know a doggone thing about radios and what they were doing. So you learn how to lead people that know more than you, and it was great. I became very good friends, I would say, which was unusual in those days, with particularly the first class petty officer that was there. Went out to his house a couple of times and those things, and it was very good. It was very good that way.

Also learned more of dealing with high seas. At least -- I think this was ocean stints in Charlie in the middle of winter. I remember going up there and relieving the guy on watch, made sure it was the mid-watch, and the seas were over the sides of the vessel. I mean, they were huge. Now, we said they were 40 feet. Who knows what they were, but they were gigantic.

And I remember going up, and what you usually did is you went up and you got your eyes adjusted and you went back and you looked at the chart to make sure where you were and you looked at the radar and things. Well, I did that, and then I did it again, and then I did it again, and the guy says to me, "Are

you ever going to relieve me?" And I go, "Yeah, I guess so." Because it was pretty doggone scary.

INTERVIEWER: I bet you were kind of nervous about the seas there.

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, you get a little bit in awe of what was there, and all you had to do was stay within a certain grid.

INTERVIEWER: There was a box that was put up for your --

MR. COLLOM: Yeah. It was a pretty boring -- pretty boring patrols out there because there really was nothing to do. I mean, launch a balloon, you know, and just watch the seas go by, because you weren't doing anything very active. And that's what was really great when that tour was over and I packed my bags and went out to Bodega Bay to a 95-footer. Now you're doing something. I mean, you're out there doing search-and-rescue.

INTERVIEWER: Talk about that a little bit. That was the one that led you up to Vietnam? You said there was a special track?

MR. COLLOM: Well, no. We called it the "Vietnam pipeline."

INTERVIEWER: And how did that work? I mean, it wasn't official. It was unofficial.

MR. COLLOM: No, but if you were selected for a -- was it official? I don't know if it was official. I wasn't in a place to know, except that if you went to a 95-footer, you knew you were going to an 82-footer in Vietnam, a year later. Some people stayed a year and a half on the first vessel, just because they had to stagger when people got to Vietnam, but there was no doubt about it, that's what was going to happen to you. So it meant you had two years of command. You were only one year out of the Coast Guard Academy and you had a command, and it was like having your own little private yacht.

And that's what I really envisioned. When I got out there, I'm going to Bodega Bay, California. My gosh, this is going to be -- I'm going to tie up to a yacht club, and I'm going to go out and do all my hard work all day and come back at night and belly up to the bar and everyone's going to say, "Have a drink on us, Skipper," you know, that kind of thing.

I got into the Bodega Bay, and Bodega Bay at that time -- it's changed now -- but, at that time, it was just a little fishing town, and there was nothing there. There was one restaurant. You weren't given housing allowance to live off the ship. I did move off the ship because I thought it wasn't good to have the CO on board and seeing things you didn't have to see. Things can go wrong that

you don't know about. That's okay. All right? But if you're there, you can't overlook it, so I did move off.

And I had to live in Santa Rosa, which was about 25, 30 minutes away, and it went over the hills. And I had a little sports car, so, you know, I enjoyed that. But it was just surprising. There was nothing there.

I mean, we tied up to a Coast Guard station, and they had a 44-footer and a 30-footer. And there was a -- it wasn't a chief, it was a warrant officer who was in charge of that, and we were his tenant. We had a pier of our own down there, and it just was so surprising because it was exactly the opposite of what I thought I was going to. But it was great.

INTERVIEWER: But you thought it was going to be some kind of tourist mecca or something?

MR. COLLUM: Yeah. I was envisioning Southern -- I knew it wasn't in Southern California, but I was envisioning we were going to be in a little town, and we'd either be tied up to the town pier or to the yacht club or something like that. I mean, I just --

INTERVIEWER: Some sleepy little fishing village.

MR. COLLUM: Yeah. It was a little fishing village.

But, in any case, we would do search-and-rescue out of there. Most of the things out of Bodega Bay were handled by the 44-footer because they could be underway quicker. Our status was usually Bravo-2, which means, you know, it says two hours, you're supposed to be underway in one hour. The 44-footer had a crew on board at all times right on the base, and so if something happened, they could scramble, and we couldn't. I mean, literally, I was at 25 or 30 minutes away. A lot of the other crew was, and you had to call everybody back, and you had to have enough people, because we only had -- gosh, I think we had 12 people on board. I think we had 11 enlisted and one officer.

INTERVIEWER: Standard crew for a 95-footer?

MR. COLLUM: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name? Was it *Cape* something?

MR. COLLUM: It was *Cape Hedge*.

INTERVIEWER: And the 44s, are they better for doing heavy surf-type rescue?

MR. COLLOM: Well, surf -- we weren't really a surf, and they were. Yes, without a doubt. They could get in closer. I mean, we were, you know, a patrol boat. That's what they were designed as, to be a patrol boat, and we did some stuff off the coast as far north as Fort Bragg. But most of our work was done once -- I can't remember the frequency -- once every three weeks or every four weeks -- I can't remember. I think it was every four weeks. We would go down and tie up to a buoy in Sausalito down in San Francisco Bay, right off of Zack's, which is a real famous bar. It was a famous bar at that point. But we were on a buoy, and so we were then in Alpha status. We were just like the 44-footer.

If something happened, we would be underway because we had no shore power or anything. The engines, you know, the generators were running and the vessel was warm. We could go out right away. And most of our search-and-rescue work was done out of San Francisco Bay as a result. There was some up the other way, but most of it was done out of there.

INTERVIEWER: Any big cases or anything that you recall?

MR. COLLOM: Well, I've got a picture.

INTERVIEWER: Must have been some heavy weather that you encountered.

MR. COLLOM: This was turning over the -- this was --

INTERVIEWER: Change of command?

MR. COLLOM: No, that was actually -- that's an admiral in the Korean Navy, and we were showing him this new fancy weapon called an 81-millimeter mortar, the over-under, which is, of course, what we were using in Vietnam. But they were putting them on these vessels too.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, the *Cape* class?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, on the *Cape* class.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know that.

MR. COLLOM: And any particular? No, none that I want to talk about.

INTERVIEWER: Really? Just because they're too ugly or something?

MR. COLLOM: No. I don't think there's anything -- I did what people do. You know, we went out there and we -- there was no -- I don't think we ever had any lifesaving. We were typically rescuing people that were aground, and aground is on rocks. I mean, I'm not talking about aground on a mud bank.

Aground or had engine problems or something like that. I remember transferring people from vessels who were injured and bringing them in, but not people who were injured as a result of a boating incident or anything like that.

It was a nice place to be. Bodega Bay, California was very, very nice. Unfortunately, we couldn't go to San Francisco on just evenings because that put you just out of the one-hour range, because the minute you went over that bridge, you added another 20 minutes. You just couldn't do it.

I learned a heck of a lot there. I had a senior chief quartermaster who was the XO [executive officer], and I remember so well when I pulled up there. I tool in, in my MGB with the top down and my wire wheels, and I saw him. He was sitting up there, standing up there on the edge of the bridge with a cup of coffee looking out and saying, "Here comes another one of those damn young whippersnappers, and I'm going to have to get into line."

And the guy before me, he had a sports car. He was running around. We were both bachelors. We were just, you know -- he could see it again, and I think I was his third CO. And he was still there when I left and gave it over to the next guy. "Another ensign, I've got to train," and I just saw it all over his face.

I learned a heck of a lot from him. I remember coming in one time, yes, towing a vessel back in that we had picked up out there. And to get into Bodega Bay, there's a big Bodega head out there you had to go around. The head, the shallow area extended a long ways out, and I remember coming back and I said, "Okay. It's time to start towing them in here."

We always had to release our tow when we got in close because we couldn't take someone up to the fish pier. We had to let the 44-footer do it. And I said, "Okay. I think it's time. Come left to" -- whatever the course was, zero-nine-zero or whatever, and here's the old Chief Quartermaster, "I don't know, Skipper. I'm not sure." And I said, "What do you think?" He says, "I don't think it's really the time to do it. Continue as you were," you know, because he was training another guy. And I learned a lot during that. It was great.

When that year was up, I don't think I was sad to see it go because, at the time, I was pretty gung-ho. I was looking forward to going to Vietnam, like kind of a dummy, but I was looking forward to it. I could have liked to -- I would say later, when I was a captain, a real captain, that I would go back to a 95-footer [inaudible]. They're now 110 or whatever they've got these days that people are doing.

Because it was hands on, you really got something for your work. At the end of the day, you really had something. So I think it's very much -- some people will take offense at this, I'm sure, but it's very much like helicopter pilots. They really get a feeling of satisfaction. It's real difficult and it's hard on them in

many, many ways, but you have a satisfaction. You saved a life or you didn't save a life. Or rescue swimmers, it's the same sort of thing. Ours certainly wasn't equal to that in any way in terms of the tasking on us, but there was this feeling of accomplishment. And I said, "I'd love to go back and be CO of a 95-footer, except I'd like to keep the pay I have now." But other than that, it would be great. So after doing that --

INTERVIEWER: So were you an ensign?

MR. COLLOM: I was an ensign.

INTERVIEWER: Or a [Lieutenant] j.g.?

MR. COLLOM: I made j.g. while I was there.

INTERVIEWER: Ah, okay. So you were promoted.

MR. COLLOM: It was a year and a half. That was a standard thing, 18 months, you became a j.g., just because of the numbers that were involved. After that, you got strung out with your classmates, but everyone in your class became a j.g. at the same time, unless they didn't, but, I mean, that was the only alternative. Then you never became one.

INTERVIEWER: But everybody at this point was still gung-ho about Vietnam, and was there a line? I mean, was it difficult to get an 82-footer slot in Vietnam?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, I don't know about that. I think everybody wanted it because it was two years of command, if nothing else. Even if they didn't want to go to Vietnam, right away you want to lead. You want to be in command. You want your own boat. You want that kind of thing.

And I used to say that to people who were thinking about going to the Naval Academy or anything like that. I said, "Gee whiz, you're going to be on a major ship for years, and you're going to be the junior assistant such and such. It's going to be years before you really have the kind of responsibility they gave somebody like me and any of my contemporaries, any of my classmates in one year."

I mean, I was the senior officer from San Francisco up to the Oregon border. And did that mean anything? No. But, I mean, it's still a little bit of a heady experience, if you wanted to say that. You were the commanding officer of this vessel, and it was great.

And then we went, you know -- from there, probably the hardest part of the Vietnam experience in many ways was what we went through next, which was training for Vietnam.

INTERVIEWER: When was it that you started that training, and where was it?

MR. COLLOM: Well, it was in a number of places, but the primary spot, we went to Alameda for political lectures, and they were nothing but propaganda, why the war is good, and, I mean, it was kind of hokey, but we did that -- and the political background of Vietnam, but there was a lot of propaganda in there.

INTERVIEWER: When did you start that training? That was in '68?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, it was -- I think it was probably July or August. Don't honestly know. I think I got relieved in July, came back home to Rhode Island for a couple of weeks leave, went back out there, and then went down and started that. It started in Alameda, and then we went down to Coronado, down to the --

INTERVIEWER: Southern California? San Diego?

MR. COLLOM: Coronado itself. In other words, what I mean by that is it's where you do your SEAL [Sea, Air, and Land—U.S. Navy special forces] training. In fact, one of my roommates down there, while I was going through that -- I think that was just a week, might have been two weeks in Coronado -- was somebody who was still in the UDT, the Underwater Demolition Team part of that. And you'd see these guys in the morning, and they'd be so nicely dressed and starched. First thing they do is run them in the water and get them wet and then roll them over in the sand. They would come home at night, and they would be just straggled and beat, but they're still shining their shoes because they had to be spit-shined the next day.

But that was interesting because that not only involved, again, lectures on what to do while you were over there, but also it was SERE. It was survival, evasion, resistance to interrogation, and escape, so SERE program.

And the survival started out on the beaches in Coronado, and, you know, you picked up limpets and clams and ate those. Actually, we didn't do too -- the survival part of that wasn't very difficult because we had all had a good meal the day before. So you weren't really hungry at that point, but the point was to show you that if you -- remember, this wasn't training for us, for Coast Guard people. It was training for anybody who was going to Vietnam at that point. That's the wrong thing. Grunts obviously didn't go through that, but any of the naval people and aviators in particular who they were fearful of having shot down someplace,

they needed to know how to survive in the woods and also on the beaches, so that's why we started out on the beaches.

INTERVIEWER: How long was the training?

MR. COLLOM: The training was about two weeks, but it was a week of -- it was only -- I think it was four or five days. It might even have been six, but it was less than a week of the last part, which was the survival. You were on the beach for just one night or two. Okay, it was one night, I think.

Then they bused us up to the high desert to survive in the desert climate. They taught us how to read maps. In fact, that was part of what was going on in the classroom down in Coronado, how to mountaineer, how to do -- "mountaineer" is the wrong word. "Orienteer," I think it was.

INTERVIEWER: Read topographical maps.

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, how to navigate there, you know, things such as that.

And then we went up and we survived up there. It's funny. You go up on the buses, and now you can see all the rabbits and everything standing there waving at you come in because they know it's another load. They take off because they know you're hungry and you're going to kill them. So they all take off, and you can't find a damn thing to eat except for prickly pear. That was about the only thing you could find that you could --

INTERVIEWER: Cactus?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, cactus. It was about the only thing you could find. You didn't see many snakes. You didn't see many birds. You didn't see many anything.

So, one night, I know they brought us in rabbits and things so that we could -- rabbits and chickens, so that you could kill them and throw them in a pot and, you know, learn something about it because you could not -- the wildlife just knew that this was another training crew, and they were going to eat us.

INTERVIEWER: So it was instinctive, practically. The animals migrated when everyone came in for training.

MR. COLLOM: It was.

So, anyway, but while you're up there -- so that was the survival, and then there was the -- well, resistance. I said resistance. It was evasion. Survival and evasion. They put us on a course, which was -- I don't know how long. I don't

know how long, but you were supposed to try to attempt to get on this rectangular course out here from this point at one end to the other end. There was a hooch down there, like a Vietnamese hooch, and it was called Freedom Village. And if you got to Freedom Village, you would supposedly be given a drink of water and a cookie or something like that, and you'd still be shipped off to the prison camp because that was part of the thing, but you'd get a respite from everything else.

So we get out there, and I think this is going to be fun, this is really going to be something. We all string out in a line and they say, "Go." And the aggressors are going to come on the course, we were told, about 15 minutes later. I don't know. Something like that. And so you have to -- you're trying to evade them. They said, "Go," and I'd say I ran about 50 feet, not 50 yards. It was probably 50 yards, and all of a sudden, the aggressors are there. I mean, they didn't give you any time at all. No place to hide. I hid behind some little spindly thing you couldn't hide behind. I kept my head down just like a baby, you know. If I can't see you, you can't see me, you know. And a guy comes up and he says, "Ah. Crazy American. You get up." So I don't say anything.

And, finally, he comes over and he kicks me in the ribs, and he says, "You get up." And I said, "Well, I think I'll get up." And he goes, "Oh, American officer. Oh, good."

[Laughter.]

MR. COLLUM: So, anyway, we were trucked to -- we were put in trucks, and they had captured virtually everybody because they didn't give us any chance to evade. It really was "We want to get you in that prison camp."

And I did learn a lesson there, too, and that was they were telling our guys I was the senior officer of this little group that had been captured. We had no relation to each other, but I happened to be the one.

INTERVIEWER: So you were playing a role. You weren't necessarily --

MR. COLLUM: No, no, no, no. I was cast into it. I guess I was the only officer. I was a lieutenant j.g., and there were ensigns there. I don't recall, but I was the senior person.

And so they said, "Okay. We want your guys to do this, to do that," and I let them do most things. They said they need to take off their boots, and I said, "No, they don't take off their boots. That's something we're not going to do." They said, "Tell them to take off their boots," and I said, "No. They need those to walk. We're not going to do that."

So the guy reached down, and he took one of the seaman or somebody and just cut his laces and pulled his boots off. And I said, "Take off your boots, guys." You know, you have to learn that there are limits to what you do, and there's no sense in having your boots cut off, you know. We'll just take them off.

We went to the prison camp. The prison camp was, you know, they put you in coffins, and they did all the things. I'm not telling you anything you don't know. They did all those things. Some people tried to escape.

That's where I first met John Kerry. He tried to escape three times. He got caught three times.

INTERVIEWER: So, during the SERE training --

MR. COLLOM: And he was with me. I was in the [TG] 1-1-5-point-1-point -- point-4-point-1 -- I can't remember what our squadron was. Division 11 was the Coast Guard, but there was an equivalent CTF [Coastal Task Force] force, which was the coastal force. I don't remember what that was. But they were the PCFs [Patrol Craft Fast], and he was a PCF skipper.

INTERVIEWER: Those were the little 40-footers?

MR. COLLOM: No, they were probably about 60 or so, and they could stay on them overnight, but they had no galley space or anything else. They were built as offshore oil transfer vessels -- not oil transfer -- crew vessels for the oil platforms down in New Orleans, and they just picked them up and put them over there and put on machine gun --

INTERVIEWER: A little bit of armament.

MR. COLLOM: A little bit of armament and that's it. And they were doing essentially the same job that we were when we got there. We'll get to that in a minute, because you asked about what we did there.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. I'd like to cover those questions.

MR. COLLOM: Anyway, some people actually broke during that time, but, again, maybe this was the reality of being a Coast Guard officer versus somebody else, but it wasn't hard to remember that there's a schedule. I mean, we're here a week. We were there two weeks. At the end of that time, they want us in Vietnam. They don't want us here. So some people would think that you really thought that you were in a prisoner of war camp. Now, you never knew that, at least I didn't, and most of the people I talked to felt the same way.

So we went through that training, and then almost a day or two later, we went back up to Alameda and shipped off.

INTERVIEWER: If you broke, did you not go over to Vietnam?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, no, no, no. That was another thing, too. I remember that very well in one of my interrogation sessions.

You know, it's supposed to be name, rank and serial number and that's it, but they keep pressuring you for more. And we didn't have any intelligence, of course, but keep doing it, and I figured I'd -- I can't remember what there was. There was something I said. I was just playing with the guy, foxing with him, and all of a sudden, he got me to say something, and I don't remember what it was, but it was something that I shouldn't have said. I knew it right away, and I started saying this thing and I said, "You got me." And he asked me another question and I said, "My name is, my rank is, my serial number." And he asked that one more time. He says, "You learned. You're out of here." I mean, that was really it.

INTERVIEWER: That was a lesson.

MR. COLLOM: That was a lesson.

But, anyway, the big thing I remember about going to Vietnam was that we were on a Braniff jet. They were chartered aircraft to fly people to Vietnam.

I remembered back to my father's days of talking about going to Europe in the Second World War. Everyone is sicker than a dog on an ocean liner or something going across. People just jammed everywhere, and instead, we're there on a plane with what was then called stewardesses coming up and down the aisle serving us food. We didn't have movies, but we had -- you know, I mean, I just thought of this. This is a dichotomy. This is crazy.

And then remembering as well getting there and circling, and we're circling over and they said we're circling Tan Son [Naht International] Airport right now, and just looking down and saying, "All of a sudden, I've just gone from this fat, easy life to this life down here."

INTERVIEWER: When was that? Was that late summer that you --

MR. COLLOM: I believe that was early September.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Anything memorable about -- you start out in Alameda, I assume?

MR. COLLOM: Yep.

INTERVIEWER: And you landed in Vietnam? Did you stop along the way?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, no. We went from Travis Air Force Base right out to Tan Son. There were no fueling stops. I think that was probably -- again, that's probably why they used passenger jets, because they had long legs.

INTERVIEWER: And you were the only Coast Guard person?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, no, no, no, no. I don't recall who was -- well, I do remember one guy who was in the group. Can't think of his name. He was an OCS [Officer Candidate School] grad. I knew him through the SERE training and was a good friend there, but I didn't serve with him once we got to country when we knew where we were going.

When we first got there, we just knew we were going to Coast Guard Division One, and they had shuffled down there to say so many people going down to An Thoi to Division 11. Some of them were going to 13 in Cat Lo, and the rest were going up to 12 in Da Nang. And it depended upon where the boats were, where the monsoon was as to how many went where. That goes to one of your questions later. Were the boats always in An Thoi? The boats were always everywhere. You move them because of the monsoon.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, because the monsoon was so drenching that you couldn't operate?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah. You keep a small cadre in each one. I can't remember what the number was, but a number of vessels would go north when the monsoon was down in the south over by Thailand and Cambodia, and when the monsoon was coming the other way, then you shifted boats south, and Cat Lo is in the middle. Didn't mean they didn't move, because it was a daisy chain down to one or the other.

INTERVIEWER: Now, when you say "monsoon," was it just drenching rain, or was there heavy seas, high winds, all of the above?

MR. COLLOM: Winds and rain. High seas is overstating it. Rough.

INTERVIEWER: Most of the water was protected, I think, wasn't it? You didn't go beyond your post, though?

MR. COLLOM: No, no, no, no, no. In fact, when we did our Christmas celebration, we went and anchored in the Leevan [ph] Island because it was pretty rough, but not high seas. When I think of high seas, I think of high seas, and it was rough. And it wasn't the best vessel to ride on there, but, in any case, I do remember going down around, being at Ton Sanut [ph], being processed,

going down. That's in Saigon, but it's on the burbs, if you will. So we went in there and just teeming with people and bar girls, and, I mean, everything you read about the war except war. I mean, there was no one popping bullets around at that point, not in Saigon. The war was outside of there.

INTERVIEWER: I guess Tet was January of '68, and that was already several months before you got there?

MR. COLLOM: That was well gone, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: So there wasn't any of that going on?

MR. COLLOM: No. And wasn't Tet more up in the north in Da Nang and in the mountainous regions? I didn't think there was much in Saigon.

INTERVIEWER: No. The U.S. embassy was attacked in Saigon.

MR. COLLOM: Oh, okay. See, I don't remember that today. But that was ancient history then.

Now, I didn't think it was like going to visit Germany today, you know, or some other, you know, tourist mecca, but it was just teeming with military people and equipment everywhere. So it was a kind of interesting, an interesting way to start.

I got put on a little puddle jumper and had a few chickens and I think some hogs and things in the back, too, going down to Phu Quoc Island, which is the home of the most fabulous *nuoc mam* in all of Vietnam. It's the fish sauce that they make by just rotting fish and draining the stuff off for, it seems like, a year.

INTERVIEWER: And you enjoyed that?

MR. COLLOM: No. [Laughter.]

MR. COLLOM: But it is the best. When we were turning the vessels over and we're going north, people said should we just put some of this in the hull because we can get a lot of good stuff for this *nuoc mam*. You could buy it for a penny down there and get all kinds of stuff for it someplace else, but no one wanted it to break open in their vessel because it smelled so bad.

When we went down there -- I actually have some pictures, not here, but I have some pictures of Tan Son Nhat International Airport, which was nothing but reinforced steel on the sand, and then being assigned there for a few days -- I was relieved in October, October 1st or so, so I must have been there for about a week or 10 days before --

INTERVIEWER: I guess the Coast Guard probably had some sort of office set up in Saigon for processing people in and out?

MR. COLLOM: Actually, no, we never went there. They did have one, but I did not go there. All of our stuff was done out at Tan Son Nhat. I don't ever remember going down to the Coast Guard office in Saigon. I think I knew where it was.

You know, I think I probably did go up there when I was being transferred at the end. That's another story. I got transferred at the end of my tour. But what they had down in An Thoi, they actually were on a -- gees, what do they call them now? A UPL? It was a repair ship.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay. So it was some kind of mother ship?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah. Well, it's bigger than that, but I can't think of it now. It's not that important.

But they both repaired vessels and also they provided vessels when you were not on patrol, so you could get off. We had a little place up on the land, but that's where the actual naval commander, who happened to be a Coast Guard officer as we were talking about before, resided in his operational command, and you went in there for briefings and things, and the officers club was in there, too, which was a quonset-hut. So that was like the second world war in the Philippines. I mean, that's the image that was evoked by that.

But you either stayed on board the boat or on the [USS] *Krishna* [ARL-38], which was -- *Krishna* was the name of the vessel, the supply ship. And then you ran in and out.

I think we were out, I think it was just about a week. It was probably a little less than a week at a time, maybe a week, depending on where your patrol area was, because every part of the coastline was designated to a certain sector, and if you were assigned to these three or four sectors, then you would be patrolling and rolling within those. You wouldn't really go outside of those because, in the next three sectors, there was another vessel. It might be another Coast Guard vessel, another 82-footer, or it might be a PCF, and sometimes there were none. I mean, there just weren't enough to go around. During monsoon season, there weren't enough to go around.

INTERVIEWER: So you'd be on patrol for a week, and then you'd be off for a few days or for a week, or how long would you be off?

MR. COLLOM: I don't actually remember how long we were off. I think a lot of it depended upon the readiness of your vessel. It certainly wasn't longer than a week, but I don't think it was a week. I honestly don't know.

I mean, at one point, we went in and had that repair ship pull our engines. We did an engine overhaul. An overhaul, we hauled it out. And we took the engine -- I've got pictures downstairs -- we just hauled up the engine, plopped in a new one, and away we went. It took a complete day, but back here, that would have taken forever. But, I mean, you just had to do it. You just took one out, popped it back in, and it probably -- by the time you fixed everything up, it took a few days to unhitch everything and then to re-engine.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel coming into this foreign land that was, I guess, fairly exotic in terms of being different and unique from your earlier experiences? But were you anxious, nervous, excited? I mean, certainly, it was a dangerous assignment, but did you have any concerns while you were there?

MR. COLLOM: I would say anxious. Excitement might be going a little too far, but still some excitement, but with a small "e" rather than a capital "E."

INTERVIEWER: Cautious, I suppose, then?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, I would say cautious, not really knowing a lot about these patrols.

I went out on at least -- I think I went out on one patrol before I relieved the guy who was on board-- the CO then.

INTERVIEWER: Were you a lieutenant or still a j.g.?

MR. COLLOM: I was j.g.. I was never a lieutenant over there. I wasn't a lieutenant until I came back to Washington.

INTERVIEWER: Was that common? Were most cutter captains j.g.s, or?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, they were j.g.s, or it's possible they could have been -- no, they wouldn't have been lieutenants. It was highly unlikely. It was too senior because we were -- you know, this is not an apt description, but we were cannon fodder. We were just another person going in. We were capable of doing our jobs, but it was a rotational thing, and I think it was good for our people, too, to be in that kind of situation and to work with the Navy and to do those things.

So it was a year assignment, and there were some people on the staff that were during that. The division commander was a lieutenant commander. And then up on the Saigon staff, I mean, you had a captain heading it, and you had a commander, and I don't know what else they had. I think they had a couple other people. But there just weren't a lot of senior billets, except for one or two or three

senior billets, and then there was nothing in the middle. There was the bottom and then the rest. Yeah, it was pretty exciting.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel like somebody had to train you in again, as they -- you had the senior chief quartermaster on the cape class. What about with --

MR. COLLOM: Not as much. Not as much. You know, you had your sea legs. You understood what was going on there. You certainly -- you had to learn a lot in front of those people, but it wasn't the same feeling as on the 95. This was a newer vessel. The 82s were newer. They put a second officer on board, and I'm convinced there was only one reason for that. It was to have someone to talk to. He was always an OCS graduate. He was not an Academy graduate.

INTERVIEWER: And the COs were typically Academy graduates?

MR. COLLOM: Yes. That's not exclusive. The person I relieved was not an Academy graduate, but I'm not -- and I don't mean to be denigrating in any way, but the Academy graduate was the person who usually was the CO, and then the XO was a really new ensign. He might have had some experience someplace else, but not a lot.

This is a digression, but it came up later when I was up in Kodiak, and I thought about this. Actually, the best thing that happened to the Coast Guard -- not the best thing that happened -- one of the good things that happened to the Coast Guard during Vietnam was we brought in a lot of those officers who weren't Academy graduates, and they brought a different perspective and a willingness to challenge more than somebody who you thought who might be making a career. They weren't concerned about what was going to happen to them in five years. Academy grads didn't make decisions that way, but they were more inclined to think about where am I going next, what am I going to do when I'm -- am I going to become a lieutenant, am I going to become a lieutenant commander, am I going to -- not become an admiral, but, you know. I think that we were more lock-set in things, where these guys were pretty uninhibited.

INTERVIEWER: And that was a good thing?

MR. COLLOM: I think it was a fantastic thing. It was a fantastic thing.

And it was true in the enlisted ranks, too. People had been -- they were there because they were avoiding going to Vietnam. See the dichotomy in what I just said? They were avoiding going to Vietnam, and they were in Vietnam, because they were going in the Army, and they never thought if they joined the Coast Guard, Coast Guard doesn't go to Vietnam. Little did they know, they were over there. But because they brought a perspective, not a disobedient attitude, but a more challenging, more, I guess --

INTERVIEWER: They weren't in lockstep.

MR. COLLUM: They weren't in lockstep, and they would challenge your decision. They wouldn't challenge it to the point of saying, "No, sir," you know, but it was one of they'd question what you're doing. They'd make you work hard in your decision making.

As a result -- I don't know that that was their intent, but it was -- in fact, I think that was great when -- that was true even as I got to Kodiak later. There were a lot of people that weren't coming through that way again. They were career Coasties, and so they were more mind-set in the mold, and sometimes it's good to have some aberrations out there to challenge you and test you. And I think that was very smart. I don't think you'll get many people to tell you that, but that's the way I felt about it. That's my personal feeling.

INTERVIEWER: What about the boat? What's your opinion of the 82-footers compared to the other ones you were on and how it suited the conditions in Vietnam and the patrols that you had to do? Was it well fitted to that service, and how well did you enjoy skippering an 82-footer as opposed to other vessels?

MR. COLLUM: I liked the 82-footer much better than the 95. It had a nice high wheelhouse. It's kind of like a tugboat. You feel like it's right underneath you, and it's going to be responsive to whatever it is you need to do. It wasn't fast, obviously not. It had good creature comforts.

I remember the cabin on the 95 was about as big as this coffee table, and it was down below decks, no portholes or anything. I mean, that was a captain's cabin. It was just another room across from the chief's stateroom. But this, you know, you were up, you had light coming in. I mean, it was nice. It was creature comforts, that way. You had a galley. You had a cook.

I've always liked 95s and 82s because you're like a family. Over there, we beefed up the crews. Instead of having 11, you had 13, maybe 14, but I think it was 13. You had the other officer to talk to. I really think that's why it was done, because it's going to be likely that most of the people there aren't going to have a college education. They may not have the same interests. They certainly don't have the same background, and so it was good to have another compatriot to deal with. I don't think there was any more need to have a second officer for the purpose of command and control. It was more that you didn't go stir crazy.

And my exec was right in the mold, that I told you he was an OCS graduate. He was a graduate of a liberal arts school. He was a great friend and companion as well as a good officer. There was nothing wrong with his

seamanship, boating skills, his knowledge of how to do things, nothing at all. He was very different from my background but really was helpful.

Then later, after the incident that we hear about today or how this started out, he, of course, was gone from the vessel because he was shot up. I got another person in who was a former enlisted and was now a lieutenant j.g., and he was always fearful of everything, including cleaning bedbugs -- I mean roaches. He always had this can of roach stuff, and he said, "Ah, the roaches are here." But I thought the vessel handled well for what it did.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever ground out? I mean, was it the draft --

MR. COLLOM: Oh, you did it all the time. You did it all the time but not like my classmate whose picture is all over every Coast Guard history thing sitting there at the end of the Saigon River, high and dry. I mean literally high and dry. They put some -- shored it up to make sure that it didn't -- he jammed it in good once he realized he was going down, but then they were, what, a hundred yards from the closest water?

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

MR. COLLOM: Now, that was a function of where they were. The tides up in that region, the delta region, just went whoosh, you know, and then they all came back in.

But did we grind? Yeah. We usually had about three or four water pumps on board because we were constantly chewing them up. Because you get into -- basically, it was a sand there. It wasn't rock bottom. It was sand. So you could ground, and in order to get into some of the places we were going -- there was a little town that we used to go into all the time up around the northern end because they had good beer in there. And the swift drivers would always go in and say, "You can't come in here because it's too shallow."

Well, I found out there was an old channel that was no longer marked -- I did, me and my buddies there, not me personally -- and we could follow that in, but there were some places you had to just bump over the top, you know, to get in and so you'd do that and the engineer would get mad at you because you just chewed up another water pump.

But the vessels worked well. There was very little -- you know, you didn't see a lot of action, until I get to later in the story, but you're out there. You had 50-caliber machine guns mounted in four places, and you could hold an M-60 and other things around, and that was good enough for boarding the junks and the things that we did.

When the Coast Guard first went there, the major problem, I think, that they were fighting was the infiltration of arms and medical supplies from the sea, but, by the time I got there, that was basically stopped. That was not happening.

What we were doing is we were boarding junks and fishing vessels and these all -- the long tails, you know, the big engine up here, and it had long shaft. That's what they called us, "long shaft."

INTERVIEWER: The outboards with the really long propeller shaft?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah. And that's what we were boarding mostly, and we were looking for contraband and draft dodgers, things coming out, not things going in. Supposedly, we were looking for things going in, but I'm going to tell you, there was nothing going in. Or we were completely ineffective and everything was going in, but I got to tell you, it just didn't happen.

And we were doing naval gunfire support. That meant that we would go along and we would shoot tons of rounds through our 81-millimeter mortar in support of somebody back in there someplace. They did much more of that in Division 13 and Division 12. In fact, they were renowned for going out in boats with ammunition just stacked on the deck.

INTERVIEWER: This would be farther north?

MR. COLLOM: No, that was just around the corner, around the tip, and then you get up in around Saigon and Cat Lo. It's not further north, but it's around the tip, so it's not on the Gulf of Thailand. It's on whatever that sea is.

INTERVIEWER: So it was west, beyond that point of land there, I guess.

MR. COLLOM: It's east.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MR. COLLOM: It's east.

But our patrol areas went around the tip and up -- I don't know how many miles. I don't remember, and then theirs would come down to there. But they had a particularly aggressive commander who liked to see numbers so they would shoot all the time. We shot a lot, too, but that wasn't -- that's not really action. I mean, it's shooting all the time, yes. I mean, you could have a round go off right there, a hang-fire or something and have a real nasty experience, but it wasn't going back and forth. A few times, we shot at people on the shore and stuff like that, but, normally, it was naval gunfire support.

INTERVIEWER: Well, can you talk a little bit about small boat operations? I know they called these "little Boston Whalers." They're 14-footers, I believe, and they call them "skimmers," but they're basically -- at least that's what I've heard.

MR. COLLUM: I don't remember them being called "skimmers."

INTERVIEWER: Whalers, whatever you call them. Is that what you called them? "Whalers"? Okay.

MR. COLLUM: Yeah, and we --

INTERVIEWER: And they were on the back, and you can hoist them off with a derrick, a little derrick, I guess, but they were low freeboard about --

MR. COLLUM: You need to get your saltiness down.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. [Laughter.] Could be a foot of freeboard or something, I don't know, but outboard motor. That was basically like a small dinghy.

MR. COLLUM: Yeah, let's talk about that. I told you I was brought up on the shore, and that was the boat of the day, the Boston Whaler, when I was in high school. They sat up on top of the water, particularly when you were at speed, because they had a lot of floatation in them. Old boats used to have displacement hulls, and you just basically sat up on top. Closer to a hydroplane than displacement hull, not, though -- I'm going too far to say that, but they skim. That's why they could be called "skimmers." I don't remember that term being used at the time, but they would. They would skim along the surface pretty much. They were fast.

I can't remember. I think it was a -- I think it was probably a 40- or a 50-horsepower engine. I don't recall. I don't recall. Well, we can probably look at one of these pictures here, and that will tell us what it was.

INTERVIEWER: It was powerful.

MR. COLLUM: And you could only put three people in there. You could put in a fourth, but it would really slow you down at that point. And they were armed with nothing. They were armed with small arms, whatever you took.

INTERVIEWER: Whatever you carried on board, yeah.

MR. COLLUM: We usually begged, borrowed, or stole an M-60 machine gun. Almost everybody had at least one M-60. You know the old John Wayne

movies? That's what he always had -- [indicating machine gun noise] -- going around like that.

Had one of those. They had, of course, M-16s and a grenade launcher, and that was it. The protection for the people? Flak jackets and helmets, and that's it. Protection for the engine? Zero. Protection for the gas tanks? Zero.

I think the reason -- one of your questions to me earlier was what do you know about SEALORDS. SEALORDS was all we were doing. I mean, SEALORDS was the mission. There was also the interdiction out there, but I think the reason SEALORDS came about -- and I don't know, but I think the reason it came about is the Navy commanders that were sitting there, and I believe it was in Cam Ranh Bay, was their headquarters.

INTERVIEWER: Was it [Elmo R.] Zumwalt at that point?

MR. COLLUM: Zumwalt was there, yes. He was the head of it. Well, actually the head of it on the SEALORDS program was a guy -- I can't -- I never remember his name. He was a captain, but his code name was "Latch." And we'd all laugh about Latch because Latch just wanted to kill those VC. "Man, just kill them." I mean, he was hard-core. Never met the man, don't know anything about him except that "Latch" just became a funny term.

And I think this was thought up by many in the Navy, not just Latch, not just the guy who put it together, because I think they were bored. I think we had done the mission. There was the brown-water Navy, of course, that was in the rivers. But as far as the coastal Navy was concerned -- I'm not talking about aviators now.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

MR. COLLUM: I'm talking about coastal patrols in any way. Their mission was basically accomplished.

INTERVIEWER: In other words, any kind of smuggling that was going on had already been interdicted by the Coast Guard and the Navy units that were --

MR. COLLUM: Yeah. And I'd be naïve to say so, to say that it was completely solved, but that was so rare. So rare.

So, in any case, I think it was thought up as a way of getting back into the action. Let's do something with these forces. Let's not just sit there with them, churning up gas, and going back and forth.

And the PCFs, you know, they were really unstable in the sense of they were uncomfortable. And they couldn't go out for more than a day or two at a

time, and then they could come to us and get some things, but it wasn't a lot of fun what they were doing. It wasn't all that fun for any of us, really. I mean, there was an excitement about it.

INTERVIEWER: So it sounds like, day to day, it was almost mundane. You would board sampans or --

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, except that we were into this other operation almost immediately, which was going up rivers in the small boats.

INTERVIEWER: And that's the SEALORDS part.

MR. COLLOM: Well, SEALORDS was incursion into rivers, yeah, by the non-brown-water Navy. And, you know, the brown-water Navy was guys with the whole -- you see them -- they literally were brown, and they had lots of armaments around them, and I don't know what their mission was, but they operated in not coast-wise but inland.

INTERVIEWER: These were heavily armored swift boats?

MR. COLLOM: Heavily armored. No, they weren't swift boats. They were entirely different.

INTERVIEWER: Monitors and things like that?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, I don't honestly know. So I think this was thought up as something for us to do. The area that we were in down in IV Corps, which is the Army designation, IV Corps, I Corps -- I Corps was up there in Da Nang, and then there was IV Corps, I think there were actually more corps when you went inland, but there were IV Corps going down. Our area was considered entirely VC.

INTERVIEWER: No North Vietnamese Army, NVAs?

MR. COLLOM: No, there were no NVA there. There was no -- it was just VC [Viet Cong] controlled. There wasn't a lot of fighting going on down in there, but it was considered enemy country.

We would go into a couple of small towns along there, but, for the most part, everything was just considered -- well, it was pretty much a free-fire zone, too. You know, you could do anything you wanted.

But, anyway, they decided they'd start going up the rivers. I don't know if it was for the purposes just an excitement. I doubt that.

[Phone ringing.]

MR. COLLOM: Excuse me.

INTERVIEWER: Certainly.

[Pause.]

MR. COLLOM: In any case, I don't know if it was to just bring excitement. I'm sure it was not. I'm sure there was plenty of good reason, but they wanted -- it was more of an intelligence gathering, going up, seeing what's there, you know, because this was heavily forested, lots of little streams and rivers running around. When we're talking rivers here, we're talking small things. It wasn't like your Saigon River.

INTERVIEWER: Ah, too small for an 82-footer, anyway.

MR. COLLOM: Usually.

INTERVIEWER: I'm talking about the use of the small boat, I guess.

MR. COLLOM: Oh yeah. That's right.

Why I said "usually" is because when these things happen, I went up one. I turned around and just put my bow in one thing and spin it, because --

INTERVIEWER: Bow gets in the way.

MR. COLLOM: -- I wanted them out.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

MR. COLLOM: But they were small. Even the rivers that the 82s could go up, you were pretty much a sitting duck there, you know, and you didn't have a lot of maneuverability, and you had your four 50-caliber machine guns and all.

I'd say that the swift boats were quicker, too. The swift boats could go in and attack and run through, and they were shallower draft, and so it was really a -- the biggest part of SEALORDS was not what we were doing in the small boats. It's what they were doing in the PCFs.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, PCF. Oh, okay.

MR. COLLOM: And they were running up there so much. At first, it was pretty easy for the swift boats to do it. There was an element of surprise, but then they were doing it so much, it was well known, and they were getting waxed all the time.

And I remember sitting in the officers club one day and seeing John Kerry there. He had these bags with him, and I said, "John, what's all this?" And he wouldn't remember any of this. I mean, I'm just nobody. If John Kerry hadn't become someone, I wouldn't remember either, probably.

But he says, "Well, I'm going home," and I said, "Wait a second, John. You and I came into country on the same day. I'm putting in a year. What are you doing putting in six months?" He says, "I got wounded three times, and I had the option, and I'm going home before I die." And that was the case with PCF skippers. Skippers, PCF crews. They were getting waxed all the time. They were taking heavy losses, both dying and injuries.

And Admiral [Paul] Yost, who I talked about earlier, he was injured. He got a silver star in one of those on a PCF. He was up there on a PCF. I won't go into any of the details of that.

They started just going in the rivers a little bit and then going way up and then doing traversing, doing complete traverses where rivers --

INTERVIEWER: When did that start? Was that in October or --

MR. COLLOM: That started -- I think that actually started --

INTERVIEWER: After you got back?

MR. COLLOM: No, it was before I got back. I think it was more like the summer before I got there, because the guy I relieved had basically said, you know, these are some of the things we're doing with our boats, and swift boats had really started doing it. They weren't really getting whacked bad until probably '69, you know, January, February, March, and that's when they were really taking huge casualties.

INTERVIEWER: Did the small boats attract a lot of fire when they did these little reconnaissance, or were they not really --

MR. COLLOM: Okay, let's segue. Let's segue because I don't think we should do that out of context here.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

MR. COLLOM: You asked a question of me about what was Commander Blaha doing there. You said your understanding was that he was there, he was in country, he was familiarizing himself. The answer to that is "yes and no."

There were a number of us 82-footer skippers that really thought that this was pretty damn crazy what we were doing, going up there in these boats. They were unprotected. They really didn't have much to defend themselves. Forget protection, but offense, they didn't have much offense. And, frankly, all you had to do was shoot out the engine, and it was done because it was an outboard. One shot and it's gone.

We didn't object violently, you know, but I know when I was told that we were doing these things -- and they had started shortly before then, probably September. I don't know because I wasn't there. I didn't do it. But it just didn't make a lot of sense, and yet there hadn't been a problem. We hadn't done them for that long either, but there just hadn't been a problem. And I got to tell you, I think that the crews, the crews of our individual vessels, were looking for some excitement, too, and, you know, you really did dress up kind of like John Wayne and go up there, and it sounded kind of cool.

And so what Blaha was doing there, it was my understanding his major mission was not just familiarization with the area and the type of operations, but to assess whether these were good, whether they were valid operations, whether they were worth the time or worth the risk.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

MR. COLLOM: And so I think that's why he was there. That's the way I remember it. I remember talking to him a little bit when he was there, but we sent him out almost immediately. I'm not sure. That might have been his second trip on our small boat.

Why did he choose us? Was it luck of the draw? I'd like to be bigheaded and say it's because we were the best. The answer was it's probably just we were in the right place at the right time. Any of the boats were doing the same things. Well, many of the boats were doing the same things.

INTERVIEWER: Small boat recons?

MR. COLLOM: Small boat. And our mission wasn't truly clear when we were going up there. I mean, we were reporting, sending reports of what we saw, but there really wasn't much to see. So I think that, you know, that became a big part of our mission, but it didn't -- it did become a big part of our mission. You'd have at least one or two small boat operations per patrol. Let's say for the purpose of argument, a patrol being a week. Let's just set that up arbitrarily. You'd at least have a couple. The rest was naval gunfire support and just patrolling the outer banks, so to speak, or the coastline.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever have any personnel that went on land at all, or was it primarily all just staying --

MR. COLLOM: Not to my knowledge. We were not allowed to.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, really?

MR. COLLOM: No.

INTERVIEWER: That was part of --

MR. COLLOM: That was part of my orders. I don't know if that was -- I can't remember that that was anything else, but the answer is I don't think so. I don't think they did in this case. Of course, my memory may be failing me.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I'm not stating that they necessarily did.

MR. COLLOM: But let's talk about the one where we had a problem.

INTERVIEWER: And that was December 5th of --

MR. COLLOM: It was December.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

MR. COLLOM: If you say it was the 5th, it's the 5th, but I don't know that.

Charlie Blaha was there. We had him. Our exec [Ensign Gordon M. Gillies] was the guy who was driving the boat, and [Eddie] Hernandez was the engineman who was going on board in case -- not that somebody shot our engine out, but in case it crapped out, he was the guy who probably would know how to start it better. Hernandez was a really short little guy, but he was strong. You asked about him being a boxer. I have no knowledge of that, one way or the other. That wasn't anything that came up there. But he was a strong little dude, and he liked the role of going up there. He always carried an M-60 machine gun. I mean, that was his --

INTERVIEWER: On the boat or on the 82-footer?

MR. COLLOM: On the small boat. I mean, that was the weapon he wanted, you know. And, in fact, when you had three people, he was the one who had to do it because the other one was this senior officer from Saigon and our exec who's driving the boat, and they have M-16s and a grenade launcher and maybe some hand grenades. I don't know. But Hernandez did like the part. I may be making this up, but the way I remember it is that he liked to string a band of M-60 machine gun belts.

INTERVIEWER: Like a bandoleer or something?

MR. COLLOM: Yes. Yeah, I mean, I just think he thought he was as big as John Wayne when he did that. I think he really, really enjoyed that. There's no doubt about that. He was a fun guy, by the way. He wasn't -- I don't -- that's probably the depth of my knowledge of him, except I remember he was fun. I just showed you a picture of him before. He was cooking steaks on a fantail.

INTERVIEWER: So he was a popular guy?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, I think he was popular. Oh, yeah, he was. I mean, there's only 14 of us, you know. You had to be fairly popular, but he was, and he always had a smile on his face. I don't remember any in-depth conversations with him anyway. So I don't have any insight, but he was outgoing, jovial, and he really enjoyed going off in these small boat things. He was probably, I think --

INTERVIEWER: He probably volunteered more than the others?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, I'm sure he did. And they had run them a few times before I was there, maybe many times, but he was one of their regular boat crew. You usually put in a fireman, a seaman up for petty officer. It was somebody in the deck rating, somebody in the engine rating, and somebody else who was driving the boat.

That particular day, nothing particularly distinctive about it. They went up a river that had no name. They didn't have any names there. Fairly small place, we took them in, dropped them off. We couldn't actually get up to the mouth of the river. The rivers in Vietnam run particularly fast, so they're deep once you get in them, but because of this funnel effect of getting the stuff off, you build up a bar outside and there's nobody maintaining the channel. There may be some kind of natural leeway, but there's no good place, so you couldn't really get in with the 82. Plus, we couldn't anyway. We knew it was too small.

And they'd gone up there. I don't know who chose that river. I don't know if we chose it. I don't know if it was chosen for us by Latch. I don't know if there was any particular importance. It was just a river.

INTERVIEWER: Was that one that Blaha wanted to go up, or you just happened --

MR. COLLOM: I don't know. Like I say, it could be any of those. I don't know if he -- if we looked at the chart that day and said, "Well, here's one we haven't been up, and they'd like some intelligence here." I don't recall what the impetus was for that particular river that particular day.

Once we dropped them off, we backed off a little. I mean, they were out of sight immediately, because the rivers are very -- not only narrow, but they're also

very snaky. And we'd get reports. I don't remember what the situation reports were. They were probably every -- I think it was every 15 minutes, maybe every 10 minutes they were supposed to call in and say, "Ops normal," and, really, that was about all, unless they observed something and they'd tell us what they observed.

INTERVIEWER: So they had a handheld radio.

MR. COLLOM: Oh yeah. It was a PRC-51 or something. It's just an FM radio, piece of junk today, I mean a real piece of junk. And that's what they used. It was an FM line of sight.

But, anyway, I don't know how long into the mission. I was on the bridge while they were up there, of course, and we had our .50 calibers uncovered. We didn't have them manned because we were out there, you know, but we were ready to go if anything happened, not thinking anything to them, but we could have done something we thought.

And we got a call that they were hit. I do not remember any of the words. I do not remember any of the discussion of how badly we're hit, what we were hit by, but that we're under fire and all that, we're under fire, and we have casualties. And we immediately put people on all those guns we had.

I kept trying to talk to them. They really couldn't talk. We talked a couple more times. It was clear that they were seriously hit, very seriously hit. Again, I don't remember any of the words. They might have even said, you know, someone has a huge stomach wound, so and so has this, you know, what's going on. But it was clear that they could not make it out on their own.

I ought to say something else first, and that is, I'm not sure that they were ambushed in any way. You've seen an after-action report. I probably saw them at the time. I don't ever remember seeing Blaha's report, for example. They kind of whisked that away. Well, they didn't whisk it away. It just never got to me. I'm sure I gave a report. I'm sure you've seen whatever I reported, but I don't know.

My feeling -- it could be a number of things. I don't think any small boats had been up there before, so there wasn't any reason for them to be alerted to think that they were going to come and ambush somebody. I think they just moseyed up to a point where there was a small village. I know there was a small village. I mean, I was told that later, that they had found a small village.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

MR. COLLOM: And I don't know that they got out of the boat. They weren't supposed to, but I don't know if they did.

I remember something said about the village being deserted or there was nobody in the village. Okay. How big was the village? I don't know. Two huts, three huts, 15. I don't have any idea. And I believe what happened was this. This is belief, 40 years old, that is not supported unless Gordon Gillies -- Gordon Gillies can tell you what happened. If he can remember, and I'll bet you he can, he can tell you what happened.

But my theory was that they saw something or somebody move. Now, people heard a boat coming up and they took off. Okay. They took to the woods. They got out of the village. Whether it was Vietcong, whether it was Americans, whether it was whatever, they just -- I don't know if they had shot with some animals someplace, if there had been some gunfire before, but I think people just left the village. They saw some movement up there, whether the movement was somebody with a gun or just movement, that was a free-fire. It was known -- everything there was, quote, known to be VC. And I think they probably opened fire on it -- shot at it. "Open fire" sounds like a fusillade. I think what it was, they shot, and I think they got shot back for shooting.

Who started the shooting? I don't rightly know. It could have been anybody. And people there did not have a shotgun or a .22. They don't have weapons. It's not necessarily that they were VC. I mean, it's just that was the weapons that were around.

INTERVIEWER: Standard weapons.

MR. COLLUM: And I'm sure that the minute they got shot at, "Holy crap. What is this?" And our guys unleashed whatever they had and were trying to get out, and then I think they were shot pretty doggone quick.

I really don't know when they were hit and how that series of events happened. But, in any case, it was clear to me, listening to them, trying to talk to them on the way back and the way they were talking -- and it was Gordon that was on the radio.

INTERVIEWER: The exec?

MR. COLLUM: Yeah. And he sounded very weak. I said, "If they're getting out, we got to go in," and it was just a stupid move to make. It happened to work, but it was a stupid move to make. That was one of those places where we really did bounce over the bar to get in. Not high and dry, but I mean, we certainly -- not just bottomed out.

And then, as we went into the river, the river was -- we were 82-feet long. The river was 85-feet wide. I don't know. I am probably exaggerating it with age or even under the circumstances, but I do remember in order to turn around, we had to literally put our bow up on the shore. The rivers were deep, as I told you.

We weren't going aground, but when we spun around, we didn't go in too far. There was a bend not too far up the river.

Some of my sanity came back about then, saying we can't get up here too far. Hold back or we're dead meat. But we got in. They never would have made it out over the bar in that, and not because of the integrity of the boat. I just think they couldn't have handled the small chop that was out there.

INTERVIEWER: Seaworthy-wise?

MR. COLLOM: They would have been okay, but I don't think they had the strength or anything else.

They came around the corner. I mean, it was soon after we got there, they did come around the corner. We got them in and immediately called for a medevac. Later, I got a security violation for doing that, giving away my position, and the fact that we had a need because that wasn't right. And I said, "Screw you." You know, are you kidding me? Obviously, the worst one hurt when they came on board was Hernandez. He had had -- all I can say is abdominal shots, you know, and he had been shot up in the abdomen.

INTERVIEWER: He was still alive, wasn't he?

MR. COLLOM: He was still alive. He was bleeding profusely, and he was obviously in the worst way. I can't remember what Gordon had. I think it was mostly leg wounds. I can't recall.

And Charlie Blaha had difficult parts of his body blown off. He was pretty stoical, though. I will say that. He was pretty stoical. He was worse off than anyone would have expected because he was -- you know, he just was stoical about it.

We did not have corpsmen on board. I mean, we had those of us who had first aid, and that was it. We didn't have any training in anything like that.

We got them on board, tried to not sedate them but help them out. I'm not sure that we gave Hernandez morphine or not. I don't know. I was trying to get us out of there at that point. The crew was down working with them.

We met up with a ship out there. It wasn't a medevac in a helicopter sense. If I remember correctly, it was a ship came alongside and hauled them up in a basket.

INTERVIEWER: So it wasn't *Krishna* or any of the --

MR. COLLOM: Oh, no, no, no, no. This was -- I don't know what it was. It was a Navy ship. I think it was a rocket launcher, I think, LSMR. Frankly, I don't know. It was a naval -- it wasn't a Coast Guard vessel. It was the closest thing that was there, and they had a corpsman on board. I mean, I would have taken anything because it was big and more stable than we were and would have had somebody, but that's what we had. But it wasn't a helicopter hoist. It was a hoist up the side.

INTERVIEWER: How long was the transit? I forget. Was it 20 minutes, half hour, hour? That may all be actually in the after-action report.

MR. COLLOM: That's what you have to really look at. My recollection is probably more like a half an hour. It wasn't real quick. They didn't answer us for a long time. They didn't -- "they," that's the amorphous "they."

INTERVIEWER: Navy or whoever.

MR. COLLOM: I didn't get much of a response, and when I did, it really wasn't anything in our area. I mean, this type of operation, it wasn't one of theirs. This is a small boat outfit, we were doing ourselves. I mean, it was within the parameters of the operations order, but it wasn't an operation that was being led from Cam Ranh Bay and Admiral Zumwalt and all those guys. I mean, it was something that we were doing that was done on -- it was like a Swift Boat incursion that was known, and they were prepared for anything. Plus, they had never had a problem before. So, I mean, yeah --

INTERVIEWER: Was it because you were Coast Guard?

MR. COLLOM: No. No. I don't think so. I think that distinction is wrong. I don't think there was any distinction at all. Sure, we laugh about it all the time, you know, but we quickly painted our boats gray once we got there. They were [originally] white and they stood out, and it also didn't make any sense anyway, so [then we painted them] gray. But, no, that wasn't a part of it at all.

If I remember correctly, I believe he was probably dead when we hoisted him. I think we knew that because I remember -- I remember my exact words as they were hoisting him up. I said, "Be careful back there. Treat him like he's alive," you know, something like that. I was really upset because I thought that they were getting pretty bouncy and, you know, just not doing things --

INTERVIEWER: Respectfully.

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, respectfully. And so I got a little exercised about that.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

MR. COLLOM: The other two also went up onto that same vessel. They got a helicopter in later onto that vessel and took Gordon and Charlie Blaha. First off, I think to Ton Sanut or someplace like that, and Gordon was out of country within a day. He was in a hospital in Japan. And I may have that wrong, too, but it was really quick time.

He was transferred because he had -- I think he had knee problems. I think that's what got shot up on him. I don't know. And I don't know if -- I presume Blaha did at the same time or in the same kind of thing. He was gone as well, was taken off there. And it's just something that had -- I guess we all were fearful of that, but we still continued doing those stupid operations up until that point. That's my point. After that, I didn't run small boats up rivers.

INTERVIEWER: That's your own choice, or that was from up above?

MR. COLLOM: I believe it was -- it was my choice immediately. It wasn't going to happen, and I wrote that. I know I wrote that in my report. You've got yourself -- that thing is sitting on top of the water, three people with flak jackets on, not body armor like today, flak jackets, okay?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MR. COLLOM: And they had no defensive mechanism. They had no offensive mechanism to speak of, unless they encounter a dog. And their motor is vulnerable.

I mean, the whole thing, all of those things -- I believe Charlie Blaha was down there because he knew that there were some concerns among the skippers, but they never surfaced to a very high level, even with myself. Hindsight is 20/20.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MR. COLLOM: But, at that point, it was clear. I mean, all those things that said "Why didn't we ever think of any of this? Why did it happen?" We should have lost all three. We never should have seen that boat again, by all rights, unless there was just one person who was shooting at them and he just happened to get lucky. I don't know.

Gordon will be a better person to tell you that. I wasn't able to talk to Gordon or Charlie Blaha or Hernandez about any of that. We were dealing with handling their wounds and getting out of there and getting them medevac'd.

And I saw Charlie Blaha years later in the Coast Guard Academy Exchange, Homecoming weekend. I always remember he was introducing me to

his wife or to his family or his friends or somebody and he says, "Here's Jon Collom, the guy who saved my life." And I always considered myself Jon Collom, the guy who got him shot up bad, not the other way, not from his side. And he was saying, "He saved my life," and he seemed to be sincere. He wasn't just saying a nice thing, you know. "Here's Jon, a guy I was over in Vietnam with," you know.

But, you know, it just brought home that this was a foolish thing to be doing, the way we were. Later, the swift boats encountered the same thing, even though it was entirely different, but there, it was the same thing in that once it was known they were going there, their speed didn't matter much. They'd just take out the first boat and make it stop and clog up the thing, and then they'd wax the rest of them, because they expected them.

I think this was a chance encounter on both sides. Our guys didn't expect to see anything going up there. Sure, we're supposed to be there gathering intelligence, but they didn't expect to see anything, and they didn't expect to see anybody coming up in a little boat.

And something was the catalyst that made it change from "whoops, I see you, you see me" to an exchange of gunfire. Who fired first, I don't know. And it really doesn't -- maybe they fired at the same time. I really don't know.

I would be very, very interested in hearing what Gordon has to say. If you would provide me that, I would appreciate it, because, to this day, I don't know what happened up there.

Anyway, there is one document, which does not exist anymore, that I wish did, and that was my night order book from that night, because I was one ripped-up person. I mean ripped up inside. Coast Guard guys don't die in warfare, and yet we had *Point Welcome* [victim of a friendly-fire attack by U.S. Air Force aircraft], and that was the Air Force beating us down.

But that doesn't happen. And I'm thinking, "What have you done here? This is stupid." Not what have I done to myself. What have I done? This is crazy. I sent those guys up on a suicide mission. This is just -- it's crazy. So I wish I had that night order book, because I'd say that I wrote about two pages of orders, and it was all about them, you know, the people, about the mission. That's where I did my best work.

Whatever I put in the log is something different. That's sterile, antiseptic. I don't know what it says either, but it would not be the same thing as what was in that night order book. And I could have kept it. That's the thing that really got me. Because when you leave a ship, you can take it with you because it's not an official book in any way. Next guy's going to write his own. He doesn't give a damn what you wrote down. Every night, streaming underway and such and

such, you know, watch out for this, expect that to happen, these kind of things. And I wish I had that, but I don't.

So, anyway, after that, we came back and every time we went by that place, we would shoot mortar rounds in where we thought that village was, because it was still considered VC.

You were supposed to get permission to fire. I would make a call on the radio. "So and so, this is Imperial Tango. We're going to fire on the village at these coordinates. Unless otherwise directed, I will start firing in 15 minutes," whatever.

And then I turned the radio off because I didn't want an answer -- or turned it down. I didn't want anyone to be telling me, "No, you can't do that," for whatever reason.

INTERVIEWER: Sure, right.

MR. COLLOM: You don't want to waste the ammunition. I mean, that was ridiculous. We didn't know where that village was. We knew it was up in that area, and we probably made more enemies than anything, because we just indiscriminately, for no reason, started firing up there. Didn't make me feel any better, but I felt that I had to do it. Did I do that a lot? No, but we did it.

We got a new XO on board, a new fireman, continued doing patrols. We supported the PCFs. We went up a couple rivers in the 82, a couple larger rivers sometime, but not very far.

INTERVIEWER: For recon?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah, I think that's what we were told to. We did, and that's fine. I have some pictures of us, and one of them here.

Forgive me for saying it. That was the exciting days, but most days were boring days out there. We enjoyed each other's company. We enjoyed -- you know, we went and we looked at these fishing boats, and we did our mission, and it was okay, but it was pretty mundane. You used that word before, and that's exactly what it was, pretty mundane.

And yet, I remember after this happened, after this happened, months later, having a naval -- a Coast Guard ship, I think it was, want to do some gunnery on this little tiny island that there was right off the coast. And they said, "We understand that there's VC on that island, and that there's a such and such, and we want to do our gunfire support." And I said, "Captain, there ain't shit there. There's nothing there." And he said, "Well, we understand that, and we want to do that, so we want you to go up and spot for us." Okay. It's not on the

island, but go up halfway between there and tell them what the damage was and all.

So we did, but the way we were doing it, while he's shooting on this thing, we were cooking on the fantail, cooking steaks. It wasn't that time that you see here. Cooking steaks on the fantail. I don't think we had our flak jackets on. Maybe we had helmets on. We were standing ready should anything happen.

When he was done shooting, he says, "I want you now to go in and get me a damage report, you know, Gunfire Damage Report, GDR. And I said, "What am I going to tell him? You know, three trees, two rocks."

But we went in there, and, damn, somebody shot at us. I can't believe it. Because somebody -- I don't know if it was a Vietcong or what, but somebody was up there, and they were pissed. Somebody had been just blown five-inch rounds at them, you know, from this Coast Guard ship out there. If anybody comes close, wow, they're shooting at us.

My cook was mad, because he was cooking steaks, and the steaks were ruined. But that and maybe one other time were the only times we came under fire. That's the only time the ship came under fire. Well, actually, I guess there was one more up north, but not important.

I mean, it was pretty routine, most things you did. I was on the ship, on the *Cypress* until April, and then I was kicked upstairs. I became the chief of staff of the division. So I moved.

I had a classmate come in and relieve me. He was already a -- well, he was a j.g., and he came in, and he took over, and I was chief of staff then. And then we were phasing down at that point. This was the end of the war, the naval war out there, anyway, and we were starting to turn our vessels over to Vietnamese, and people were going home early.

I always said I was too important. Lucky me. They told me I had to go up to Cat Lo and spend my last month there. And then I got to Cat Lo, and they didn't need me, so I went to Da Nang. I had a classmate in Da Nang who was extending for six months. So you got a month's leave when you did an extension, and so I took his job for a month, and I never went out on a boat there.

Your last month, you're always looking over your shoulder. Things were a little more exciting up there. There were things -- every now and then, there would be incoming [fire] up there. Every now and then. Yeah, not often.

I remember when I first got there, I said I ought to at least see the patrol area. So I went up with an Army pilot in a Piper Cub. He was a spotter or a reconnaissance, and I went up with him, and, boy, that was the most stupid thing

I ever did. The first thing he said was, "Sit on your flak jacket." He says because the problem is small arms coming up, just somebody with a little M-16 that shoots up and you get a bullet up your tail, and so we did that, but what was so foolish about it was not just doing that part of it, but coming back, we get right over the airfield, and, you know, he says, "Oh, I got a sailor here. I got a Coastie," and he says, "See that strip down there?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "We're going to land there." And he just went -- [indicating noise] -- like that.

[Laughter.]

MR. COLLOM: And he wanted me to barf. That's what he wanted. He didn't get it, but, man, I was pretty lucky.

So I spent a month in -- now, this was already -- this is now down in August, August of '69 and probably July of '69. I think I was up there a month in July, and then in August, I came back.

INTERVIEWER: So the small boat operations pretty much ceased throughout the Coast Guard after --

MR. COLLOM: I can't say that. I cannot say that. Certainly, amongst the skippers that I talk about, they were always leery of them. Even 13, that gung-ho guy who wanted things to happen, his commanding officers were trying to police him. They did mostly naval gunfire support. But they also did rivers. I don't honestly know what happened.

Down in our area, they ceased, except in support of the PCFs and all. But it didn't cease that day. Don't get me wrong. It was a watershed event, but it wasn't watershed going over the waterfall and then, when you reached the bottom, it all stopped. No. It took a little time. But we certainly didn't run them, and I don't think anybody else in our division did.

Whether the next divisions did or not, I really don't know. And we might have been the only place that was really doing a lot of them, just because of the nature of the types of rivers that we had. Up there, the rivers were --

INTERVIEWER: Deeper and wider.

MR. COLLOM: Deeper and wider. I never served in them operationally. Even though I was the chief of staff, I was just -- when I was the chief of staff up there, I had nothing to do with the operation, so I was literally a paper pusher. Down in Division 11, I was more than that because I had been a part of the fleet beforehand, so that changes things.

INTERVIEWER: We talked about the cutter, and you actually talked about the crew somewhat already, but I was wondering if you had any other

comments about the *Point Cypress* crew. I mean, anything more you can remember about Hernandez or anything about -- and you talked about the XO, Gordon Gillies already, too, but what about the crew as a whole? I mean, how did that compare to other crews you've been with? Or were they fun-loving or any qualities that stand out that you can think of?

One thing I'd also like to ask you is I think there was another Hispanic-American crew member on board, wasn't there, or not?

MR. COLLOM: Not in my time.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. But, anyway, anything else you can say about the crew?

MR. COLLOM: I've got to tell you something.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

MR. COLLOM: Hernandez wasn't a Hispanic American. He was just a Coastie. I mean, there was -- as much as -- there wasn't any distinction at all. And everybody has nicknames. I don't remember what his was.

Yeah, if you look at him, you know he's Hispanic, but that was not a -- that was -- we were close family there, and I don't think there was any distinction with people of color. I don't think there was a thing.

Were there black people aboard? Yes, I believe so, but that was of no moment, of no moment whatsoever. People did their jobs and that was it, and it was not a -- so it's just -- but anyway.

Vietnam was really tough on married folk. You don't think about that, and, of course, we know that now. I mean, it's all over the papers with people who are married going to Afghanistan and Iraq. It doesn't make any difference. I mean, that's a tough situation. But it's really tough for them.

I mean, a lot of the guys were like me. We were young. We were full of ourselves. We were, you know, thinking of adventure. That's going a little far, but we were, you know, that's okay. We did have family. We had mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters, but we didn't have spouses there. Those who did found it particularly difficult.

I thought it was really hard. I don't know how people ever did this. Some of them went on their R&R to Hawaii and met their wives, were there with them for a week in Hawaii and then flew back to the war zone. I just don't know how it happened.

I went on R&R to Bangkok and to Hong Kong, and I remember getting on the plane going back with some of these guys who were going to be in a foxhole, you know, a few hours after they got back, and I wasn't going to a foxhole. I mean, I was going to my ship.

Well, actually, I didn't take -- one time, we hopped aboard a Coast Guard ship. Both times, it was after I was no longer in command, so I wasn't going back to my boat. I was going back to a fairly comfy existence. So I just don't know how those guys ever did it.

The crew--one of the reasons I'd really like to find that Christmas card we did was because we had the names of all of them, and I do remember a few of them. I was looking at some the other day. We had Barney, the gunner's mate, and Chief Beesacker [ph] was the engineman -- not chief. He was a first class engineman. And we had -- well, maybe I'm wrong. Santos. Who knows? He was -- I think he was swarthy, but I think he was -- he looked more like he was middle -- like Italian or of Italian descent. I don't remember him that well. He was on board when I first got there, and he got replaced in the normal rotation.

What you don't have in Vietnam -- another thing that was very -- I think very difficult operationally -- was that people didn't go as units. You know, now, if you were in the First Tank Brigade, your brigade or your platoon or whatever goes there and you're there for a year and you come home, and that's it. And, yes, you might have some replacements every now and then, but, in fact, the whole unit goes and comes back.

That didn't happen here. You were constantly changing people. I mean, somebody's year was up, and that was it. And we all had the countdown calendars. We colored off another piece of a woman's anatomy, you know, going around. Some of them started them at 365 days. Most of them started about 180 days, and you started coloring in another block because how many days to go, to go home.

But that was difficult because you did lose that kind of cohesion of people just coming in and out. But, still, it was a pretty good family, and, of course, for us, after that incident, I mean, we were even tighter, you know, because we lost one of our own -- lost two of our own, and we, you know, I think we became a lot closer than we were.

Fun loving? Yeah. Christmas. I told a couple of the first classes--I said, "If the cook can come up with the egg nog, I can come up with the rest." And what we did is we went and there was a little island at the foot of [inaudible]. Pulau Obi was the U.S. name. I can't remember what the other name is. And it was a radar station that sat up at the top, and we went up there. We threw over the anchor. We're supposed to be on patrol. We threw over the anchor, and we partied. And we partied for 12 hours or whatever, you know, and then eventually,

we -- I remember somebody from that station up there said, "We've got somebody. We need to take out to a" -- and they're meeting a Thai PGM out there.

INTERVIEWER: A patrol boat or something?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah. They're much bigger than ours. They said, "We need to take them out." And I said, "Oh, crap. Nobody's sober enough to go alongside another vessel." I guess I did it in the end. I know I did it in the end, and we didn't damage anything. But, I mean, yeah, there were times that were good times. And we had -- you know, it was fun.

The cook was important to the whole thing. His name was Jones, Jonesy, CS2 Jones, and he was crucial because he was a good cook. He had a foul mouth like you couldn't believe, and he'd use it on anybody. But it wasn't a mean mouth. It was just foul-mouthed. And I can't remember where he came from. I can't remember where he went to, but he was a joy. I mean, that made a lot of difference as to how things went.

You know, I can't single out any other individuals. You know, I can picture some of these guys, but I can't remember a lot of their names. Some of them were on the back of the slides I had, so I had those. I was looking for that Christmas card because I would have had a lot of other names.

The names you brought up, of course, they were all not names I don't know because they left before I got there. And they would have known Hernandez more because he had been there awhile. I honestly don't know where he was in his tour.

INTERVIEWER: May of '68, I think he came on board.

MR. COLLOM: Oh, okay. All right. So he had been six months in, a little more than six months in. So he still had a fair amount of time left.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

MR. COLLOM: And they didn't tend to rotate the enlisted people on and off. Like I said, I went up to chief of staff. They had a hole in chief of staff. They wanted somebody who had been on the boats, you know. They didn't want somebody coming in from afar, so I went up there, and that did happen. So some of the officers changed more frequently. Plus, every six months, you were changing either the CO or the XO.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay. So they had a little bit of continuity, overlap.

MR. COLLOM: Yeah. And I kind of think that, as I think about it -- I think that Gordon probably was getting closer to his time for leaving, too, because I got there in August, and so he probably would have been leaving -- or I relieved in October, but I got there August-September. I got there in September, so he probably was going to leave around March or something like that, because they tried not to have two newbies there at the same time. That's really it. I didn't stay in touch with any of those people.

INTERVIEWER: So nobody ever heard from Giles after he got back to the States?

MR. COLLOM: Me. You know, as I told you.

INTERVIEWER: Or I mean during the patrol after -- I'm saying, I guess, from December --

MR. COLLOM: Oh, did he ever write to us?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Any kind of hello or "I'm doing okay" or whatever?

MR. COLLOM: I'm sure there was. I'm sure there was, but, remember, we did not have e-mail.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

MR. COLLOM: You did not have a real postal service. I'm sure that we got something from him. I knew when he was being transferred, and I knew when he was transferred back to the States. Other than that, no, there wasn't any of that.

Didn't hear anything from Blaha. And, certainly, after the -- after we came back here -- actually, I think I saw Charlie Blaha one other time, because I spend so much time in Washington. I saw everybody. I remember so much, when I got my orders over there and I was being ordered to be [the Military] Aide to the Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard.

INTERVIEWER: From Vietnam?

MR. COLLOM: From Vietnam, yeah. And I was really kind of upset. I just had two years in command, and, of course, you're not going to have a command again. I said, "I'm going to go and have to kiss up to some admiral, have no responsibility at all and just be a figurehead and be nothing but a, you know, shoe polisher and kiss up, and it's going to be terrible." And I had enough chutzpa at that point to write to the incumbent Aide and say my thoughts about that, you know, "I think this is really poor. I thought I had a good career going here." And, you know, put me in a boat station, put me in headquarters, but don't

-- I didn't even know the Vice Commandant. Literally, I had to go look in the Commandant's Bulletin and find out who the Vice Commandant was.

INTERVIEWER: Aren't you typically selected by the admiral, or not?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah. He selected me from --

INTERVIEWER: From your record?

MR. COLLOM: From my record, I guess.

INTERVIEWER: So he didn't obviously know you?

MR. COLLOM: No, he didn't know me. [Vice] Admiral [Paul E.] Trimble. So I wrote to this guy, and I got a scathing letter back, because there was no Aide to the Vice Commandant. They had one Aide who took care of the Commandant and the Vice Commandant.

And so I went to the Administrative Aide to the Commandant who was a Captain, and he basically said, "Son, get off of your high horse. Get in here and do your job." And, as it turned out, it was an excellent job. Admiral Trimble was wonderful. I really had no responsibility for anything that went on in the Coast Guard, but I knew everything that was going on in the Coast Guard, because most of it passed across my desk.

I obviously got to know the top hamper of the organization. I even worked well with that captain that sent me the scathing letter. I guess it worked out fine. And I had the pleasure of having Admiral Trimble leave after a year, and so I had [Vice] Admiral [Thomas R.] Sargent come on, who was also wonderful. But the good thing there is it made the second year different because different personalities, different things.

And then, when I left there, I went to law school. So then I kind of dropped out for the time I was -- two-and-a-half years, I didn't put on a uniform, and nobody wanted to see me because my hair was long, and, you know, I was in the throes of everything that was going on in Washington during those anti-war days.

And so it did -- it was really something to go. I always -- I used to say, "I went from a 311-footer to a 95-footer to an 82-footer to a 4-foot desk, and my career is in the toilet. It's never going to resurrect again."

I don't know what else I can tell you about the missions over there, you know, and I tend to ramble. You know I'm a talker, so I don't want to talk you out.

And, as I say, I probably saw Charlie Blaha once again, other than at the exchange that one time, and I talked to Gordon at one point. I think I found him

on the Internet. I think I did, the very first days of the Internet. I'm not sure. I think that's how it came up. And he was teaching at that point.

So what didn't I answer? What do you want to know?

INTERVIEWER: Is it okay if we take a break?

MR. COLLOM: Sure, go ahead.

[Break taken.]

INTERVIEWER: Okay, we're back with Mr. Jonathan Collom, Jon Collom.

I think you've pretty much wrapped up what we wanted to talk about as far as Vietnam and your career with the 82-footer, *Point Cypress* and your career. But I just wanted to first thank you for taking the time, but I also was wondering if there's anything further that I haven't asked that you might want to say about the service or your career or anything that you felt I should have asked that I didn't ask. Did we cover all the questions pretty much on *Point Cypress*?

MR. COLLOM: We did. There's no doubt about it.

INTERVIEWER: If there's anything else you want to add about any feelings about anything, I just want to make sure you had an opportunity before I turned off the recorder. If you have, that's fine. If not, that's fine, too.

MR. COLLOM: The Coast Guard was the best thing that ever happened to me. I'm thrilled that I did not go to the Air Force Academy, and whether I would have stayed in the Air Force or not, I don't know.

It was such that every step of this -- every step of the proceeding, when there was an opportunity to leave, which was at the end of four years -- and then they gave me law school, which kept me in, obligated me till the end of 13 years. Something else would go on. I went back to sea. Here I am, a lawyer. I'm going back to sea. Being told that I had to go to Governors Island and that everybody just absolutely hated it and it was just wonderful. It was a great experience when I was there. To having my final job be Chief of Maritime International Law, which is really a very fun and exciting job.

My point is that every time one of those little blips came along when it was time to decide that, okay, you've done your obligation, now are you going to hang around, and you'd say, "No, I don't think I will," and yet, yeah, I did. And I did it again, and I did it again, and I did it again.

And the reason is not because of me. The reason is because the service was a wonderful place to be. It gave a lot of responsibility early. It had a

camaraderie about it that was wonderful. The fact that my brother had been in the Coast Guard just a step ahead of me --

There's my wife.

INTERVIEWER: Do you want me to stop it?

MR. COLLOM: Yeah. Because she doesn't know what it is.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, that's fine.

[Break taken.]

MR. COLLOM: Anyway, going back, but every step of those things, it gave you a lot of responsibility. Because I had a sibling in there that was five years ahead of me, there wasn't any place I went in the Coast Guard where somebody didn't know him or me already. Not personally, not just know of us, just knew our names, and it just makes it fun and family-like.

It's really funny because all the top hamper at the Coast Guard is all one-time junior to me. You know, it's just they were younger is the thing. [Admiral Thad] Allen and I were up on Governors Island at the same time working for Admiral Yost, and that goes on and on and on. And it's just -- it's wonderful. It really is, and I highly recommend to anybody who's ever had a thought about that, about the service in general, but the Coast Guard, in particular, I would push them towards the Coast Guard. There's no question about it. It was a wonderful experience.

I have now been retired not as long as I was in the service, but it's coming close to 20 years now, and it's amazing, but I still have a very, very fond place in my heart. Unfortunately now, I mostly see Coast Guard people when I go down to Arlington Cemetery, you know, but it's been wonderful.

So that's what I'd have to say about the service. It sent us to wonderful, good places. When we said we wanted to go to any northern 210, when I was now after my first tour as a lawyer and I was going back to sea, I didn't realize they would have me in Kodiak, Alaska, and that was kind of tough. That's the end of the world. Even though Sarah Palin says she can see the world from there, we were closer than she was, and we couldn't see Russia.

But that's been good. It provided me a stable financial base, able to send two kids to college, and so, you know, it seems like when you found out -- and maybe this all started with the Coast Guard Academy, but if you've got to go someplace, even if you think it's going to be awful, you just find what you can do and run with it. And that's what happened in all of these places.

Kodiak, we were only there a couple years, but we got real active in the church, and it wasn't so much -- I'm not thinking of the religious aspect of it. I'm thinking more of just the fraternal fellowship. And people say, "Boy, you really jump right in." Well, we jump in wherever we are because we're going to be leaving soon, and I think that's what the service and what the Academy did. And I'm glad to see that there's been -- the Academy seems to be doing quite well, and that it will continue.

And, yeah, I've just had a great career. And they gave me law school, which gave me two jobs after the Coast Guard, moved me right into something else, and that's been wonderful. They sent me to the senior seminar, which was the State Department thing for ambassadors, ambassadors in D.C., and, gosh, that was a year-long sabbatical right at the end of my career, and I learned more from that and got more out of it.

So I'm just saying it's a world of opportunity out there. It's something that I highly recommend.

Anything else you want to ask me?

INTERVIEWER: Well, I guess you talked a little bit already about your legal background, your work here in Washington D.C. Is there anything that stood out in your experiences in Kodiak that you care to talk about or mention?

MR. COLLOM: Oh, gosh.

INTERVIEWER: Or is that opening up a whole new --

MR. COLLOM: Oh, no, that's not opening up a whole new thing. I'm just trying to think of what was significant up there. Kodiak at the time, this was '79 to '81. I think that's right. It was a pretty depressing place in terms of physical buildup. They had not done much. It was still the old World War II Navy stuff, and we were at the end of the supply chain, and so it was tough that way, but the friendships were unbelievable.

As far as the Coast Guard aspect of things, you know, we were on the forefront of fisheries law enforcement. All these things that were so -- the big deal there was black hat, white hat. And it was whether you were going to be -- the white hats were the saviors, the people who were going out and saving people, the aircraft guys and the ships that were picking up people, and the black hats were the enforcers and fisheries people. And that was the debate, whether we should be there.

I don't know what's happened to all these programs since there's been such an overwhelming emphasis on homeland security and militarism and things like that. I'm fearful that a lot of those other missions have really gotten short

shrift. I don't know that. I'm just saying I'm fearful of that. Because at the time, there was the simple thing just you've got to be a cop or you've got to be a savior.

Well, we're still saving people. You don't hear a lot about fisheries enforcement, but we should. Oil pollution, things like that. Merchant marine safety, except as it relates to security. I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing, but we -- during my time, when I started, the Coast Guard was in the Treasury and with Transportation, and, of course, now it's in Homeland Security. There was always the problem that the Coast Guard could be broken up at any particular time because any one of those functions was really disparate, and you could easily fit any of those things.

INTERVIEWER: Somewhere else.

MR. COLLOM: You could fit in DoD [Department of Defense]. You could fit in EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. You could fit in somebody else. And I don't know if that's now a problem again for those missions being pulled off because we're all warlords now, and I think we rode that gravy train for a while. I think it's smart to ride the gravy train. It's there to get things. I see the gravy isn't there right now. The gravy seems to be falling apart. So I don't know what the next horse is that we'll ride.

So, for example, I don't really like seeing [the Commandant Admiral] Thad Allen walk up in his dungaree outfit to address people. I just think that that's -- it's not unseemly. It's the warrior side. He has all sides. I'm not damning him for it, but most of the time you see him, he's in the things he was wearing in [Hurricane] Katrina [as Principal Federal Official]. And I don't know where we will be when the next gentleman comes on board. And I wish them all well, and that's really about it.

The other thing is make sure everyone goes to sea on the *Eagle*. Make sure they get sailing experience. It's wonderful. That's all I've got to say, really. I don't have anything else.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, I thank you very much for taking the time.

MR. COLLOM: Okay.

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