

Veteran: JOHNSTON, Gilbert
Service Branch: NAVY
Interviewer: Johnston, Daniel
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Terry Moore
Highlights of Service: Vietnam Era; Electronics Technician; Nuclear Submarine

Interviewer: This the interview of Gilbert Johnston by Daniel Johnston on November 26, 2004.

What made you join the service?

Veteran: I joined the Navy in 1970, and the reason I did was that I knew my draft number was up because I was in the very first lottery that they had. That's where they drew numbers out of a barrel on TV, and whatever your birthday was on was the number you came up with. I knew I was about to get drafted into the Marine Corps, because I learned that fact from one of the ladies at church who worked down at the Draft Board. Me and a friend of mine had wanted to join the Navy for a long time anyway, so we went down and joined the Navy on the 'buddy system.' We joined right out of high school after we graduated in the spring. We joined this program they called the "cache program," and I didn't have to go in until like September. So that's how I joined.

Interviewer: Where did you go for basic training in the Navy?

Veteran: I went to Orlando, Florida—before Disney World.

Interviewer: A typical day in basic training—say week one. How did they treat you? What did you experience from the beginning to the end?

Veteran: Boot camp was an eleven week process. For the first five weeks, the company commander was Chief Bolliman LaRue. They referred to everybody as a 'squirrel,' and you wore a little blue cap, like a baseball cap. You weren't a

sailor, so you didn't get to wear a white cap, or a sailor cap. You got to wear a little ball cap, and you wore dungarees all the time. Kind of like blue jeans with bell bottoms, and a shirt. You did a lot of exercises, and you did everything as a team. I think the purpose was to build team work. You were trained as a unit, and you were no better than the weakest link. The idea behind it was to drag along the weakest link so that he'd be brought up to speed with everybody else.

Interviewer: Towards the end of your basic training, did they treat you any better?

Veteran: Well, yeah they did. You did a lot of classroom and a lot of exercises, and you marched everywhere you went. You didn't ride anywhere—you marched. You cleaned your own clothes for five weeks, and then after that you could send your stuff out to the laundry and they took care of it. The first five weeks, while you were considered a squirrel, you had to scrub all your clothes by hand. They got washed, rinsed, and everything by hand. These techniques that you were taught actually came in a little handy. Sometimes in the service you were in a pretty desolate area, and you needed to take care of yourself with just a little soap and water. The last six weeks, you did a little more formal training. We were in a group called Drill Company, and for the first five weeks we learned to drill and throw guns and swords, and all this stuff. They took everybody that was six foot and put 'em in one company. I played the bugle, since I'd played the trumpet in high school, and I was one of two guys that were the regimental buglers, and we took turns doing it. You'd get everybody out of bed in the morning with Reveille, you'd call them for breakfast, and you'd do colors, call 'em to lunch, call 'em to supper, and then you'd do colors, and they'd take the flag down. That was my routine every day, but you also had to do all the exercises and everything everybody else did, so you got a little bit less sleep.

Interviewer: You get out of basic. What were you trained to be in technical school?

Veteran: I was sent off to submarine school. You had to volunteer to be on submarines, so I volunteered to be on submarines. I went up to New London, Connecticut, and went through basic enlisted submarine school. It was about eight weeks long.

Interviewer: What exactly did you do at submarine school?

Veteran They taught you all about how submarines work and the theory behind why they would just sink and float; the different compartments on them; the propulsion systems and stuff. They taught the basic diesel submarine theory, and then they taught nuclear power theory, which was basic—not anything serious, just basic. They did a lot of swimming with you, and you had to do this escape tower. You would get in a tall tower that was filled with water, and you'd practice coming up from the bottom using different floating devices to practice escaping from the submarine in case it ever sank on you.

Interviewer: At what point did they actually put you out there in a submarine?

Veteran: When I left basic submarine school, I went down to Charleston, South Carolina. I was assigned to a submarine called the USS *George Washington*. It was in dry dock, and they were doing a refit on it. I forget the exact timing on it, but it seemed like every five or six years they would bring in a submarine, and they would change out reactor components and all kind of equipment that's onboard the submarine. This submarine had big holes cut in it from stem to stern. It was mounted up on little wood blocks in this dry dock, and it was completely out of the water. I was assigned to this submarine that was in dry dock, so we lived in a barracks and worked on the submarine during the day. Since I had no formal skills, I was assigned to the deck crew. What I did was I chipped and painted, I worked as a mess cook and did dishes, served people dinner, scrubbed up the tables, mopped the place out. The dining hall on the submarine was in service even though everything else on it was out. They still fed the people that was assigned to the thing, because they kept a minimum skeleton crew onboard, and you took watches, so every now and then you were assigned to do it. When I was assigned to it, I did it for like six or eight weeks straight. I was a mess cook down there, and basically did all the dirty work. You'd get up at four in the morning and go back to bed about eleven o'clock at night, and this was every day—7 days a week.

Interviewer: So there was no rest really on the submarines?

Veteran: Well, this was in dry dock only, and you didn't have any days off. Everybody else was getting days off, but the new guys didn't. They had to spend a couple of months with no time off before I finally got some time off. The crew took me out kind of partying and having a good time one day after I'd spent all this time down there working.

Interviewer: Was that your job the whole time you were in?

Veteran: No, I got in a little skirmish with one of the individuals onboard the submarine. He was a skilled radioman, and one of the E.T. supervisors saw me and took up for me, because I was kind of in the right. They assigned me to work for this guy instead of getting into trouble, so I worked for the electronics supervisor at that time, and he sent me off to a little school. It was a two week school, and he told me if I could do it, then he'd assign me to another school, and if I didn't do it, they'd send me off to a searcher ship, because they didn't have any more room for anybody on the submarine that wasn't skilled. Since I was assigned to them, I had to learn a skill. I earned an A in the little two week course, and they sent me to another two week course. I made an A in that, and they sent me to a third two week course, and I found out that I liked electronics, because all three of these courses were basic electronic theory schools, and they were to find out if you had what it took to learn electronics. Then they came and made me an offer to go to Dam Neck, Virginia, which is Navy guided missiles school, to go through and be an electronics technician onboard the submarine. I took that offer up, and I kind of liked the Navy in a warped sense of way. It was a life of discipline and even though it seemed harsh, it seemed like there was a certain amount of fairness to it. I knew I could do well in this, and I really like electronics and the excitement of working with all this kind of equipment. Being a young man, I just decided this was what I wanted to do, so I took 'em up on it and extended my enlistment two years to a six year enlistment. I went to Dam Neck, Virginia, for guided missile school.

Interviewer: So all of that came out of that skirmish.

Veteran: Well, yeah, kinda. It was the way they noticed me. After that, I got an opportunity to do something other than just be a mess cook. They found out I

could do it, and I liked it. Electronics just seemed like something that was good to do at the time, and I did it because it was exciting. Guided missiles and all that kind of stuff for a kid out of high school that hadn't done much other than work at a pizza parlor, and throw papers, and play a short order cook. It was an opportunity to me, so I took it up.

Interviewer: That's really neat. That's the professional aspect of your life; how about the personal aspect? How was Navy life for you, as far as liberty and things you'd do, places you'd go?

Veteran: At that time there was an admiral by the name of Admiral Zumwalt, who was the chief of naval operations—the senior officer of the Navy—and he kind of handled discipline and the dress code, and that kind of stuff. He allowed everybody to grow a beard, and as long as it was well trimmed, you could have a pretty full beard, so I grew a full beard when I went to Dam Neck, Virginia, at the guided missile school. Since I had come from the fleet—that's the word they used for somebody that had already been assigned to a ship and even though I hadn't been much more than a mess cook, I was like “experienced,” and all these other guys were right out of boot camp, so in my class I was class senior officer, which is just a fictitious title, but I'd march people to and from class, and stuff like that. I found most of 'em lookin' up to me because I had come from the fleet versus signing up immediately for six years. I guess there were some good advantages. They had an enlisted men's club on base, and at that time they encouraged you to drink by making drinks so cheap. Cigarettes were available really cheap, and a few dollars could let you party for a long time and have a good time. A young kid that didn't have much to do, I ended up going down there quite a bit when I had free time, but you spent so much time studying at school that you really weren't down there often. You probably didn't go down there four or five times the first three months because they threatened you in class that if you failed class, they would send you immediately to an aircraft carrier, so they made it sound like that was a real bad punishment, even though after I found out there wasn't that bad a life on those aircraft carriers. Some of them guys I met later, and they got sent off to one. They stuck to their word, though. There was people in the class that would make below 70, and the first test they would

make below 70—you took a test every week—they'd have orders in just a couple of hours, and they'd put 'em on a bus outside, and they were gone. Out of thirty-something people, seemed like they cut the class down to about twelve people by the time we finished. The A school lasted six months. They taught you math, electronics, and computers—theory behind all of that stuff, and how to use test equipment and that kind of thing. It was a pretty intense school. Since I've been out of the Navy, I've attended college classes and become a commercial pilot, but still to this day I've never seen such intense classes as I ran into while I was in the military. After I finished the A school, which lasted six months, I went to what we called a B school, and there was about three different B schools in this class. They all dealt with a weapons system, and the one you really wanted to be in was a CNC school, because that's where all the kids that scored the highest in the class got to go. I worked real hard at it, and I applied and was accepted in the CNC school, which was the central navigation computer, and that's what I did while I was in the service. I was ET with a job code that indicated that I worked on that kind of equipment, plus there was a lot of peripheral equipment that you learned later that went along with that. That school also lasted up to six months, so you were actually in electronics schools for over a year, and it was pretty intense schools. You had a lot of confidence in yourself when you finished these schools. When you finished the A school, they automatically made you an E-4, which was a third class petty officer, so your rating at that time was ET-3. I bought a car while I was in there. I had a '64 Chevrolet Impala convertible that I paid \$400 for. It supposedly had only 40,000 miles on it, but it probably had the speedometer wound back on it, but being a young kid you didn't think about that kind of stuff. Anyway, we rebuilt the engine when we found out it was leaking water into it. I had a bunch of guys on the base helping me, and we had a base hobby shop where they had a chief petty officer assigned to it that would give you a lot of help building stuff. I spent most of my time doing that, and during the second part of my school, we didn't hang around the club much. Being young guys, they had girls that would dance topless over there, so you'd go over there and watch the entertainment when you got the chance, but you spent most of the time over at the hobby shop working on cars. That's what I did. I spent most of my time "souping" up my car, because you could get parts cheap. The chief that

was assigned to the hobby shop would always help you and show you what you needed to order, how to bore out things, so I learned a lot about cars rebuilding this engine. It really made the car nice.

Interviewer: Did you date or get married while you were in the service?

Veteran: Yeah, I did. I got married while I was in the service. I joined in 1970, and in 1973 I met this young lady from St. Louis at the enlistment man's club on the submarine base back in Charleston, because when I finished my schooling I went back to Charleston. That's what I was assigned to, and I was assigned to a submarine that was really going out. It wasn't in refit. The way it worked, you had a blue crew and a gold crew. One crew had the submarine out on patrol, and the other crew would be going through retraining and refit and remedial training. They had a submarine trainer that actually moved up and down and that kind of stuff, so whatever your classification was, you kept going to schools learning more equipment. They would do changes to equipment, modifying the equipment that was onboard the submarine. Just about every patrol you had to go in and learn the new modifications and what-not. The way the cycle worked, you'd go on patrol, and we'd catch airplane to fly over to Scotland. We'd be over there for about ninety days, because you'd get on a submarine and go out on patrol. You'd do a little short trip to make sure that the submarine was working good. You'd come back in, load the rest of your stores out, and then go out for an extended stay. That would be the rest of the ninety days. Then you'd get back and the other crew would come over to Scotland on an airplane. I remember we'd go to the airport and they'd always have three airplanes there ready to go. The captain would pick one of the Boeing 707s, and we'd fly over to Pressler, Scotland, and go and do a refit and a changeout while the crew was on there, and they'd get back on the plane and fly back over here to the states. That's what we did the whole time I was assigned to the submarines for the next four years.

Interviewer: This was during the Vietnam era, right?

Veteran: It was during the Vietnam War.

Interviewer: Did your crew see any kind of military action?

Veteran:

No. What our job was, this submarine was a fleet missile nuclear submarine. I was assigned to the USS *Tecumseh*, and I guess it goes back to when years ago the president had come up with the theory to 'walk softly and carry a big stick.' I think we did that. They always said they could never confirm or deny the nuclear weapons we had onboard—had or did not have onboard. I really always had the suspicion they didn't send us through all that training for nothing. We'd go out on patrols and stay hid. The threat of a nuclear submarine was that if they would bomb us over here, we could annihilate them. The communists at the time knew this, we knew this, and these kind of submarines still stay on patrol today, except they've changed the class of submarines. I was on what they called the Poseidon class submarine. They had a Polaris class, a Poseidon class, and then they went to what they call a Trident class, which is still on patrol today. I think they retired the class submarine I was on at that time. We were chased by a few Russian trollers trying to get out. They would just try to observe us and get information about the submarine that they could enter into their Russian database or whatever so they could locate us at some future time. The captains that were on our ships were always pretty smart and out-maneuvered them and lost them pretty easy. I think they didn't show them any more than they wanted 'em to know, but that was just my guess because just in the little area I worked in, the submarine is handled by the captain and the executive officer. Life on a submarine is kind of strange, but you had your own bunk. You never had to share a bunk with anybody. When you'd go to bed, everybody slept at different times because you worked shift work. They fed the meals just like you were working them. In the morning you had breakfast, dinner, supper, and they had snacks at midnight that they called 'midracks.' When you'd go to bed and you were gonna wake up for breakfast or dinner, you'd fill out a little meal ticket and tell 'em what you want, and when it came time to stand your watch, they'd come down and wake you up, and your food would be ready. You'd go up and it'd be waitin' on you, so that was all taken care of pretty good. Everything was really efficient from the laundry you did—you wore a special uniform that didn't give any lint. We referred to them as a 'poopy suit,' but look very much like the astronauts wear when they are inside the shuttle craft. It's just a tight-fitting coverall, really, and that's what we wore the whole time we were on patrol. We never wore any

civilian clothes, and you didn't wear any of your uniforms. We wore the poop suit, which was a coverall with a lot of elastic in it. It fit real tight, but it was fairly comfortable.

Interviewer: Now, towards your end of your stay in the military what was it that got you to leave the military?

Veteran: My enlistment was about up, and they had this system called the SRB System. When I extended my enlistment, they had the VRB System, which was the Variable Reenlistment Bonus, and I was supposed to get a maximum bonus. While I was in there, they changed it to the Selective Reenlistment Bonus System, and they only gave me about half of the money they told me they would give me, so I felt kind of betrayed by my government. I mean I'd really given them my all to defend my government, defend my country, and I did everything for my country. At first you did it for the excitement, but after you're on patrol and are really doing this stuff and are sitting out on the water for long periods of time, you do it because you love your country, and you believe in it. I felt like they stole half of my money from me, and I was really disappointed in it. Plus, the military puts you where they need you and not where you want to go. I was told that I was gonna go down to study telemetry gear at the Cape, and that I would be assigned to tracking all the different rockets shot off the base, and I was really getting fired up about this because I had the grades on the tests to get this, and it was pretty much promised to me before my last patrol. I was planning on signing my bonus and everything, and they got a message out there on the submarine that said they wanted me to go be an instructor at Dam Neck, Virginia. Well, I'd already been to Dam Neck, Virginia, and I didn't want to be an instructor there. I wanted to do the telemetry gear at the Cape. That along with the fact that they didn't give me but half my bonus made me get out of the Navy. I figured they messed up by training me too much. I felt like I could repair anything that was electronic—any kind of computer, any kind of television, any kind of switches, any kind of data converters, and any kind fix-tinking (sic) devices. I figured I knew had to fix them. I had repaired them on many occasions, and out there there's no help. You either do it yourself or it doesn't get fixed. The captain depended on me, and I felt that I'd never let 'em down. I

just knew that I could make it in a civilian world with the training they gave me, and I knew I'd make more money. I wanted to provide more to my wife, and after they cut me out of that seven or eight thousand dollar bonus, I felt like I was cheated. I figured, well, they goofed up by training me too much, so I got out and didn't have much trouble finding an electronics job, and I went right to work. I was making about six times the money I was making while I was on that submarine. When I got out of the Navy, I had so much confidence in myself. My wife was seven months pregnant, and we didn't have any insurance, and I had about six hundred dollars to my name, but I just knew I could get a job somewhere. {TAPE STOPPED—END OF SIDE A}

{SIDE B BEGINS} Sure enough, I went down there and got a job right away at the Houston *Chronicle* to maintain their computer systems for 'em until I found out that the Exxon Refinery was hiring. I went down there and took their exam, and I was hired and reluctantly left the *Chronicle*, because I loved the *Chronicle*—it was a great place to work. There were a lot of good people down there at the *Chronicle*. I went to work at the refinery because it paid just a few cents more, but there was a little overtime involved, and my main goal at that point in life was to make money for my family. My first born was just a few months old, and I wanted to provide as much as I could for 'em, so I took that job at the Exxon Refinery, and in January, I'll be with those guys for twenty-eight years.

Interviewer: So your military service did benefit you.

Veteran: Oh, yes, it definitely benefited me. There's still nothing electronic I can't repair, and a lot of the technologies I learned way back in the seventies is just now being exposed to the public.

Interviewer: Wow! That's pretty cool.

Veteran: That's pretty amazing. They made me some offers to stay, but they were only allowed to offer so much money at the *Chronicle*, and I'd have stayed with those guys because I really did like the job. You always live long enough to think you made the wrong decision, but working out in that refinery all these years doing

shift work as an operator, I really don't know if that was the right decision. But you know the Lord has you do what He has you do, so I'm not gonna look back. I'm just glad he let me be employed all these year. The last two months I was in the Navy I was assigned to the USS _____ in the electronics department, and they used me to train two data processing techs that didn't know anything about electronics to try to get them to pass their second class petty officer tests. I stuck with those guys and trained them in electronics, and they both passed their test, so I felt like 'mission accomplished.' That was the last real job I had. Other than that, the last three weeks I was in the service, I just went in once a week and just waited for discharge. They didn't really give me more to do. Me and my wife lived in an apartment in town, and we just had a good time. Made a lot of good friends in the military, friends that I still have today. There's a closeness you get with people when you're counting on them to protect your life while you're asleep that you don't get in the regular civilian world. It's hard to describe that to somebody, because you get close and you have real good friends. It's kind of like having a covenant with somebody. You have such a close relationship with 'em that you would trust your total life with them. I don't know, but I didn't spend that part of my youth in the civilian world, and I don't know if I'd have really met anybody to build those kinds of bonds with like you could while you were in the military. Overall, I would change my military life for anything. I saw Scotland. You know, you don't know what else would have been in store for you if you wouldn't have done this, so I can't say that I what I did was better than what I could have done, or vice-versa, but it was the life I lived, and I wouldn't change it for a thing.

Interviewer: Thank you for your time.

Veteran: You're welcome.

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