16 December 2001

SHAY: December 16 – This interview is with retired Navy Captain Jerry Wages about his experiences in Vietnam. The interviewer is Peter Shay, and my first question is: Since the interview relates to the Vietnam portion of your career, would you please describe how and why you received the assignment and whether or not your experience in 1967 at the Naval War College where you wrote your thesis regarding the need for a "Brown Water Navy" inspired you to get that assignment?

WAGES: Yes Peter, first a little background about from whence I came. I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana**,** actually only about a block and a half from the Mississippi River. I lived my young life, which was during the Depression, at my mother's and my grandmother's home in Monroe, Louisiana. As a young boy, I learned to swim quite early and I spent a lot of my spare time on the bayous and the Ouachita River there. I also became involved in the Sea Scouts when I got to be old enough. We had a small craft there on the river. Then we moved to New Orleans shortly after World War II started. My dad was in construction work and so we went down there for better opportunities in the defense industry for him. I transferred to the Sea Scouts down in New Orleans and spent a lot of time on the bayous of South Louisiana and Lake Pontchartrain. So I had a very good background as a youngster on small rivers and big rivers, and canals, bayous, etc. I was very comfortable on the water; I liked it. Later in my life when I was in the Navy I went to WESTPAC on the guided missile destroyer *King*. It was 1963 and Vietnam was starting to boil a little bit and with the assassination of President Diem, we were ordered down there off the Vietnamese coast. So I qualified for the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal for the Vietnam conflict initially in October and November '63. Then I came back to shore duty in the Bureau of Personnel(BUPERS). There I was assigned the Junior Officer Assignment Section as a fresh lieutenant commander and one of my duties was coordinating the shore assignments. These shore assignments included overseas shore duty and South Vietnam.

Of course in those days it was all advisor duties at the Naval Advisory Group and logistic support roles at Headquarters Support Activity in Saigon. So I was sending young j.g.' s and lieutenants to those types of assignments as the war was building up. I'm talking about in 1965 and early 1966.

There were some manning problems because we were getting signals directly from the Pentagon. In fact, some of them were coming from Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's office about the coastal surveillance force, which later became Task Force 115. Actually there was an absence of Vietnam experience in BUPERS. We had a few fellows who had been administrative types in Saigon itself, but we had no one who had field experience. We needed to know what sort of personnel we should assign to these new billets coming up. So I volunteered to go over there. I spent about five weeks in January and February of 1966 reporting to the Chief Naval Advisory Group, Admiral Ward. I spent at

least a week in each of the four corps tactical zones, and got a good idea of what we needed in the immediate future and put it in a report which was pretty well received. That summer when I got selected to attend the Navy War College, I had that experience under my belt. About five weeks field experience in Vietnam, where I went from I-Corps down to IV Corps. Got shot at as a matter of fact, once that I know of--- up near the Three Sisters---in IV Corps

SHAY: Right.

WAGES: Anyway, when I got to the Navy War College for the Command and Staff Course, I started looking in the library to see what they had on riverine warfare. Surprisingly, the only thing in there was one part of a chapter of the Marine Corps Small Wars Manual. That subject was non-existent for all practical purposes, so I decided that I would do my required thesis on a subject that I was interested in and that was riverine warfare. That's how the thesis came about. When I left there I had orders to a DDG exec's job, which in the destroyer navy was gravy--they don't come any better then that for lieutenant commanders. So I went to that assignment and boarded the USS *Cochrane* DDG 21, in its homeport, Pearl Harbor. I wasn't there long before we went to WESTPAC for a six-month stint, where I got a lot of experience from our shelling the shore and supporting the Marines and Army in I and II Corps**.**

We also made a couple of soirées up to North Vietnam on Operation Seadragon, which was somewhat exciting because there were no friendlies up there. And it's quite an experience having 122mm rockets exploding in close proximity of your ship. During this tour I looked at what's next for me when surprisingly I got picked up early for commander.

About that time Admiral Zumwalt had been selected for three stars to command the naval forces in Vietnam. He and I had been friends in the early 60's when I was embarked with a flag staff on his brand new guided-missile destroyer, the *Dewey*, (DLG 14) for a Northern European cruise. I was the Flag Lieutenant and held a few other jobs. We had a small staff when we went afloat. Captain Zumwalt and I worked together closely and we developed a mutual friendship and respect for each other. So when he came through Hawaii for his briefings with CINCPACFLT before going out to Vietnam, he called me and asked me if I would like to come out to work for him. I told him I had a TDY trip out there in 1966 and where I had been. I said, "I'd be most happy to go work for you Admiral, but I want to be out in the field; I want a field command. I don't want to be on a staff up in Saigon." He said, "I'll take care of that, give me a little time." And sure enough a couple of months later I got the orders to COMNAVFORV for duty as the senior advisor to the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ) and concurrently the commander RSSZ River Task Group, CTG 116.9. So I couldn't have been happier with that assignment. And so off I went!

SHAY: That's terrific lead in to your assignment. Perfect introduction as to how you got to the Rung Sat.

WAGES: I had visited the Rung Sat briefly in January 66' and went on a Vietnamese Navy river patrol down there for a day and a night and I saw what it looked like. Reminded me a lot of some bayou trips I'd been on in South Louisiana, except the people weren't as friendly.

SHAY: Right.

WAGES: That's how I got started and with that background of growing up in Louisiana, snakes and alligators and things like that were nothing new to me. I really can't remember when I couldn't swim. I probably gave my mother gray hairs by telling her I was going up to the school grounds to play soft ball and I'd end up with a couple of my buddies swimming in the Ouachita River or one of the bayous around Monroe. So I was very comfortable down there in the Rung Sat.

SHAY: I see. I noticed in here you… Did you take diving?

WAGES: Yeah…

SHAY: When was that?

WAGES: Peter, when I was in the mine force.

SHAY: Oh yes. That's a question I wanted to get back to… Thank you for bringing that up. In 1959, you attended Mine Warfare School in Charleston.

WAGES: I'll give you a little more background. Before I went into the Navy as an officer, as you know, I was an active duty enlisted man for almost two years during the Korean War. Nothing exciting, I was on two destroyers as a FN & MM in the engine room. Then I got released from active duty and took advantage of my G.I. Bill and finished college at Louisiana State University. I also was a drilling reservist during that time. I made six dollars a night for being an instructor at the local Naval Reserve Unit. That came in handy for myself and my young bride. Six bucks a night times twelve, you got it every three months; it was a night we could go out on the town!

When I volunteered to go back on active duty as a reserve officer, my first ship assignment was a DER. During that time, a two-year tour, I applied for augmentation to the regular Navy and on the second time, fortunately, I got selected. My first set of orders as a regular Navy lieutenant j.g. was to be XO of the minesweeper *Exultant* MSO 441. In December of 1959 I went to Mine Warfare School in Charleston, SC prior to going aboard ship. The familiarization course was very helpful for me to learn the basics of minesweeping. Then I flew over to the Med and relieved the exec on the way back to Charleston. During that time the Navy had provided scuba gear to the MSOs. Later in 1960 when we were down in the Caribbean as the Cuban thing started to grow hot, we were in several ideal places to go scuba diving like St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Our ship had several crewmen who

were qualified divers and one of them, a first-class petty officer, gave me some instructional dives, which I enjoyed very much. We dove in shallow water with him right by my side to make sure I was doing things properly.

Later when I went to MINELANT Staff on my next tour of duty I had an opportunity to take a formal Scuba and Shallow Water Diving course. Right next to the MINELANT headquarters was Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit Two and they were qualified to by the Bureau of Personnel to give shallow water and scuba courses. So I took a two-week course there, but only to prepare myself for my next assignment, which was chief engineer of a guided-missile destroyer. I was sure there would be occasions then as a chief engineer when I would need to get underneath the ship for inspections, and survey different things, rudders, propellers, whatever. So I took that course.

SHAY: Oh really! I didn't know that was part of that job description as an engineer officer to learn how to scuba dive?

WAGES: I'd known from personal experiences as a machinist mate that there were going to be occasions when divers had to go under and look at problems relating to engineering. I felt as chief engineer, that I would rather go under there myself then have someone go under and then report to me. Anyway, I was glad I had that qualification because later in my assignment on the USS *King* (DLG 10), I had occasion to go under the ship to do some survey for the CO and it was very appropriate that I was fully qualified to do that.

SHAY: I see.

WAGES: So that's where the diving came in.

SHAY: I'm going to come back to a question about minesweepers in a little bit. At this point could you describe to me… You served two functions in your assignment in Vietnam. One was Senior Advisor Rung Sat and the other was Commander RSSZ River Patrol Group 116.9. Could you explain the nature of each assignment briefly, exactly what each one entailed, and how they were different? How you merged them into your activities.

WAGES: Yes, again a little background. The RSSZ consisted of two districts, whereas a province in Vietnam normally consisted of about six. The Rung Sat, because of it's uniqueness of having the Saigon River come right down its middle had a senior U.S. advisor there for some years prior to the time that operating U.S. Navy units came into Vietnam. We strictly had an advisory role then. In fact the earliest senior advisor there was a U.S. Marine major. As the political situation changed in Vietnam and the Vietnamese Marine Corps went off to be a separate service, the powers to be assigned that area of responsibility to the Vietnamese Navy, so we, then sent our USN advisor down there.

Now during the buildup there this advisory role got to be quite important and as some dynamic people were coming in to run the pacification side of our effort over there, like Ambassador William Colby for instance. The tempo really picked up in the advisory role, which also included doing away with the Viet Cong. A lot of people didn't think advisors did that, but that was the main function of the advisory role in the RSSZ. Anyway, you had a full time job for the Navy commander there to take care of an area of almost five hundred square miles in the two RSSZ districts. I had a staff where over half were U.S. Marines, because of the role we had for the training of the Vietnamese Regional Force units in those two districts. These were Vietnamese military that were somewhat similar to our National Guard. They were on active duty but they were assigned only to this area. When you enlisted in the Regional Force you didn't have to serve in some other area. They were guaranteed to stay right there in the Rung Sat, which was very good because they knew the soldiers knew the local terrain, and morale obviously was better.

So I had a full time job as the senior U.S. advisor there. The Senior Advisor, RSSZ billet was a full time assignment that eventually went up to commander. It had been a major and then lieutenant commander and then moved up to commander about that time the U.S. operating forces started coming in. Task Force 116 was the command that assigned the PBRs, the HA(L)3 Detachment, the SEAL teams and the minesweeping craft there, all under CTG 116.9. So it made a lot of sense to give one individual the responsibility for both the pacification and the tactical command of the task group, TG 116.9.

SHAY: I see. And the advisory group operated also out of Nha Be?

WAGES: Yeah. As a matter of fact I had two offices, one was the old advisory team building that was reportedly built by the French. Of course anything old over there that was European-looking, they would always say, "the French built this," and I'm sure they did. That was the building that existed for the advisory group. Then I also had offices and a Tactical Operations Center (TOC) located on NSA Compound.

SHAY: Was that close to the waterfront?

WAGES: Yeah, right there at the waterfront. In '66 a construction project contract was awarded to an American firm and they came in they dredged a lot of land fill up and built the U.S. Navy Support Activity Support Base, right near the U.S. advisor's headquarters. The building was there for many years where the advisory team was housed, so I had really two offices. They were real close to each other. This was an ideal situation because the Rung Sat was very unique in a number of ways. One of them was that I was the only naval advisor in Vietnam that actually had a large portion of land to be concerned about in addition to the waterways. That assignment, that person who had that job, including me and people shortly before and after, they also had their reporting requirements to the Two Field Force Victor three-star general in the pacification role. Admiral Zumwalt obviously was my boss, but I also had reporting roles to Two Field Force Victor for the pacification effort, including responsibilities to the general's deputy for CORDS (pacification), Mr. Charles Whitehouse.

SHAY: I see, so you had two people you were reporting too, but primarily Zumwalt. Right?

WAGES: Right.

SHAY: In other words that was your main job?

WAGES: Being Senior Advisor was my main job and Admiral Zumwalt was the main man.

SHAY: Of course.

WAGES: As you know, Admiral Zumwalt was under General Abrams' command and he met with the General at least once a week. Of course the progress in the Rung Sat as well as the other areas in which the Navy was involved, was always discussed. It was very interesting; it was, in my mind the ideal organizational arrangement in the RSSZ for me to have the two hats. Because, the Navy's riverine forces in all of Vietnam were limited to, I think fifty yards, or maybe a hundred yards of riverbank and that's it. I'm sure it varied somewhat in the different provinces. The province chief made the call on that. In my particular case I had free access as long as my counterpart concurred with our operations anywhere in the Rung Sat. So I didn't have to worry about where the riverbanks were.

SHAY: I see. That covers your assignments pretty well. Could you tell me who your predecessors were in each job and your successors? In those two jobs.

WAGES: Let me start with my successor first, Commander, now retired, Captain James G. Williams, whom I had served with previously at BUPERS. When I was asked by Admiral Zumwalt to give him a recommendation for my relief I said, "Well, if I had my choice of any officer in the Navy to relieve me, it would be Commander Jim Williams, for this reason. Like myself, as a youngster he left high school and joined the Merchant Marine. He got extensive combat experience in World War II in the Merchant Marine" and I said, "he later got educated at Cal Maritime Academy and received a USNR commission, and was in the destroyer force, and worked his way up to command. He also spent some time in the Mine Force including going through EOD training." So he was a diver, EOD qualified, and all of these backgrounds were ideal for the Rung Sat job, because the primary mission there was to keep the shipping channel open from the South China Sea up to Nha Be, where the Shell Oil Company had their big tank farm, as well as the cargo ships going on up to Saigon itself. So, to know that business, the merchant marine experience, and the minesweeping experience, that's the ideal background for the Rung Sat job.

SHAY: He was your successor. And this was in your job, your operating job?

WAGES: No, they were concurrent.

SHAY: Both jobs.

WAGES: You get one job; you get them both. And of course you had responsibilities to the Commodore over in Binh Thuy, concerning the Task Force116 units that he chopped to you, like the PBRs, SEALS, etc… You were involved in commanders' conferences and saying I need more of these or things like that. So you had a responsibility to the Task Force 116 Commodore too. But Jim Williams was the perfect person to relieve me. The fellow that I relieved, Commander Straney, I really knew nothing about him professionally. I understood that he was a research and development sub-specialist because he went to an R&D lab assignment after Vietnam. I only saw the fellow about five days or so during the turnover and the change of command ceremony. I don't really know much about his background. I do know that when Admiral Zumwalt came in as a three-star there were a lot of changes at NAVFORV Headquarters. In many of these command jobs, including the Rung Sat, you had to have been command cleared in the formal process at BUPERS if you did not have actual command experience. Of course, in my case, I had not had command before, but I had been selected to command a destroyer escort. Then I got selected for commander and I command cleared at the first look in that rank. So I don't know what operational experience Commander Straney had. He was a nice fellow but I had very little time with him, so I don't know any specifics on his operational background. Someone did say he had a research and development background because he went to an assignment in New London, Connecticut, where they required engineers.

SHAY: The other question I have regarding those two jobs is: reporting to seniors, to superiors, in the sense how often did you meet or report to Admiral Zumwalt or to the senior advisor? Do you remember what his name was, the general that was running that, at that time when you were there?

WAGES: Commanding general of Two Field Force Victor…

SHAY: I mean, did you see him often?

WAGES: Yeah, I saw him fairly…regularly. I'll tell you his name in just a minute.

SHAY: Was he also located in Saigon?

WAGES: No, he was at Long Binh.

SHAY: Long Binh.

WAGES: I frequently got called in to meetings, with Lieutenant General Julian Ewell, who had previously commanded the Ninth Infantry Division. They operated with the Navy's Task Force 117 in the Delta and had very successful operations there. Then he got promoted to

three-stars. I had a fair amount of direct meetings with him because he was the supplier of the helicopters that we used for our Vietnamese troops, as well as having oversight for the pacification efforts in the Rung Sat.

SHAY: Oh, I see.

WAGES: Where we got our…

SHAY: You went through him to get the aircraft assignments?

WAGES: Yes. For the slicks and also the assault helicopter companies. When I reported aboard, I did an assessment on what we needed in the Rung Sat and Admiral Zumwalt said, "Jerry, as soon as you get down there, spend a few weeks learning the ropes and determine where the strengths and weaknesses are and then give me a personal report on what the Vietnamese need. Admiral Zumwalt and Commodore, later Rear Admiral Chung, the CNO of the Vietnamese Navy, worked together very closely. So in a few weeks I was able to present the Admiral with the things we needed and one of them was to get the thirteen RF companies qualified for helo assault operations, and which for my Marines was one of the top priorities. Those helo resources came from the Army, from the Commanding General, Two Field Force Victor, Lieutenant General Ewell. He was a good person to have a command relationship with because he was familiar with riverine warfare. He had been involved in it with the Navy in the Mekong Delta when he commanded the Ninth Infantry Division. General Ewell also had a very good relationship with Admiral Zumwalt. He was a tough, combat experienced leader who really understood the problems that a field commander could encounter.

We had an organizational change down there in the two districts that composed the Rung Sat. For a long time the district advisors were Army personnel and they reported to a full colonel in Gia Dinh Province. They were in my Special Zone and I wasn't their immediate boss. Of course in Vietnam I learned there's a lot of that. That, unlike being on a ship, where you know who the captain is. There are other factors involved when you're on joint operations and you have other forces involved. It's kind of delicate to make my case because I didn't want to say the Army wasn't doing a good job, but at times they were not. They had good personnel but the command structure was about as confused as you could design it. So I talked to some Marines on Admiral Zumwalt's staff, then I talked to the Admiral and, of course, I had to talk to General Ewell too. Obviously I didn't want to tell a three-star general that his people weren't doing a good job. I just said the command relationship is far from ideal here and he agreed. Admiral Zumwalt agreed, so we ended up replacing the two Army district teams with Marine/Navy teams, about the same ratio that we had at my headquarters, about 60% Marine and 40% Navy.

SHAY: I see. So when you needed some helos, how did you do that?

WAGES: Well…

SHAY: You just…

WAGES: First of all…

SHAY: I assume that came out of Bien Hoa.

WAGES: First of all I had the Navy…

SHAY: Right. HA(L)3…

WAGES: A gunship fire team---light helicopter fire-team.

SHAY: You had two, right?

WAGES: HA(L)3. The Admiral told me early on of the importance of keeping the channel clear and as soon as they were able to have enough helicopters for a heavy fire team – four gunships, that I was top on the priority list, that I would get them. Of course a lot of other field commanders in TF 116 were telling the Commodore, you know, that they needed four gunships too.

SHAY: Of course everybody would have wanted that.

WAGES: Everybody wanted them. But I didn't say anything to the Commodore or his staff.

SHAY: Did that ever materialize?

WAGES: Oh sure.

SHAY: It did? You had four…

WAGES: Definitely…

SHAY: You had two fire teams.

WAGES: I had a heavy fire team there – four gunships. I think I was the only task group commander to have four.

SHAY: Four Navy gunships?

WAGES: Navy HA(L)3 gunships.

SHAY: No kidding. That's incredible. When did that start? At what point in your assignment?

WAGES: I can't pinpoint the date. I'd say after I'd been there about three or four months, I got the heavy fire team.

SHAY: That's interesting.

WAGES: And had it the rest of the time.

SHAY: So you didn't need the Army too often after that, the Army gunships anyway.

WAGES: You've got to remember Peter what was the heavy fire team's top priority. That's one thing I was somewhat critical of the situation in my Rung Sat Assessment Report, the need for more helos because Admiral Zumwalt made it very clear to me as soon as I reported onboard… "Your top priority is keeping the river open to our shipping."

SHAY: Of course.

WAGES: First and foremost. If I had a planned operation for using the Vietnamese troops, the TF 116 units would support them and often put them in position in a river or canal but I would also go to the Army for helo assets to support that land operation. I wouldn't take the Navy gunships that were on the strip alert to support the freighters coming up or going down the Saigon River and assign them to an operation in the woods.

SHAY: So you'd be tying them down.

WAGES: I couldn't do that. Now when I got four Navy gunships I did have an opportunity to. I was convinced early on in that job of mine, that you had to be efficient in a counter-insurgency war, that you had to go and not just spend a one or two-day operation in the woods and then withdraw back to the support base You had to establish the place, and occupy it, because if you didn't, the bad guys would come right back to where they were, where they had been. So having the Army assets, yes, that's their gunships and slicks – assault helo companies who were there specifically for the operations with the Vietnamese ground people, it made it ideal. As far as my spare Seawolf fire team at Nha Be, of course I'd use them on the operations too, but I'd also have two birds there on strip alert in case anything happened on the river. I also was able to get the Vietnamese authority and I worked between myself and Admiral Zumwalt to temporarily enlarge the area of operations (AO) so that we could send our RF troops into the adjoining districts, one of which was Nhon Trach. There was a lot of intelligence that Nhon Trach had base camps for the Vietcong Doan Ten they called it. It was a Viet Cong main force sapper regiment, and they were the ones that had given us so much trouble, firing rockets at our merchant ships on the Saigon River. By getting this authority to expand our AO over there, it gave us much more tactical flexibility.

SHAY: Wasn't it to the east, no?

WAGES: Yes it was.

SHAY: That was the famous T-10 area.

WAGES: Yeah, exactly.

SHAY: The wooded, heavily wooded…

WAGES: Yeah, T-10 was the area where the Doan 10 had their headquarters, so we had a lot of action there. This was, of course, primarily on my advisor side. I worked very closely with my counterpart on these operations. We had a lot of success there, especially with the RF troops and our Navy SEALS.

SHAY: Did they ever clear that area? When I was there in '67 and '68, they were mainly using defoliants on the main rivers. They didn't try and defoliate that area did they?

WAGES: We defoliated with Agent Orange mostly along the river and canal banks.

SHAY: I'm saying, up in the T-10 area though.

WAGES: Up in the T-10…

SHAY: There was so much vegetation.

WAGES: Up in the T-10 we got the Rome Plow. Are you familiar with the Rome Plow?

SHAY: No Sir.

WAGES: It's the… It must be the biggest bulldozer in the world. It's a huge thing and it just comes and clears trees and shrubs and everything.

SHAY: It's called a Rome Plow?

WAGES: Rome Plow, because the company that makes them is in Rome, Georgia.

SHAY: How did they ever get it in there? This thing, as I recall was so developed…

WAGES: It came up at a meeting and the Army fellows, as it was Army asset, an engineering outfit, and they came up, "do you think you could use the services of a Rome Plow?" A Rome Plow! I turned to my Marine major and said, "what's he talking about?" He

said, “he’s talking about a super, super, bulldozer.” Anyway, there was a lot of clearing there and mostly over in the T-10 area… If you remember from your days there, if you spent much time there, that the terrain began to stop being marshes. Again, it reminded me of Louisiana where in the deep southern part of Louisiana you have the tidal marshes and the further you go to the north the more the ground got solid. Well, that was the same thing there. So yes, we did a lot of operations there.

SHAY: Did you ever feel that you had it cleaned out?

WAGES: I don’t like the term “cleaned out.” I think that we hurt them in the worse sort of way. In fact after I got relieved and got back to Washington, my relief, Cdr. Williams, sent me a Chicom Model 51 Automatic, legally as a war trophy, that they had gotten off the executive officer of the Doan Ten Regiment. It couldn’t be confirmed that we killed the regimental commander, but we destroyed his headquarters and got his exec and some other key staff people. Because their MO there was to not have a face-to-face…

SHAY: Of course not.

WAGES: …confrontation with us; it was to try to escape. That’s why it was so important for us to expand our AO so we could continue to chase them. They would, of course, when they had no other alternative, then they would stop and we got them in a position where we were able to destroy their headquarters complex. I have to also say, we can’t forget the support from the U.S. Air Force. I had a small forward controller detachment there in my headquarters from III-DAS, Direct Air Support Center, headed by an officer and about three NCOs. One was on watch all the time. So when we had contact with the enemy on an operation, and we needed additional air support, then we could plan on getting the USAF Fast-movers down from Cam Ranh Bay.

SHAY: They came all the way down from Cam Ranh Bay?

WAGES: They came all the way down. It worked real well. Also we had VAL-4, the OV-10s from their detachment in Vung Tau which were in direct support of the Rung Sat operation. So if we ran into fortified bunkers or something like that, the HA(L)3 guys, they were the first ones on the scene, first ones there and they were there real quick. Of course, their time and ordnance was limited, so as they would be peeling back to return to Nha Be to rearm and gas up, then the OV-10s would be there and with their rocket and strafing support… In the meantime, the duty officer or myself, whoever was in the TOC would have just turned around to the Air Force captain and said, “hey, we need iron bomb support here, they’ve got bunkers” and so the F-100s would be coming down the pike. And it worked real well.

SHAY: Did four HA(L)3 aircraft ever go on an operation at the same time, from Nha Be?

WAGES: Well yes, there were occasions. I'm trying to think.

SHAY: Would that be a little bit too confusing, especially at night?

WAGES: There often were two up at one time, then the HA(L)3 LHFT would be relieved on station. We later started a process where we called "high-value or special interest ships", ammunition ships or tankers that would come up the river, and we would give them constant…

SHAY: Oh, you would.

WAGES: …helo coverage to make the trip up**.**

SHAY: Oh, you would. That's interesting.

WAGES: Also, there were times when we had contact with the enemy in more than one location, then there would be two HA(L)3 gunships involved in each location, or flying over the river escorting a special interest ship. We also had some special requirements for the PBRs on the river too; they would escort those ships, that we called "special interest ships."

SHAY: Now for night scrambles, I assume they only sent up two?

WAGES: Yes, normal scramble would only be two.

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SHAY: Concerning your minesweeping school experience. Did you feel with that experience it gave you a better idea of what the minesweeper's role was and how they performed? And the other question that I had about minesweepers out of Nha Be, do you think were they still performing a vital role when you had that assignment?

WAGES: Yes to all above. These minesweepers, the small MSB 57 ft long minesweeping boats that we had there and the lieutenant that commanded that division, in my opinion, had the most important job of any lieutenant or O-3 in Vietnam. Keeping that Long Tau (Saigon) River clear of mines was vital. And yes, my background in the mine force certainly helped. I did have the benefit of a formal school, and then a year's sea time as XO of an ocean minesweeper, then that staff assignment at MINELANT. I think that was a very meaningful background for that Rung Sat job. It gave me, for instance, the knowledge and ability to appraise the value of boats called MSRs (Mine Sweeper River).

It was an idea that the Navy came up with in the early days of taking one of our river-craft and converting it to a minesweeper by using what they call a chain drag gear. That was

okay for the small bayous where the riverine craft would transit and operate, but that type of sweep was not appropriate for the big Long Tau River, better known as the Saigon River, because of the strong currents. With my minesweeping background, I could confidently say, " I don't want those boats here. They're not going to help me. They'll probably help some other task group commander in another area, but they won't help me."

SHAY: The little vessels you mean?

WAGES: No. I don't mean the MSR minesweeping boats. The MSB minesweeping boats were perfect.

SHAY: You mean the MSBs.

WAGES: Yes, the MSBs.

SHAY: You said there were smaller ones you had also.

WAGES: The MSRs were about the same size. They were ASPB (Armored Support Patrol Boat) hulls. They just didn't have the capabilities. The MSBs however, are miniature ocean minesweepers. They've got the same equipment, both mechanical sweep and the influence sweep gear. In fact, we used them for both type sweeps. Typically we ran a two-boat patrol 45 miles down the river, then back around and up the river in a twelve-hour daylight run. Once every three days we'd do what we called a check sweep for bottom mines, with influence gear, so the MSBs were perfect for that mission.

SHAY: You couldn't go up the small rivers in the other boat, in the MSRs. You couldn't take them up any small, narrow rivers because they were too shallow, unless it was just at high tide?

WAGES: Well, I guess you could, but those other areas of the Delta were not under my cognizance, there were you know, we're talking about the Bassac and the Mekong…

SHAY: Oh, I know that, right.

WAGES: They may have been effective there but I told the commodore, "there really is no requirement to put the MSRs down here under me. They'd probably be much more helpful in some other areas." So I actually gave them up. Then I said, "Oh, by the way, I could use some of these Alpha Boats (ASPBs) for troop carriers." By having a background in the mine force and having a good familiarity about what you needed really helped me. It probably gave me a jump on a lot of officers who didn't have that previous experience. But I can't over emphasize the job that the minesweeping boats did there. They were, as far as operating U.S. Navy units, the first ones there in the Saigon River, and they had some tough times in the early days. The Vietcong inflicted heavy damage on them and sank several. But they did

a tremendous job. Minesweeping is not exciting. In fact, it can be a dreary job, every day going down the river and then coming back up. Every once in a while, Bango!, you're into a lot of excitement. It's a very important job and as the history of our great Navy shows, it's often a requirement that's overlooked until you really need them, and then, "where are those minesweepers?" the admirals say.

SHAY: I have the book here someplace, mid-70's, when we went back to Haiphong to clear the mines. Did you know any of those people? It was a whole operation?

WAGES: That operation was after I left Vietnam.

SHAY: I forget what it was called. But one of my OINCs at Nha Be was Roger McPherson. He wound up being the CO of that squadron that were using the minesweepers.

WAGES: The MH-53 Squadron?

SHAY: Oh yeah, oh yeah. So I saw his name in that book, I thought that was quite interesting. He went back a number of years later and he was clearing the mines.

WAGES: Of course we had the book on all those mines because we'd laid them. They were all influence mines and we knew when the batteries were going to expire. I wasn't involved, but I talked to some experienced people who had been. The thing about the mines, they don't always produce as advertised. Sometimes you think the batteries are no longer any good and you go in there and surprisingly, they may be. This is not official, but the one influence mine that we laid and later successfully swept, there still remains the argument whether it was the MH-53 or an MSO that swept it. Both units were in the area when it exploded!

SHAY: I see.

WAGES: But I wasn't involved in that operation at all.

SHAY: You were saying, "it's a tough job running those minesweeping boats, which were boring and tedious." Can you imagine being in a helicopter, maybe they were flying at a hundred feet or less, dragging some heavy piece of metal out there, trying to clear some mines. Basically in a hover, in a high-power hover, they lost a couple of them because the strain on that aircraft, being that it's a big aircraft, they were using big monster aircraft, but I can't imagine a job more boring than that, dragging. Flying in a hover and pulling top power the whole time is a truly boring task.

WAGES: It is tough and dangerous, whether it's a helicopter or a surface minesweeper.

SHAY: It's just waiting for hell to break loose, especially when you're operating at high power.

WAGES: When I was as exec of an MSO I was involved in annual readiness exercises we had down at Vieques off Roosevelt Roads, and it's tedious too for the ocean going MSOs. You have to be sure you get in close enough to sweep the mines, but you don't want to get in so close that you run aground. It's like you say, very tedious and very boring and also very dangerous.

SHAY: As long as we're talking about craft, can you describe the support of the PBRs. Where did the Strike Team Assault boats, or Seal Team Assault Boats, the STAB boats, fit in? Were they the fastest boats down there?

WAGES: To answer that easy one. No, they were not the fastest boats there. The fastest boats, and it weren't even close, were the PACVs, the patrol air cushion vehicle boats that were assigned to the TF 116 for a while. I was involved at BUPERS in assigning the officers to that division when they first started.

SHAY: Was that out of Nha Be?

WAGES: No.

SHAY: The PACV?

WAGES: They were originally over at Phu Quoc Island and then they moved over to Binh Thuy. The PACVs were air cushion vehicles and we had three for the Navy and three for the Army. Well the Army later gave those three to the Navy. And as you know from your own experience, when the Army gives the Navy something . . .

SHAY: Watch out.

WAGES: There's a hidden message there. They were, without a doubt, the fastest craft in the Mekong Delta or the riverine operations. In their three years there, the STAB boats really didn't work out well for several reasons, but I don't want to talk down about anybody that was assigned to them.

The STABs are another boat. I never had personal experience with that Strike Boat squadron or division. I did however have experience with the same vessels that the SEALS had. They also had the STABs -- SEAL TEAM ASSAULT BOAT. In my command at Nha Be, TG 116.9, for the most part of my time over there, I had two SEAL 14-man teams assigned, and they usually had STABs. These particular vessels were not popular though with all the SEALS themselves because they were gasoline-powered. While I was there, we didn't have any destroyed but some of the fellows riding them were a little apprehensive about

being on a gasoline-powered boat. In fact, one of the SEAL OINCs asked me if I could, he would prefer to use the PBRs as the vessels that inserted and extracted them on their operations. His reasoning was that the PBR had more firepower and although it was a little tougher to crawl up the PBR gunwale, these young men were all in real good shape. They also didn't have to worry about being hit in the gasoline tank on a PBR.

SHAY: Well that's what we had of course in '67 and '68.

WAGES: The operational situation however, may well involve using helicopters. My guess is that was the SEALS favorite craft by which to be inserted/extracted, it would have been slicks, and number two would have been the PBRs and number three would have been the STABs. I'm sure, if you asked experienced SEAL officers, most would agree with me. As far as the STAB strike unit, it's my understanding from TF116 people in the Mekong Delta, out of my area, that they really never operated as a squadron. They operated as two ten-boat divisions. Their biggest problem was that they were gasoline burners. The availability of gasoline was really difficult in the Delta and they were the only combat craft around that were gasoline-powered. There's no doubt in my mind that the PACVs were the fastest, but after a while they were found to be very hard to support logistically. This is based on my talks with Commodore Roy Faulk who was the Task Force 116 commander during most of my time in the Rung Sat.

End tape No. 1

Begin tape No.2

That was his feeling. There were some missions that the PACVs could do quite well, but their speed really was not something that made them better than our other craft. Yes, they could skim over the water at 50 knots or whatever. Now in some places that's a very good to have, especially when used as a MEDEVAC. They could clear walls and obstacles that were in the neighborhood four of five-feet high. Later they ended up being moved up to I Corps and assigned to CTF 115. They felt that on the Perfume River, which is the river that goes from the South China Sea up to Hue, they could provide some help. They had a command up there called Operation Clearwater that had primarily PBRs. However, with the heavy VC harassment along the banks of that river, the PACVs were more helpful there than they were in the Delta. However, parts availability became a problem and in less than three-years, it was decided that they no longer were needed. When they went over there initially, I think it was an experiment more than anything.

As I said, the Navy had three initially and the Army had three. That's my feeling about the fastest ships in the Mekong, the PACVs. The other craft, ship's I should say, the PGMs, the gunboats that came on the line in the '68 period, they had turbo-charged diesels and were quite fast too. They too had parts problems. None were assigned to my command,

but they were quite effective in some operations and they were fast too. You know the public affairs people always put out how fast they'll go and it's always under ideal conditions with flat water but I think a PGM was capable of about forty knots. I'm not sure what the STABs were. With the one's we had in the Rung Sat supporting SEALS, I never saw any indication that they went any faster then the twenty-six knots or so that the PBRs could do. The PBRs had a much higher gunwale so they were more effective when there was any kind of a chop on the water.

SHAY: I see.

WAGES: Is that about it?

SHAY: That's about it with the craft. Could you tell about, early on in your first assignment to Vietnam as a detailer, when you went in to try and determine suitability and what was desired for assignments. Can you tell me what you thought about pre-deployment training for Vietnam assignments for both officers and enlisted? Did you give that much consideration on making any recommendations back to CINCPAC or to the States on what you were looking for over there, due to the nature of the entire operation, "Brown Water" operation being something not germane to the Navy?

WAGES: Yes… It became quite obvious that the early advisors, the Army and the Marines assigned to the South Vietnamese forces, were probably better trained than the Navy people assigned to Vietnam. This was in the early days. The Green Berets in particular were really well trained. At their training center at Fort Bragg they had a number of courses available for field advisors. They also worked closely with the Defense Language Institute out at Monterey, California. They were provided with very good training before they went in country, and the Marines were getting those courses too. One of the Marines who worked for me down at Nha Be, Captain Bill Cowan, had gone through several of the courses at Fort Bragg. He also had the language course and was quite fluent in Vietnamese. Some of this training wasn't appropriate for Navy support people, but for the advisors it was. I came to this opinion because I was in BUPERS at that time when we got the sudden build up of forces in Vietnam. I felt that there were times when we could have sent candidates to a longer training pipeline than we did. Now when we started sending operating units, i.e., TF 115, TF 116 and TF 117 over there, we built a riverine training school at Mare Island, California. It was a fine facility and had a number of training courses available for people going to riverine operating units. Surprisingly, they allowed us to fire live ammunition up there. I don't know how long that lasted, but that's the way it was when I went through the course. When they started getting people returning from operational tours in Vietnam, the school was able to tune up the curriculum so you would get the right kind of training for the environment you were going to, whether it was TF115, 116 or 117. Yes, I think in the later period we did have real good operational training.

SHAY: You thought they might have been adequately prepared for the assignments?

WAGES: In the early days…

SHAY: No, no. In the early days there was no training.

WAGES: As I said, in the early days I don't think the training was adequate.

SHAY: I trained for HA(L)3. We had, I think fifteen hours at Fort Benning, GA in the UH-1. That was it. That was about one week or ten days of training.

WAGES: And you came from what…

SHAY: This was right from the training command. I had 300 hours of flying time, 20 or so hours in UH-1, and there I was out in the Rung Sat. We were all being trained by the Army at that time. I wonder if there was any more extensive training by the time you were there, which was two years after I left.

WAGES: I don't know about the air side, about what training they had. When I had my training package it included a couple of weeks at Coronado at PHIB School and we had a very basic counter-insurgency course. I had learned more about counter-insurgency at the Naval War College then I did at that course, but that's understandable. Then I had, because I was going to a command job, some special sessions at COMPHIBPAC with some staff officers –ops and intelligence. Then I went through the tough-way-to-loose-weight course up at Warner Springs SERE (Survival Evasion Resistance Escape) school for a week. Included in that package down in Southern California was a week of small arms training at Camp Pendleton. The Marines are very good; the interesting thing there was that I learned all about the M-14 rifle, how to field strip it, how to shoot it, etc. Then when I got to Vietnam, I never saw one! It had been replaced by the M-16 rifle!

SHAY: I know. They train on the M-14, and use the M-16.

WAGES: This sometimes happens. Then I went up to Mare Island to the Riverine Warfare School for three weeks for a special commanders course. So I felt comfortable when I went over there--it was very adequate training. If I hadn't had the minesweeping experience though, my training would not have been adequate. An officer going to that Rung Sat position who had not had minesweeping experience would have been in a hole in the mine countermeasures business, because he was going to be exposed to it right away. During my tour, I participated in live mechanical and influence minesweeping and mine laying. The Navy R&D office in Saigon received some experimental canal mines and I got tasked to provide four PBRs to act as minelayers, so I went out on the operation. It was a long night. After we laid a dozen mines, we had to stay nearby so we could record the mines' firing devices. While beached there on a canal bank, keeping very quiet, a small VC unit showed

up. So a firefight prevailed. One PBR was hit, but we didn't have any personnel casualties. The VC were not expecting to see us---or our forward 50 calibers.

SHAY: You're not talking about Claymore Mines, you're talking about water mines?

WAGES: Yes, MK 110A water mines designed to be used on canals and small waterways. To answer your question, in my case I thought the training was quite adequate. It could have been better, I could have learned about the M-16 instead of the M-14, little things like that. I did not feel particularly confident with our pre-deployment training when I went out there the first time for BUPERS in early 1966. I put in my report that we still had to take another look at training. The interesting thing was that in the basic mission of pacification out there, that was the Army's mission and they had their people well trained. The Navy did some, what I call collateral pacification, but basically they weren't in a pacification role like the Army and the Marines were. The Army had some very good schools. It was just a question of getting the Navy people ordered to them and establishing requirements, getting quotas and this sort of thing.

When the Navy got into the Mekong you initially had a high rate of casualties, so oftentimes you had to get replacements out there ASAP. I particularly liked the way that Admiral Zumwalt made command assignments. He typically did what was to be known as the "Army system", in which you don't get assigned by some detailer in Washington to a command in the field. You go out there and you go to the Staff and then he decides from there where you'll go. That's the way Admiral Zumwalt often played it. Most of the people, and I'm talking about O-5s in particular, would come out there and they'd be on his staff for a while learning what was going on. Then he would size them up. So when a field commander either got hit or had to be MEDEVAC'd or his tour was up, then the Admiral had a chance to pick someone on his staff who could fill this job with his confidence. It worked quite well.

SHAY: Something else about personnel I'd like to ask you. When you were detailing. Let's see, what year was that, when you were in Washington detailing for Vietnam?

WAGES: We shouldn't call it just for Vietnam, because at that time Vietnam was included with the other overseas shore assignments junior surface officers.

SHAY: Here it is, 1965 and '66. Were you getting a lot of volunteers at that time and when you ultimately were assigned to your job in the Rung Sat were you still getting a lot of volunteers. In the beginning it was my understanding it was almost an all-volunteer Navy in Vietnam at least in the Game Warden Operation. What are your thoughts about that, and your knowledge?

WAGES: The all-volunteers for Game Warden was applicable to both enlisted men and officers. I saw the figures at one time…kind of fuzzy over thirty years later. I think we were talking about in the neighborhood of at least 94 - 95%.

SHAY: When you were there?

WAGES: Officers and enlisted people were nearly all volunteers on Task Force 116.

SHAY: No, I wanted to ask you about two different times, time periods. Back in ’65 and ’66 and then ’69 and ’70. A spread of almost four years.

WAGES: I’m talking about in the early mid 60’s initially. You know we went out with ALNAVs and asked for volunteers.

SHAY: In ’66?

WAGES: Yeah. I wasn’t actually involved with enlisted assignments, but it was my understanding that we filled nearly all of those billets with volunteers.

SHAY: What about officers?

WAGES: Now officers…

SHAY: This thing was advertised… You remember how this was advertised – the hottest thing ever to happen in the history of the Navy – the “Brown Water Navy.”

WAGES: When I was out there on that special assignment in January and February of ’66, there were some people there in which it was obvious why they had volunteered. They had big bumps in their career, like punitive letters in their jackets or a poor performance that would prevent them from getting selected for their next rank. I think there was an attitude that prevailed that… this is before the U.S. operating units got out there. This is when it was strictly an advisory or logistical support role, that there were people out there who said, “This is my last chance. If I go over there and get decorated, I’ll get promoted.”

SHAY: Okay.

WAGES: There were some people over there in that category.

SHAY: There were a lot of people like that.

WAGES: I don’t know…I can’t give you empirical data on how many, but there were some officers like that. When the operating units started going in, i.e. TF116…The quality made a sudden change for the better.

SHAY: But did you also have people that were sincerely interested in going out there, because…, or they just didn't know enough other then just to go out there as a career saver?

WAGES: Oh, there were people who were sincerely interested, some top-notch officers. You know Admiral Mustin's son, Hank, he later retired as a three-star himself, he went out there quite early as a lieutenant commander. I understand that some of the assignment people in BUPERS tried to talk him out of it.

SHAY: I believe that was the same with Saltzer, you know that name, Robert Saltzer. I read his oral history done at the U.S. Naval Institute, and I believe that was the same. They tried to dissuade him from going out there. He went out there twice.

WAGES: Yes he was… I know from later working for Admiral Zumwalt in the Pentagon, that Admiral Saltzer was really held in high esteem. Of course Admiral Zumwalt sent him out there the second time, after he'd made flag... But, yes, there were a lot of people out there who were not top performers in the earlier days. Once TF 116, 115 and 117, started gearing up, you really had high quality officers. In the TF116 units many were in some level of command. They were…lieutenants in command, lieutenant commanders had squadrons, and some lieutenants had divisions. And so these people went through scrutiny by the detailers just like they were going to command a ship.

SHAY: So they had tremendous opportunity.

WAGES: Yes, very much so.

SHAY: Just to volunteer for this.

WAGES: And that's right. Get a responsible job in combat and be in command.

SHAY: And you can start off having command of a small boat instead of a big ship.

WAGES: Sure. Or a group of small boats. And it's going to be all action, it's really going to be an "action-Jackson" assignment. A number of people have asked me after I retired what I did in the Navy. I said, "In the operating Navy I started out as a firemen in the engine room of a destroyer and my last job at sea was a commodore of an eight-ship destroyer squadron." But I said, "The best job I ever had was in Vietnam when I was a commander and had a senior advisors job and concurrently a river task group command. In combat for about 14 months….and that was the best job I ever had."

SHAY: Do you think Zumwalt would have said the same thing, that was his best job, was that his favorite job? You knew him pretty well.

WAGES: I think so. Admiral Zumwalt was a real operator. I'd been with him at sea up in Northern Europe, in the Baltic. At MINELANT, one of the admirals I worked for there had been Admiral Zumwalt's commanding officer on the USS *Robinson* in World War Two. In fact, Admiral Grantham said to me when he learned that I had made that cruise on the *Dewey*, "You watch Bud Zumwalt. One of these days he'll be CNO." He also told me that he gave Bud Zumwalt full credit for successfully attacking a Japanese cruiser. It was a torpedo attack. They hit it and caused major damage. He was the CIC officer…and was running the whole show from CIC. Admiral Grantham said, "I put him in for the Navy Cross" but, "the fleet staff downgraded it to a Bronze Star. They gave me the Navy Cross. Bud should've gotten it." Grantham said he was a real operator. He was an ideal guy…to work for…I should say, the ideal commander to work for in a combat environment. He knew what was important and if you had any complaints about not having support somewhere, boy, he would personally get involved real quick.

SHAY: So back to that same question of course. You said just now it was your favorite assignment. Yet here you, yes you were a squadron commander of destroyers but you were also commanding officer of a guided missile destroyer leader?

WAGES: Yes.

SHAY: The *Josephus Daniels*?

WAGES: That was a DLG then. Later during my tour it was re-designated a CG—a guided missile cruiser.

SHAY: I see, so that's a pretty important job, but yet you still would say that the Vietnam experience was even more to you, a favorite, looking back in your career. Now, why do you think that is? Do you think it's because you could actually do something there and see results and because it was of course in combat you could measure activities and assignments on a daily basis and see progress? Of course there was no progress generally overall but, is that the reason, and you had the power to call in something and get it done immediately?

WAGES: In Vietnam**,** you are involved full time in the planning for war and for battle and conducting combat operations. You do some logistic planning, of course, but no responsibility for maintaining your craft and the reams of paperwork that you have on a ship. And the INSURV I just saw in a paper yesterday they relieved of command a skipper of the JFK, a thirty-three year old carrier.

SHAY: When was this?

WAGES: It was in the paper yesterday.

SHAY: It just happened?

WAGES: He failed his INSURV inspection. The JFK was supposed to deploy in two months.

SHAY: No kidding.

WAGES: I've been through these INSURV inspections successfully, fortunately, two or three times on surface ships. The preparation, it's almost like, a month. That's all you do for a month is prepare for the INSURV inspection, and things like that. Now as an operator on a guided missile cruiser deployed to the MED, it's fantastic. Its part of your dreams as a career officer, but all of the logistic and the maintenance requirements hung on you and the reports you're required to do, you didn't have that in combat. You wake up every morning knowing my prime job is to find the bad guys and do away with them, etc., etc. And if we've got problems with one of the boats, or one of the minesweepers, you make a report to the people that are responsible for their maintenance, the support activity. They did a real good job. It wasn't your job to concurrently be an operator and then worry about maintenance requirements, inspections and the paperwork that went along with that.

SHAY: So it was kind of a break in your career from the standard Navy stuff. In other words, somebody on assignment to the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean was doing some standard things, having inspections every day, general quarters, drills… Thank God, in Vietnam, you didn't have any too many general quarters drills, you had "General Quarters", even in a place like Nha Be.

WAGES: I felt as a ship's skipper, there was nothing more important, as long as we weren't firing at the bad guys, than to have drills. I am a big believer in that. I've had some training assignments as I said. I often had nighttime GQ and I had my destroyers fuel at night and practice being towed and towing; all these sort of things that can happen in combat. I don't have any problem with doing that. It's just the maintenance related inspections and maintenance related availabilities and the many reports you have to do. That seems to gnaw away at your time when you're in command of a ship, or whether you're an XO or a department head, it's part of the regime.

SHAY: The question I have for you now is. It's a side question about Admiral Zumwalt. When he became CNO, do you think the Vietnam experience, of course it had an impact on all of us, had a particular impact on him, because he came out with a new series of Z-grams.

WAGES: Yeah.

SHAY: They turned out to not be too popular. He started to, how to do with the enlisted uniforms. He made a lot of changes as CNO. Quite a few of them were not popular with the standard regular Navy. But do you think it was the impact from the Vietnam

experience that brought this about? And from knowing him personally do you think that?

WAGES: I'm sure that was a factor. For instance, beer machines in the barracks. He knew that what these young guys, eighteen, nineteen years old, go out on the rivers, often at night on these little 32-foot boats made of fiberglass, and go through what they had to go through day in and day out. When they came back to the support base, they all liked to have a couple of cool beers. He felt that if you could put your life on the line for the Navy, that certainly little things like having availability of a couple of beers at the barracks was nothing out of the ordinary. In fact it was well deserved.

His nature both in the combat environment in Vietnam, as well as when he was CNO, is that he moves out among the troops. He talks to the senior officers, he also talks to the junior officers, the chiefs and he talks to the lower enlisted men. He got a number of inputs from them and some were eye-openers for him. But that's his nature and then he'd quickly follow up on it. Some of the issues that were quote 'not-popular,' it depends on who decided they were not popular. Let's just take beards for instance. You know I was in the Navy and the Naval Reserve for over thirty-four years and the Merchant Marine before that and in my mind (I never had one myself), beards were often typical of sea-faring men. You look back at pictures of the battleships in the Spanish-American War and all these sailors sitting in front of the guns, they all had beards. I have a little hobby of collecting Blue Jacket's Manuals. I've got I think eleven or twelve. Some of them go way back; one of them is the 1918 edition. They all discuss military appearance and it doesn't say you can't have a beard, but it says if you have one it has to be neatly trimmed. I know a lot of sailors told him that, quote "the captain won't let us grow beards," or words to that effect, unquote. Where the regulations said they could, unless they were involved in something that a beard may interfere with, maybe divers couldn't.

There were commanding officers that not only did not allow beards. Some I knew tolerated XOs restricting officers to the ship--the old term "you're in hack." Well there's nothing legal about being "in hack." It is something that doesn't exist in our regulations. If you have work to do and you haven't finished your work, if you're main propulsion assistant and your overseeing the tearing down and cleaning out the debris inside of a main circulator pump, you have to stay there with your men until that job is complete. If you miss going home, that night, so be it. But for an exec or department head, who supposedly is speaking for the commanding officer, says "your in hack lieutenant or ensign", this is illegal. You must make charges against an officer, a disciplinary charge, then you should follow the proper procedures. Hold mast on him. But to deprive an officer or an enlisted man of his opportunity to leave the ship without due cause is illegal. Oftentimes in the Navy, when I was an enlisted man, the chiefs would dole out the liberty cards and there were times when a chief wouldn't give an individual his liberty card, even though he rated liberty. That's not right, and the Admiral heard a lot of these stories---first hand!

30 December 2001

SHAY: December 30, 2001, and this is the second interview with Captain Jerry Wages, Part Two Interview. We finished off, just about finished off discussing Z-grams and Admiral Zumwalt's influence on the Navy after Vietnam. And I want to switch topics today and start out fresh.

You were very active as the commander of the Rung Sat Special Zone River Patrol Group TG116.9, and it seems from your record, that you went out with units on operational missions, apparently quite a few. Please tell me about June '69, August '69, April '70, three selected dates during which you received medals. So tell me about how active you were and what you felt that it accomplished, if you can do that. So the first in June '69 you received the Bronze Star, then August the Silver Star, then April '70 a Purple Heart, which was I guess April '70, a month or so before you were to leave, you were pretty short at that time, so to speak.

WAGES: Actually it was a week before I was pulled out of the field.

SHAY: A month before I was scheduled to leave Vietnam, three weeks after my replacement came in, in April of '68 we became short timers and we let the new guys fly. So tell me about these please.

WAGES: Well Peter, first of all, I had been to Vietnam previously as I told you in part one. Actually, part of that time, I was doing an official report, but I had a wonderful opportunity to get around and see the various areas that the Navy was involved in and I particularly wanted a field command. I talked with Admiral Zumwalt when he got his third star. When he came through Honolulu he called me and we talked about me coming to work for him. I made my point that…I said, "I'm sure most of the naval officers feel the same way but I don't want to be in a headquarters job, Admiral." And he said, "Well, don't worry about that. I'll take care of that." And of course, as always, he kept his word. Again without dwelling on it, because we talked about it in the previous interview, the uniqueness of the Rung Sat job. In fact, I actually commanded a task group under TG116 of various units which had various officers in charge or in some cases COs and I wanted to set the example for them. And then I had the other hat, of being the senior advisor, not the senior naval advisor, but the Senior U.S. Advisor for the entire Rung Sat, and in that role I had a Navy/Marine staff.

The staff was closer to two-thirds Marine, one-third Navy, in the advisory role, and I had to advise my counterpart and his headquarters staff. Also the Regional Force troops under his command, thirteen RF companies. So I had a full deck of cards there to keep me busy. I just felt in my role as a leader and a planner, I couldn't do either one without getting out in the field. I didn't spend all my time out there obviously, but getting out there having a good feel for what the various units were doing was necessary in my opinion. I was also very fortunate during most of my Rung Sat tour to have two highly professional deputies. LCDR

(now Captain USN Ret.) Lewis Thames was my TG 116.9 CSO and Major (now Colonel USMC Ret.) Edward Badolato was my Assistant Senior Advisor. Both of these officers were seasoned combat veterans on their second VN tour. They were good guys to run the store when I was out in the field! They had my complete confidence.

With the mine division there, or I should say plural, mine divisions, for a while I went out with them on the Saigon River sweeps. I wanted to see how a twelve-hour sweep, a mechanical sweep, how they did it and how these sailors handled themselves, etc. So I would go out with them. Early on I spent a lot of time on the PBRs, but then later I learned I had to be selective of how much time I went out on something like a PBR, because I may have problems getting back to the headquarters. So I started to spend more time in the helicopters. Incidentally, my BUPERS PCS orders authorized me to fly as a "technical observer." I didn't rate AO wings, but more importantly, I got 150 dollars monthly hazardous duty pay, plus Air Medals. The slicks were provided by Two Field Force Victor. In fact, most of the time that we had operations with the multiple RF companies, we had Army helo support as well as the TF116.9 assets. Often I would be in a helicopter with my counterpart and I had direct communications with the tactical operations center there at Nha Be in case we needed additional air support or a MEDEVAC.

SHAY: Who was your counterpart? Do you remember who your counterpart was?

WAGES: Commander Tan.

SHAY: Tan.

WAGES: He was a commander for the most part, but later made captain.

SHAY: Do you remember his first name?

WAGES: Yes, Nguyen Van Tan; he was a very dedicated officer, very professional. In fact, he had transferred from the ARVN to Vietnamese Navy (VNN), so he knew about ground warfare. As to the several times when I got into hectic action was when Admiral Zumwalt had asked me to deploy some of my assets to the upper Saigon River north of Saigon. The VNN were having problems for a while during the turnover getting adjusted to the craft that we had given to them and with our tactics. Although they had U.S. advisors embarked, these basically were hands-on technical enlisted men and junior officers, teaching them how to run the boats, how to fire the guns, etc. As for the tactics, we had to beef em' up with officers initially. So several times I was up on the upper Saigon River area for that reason. The Admiral asked me to keep a close eye on our progress there. The VNN by then were in command of these former TF116 assets, but we were still the combat experienced experts. For some reason, it seemed that every time I went up there, I had more action then anticipated. On the particular day that you asked me about, 18th of June of '69, I actually

went on a "milk" run to see one of my PBR division commanders, who had eight PBRs up there supporting a company of the First Infantry Division- the Big Red One!

SHAY: And what rank was he?

WAGES: Lieutenant Commander.

SHAY: A PBR division.

WAGES: Yes. He was under my operational command. I had sent his division up there…to beef up the PBR unit that a Vietnamese commander recently took command op. The USN crews had been living in pretty extreme circumstances. They actually camped underneath a bridge up there most of the time. Of course this was an area where there was a lot of enemy activity known as the "Iron Triangle."

SHAY: Do you remember his name?

WAGES: It was a long time ago – over 30 years… I'm not sure. Anyway, I went up there to take them their mail from home and to tell them as soon as they finished supporting the U.S. Army units that day they could return to Nha Be. After putting the U.S. troops ashore, our PBRs moved to the other side, and they stayed there in support until the Army units got inside the tree line. Our PBR Sailors were really looking forward to going back to Nha Be because there were hot showers and hot food at the mess hall, etc. After being put ashore, the Army units proceeded inland thru a somewhat marshy area and then into the tree line.

SHAY: This is now the U.S. Army?

WAGES: The U.S. Army; yes.

SHAY: Part of the Mobile Riverine Force?

WAGES: No. The First Infantry Division; the Big Red One.

SHAY: Oh, they weren't accompanied by the boats? Were they coming off of boats?

WAGES: Yes, they were coming off the PBRs.

SHAY: Oh, they were.

WAGES: The boats were standing by across the river with their weapons ready for close support. Once the troops got to the tree line and began to go inland they couldn't be supported by the PBRs anymore. That was the old Michelin Plantation area and there were a lot of trees.

SHAY: So how were they transported, what kind of a boat, Mike Boats?

WAGES: No, no, PBR's.

SHAY: Oh, you brought them, this whole group. How many men were there?

WAGES: It was a company.

SHAY: A company. A hundred…

WAGES: In the neighborhood of 150; maybe fewer.

SHAY: Oh, wow, so that was a lot of transporting to do.

WAGES: Well, for a short trip across the river it's just load up and run across. Then, they would go back and get another load. The PBRs prepped the bank, but there was no contact with the enemy, so things were fairly routine. As I said, the PBRs were standing by on the other bank to support them with heavy weapons if needed. The U.S. Army guys are now across the river and they are proceeding inland. I'm with the PBRs on the other side, and things there are somewhat relaxed. I'm talking to the lieutenant commander saying. "Okay, as soon they release you here and proceed inland, you're to come on down the river today and tomorrow when you show up at Nha Be take a few days off. Fix what needs fixing and get your guys cleaned up, and get some hot meals." I also brought them some personal mail and a couple of cases of cold beer. There were two beers per man that wouldn't impede their action but it would give them a morale boost. Small things like mail from home and a couple of cold beers really help morale These young men had been living on their little PBRs for a number of weeks. I was just getting ready to leave when we started hearing fire coming from inside the tree line. The US troops had made contact with the enemy! Since we were on the same radio frequency as the Army unit, we heard a lot of excited requests for MEDEVACs due to multiple casualties. So right away I walked over to my slick pilot, a U.S. Army warrant officer, and I don't remember his name, and I said, "Look I think we can help them out over there."

SHAY: You were in a slick?

WAGES: Yeah.

SHAY: That day.

WAGES: The U.S. Army slick brought me from my headquarters in Nha Be up to the PBRs on the upper Saigon River.

SHAY: Ah, okay. I had the idea in the beginning that you had gone up in a boat.

WAGES: No, I went up in the slick to the improvised LZ on the riverbank.

SHAY: On other side of the river

WAGES: Yes, on the safe side of the river. When this action started, I knew we were not far from the Cu Chi Army Field Hospital. It didn't sound good for the U.S. infantry boys. So when I said, "how about we crank up and go on the other side of the river and see if we can help," he said, "sure Commander, let's go." I then told the PBR DIVCOM, "be on the standby with your boats armed and ready." Then I said, "of course there's not much you can do unless they end up retreating back to the river bank, but right now we wouldn't know who we'd be shooting at." Agent Orange hadn't been sprayed up there like it had in the Rung Sat. So the warrant officer flew me over to the other side of the river.

SHAY: So you went solo with one aircraft, no gunship?

WAGES: No gunship, right. We were just up there on administrative flight and didn't anticipate this. It wouldn't have been my role to request gunships. The U.S. Army commander on the ground was in charge of the fighting. All I was going to do was offer my assistance. When I saw there were a number of casualties, I asked the crew chief if he would throw away the chairs in the slick. I told him I'd buy some new ones from the Navy. So he cleaned up the deck anticipating we would be putting wounded there. Then I went over to the tree line with a couple of other Army fellows.

SHAY: So you were in the back of this aircraft; you were seated in the back in the cabin?

WAGES: Only to get on the other side of the river. Then I got out.

SHAY: I've known some people to go for a ride in the right seat, or the left seat actually.

WAGES: No, no. I didn't do that with the Army. Now I did that a few times on HA(L)3 recon flights. I sat up front with the plane commander. I always sat in the back with the Army. So as soon as we got to the other side of the river, I went into the tree line, right at the edge. I had to assess how many wounded we had. We ended up with more wounded than anticipated. We ended up putting eight seriously wounded GIs on that slick, and the pilot was quite cool about it. He said he could handle that. I had also had the chief storekeeper with me to take orders for what my PBRs would have needed when they got back to Nha Be the next day.

SHAY: So you mean there was a total count of twelve people? A total of twelve or fourteen people went on the plane?

WAGES: Yeah.

SHAY: Because there were also two crewmen, the pilots, you and the storekeeper.

WAGES: I had eight serious wounded GIs, myself, the Navy chief and a crew of three. That's it.

SHAY: That's thirteen.

WAGES: That's a big load, huh?

SHAY: A big load.

WAGES: And those were single-engine Hueys, you know.

SHAY: I know, I know.

WAGES: Well anyway… I made three or four trips under enemy fire back and forth from the slick on the riverbank over in to the tree line and helped bring out the wounded. Actually I refused to put one soldier on the slick. He had a nick but was obviously shaken up emotionally more than he was physically and I said, "son, you aren't hurt that bad. You go over to one of those Navy boats and there's a chief corpsmen over there. He'll take care of you. He'll give you something, aspirin or something. We need all the room available on the slick for the more seriously wounded."

SHAY: So you were still not too far from the shoreline at this point? In other words, this incident occurred not too far from the shoreline, if you were going to send him over to a PBR?

WAGES: The Saigon River up there is quite different from where you and I spent our time down in the Rung Sat. There the trees came right up to the banks. Up in this case the bank area was fairly firm. It was firm enough for a makeshift LZ but…you had another, let's say, thirty-five or thirty yards before you hit the tree line.

SHAY: Is that also where the helicopter landed?

WAGES: Yeah. That's where the helicopter landed and stayed there with its door-gun at the ready while we went to the tree line to get the casualties. Of course there was a lot of firing going on. Later I learned that we were in the area of these famous caves and tunnels, the "Tunnels of Cu Chi." That's what put these U.S. Army guys into harms way. They had a prep; I don't know if it was fast-movers or gunships, but they had an aerial prep of the area. When they crossed the river, it was a routine trip, going over on the PBRs from the other side

of the river. Then they began to maneuver inland and as they did, they started taking heavy fire. Later on I learned that the VC had gone down in those tunnels during the prep attacks and then came up to greet the GIs. In my role, we recovered a total of eight and they were all badly wounded. We put them all on the deck of the slick including the company commander. I saw his West Point ring. He was severely wounded.

SHAY: Was he a captain?

WAGES: Yeah. Then we took off, and there still was firing going on, but you couldn't see very far because of the trees. When I asked the pilot, "can you make it?" He said, "I've got a few needles up there bouncing around in the red, but we can make it." So off we went. We hadn't cleared twenty-five or thirty feet, when, "swoosh!" I'm glad it wasn't a heat seeker because they fired RPGs at us too. Then we proceeded on and radioed to the Cu Chi field hospital that we were coming. When we got to the hospital's LZ, those corpsmen and female nurses, they were out there, waiting for us just like in MASH. I'll tell you, it was really inspirational to see them. We took all these young fellows off. One of them didn't make it, but seven did!

SHAY: I see. When we had insertions in the Rung Sat, normal procedure was, because the most dangerous time of course, was when the SEALS exited the aircraft. Even if they wanted to go out somewhat clandestine, there were always some gunships on the ready if they needed them during the insertion. Did the Army in this particular case, was it felt that it was that safe; that they were just going in for like a sweep? Or… It didn't sound like there were many gunships around supporting this operation.

WAGES: No, tactically, it has always been an argument about gunships, vis a vis the gunships going in and prepping the area and leaving. That's what they did here. It really depended on the tactical situation.

SHAY: Oh, they had been here?

WAGES: They had been there and they prepped the area.

SHAY: And they weren't loitering about?

WAGES: No. As you know, loitering gunships run out of ammo and they run out of fuel.

SHAY: But do you agree with me that in the Rung Sat on all SEAL missions there were two HA(L)3 aircraft on the stand by or flying nearby in support in case they were needed during the insertion.

WAGES: In the Rung Sat on SEAL missions and later when we got the RF troops moving, especially if it was a good size operation, we'd have the gunships airborne. If however, it was

a small operation, hovering helos could be a giveaway! Now looking back on your days in the Rung Sat when you only had two gunships, you can't keep them hovering all the time.

SHAY: We were on standby. We could be off… If there was a mission, we could be off in less then three minutes.

WAGES: That was standard for me down there, too. I wanted them moving in three minutes.

SHAY: I'm sure there was still that Seawolf bunker adjacent to the helicopter pad.

WAGES: Yup.

SHAY: I don't know if it still existed, green, with sandbags and the Seawolf emblem on the front

WAGES: Sure.

SHAY: And on the other side of it was the outpost where they had a machine gun, like a vantage point, high, like a nest, which the Army manned, or maybe the Navy manned. So we used to hang out inside that shack, ready, if we weren't flying, when we had the duty. So we were ready to be off in a minute. But it didn't sound like the Army came too fast unless they were pretty busy.

WAGES: I'm not being critical of the air side of that Army operation, which I didn't participate in the planning or anything else. That was their show. Our PBRs were in a support role. However, it appeared to me that these fellows, as much as you love these guys flying helicopters, fast-movers, etc., they usually always do it better in their PR pictures than they do for real. You just can't take the chances of putting troops in all huddled up close together. We have all heard, "no body can survive that." We've known pre-assault preps since Tarawa, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and all these other places in the Pacific. You can drop a lot of ordnance on them but these people we fight in the Orient, seem to know how to hide quite well. And I think that's what happened here. Once you get inside that thick jungle that you've already prepped, it's hard to differentiate who's good and who's bad. So you've got to be careful when you bring in additional helicopter gun runs.

SHAY: Once they're up there making noise though…

WAGES: Yeah.

SHAY: It usually keeps the other guy's heads down.

WAGES: That's right. But in this case the Army helicopters had already done their thing and returned to base. If we're going to be critical of that op it might have been that this Army

unit, which I heard later, hadn't been in country very long. They might not have been anticipating the strength that the Viet Cong still was able to muster after that pre-assault prep.

WAGES: To wind up what we were talking about in June 18. The assistant division commander for the Big Red One showed up soon as he learned about the operation at his headquarters. By that time, we had taken the eight guys to the Cu Chi field hospital and I had come back to finish up some business I had with my PBR commander. Then General Wolf, brigadier general and assistant division commander of the Big Red One, thanked me very much and…

SHAY: W-O-L-F?

WAGES: Yes, maybe WOLFE, might have been an "E" at the end. I'm not sure. He was very appreciative and thanked me for not hesitating to leave my safe position on the other bank and moving over there where the action was. Of the eight seriously wounded GIs, he confirmed that seven of them had survived. In fact, he wanted to put me in for a decoration. I thanked him of course and I said that I felt sure that when the NAVFORV saw the after action report, and if they saw something special there they would take appropriate action. So that's where I got the Bronze Star for heroic achievement.

SHAY: So it was written up by the Navy, instead of by the Army?

WAGES: Yes.

S**HAY: Technically, if you wanted to you could have wound up with an Army Bronze Star, right?**

WAGES: Well..sure.

SHAY: Technically. It was possible.

WAGES: It takes longer paper-wise you know. It might have been interesting to let him do it since Brigadier General Wolf was on the scene later that day. But anyway, I wasn't over there to see how many medals I could win. I really felt good that of those eight wounded young American soldiers, we participated in saving seven of them. So that was my adventure on June 18th.

I'd do it again. I wasn't in command, but I was there on the scene, I was the senior guy, so I was going to do something about it instead of just watching from a safe position.

On August 27th of ’69, I was put in a very similar circumstance. In the Vietnamization process, as we turned over these PBR units over to the VNN we had Vietnamese commanders, and this was new to them. To the best of my knowledge in Task Force 116 the VNN officer got orders as the prospective commanders of these various PBR units. But, the U.S. guy didn’t give them the conn until all the boats were transferred. It was just not sound to have a split command relationship of a PBR unit. These PBRs had formerly been tactically assigned to me and there were still some USN crewmembers assigned as advisors aboard. Junior officers and petty officers, helped with the engines, guns and comm. gear. There was one newly formed VNN unit assigned to the upper Saigon River Area that had a USN turnover Deputy with no PBR combat experience. So I went up there to the same area in August just to see how things were progressing.

SHAY: Upper Saigon.

WAGES: Upper Saigon River, yeah.

SHAY: How far north by the way was this? Do you have any recollection?

WAGES: I don’t remember. Thinking back, it was no more than twenty miles up to the Trapezoid; that’s what they called that area. When I got up there, it was a very similar situation to the other place on the upper Saigon River except it was clear of trees. There was a camouflaged VC heavy weapons position there that caught the U.S troops coming across a field in the open. That wasn’t the only enemy position, but that was the one that was giving us the most trouble and the GIs were taking a lot of casualties.

SHAY: You were up there in a slick at that same time?

WAGES: Yeah, a slick, the same thing as I was before.

SHAY: Supervising the PBRs.

WAGES: Actually no, this time I didn’t command them anymore, so I wasn’t supervising. The VNN had taken over command and they were still shaking down! Of course if you’re not in tactical command, you’re not sure what all the problems are. I’d know what I’d do in the Rung Sat. I would have already had HA(L)3 gunships there, already had requested Black Ponies for support and probably gone to III DAS for USAF fast-movers to come down from Cam Ranh Bay. That’s what I would have done. But of course, I wasn’t in command; I was just observing what was happening to my former PBRs, as well as the USN advisors aboard them. That was what was happening!

SHAY: Do you recall what unit that was?

WAGES: Only that it was Big Red One’s (First Infantry Division) operating area.

[END OF SIDE B OF TAPE # 1]

BEGINNING OF SIDE A OF TAPE #2

WAGES: The specific battalion I'm not sure.

SHAY: And it was also a company-sized operation?

WAGES: Yeah, maybe more. Anyway, I saw what that was happening there to that one group and I talked to the slick warrant officer pilot. Those young guys were all single because they were always ready for the action. So we went down low at ground level and silenced the heavy weapon with the door gunner's fire. Since I wasn't sure that we silenced him just temporarily or not, I got up close enough to fire WP M79 grenades into the bunker. This enabled those GIs that were pinned down to clear out of the area of the enemy fire. Then I had the slick take me back to where another U.S. Army unit had gathered and I convinced the company commander right away that they needed help over there I said "don't worry about protocol, here's a slick that can take eight of your boys over there right now." That's kind of what the operation was like on the 27th of August 1969. When I got an award from the previous operation, the deputy NAVFORV commander, Admiral Flanagan, had given me a stern "Be Careful", but this particular time I was there and U.S. Forces needed some help, so I was able to help 'em,… That was the one in August, the Silver Star award.

SHAY: What happened in April 1970.

WAGES: Oh, April of '70…

SHAY: A week before you were due to leave country.

WAGES: Yeah, this was a typical Rung Sat experience. By that time we really had, as I said in the first interview, we had beefed up our advisory role there. I'd gotten several requests approved for more Marines. We had a series of very successful operations down there using the regional force troops under the command of Tan and having my Rung Sat Marine advisors in the field. Of course, they were accompanied by Navy corpsmen. Things really started going good by then and we were getting good support from General Ewell's forces. In this operation, we put three RF companies in with a U.S. Army Assault Helicopter Company. Slicks and gunships got them in but then they had to maneuver. This was near the T-10 area. Shortly after our unit made contact with the VC, I got a report from the Marine advisors on the ground that we had a U.S. casualty. Now, if one of my senior guys on the ground had gotten incapacitated from a wound, I should be there right away to assess what the situation was and what action we should take. Again I talked to the Army warrant officer pilot to take me into a LZ that may get hot. Incidentally, those Army warrant officers flying out of Long Binh, used to volunteer for Rung Sat duty because they said the Navy chow was so good.

SHAY: Absolutely; it was the same when I was there.

WAGES: One time I told a visiting Army general that, "it's Navy cooks General, but we get our food from the Army." But anyway, in this particular case, it was my last week in the field. It was an LZ that we figured was secure but as we went down we started taking fire. It was the pilot's discretion whether he wanted to go in or not, but he went on in. He said to me on the intercom, "we're not going to land Commander, we're just going to let you get out real quick." Well I got out too quick. It was one of those areas where there are marshes all around but there are also these hard sandy spots. They were like concrete. I hit one of those spots real hard and then crawled to the tree line under fire. I just thought I had myself a bad bruise or back strain. Later on I started having more trouble and back spasms. Then, I had follow-up X-Rays, tests and all that. The APCs made the pain stop temporarily, so I wasn't MEDEVACd. I went on with a bad backache. The injury eventually ended me up in Bethesda Naval Hospital for a month. I had crushed two discs back there and then the fragments began to maneuver into my sciatic nerve so I was pretty miserable after a while.

When you're there in combat you don't worry about things like that. Later on Admiral Zumwalt said, "Jerry, you know you've got a combat injury. The bullet doesn't have to go in you. You've got a combat injury, indirectly from the enemy fire. You should put in for a Purple Heart." So I put the facts together, got a couple of witnesses, a Marine captain and the Navy lieutenant back at the TOC and sent it in and BUPERS approved my Purple Heart.

SHAY: Okay.

WAGES: But it doesn't look good or smart, does it happening during my last week in the field, two weeks before I go home. And I've had a bad back ever since!

SHAY: No, it doesn't look good for you. You should have been breaking your relief in. Where was your relief at that time, back at the office?

WAGES: I'm not sure if he had gotten there yet**.** He was the kind of guy who would have been with me if he'd been there. Maybe he was checking in at Saigon or getting a TF 116 briefing over at Binh Thuy.

SHAY: Still processing.

WAGES: Maybe he was getting his field gear and processing up at NAVFORV.

SHAY: What was his name?

WAGES: Williams, Commander James G. Williams; he was one of the finest naval officers I'd ever served with.

SHAY: Well, let's move on to my second question, because I listed these first. Can you tell me about the rules of engagements and how the directives for those were promulgated and enforced and the reporting about incidents that resulted in friendly casualties.

WAGES: Sure Peter. Before we shift from awards I want to go on the record and say that the award that I am most proud of during my time in the Rung Sat, which was March '69 to May of '70. The award I am most proud of is the Presidential Unit Citation that we got specifically for extraordinary heroism for the Rung Sat Special Zone River Patrol Group.

SHAY: I see.

WAGES: We got awarded the PUC for the period of 24 June '69 to 28 February of '70, when we made significant hit on the VC sapper threat to merchant ships going up and down the Long Tau Shipping Channel. So many people participated in and contributed to this that I'm more proud of that PUC than any other award I received. Incidentally, I did get two Gallantry Cross medals from the Vietnamese for advisory duties in combat operations. I don't have those citations in front of me; they're written in Vietnamese. Then I got the Vietnamese Distinguished Service Order when I was relieved. So that's all the medal activity I can think of.

SHAY: Okay.

WAGES: Okay, now let's talk about rules of engagement.

SHAY: How were the directives promulgated and enforced and tell me about the reporting of incidents that resulted in friendly civilian casualties? And, as you had briefly said that your predecessor really didn't do…, you couldn't get much information, since there was nothing passed down to you I assume from his time there.

WAGES: I pretty well knew most of the rules when I went down to relieve Commander Straney. I knew I was going down to that Rung Sat job when I received my orders from BUPERS. I knew that Admiral Zumwalt was relatively new on the job there and had changed some things. I had a good feel about what he wanted. I read a lot of the MACV directives too. While some naval officers might have just rushed through the Army directives, I knew if something goes wrong in your area, General Abrams is not going to be growling at me or a PBR skipper or a HA(L)3 pilot, he's going to be growling at Admiral Zumwalt. So I got very familiar with the MACV directives as well as with the ones from NAVFORV.

SHAY: You know they went back to July or early of 1965, those directives.

WAGES: Well they had new people. Abrams was there a good while as Westmoreland's deputy, as you know, but he made changes when he took over. And the free fire zone thing went away. There was no longer a "free fire zone" in the Rung Sat Special Zone.

SHAY: Really. Did the rules end while you were there or before you were there?

WAGES: When I was there the "free fire zone" policy had been done away with where I was. In fact, I think this was the policy throughout Vietnam.

SHAY: Really.

WAGES: We had a TOC, a Tactical Operations Center that was jointly manned by one of my officers and several enlisted men, as well as my counterparts people. In the case of NGFS or air support, unless the targets were fragged, we couldn't attack them.

SHAY: They were what?

WAGES: You just couldn't go start shooting at anything you saw.

S**HAY: Unless they were what?**

WAGES: Unless they were fragged, or you were defending yourselves.

SHAY: I'm not sure if I know what that means.

WAGES: It's called a fragmentary order, a pre-arranged target tasking order. It was routinely called a "frag order."

SH**AY: I never heard of that.**

WAGES: Peter, you frag a particular area in the Rung Sat for pre-assault prepping, or whatever. It's a pre-planned mission. Now, when you're out on the boats, you still can return fire, no matter what. I learned a long time ago by U.S. Navy Regulations, which have been around a long time, you can defend your boat or ship and your men anytime anybody takes an aggressive action toward you. So you don't have to rediscover the wheel there. But by the same token, if you see a guy walking along in a black pajamas with a flock of geese you can't go shoot him either. That's not the way to win friends and influence people and you can't do that and expect to win a counter-insurgency war. Also there is always the possibility that there will be friendly troops in the area---including me!

SHAY: So if there was a case where they had suspected VC's, how would they go about getting clearance in cases where say the PBRs or say, units of HA(L)3 were not under

fire, were not being assaulted or pre-assaulted? How would the clearance work to be able to pursue them?

WAGES: If you had intelligence on this village or these particularly people, that they were Viet Cong or Viet Cong sympathizers, generally they were taken on by the PRUs. I wish you could have been there later and seen the improvement that Ambassador William Colby made with the Phoenix Program. It was his operation and it really began bearing fruit in late ’69 when they had the intelligence setup in place. Their people, the PRUs, would be the ones that would go after the suspected Viet Cong. This was a CIA program and it was highly successful.

SHAY: I’m not talking about in the plans, I’m talking about in incidents where a PBR would run into something and see a movement or see some people along a river bank that didn’t look right. And let's say they saw somebody carrying a weapon, what would they do? In other words, if you had a counterpart and in most cases if it was near a village, would you get clearance from him?

WAGES: My counterparts wouldn’t be in every village. However, he or his representative would be at the TOC, the Tactical Operations Center. My PBR people, if they saw something that didn’t look right, looked suspicious, they would call in to the USN officer on watch there, who represented me and say, “we see this and this.” And he may say, “well thank you very much, we are aware of that activity.” For instance, if CDR Tan’s PRUs put people in the field, they would be toting AK-47s and they’d have on black pajamas!

SHAY: Of course.

WAGES: You can’t take a soldier, I mean a PBR sailor or a chief or a junior officer and have him look out and immediately assess the situation, unless somebody is shooting at him. We in the TOC at Nha Be always knew what was going on; we had to!

SHAY: It would seem as though you had very few, if none, incidents where PBRs would take anyone under fire, unless they were fired at first based on what you are saying about friendly personnel being in the field.

WAGES: You must remember that our Rung Sat Marine advisors were usually on the ground with the RF troops. Also, there might have been a SEAL mission in the field too. I occasionally went on these RF patrols myself, at night. So I could have been in the field too. There’s a big distinction to make here Peter. Is it night or day? I wasn’t satisfied with the lack of night operations when I took command of the Rung Sat. And I’m not criticizing the guy I relieved, but that’s the way he ran it. So I told my guys right away that you’re going to spend a lot more time out at night than you have been in the past. And sometimes I’ll be with you, but you gotta control the night as well as the day. In the Rung Sat as you know, keeping that busy channel to Saigon clear was our primary mission. I even took issue with Commodore

Chun, the CNO of the Vietnamese Navy who wanted to put armed soldiers on the merchant ships. I strongly opposed that and in a nice way, I told him why. Admiral Zumwalt agreed with me. We had to have positive control in the daytime. After all, the civilian population in the Rung Sat did have to go fishing and they did have to get their charcoal products to market and that sort of thing.

SHAY: So in other words if… I assume HA(L)3 still went out on patrol during the daytime or were they just for training and they did most of their night work.

WAGES: Sure. They always went on patrol, day and night.

SHAY: Now if they reported a suspicious sampan in the middle of a river when they weren't far from T-10 area, what would… Let me give that as an example. Say there are two sampans with some males on them crossing a river, let's say the Dong Tranh River which was right near the T-10 area.

WAGES: Well, if there are no villages there, we turned to the Vietnamese watch officer, a lieutenant, and say…"should we take these sampans under fire?"

SHAY: Would he call the district chief? I just want to understand how somebody verifies that. In other words if free fire zones were gone…

WAGES: Right. The two district headquarters were always in radio contact with our TOC in Nha Be.

SHAY: I'm glad of that, personally. But so how would… Seawolf identify a couple of boats on the river, suspicious males, if that's all they would see?

WAGES: At night?

SHAY: No, no, no. Daytime. I'm talking about daytime.

WAGES: Daytime. They'd report that too, but in all probability those boats were authorized. If there was any doubt, we would order one of our PBR patrols to investigate. We always had twelve PBRs on patrol on the Long Tau River, day and night.

SHAY: Well I'm talking about T-10 area, which was away from any village.

WAGES: Well, it's hard for me to give you a specific answer for an unspecific scenario. Let's do it this way. At night there was what was called "restricted areas" and they were in essence free fire zones. If you go in the south 40 or T-10 or anywhere else at night, the HA(L)3 patrol could roll in on a target. However, even then, they would have to get permission because it could be a covert friendly mission. The HA(L)3 patrols were briefed

on the SEALS' missions of course, but it could also be U.S. Marine advisors and a platoon of RF troops.

SHAY: But they would be briefed before they went out.

WAGES: Yes, uh, huh.

SHAY: On any activity?

WAGES: In the restricted zone, in essence it was, you know, blast away if anyone was there without authorization, but you still had to get clearance from the TOC.

SHAY: Okay.

WAGES: Also, you might have hot intelligence that VC were going to be in this village sometime tonight, that there is going to be a heavily loaded sampan coming in with arms. Now I participated in one of those ops. That night, I embarked in the HA(L)3 aircraft with the OINC of the det. We didn't use the rockets because it was too close to the village. So we used the door gun M-60 and my M-16 to polish off a good-sized sampan full of Viet Cong, ammo and weapons.

SHAY: At night?

WAGES: Yeah. We knew from intelligence reports that some VC were going to be making a move that night…So we caught these guys crossing a small river, and it was dark but we got 'em. We sent them to the happy hunting grounds.

SHAY: Okay.

WAGES: But with those sort of things… you had to eliminate indiscriminate firing. You also know the organization you set up is not going to be foolproof. On one occasion we did have an inadvertent firing of rockets from a HA(L)3 bird that was rolling in on an enemy position as it came back around for another firing run. I don't recall what the electrical system problem was, but anyway, the other twelve rockets were salvoed and some hit near an old man and a young girl on a sampan. We treated them just like they were U.S. wounded.

SHAY: That was daytime?

WAGES: Yeah. We got them up to a hospital in Saigon, and we sent out incident reports, as required to MACV, copy to NAVFORV.

SHAY: Oh, you did.

WAGES: Yeah.

SHAY: So in other words then, any civilian casualties were reported.

WAGES: Absolutely.

SHAY: By the book?

WAGES: Yes. By the book. That's right. You see, in the other areas of the Delta (actually the RSSZ was near but not in the Mekong), the U.S. Navy guys didn't have that reporting responsibility. They made inputs, yes, but the Province Senior Advisor (PSA) had that responsibility. He was the one who made the reports to MACV-CORDS (Civil Operations for Revolutionary Development Support). In the case of the Rung Sat, I was in the CORDS chain. For example, if, in Long An, the province on the other side of the Soi Rap River, that's near the Vam Co River, had a US supported ARVN operation in which civilians were wounded, then the US Army advisor team at the district level reported it to the PSA and he followed it up with a report to MACV-CORDS. There was a fund available for these wounded civilians. I forgot what it was called.

SHAY: Solatium; does that sound right?

WAGES: That's it, a word that comes from SOLACE---I've never used it since I left Vietnam!

SHAY: I know, solatium, because that's something that Kirk Ferguson referred to.

WAGES: Yes, that's it. We would give them whatever amount of money that was required after checking on their condition. That's what my psychological officer, CWO John Haferkamp (now LtCol, USMC, ret.) did, or one of the many things he did.

SHAY: Do you know what village that was or town?

WAGES: No, I don't remember. But it was in the area near the old French Fort.

SHAY: It was on a river.

WAGES: Yeah, it was on one of the rivers. You see, the fact that I was the Rung Sat Senior Advisor, not just the senior naval advisor, but the senior advisor, period, I had responsibility to make sure those reports went into the CORDS chain and that progress reports followed up.

SHAY: But why did you say that down in the Delta they didn't have that responsibility when that was put out by DOD that all civilian casualties had to be reported?

WAGES: Well, DOD says all civilian casualties are to be reported. That doesn't mean that you send a message to McNamara you know.

SHAY: No, no. I don't mean to him but that was a rule that Americans had to report civilian casualties.

WAGES: Well, that's right and USN units in the Delta made inputs too. What I'm saying is the follow-up solatium money to the families or the wounded, their care, and the progress reports, were the responsibility of the advisory people. The Navy tactical units obviously reported civilian casualties that they were aware of, but the follow-up reports and actions were usually carried out by US advisory group personnel—some were military and some were US civilians.

SHAY: Okay.

WAGES: That's the point I'm trying to make, the uniqueness of the Rung Sat, where I was the senior advisor, not the senior naval advisor. I had to insure that there was a follow up inquiry, medical treatment provided and the solatium payment. We had in place a very clear set of rules of engagement. Also, MACV had designated the Rung Sat an Air and Artillery Warning Center (AAWC), which meant that there were restrictions of how high we could fire ordnance. Also, that all transiting aircraft were required to check in with our TOC.

SHAY: Okay.

WAGES: I think with the more junior people in the field when they saw these guys out there tromping through the field, quote "looking suspicious." Well…

SHAY: Suspicious, right?

WAGES: You just don't know, unless you have the whole story you don't know who these folks are.

SHAY: Was the reason that… It seems to have been stricter… You know I'm… In my mind I can't avoid comparing what you were doing in '69 to what I was doing in '67 and '68, but it seems to have gotten stricter. Do you know, was there any reason behind it? Did you read any reports about incidents prior to your taking command, and that was the reason they made it stricter, because of previous experiences?

WAGES: Well, I think all over country it got stricter. I think that it became better organized too. I'm speculating now, but I would say it was the Abrams influence. We had an interesting incident in my time that I remember. As you know, Vung Tau was the Army's location for helicopter depot level repairs.

SHAY: Right.

WAGES: Frequently the Army birds that went down there to be turned over to the maintenance people transited through the Rung Sat. Well, occasionally some crews took pot shots at the local farmers' water buffaloes. This was terrible; it was like shooting at a U. S. farmer's tractor. Well, I had to send some nasty grams to NAVFORV and MACV to get it stopped.

SHAY: So it was stricter.

WAGES: Yeah. There was a significant change in the two to three year period that we were discussing about when you were there in '67 and when I was there in '69 and '70, as far as firing and free fire zones 24 hours a day and this sort of thing.

SHAY: So I take it you didn't have many incidents of friendly civilian casualties?

WAGES: No. We had a few and I investigated them and reported accordingly. We didn't have any case where there was a disregard of regulations or any case that warranted disciplinary action.

SHAY: How did you feel about body count reporting, especially what became of the results of night firefights?

WAGES: My feel on body count is…

SHAY: And were they… Also, was it emphasized heavily like when I was there? Body count, was that the magic number of success?

WAGES: No, my magic number was VC attacks on the merchant ships in the Long Tau River. That was how I got my grade. Body counts had to be related to some aggressive activity or carrying weapons or something like that. You know, don't tell me that you killed an old man and two little kids in a pirogue and call it body count. We followed up on that. I wanted to know that when various units including SEALS came in. Okay, you policed the area that you ambushed. Okay, what did you find? What did you recover? Did you get any weapons? Did you search them in accordance with instructions to see if they had any intelligence material on them? You know…this was routine in ground operations. So, body count was something important but it wasn't stressed.

S**HAY: Who ran the debriefings on operations, when say the SEALS would come back with some results.**

WAGES: The SEALS were required like everybody else to do a report, an OPREP. All units did OPREPs, however the SEALS had their own terminology. And everyone would give a post-op debrief to my operations and intelligence guys.

SHAY: I see.

WAGES: The SEALS did an awful lot of ambushing. That seemed to be their favorite. It had been a very effective tactic in the earlier Rung Sat days.

SHAY: Right.

WAGES: However, I nudged them to occasionally get away from that. Every week I had a meeting of all of the OINCs, det OINCs, or COs, including the SEALS and my ops and intelligence officers. I asked what we had done in the past week. Well, here's the number of ops that this unit did, this unit did, that unit did etc. Here's where they were engaged with the enemy and here's the body count, and any thing else of significance. As we became more organized down there, I was able to see that our PBRs were being a lot more aggressive as I pushed for increased night operations. We would put two boats in night ambush positions at key choke points. I participated in some of these ops so I know they were effective. We started to really get achieve good results from the night PBR operations. So I nudged the SEAL lieutenant OINCs to do some other things. For instance, when we would do a ground operation with RF troops and our Marines, the "stay behind ambush" was perfect for SEALS. And I reminded them about that tactic and what page it was on in the NWIP that was supposed to be their bible. Sure enough, one platoon, I can't think of the lieutenant's name…

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BEGIN SIDE B OF TAPE #2

WAGES: …Oh yeah, it was, Doug Ellis.

SHAY: You named another one didn't you?

WAGES: No, Herb Ruth was the XO. He is deceased now.

SHAY: Right.

WAGES: Chief warrant officer, later a lieutenant.

SHAY: Herb Ruth?

WAGES: Herb was well known in the SEAL community. I think he was one of the SEALS' top operators and a great naval officer. But anyway, I said, "hey, you guys, that's one of your

advertised skills. Let's do it." Then I told him about the situation. Sure enough we made a big hit, I mean his unit made a big hit when…. we came in to extract several of companies of RF troops with U.S. Marine advisors, and usually when they leave an LZ they've been operating out of three or four days, they always leave things behind that the Viet Cong are interested in, for example, ammo and rations, etc. This time the SEALS had some very nice stuff to leave for them; you know some funny ammo.

SHAY: You mean some Claymores?

WAGES: Things from the classified dirty trick department. Anyway, Doug Ellis' team made a real good hit there. So my feeling was, it's okay for ambushes, you know for different units to do ambushes, but I was getting more success out of the PBRs, because we had a pretty good idea where the VC logistic trails would be and where their boats were going to be. That was a perfect place for the PBRs to ambush them.

SHAY: You mentioned intelligence. Two questions. Who ran the intelligence? And did you think it was very effective, the intelligence that you received?

WAGES: Yes. Who ran it? Well, there were different intelligence agencies there. NAVFORV had a captain, assistant chief of staff for intelligence.

SHAY: They had a captain at Nha Be?

WAGES: No, no. At Admiral Zumwalt's headquarters in Saigon.

SHAY: Okay. It came down from headquarters, but…

WAGES: I actually had several staff intelligence officers, full time USN and USMC. Also we had the DIOCs and the PIOC. You don't know what those are, do you? They were new groups.

SHAY: No.

WAGES: Well, it was the CIA money that put these intelligence centers in place. The DIOC was for District Intelligence Operational Center. There were two of those in the Rung Sat, in the two biggest villages, Can Gio and Quang Xuyen. At Nha Be was the PIOC, which was a Province Intelligence Operations Center. This CIA run operation was our best source of intelligence.

SHAY: In the villages, the DIOC?

WAGES: The DIOC. We had one in each of the two district headquarters in the Rung Sat. They each had a DIOC.

SHAY: Do you remember where they were, which towns?

WAGES: Can Gio and Quang Xuyen were the two district headquarters in the Rung Sat. Each had a DIOC and they reported to the PIOC in Nha Be.

SHAY: Okay.

WAGES: Okay. The CIA money or I should say the CORDS/CIA money. This was part of Operation Phoenix. They organized it and hired people. We had local fisherman who actually carried out transponders and put them underneath their sampans. When the Viet Cong came around to collect taxes, the fisherman turned the beeper on and one of our operational units would get involved, usually PBRs or HA(L)3 gunships. Operation Phoenix was funding all of that and providing the equipment. So we got good local intelligence from them. Also, the 525th Military Intelligence Group in Saigon; our Marine advisors worked closely with them. Of course, the Marine advisors, being Marines, had a lot of friends and colleagues at the Marine Advisory Group in Saigon, which was also a source of intelligence. It was all agreed there in the Rung Sat that the 525th Military Intelligence Group were real pros in their business. They gathered a lot of hot intelligence and knew when things were to happen, the kind of intelligence an operator can jump on, like tonight, or tomorrow morning, or something like that. I gotta be honest, even though the man who ran intelligence for Admiral Zumwalt subsequently became a flag officer, I did not get the best intelligence from NAVFORV, but I think it was due to our unique tactical situation in the Rung Sat.

SHAY: I see.

WAGES: The thing to remember about my counterpart, he was a VNN commander, but he had been ARVN intelligence officer for most of his military career. Then he transferred to the VNN. The VNN headquarters felt that with his Army intelligence background, he would be the ideal choice commander for the Rung Sat, and he was!

SHAY: That's Commander Tan?

WAGES: Yeah. Captain Tan. He was a commander with me and then made captain later. He had replaced a Navy fellow who had gone to a French naval academy and stuff like that, but it was more of a ground environment down there in the Rung Sat as you know. For a long time they didn't utilize the regional force troops that they had. They didn't train them adequately. They gave them carbines and green uniforms and didn't do much else. So, those are the different sources we got intelligence from. I'd say as for effective intelligence, number one was what we got from the Operation Phoenix operations. Because I was tasked to support their field ops with boats and helos I had an officer that was assigned to the PIOC full time, a Marine officer. The second source of good intelligence was the Army's 525th Military Intelligence Group. Last was the Navy.

I think the Navy did a very commendable job in other areas of the Delta operation, but since the Rung Sat was so inter-wound with army ops, it was a bit out of their league. I felt the Navy, U.S. and VNN were the least effective providers to us down there. I'm just looking at it from my viewpoint in a five hundred square mile area of responsibility.

SHAY: Okay. What was the status of the civilian population in the town of Nha Be? In other words, when you were there, did you think they shared their loyalties, or were they 100% pure American? We know of course that a lot of the employees, the base employees came from the town.

WAGES: I had advisors right there in town with their counterparts. I think the majority of the people in the Rung Sat and in Nha Be in particular were pro-American, pro-South Vietnamese government. Of course a number of them made their living off of us. You know, starting with the Cos and Bas (slang for the Vietnamese girls and women that came to clean the rooms and take out the trash and that sort of stuff). They all made very good pay down there working for the Americans.

SHAY: Some VC used to also, at least when I was there, used to come from the town and go and do some work. Did you get much feedback about that?

WAGES: Not in Nha Be. Now we knew from the enemy order of battle that there was some support of guerillas in a few of the Rung Sat villages. Those guerilla units were not organized Viet Cong main force units, but they were guerillas nevertheless. When we sorted out everything, intelligence-wise and got the facts instead of a lot of speculation, we are talking about maybe a squad of guerillas that were supported by this village or that village. That's where these DIOCs came in. They did a tremendous amount of research on local people and they made dossiers on all the officials. Then if there were people down there that were bona fide Viet Cong supporters, the PRUs [Provincial Reconnaissance Units] went in and you didn't see those guys any more. I really don't know where they took them or what they did with them.

SHAY: That was the Phoenix program.

WAGES: This was all set up by Ambassador Colby after Tet 68. It was very well organized and very well run. Yes, there were VC supporters down in some villages in the Rung Sat, but I'll tell you, they were on thin ice there when I left in '70.

SHAY: Briefly, since I have about fifteen minutes left, could you tell me, what was your relationship as Rung Sat leader, which you explained was a little bit different because of its proximity to Saigon, what was your relationship with Roy Faulk, who was the task force commander?

WAGES: Roy Faulk**,** and I'm repeating what you know to make sure it gets in the record. Captain Roy Faulk, as you know, was Commander Task Force 116, and as such, he also commanded Operation Game Warden. Later he also became the field commander of Operations Sea Lords, but I wasn't involved in those operations.

SHAY: You fell under him?

WAGES: Administratively, he was Commander River Patrol Flotilla Five. But that's on the TYCOM admin side. In that role Roy Faulk saluted COMPHIBPAC back in Coronado. As an additional duty, I was an operational commander under Roy for all the TF116.9 assets. I went to commander's conferences and I gave him and his staff my pitch as to why I ought to have zippo boat instead of some of the other task group commanders and I bargained back and forth with TF 116 assets. But my regular reporting senior was not Roy Faulk; it was Vice-Admiral Elmo Zumwalt. A lot of people forget this because the Rung Sat was so unique. I was in a billet that was specifically for the Senior Advisor of the Rung Sat Special Zone. For a number of years, before the PBRs and HA(L)3 got there, the guy was just the Senior Advisor- Rung Sat Special Zone. This was before the USN TF 116 operating units came. You probably were in the first group to come over there with the HA(L)3, weren't you?

SHAY: Yes.

WAGES: When the build up started with the TF 116 assets, I think for the first few months there was a separate lieutenant commander who was called CTG 116.2 in those days. When I got there, for several years the Senior Advisor also had additional duty as Commander Rung Sat Special Zone-River Patrol Group (CTG 116.9).

SHAY: So you reported directly to Admiral Zumwalt?

WAGES: Yes. But I did have TF116 collateral duty responsibilities to Commodore Faulk.

SHAY: I see. Okay, my last question. Actually I have two more questions. While you were there, what did you think about whether we won the local war? I think you might have already answered this. Do you think we won? Also maybe you want to compare this to when you arrived and when you left. Do you think we won the loyalty or lost it of the civilian population in your area?

WAGES: Yes, I think we won tactically, meaning militarily, without a doubt. I think overall we won the decision. I think tactically we won by a knock out and I think the winning the friendship and the loyalty of the people there, we won that too, but by decision. It was something you had to continually work on; you couldn't take it for granted. We had cases of Charlie knowing that we were getting intelligence that had to have been provided by locals. Once the VC held, and I'll never forget this, because I had a daughter about the same age

back in Honolulu, an impromptu kangaroo court that lasted less then an hour. Anyway, they decapitated this young girl for being suspected of reporting locations of VC tax collectors.

SHAY: What town was that in?

WAGES: It was on the edge of a riverbank. It wasn't in a town. We'd been on top of it in a town, because we had advisors there. They, the VC, just pulled a couple of fishing boats over on the bank and set up a little court. The local populace were taking their hits from the Viet Cong too, even little eleven year old girls!

SHAY: So we had Phoenix on one side and they had the VC on the other side doing dirty business.

WAGES: Uh huh.

SHAY: Right.

WAGES: Yeah. Counter-insurgency war is a dirty business, a very dirty business.

SHAY: I know.

WAGES: About loyalties, I see what you mean, yeah

SHAY: I'm talking about the people… I just finished reading a book called "When Heaven and Earth Divide." They made a movie out of it. It's about the Vietnamese population caught in the middle between the VC and their government at that time. They had to play two roles sometimes.

WAGES: Well, yeah, I'm sure. There is another thing that I tell people frequently, when I get asked, or if I give a little talk on my Vietnam experiences. I say, I can tell you that for almost fourteen months in an area of Vietnam that most Americans never heard about, I can tell you all about the Rung Sat Special Zone operation and how we did it and that we were winning there. We did well, you would proud of our young men there. I can't tell you, however, specifics about many other places in Vietnam. I knew what was going on generally. I knew what kind of forces were there. I knew that in the river wars we did a great job overall, but I said, the area that I am particularly knowledgeable about is the RSSZ.

SHAY: Right. So my last question would be, is there anything you would have done differently if you had the opportunity to repeat your tour?

WAGES: I don't think so. If there's anything I might say it wouldn't have been anything tactical in the field, but in the preparation for service there. I would have given a bit more training to people going to the key positions over there and taken advantage of those

wonderful schools that the Special Forces offered, mostly at the Fort Bragg. I would have done that. As I told you before, I did a lot of reading on riverine warfare at the Navy War College. I did a thesis on it, so I did a lot of research, and I felt I probably had a better feel for riverine ops then most of the O-5's. If I had to recommend something to make us operate better, I would have given select field commanders, mostly which were O-5's, a longer training pipeline that included language training and in-depth counter-insurgency courses.

SHAY: Okay. What was your most memorable experience when you were there?

WAGES: That's easy**.** I guess my most memorable experience, besides being able to work directly for Admiral Zumwalt, was being told that we, the Rung Sat Special Zone River Patrol Group, had won the Presidential Unit Citation.

SHAY: I see. That's terrific.
[END]