



## **Mike Eldredge**

Interview Utah Vietnam War Stories, KUED

### **Interviewer**

Give us your full name.

## **Mike Eldredge**

Michael S. Eldredge.

### **Interviewer**

And where are you from?

## **Mike Eldredge**

Ogden, originally. Salt Lake for now.

### **Interviewer**

Did you grow up in Ogden?

## **Mike Eldredge**

Yeah.

### **Interviewer**

And you went to high school in Ogden?

## **Mike Eldredge**

Yeah. Ogden High School.

### **Interviewer**

And your dad was in the Navy?

## **Mike Eldredge**

Yeah, my dad was actually in WWII on Guam and then when he came home, he got out. The Navy asked him to come back in and build the Ogden Reserve Center and we have a picture of it there. So, he built it and then he resigned his commission and went to work for Reter Kiewit.

### **Interviewer**

And you were telling us that in high school you had some political feelings about the war in Vietnam.

## **Mike Eldredge**

It didn't start until my senior year, about halfway through, when they had the Tet Offensive. I remember I did a paper - it was on the Tet Offensive. It was Current Affairs. While I was reading all the Time magazine and US News & World Report, my hair began to stand up on end. I thought, wait a minute! We may be there in a year. In fact, later on towards the end of the year some of the guys who had gone out that graduated a year before were coming back from Vietnam wounded. It was a pretty scary prospect. Then I went to Weber State, and after my first quarter there I got married. But I was a major in Political Science, and one of the classes I took had a book called War Comes to Long An and that started me thinking like, we shouldn't be there. But at the same time I had always wanted to be like my father. Wanted to be in the Navy. My grandmother used to always encourage me to go to Annapolis but I didn't have the grades or the wherewithal or the gumption or whatever.

Anyway, I still wanted to be in the Navy. So it was a bit of turmoil in me. But at Weber State they had demonstrations but they weren't much. Nothing like University of Wisconsin or Cal Berkeley or any of those. They were rioting and there was violence. So anyway, in 1969, my second year, I decided I would join the Naval Reserve anyway. And it was a good thing because the draft came up. The lottery. And my birthday drew out number 88 and they went that year. I had a friend who was born the same day, I think his name was Gale Ryugin, and he was born the same day I was. I think he went and I have yet to hear his story but Gale, if you're out there.... But anyway, I went to OCS in two summers. In the summer of 1970 and in the summer of '71 I was commissioned. The Navy gave me a year off to get my masters degree in International Relations (that was Utah State), and towards the end of the year the Army ROTC commander called me and he had received communication from the Navy and they wanted to know my interest in teaching at the Naval post-graduate school. By then I said "Nah. Put me on a ship". John Paul Jones says, "Give me a fast ship going in harm's way." So they did, they put me on the first ship to Vietnam. And I was assigned Communications Officer aboard the USS San Bernardino.

### **Interviewer**

So when did you arrive in Vietnam?

## **Mike Eldredge**

Late September of 1972.

## Interviewer

What was going on? We were winding down by then weren't we?

## Mike Eldredge

We were winding down in October/November but Operation Linebacker started up in December when they started bombing the bejeezees out of the North Vietnam. What we would do is we were part of an amphibious ready group. There was ARG Alpha and ARG Bravo. I think we were ARG Bravo. And in our amphibious ready group we had USS Fresno LST-1182, the USS Tulare, the USS Ogden named for Ogden, and the USS Monticello. And we would sit off the DMZ and "drill holes in the ocean" we called it. It was very tedious and very - you wondered what to do. I mean you could see Vietnam from the ship, North Vietnam actually. It looked like it was close as Antelope Island but probably Promontory Point up there. But you could see it. We drilled holes in the ocean day and night. In December, we would go on the line for three to four weeks and then we'd come off for three to four weeks. We'd rotate with ARG Alpha.

In December, they started escalating the bombing and sometimes at night too we'd see contrails of four B-52's flying over and they'd light up the horizon like old Victor at Sea movies. There just was flashing but no sound, and then a little while later you'd hear the low rumble. We'd see three contrails going back, meaning they shot one down. It was tedious. We were loaded with Marines, our ship. Our ship carried twice as many Marines as there were Navy personnel. In case they needed to land we could land in an instant. The Marines sat there and played cards and drank all the Coke out of the Coke machines. They'd drain the Coke machines. They took all the seats up in the wardroom. I mean there's a love-hate relationship with the Navy and Marine Corps. And this is one of the times you hate the Marine Corps because they were so tiresome to take care of.

One day all the Second Lieutenants and First Lieutenants sat down in the wardroom and parked their fannies there and we could never rest or relax for a minute. And so one day while we were in Subic Bay, I went over and got a tape recording of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing "From the Halls of Montezuma." If you're Second Lieutenant or First Lieutenant when you play the "Halls of Montezuma" you have to stand up at attention. So we went and put that baby in the cassette and "dum-dum-dum-dum" they stood up and we slid in behind 'em. That's how we got our seats.

## Interviewer

So this is '72, you guys are on ship. Are you hearing from home at all?

## Mike Eldredge

Oh yeah. We had mail regularly from home. It sometimes came and you'd get four or five letters at a time. Sometimes you had regular mail delivery like when we were in Subic. Subic Bay is in the Philippines. That's your homeport while you're in the Seventh Fleet. It's quite a place. We'd get mail regularly but when you're out on the line we'd probably get it once a week.

## Interviewer

Being Communications Officer did you have access to radios and things like that?

## Mike Eldredge

As Communications Officer I was a Top Secret Control Officer for the online crypto machines. We had an IBM card that had the daily code that we snapped in. We would sync the broadcast. It had to be all in sync. So we had Broadcast A and Broadcast B and then we had Test Group Orestes, which was a voice transmission, I think. I'm not sure, maybe not. I can't remember. But I had custody of all the IBM cards that changed the code every day so that's why I had a top-secret clearance. On the broadcast it was just like having UPI or AP, the broadcasts were running all the time. I can remember one night the Navy has a classification of priorities that has the acronym ZOPR.

Routine messages are - just handle them when you get them and you have time.

Priority messages you have to put on the clipboard and take around the officers who are in need of seeing it.

Operational Immediate, you had to respond within a certain amount of time. And Z was flash. One night we were in the Gulf of Tonkin and drilling holes in the ocean. I was sound asleep and about three o'clock in the morning a radioman came in and knocked on my door and burst in the room. He showed me the message board and his hand was shaking. I cleared my eyes and it was a Z for flash. It means you have to respond immediately. It wasn't addressed to all the ships in the Seventh Fleet and Yankee Station. It was addressed to us. And all the members of our Amphibious Ready Group. And I immediately came away and -huh! It was an offline crypto. It wasn't an online crypto, which was automatically translated. It was five letter groups. It was a throwback to the old German Enigma Machine. It was called a KLB-47 and I was the only one on the ship that had been trained on it because I'd been to Comm Officer's School.

So I leaped out of bed in my skivvies and ran to the radio shack and began sending up the rotors - there's a little rotor in a basket that you put up. Then put it in and you run a test strip and the test strip didn't work. And there are 23 things that you have to trouble shoot to get the machine to break it. So I pulled out the book, started on number one and my Chief Radioman, he was a crusty old guy, Chief Kane, I loved him. He took off his chief's hat and whacked me on the top of my head and said, "Start at 23 and work backwards. All the other stupid Ensigns in the fleet are working from 1-2-3" So I started on 23 and it broke on 21. And it basically was a message that said four

Komar Boats - they're Russian Styx missile boats, had sortied from Tiger Island and were headed our direction. So we took the broken message and immediately slapped it on task group and send it in the clear to all the other ships. It was still encrypted.

The captain was standing over me too in this little vault. I swear he'd light a cigarette and he didn't exhale. The minute he read it he called Combat Information Center and what had happened is we normally had the destroyer screen around us protecting us. The destroyer screen had gone off to Kitty Hawk to plane guard. I don't know if really the Komar boats had sortied from Tiger Island but some people say it was just an exercise that they pulled on us all the time. But the captain was sure enough concerned. He knew we were armed with two, three inch 50 anti-aircraft guns and that was it. He knew that the Komar boats could fire a Styx missile a mile before they came in range of our guns.

So he said "Pick out the Kitty Hawk (aircraft carrier) on the radar and head for it as fast as you can". I went upstairs and I got my uniform on and got my life jacket on and got my helmet on. My roommate said (he's a CIC officer, Bill Muller), he said, "What's up?" I said, "I can't tell you it's top secret, but I'm going to the Signal Bridge because if a Styx Missile was coming toward the ship that would be the first place you could dive off of". But we didn't get any missile but it was pretty fun. Kept me awake for three days.

### **Interviewer**

So you were there when the plane carrying the POW's flew overhead.

### **Mike Eldredge**

Yeah, it was early in February. On the 15th or so of January they ceased all offensive actions. That meant that we just barely left the line and cruised south just to get away from Vietnam and we went and down and crossed the line (Equator) by Singapore and then went up to Singapore. And we were actually in Singapore the day a peace accord was signed. That was the 27th of January. We immediately got underway the next day and headed straight to Subic to off-load our Marines because we had to come back to the line to support the minesweeping operations. I think the day the, I think it was a C5A - a big jet took off, you could see it from Hai Phong - we were out quite a ways, but this little spec was supposedly the airplane.

Everybody was watching for it. Again we had the broadcasts so we knew the news instantly when it was happening. It was quiet. There were a lot of old crusty first-class sailors that had tears in their eyes. It was quiet and we watched it. We couldn't hear it. We'd watch it. I thought, you know, Lieutenant Alvarez was on that. He was the second longest POW. He had been shot down when I was in Junior High School, 1964. And here I'd gone to high school, gone to college, gotten married, I had a son, I got my Masters degree, then I got commissioned and I came over. That's all the things that I did while he was sitting in prison. And it really unnerved me. Made me reflective of it. I just remember it was real quiet on ship.

### **Interviewer**

Were you wearing a John McCain bracelet?

### **Mike Eldredge**

Yeah, I had John McCain's. We had gone over in Honolulu before we actually came to Vietnam and we all got John McCain bracelets. We knew who John McCain was. We knew his father was CINCPAC (Commander in Chief - Pacific). He wasn't on the first plane but he came about a month later. And we all heard stories - some were mythical some were true. We knew who John McCain was and we'd all seen him on the Navy film about the Forrestal burning and how we got out of that I'll never know. But we all had to sit through that for training. Again, I think we took them off in Subic just before we came home and mailed them to him. About 6 or 7 officers all had John McCain bracelets.

### **Interviewer**

So you're hearing radio broadcasts regularly because you're on ship and you're Communications Officer. I mean the news, the network news. And you're against the war before you go.

### **Mike Eldredge**

Well, I didn't think we should be there. But, again, I felt like if my friend Jack Everts had to go and he was killed in Vietnam, he was a high school buddy, if he had to go then I would go. It doesn't mean you have to be for or against something. But I would never dream of going to Canada. I just had an opinion that we shouldn't be there. But my opinion - you had to do your duty to serve and I was all for that. I remember the day we crossed into the combat zone the first time in October of '72. The XO (Executive Officer) called all the junior officers to the wardroom. (The XO's the Executive Office, second in command.) He had a big cigar and he flipped out these little boxes that we opened up and it was our Vietnam Campaign medal. The yellow and green striped, and Chuck Snow and I left them on the table.

We'd planned to do that because there weren't many ways you could show your opposition to the war but that was one of them. You're only required to wear the National Defense medal. So we looked it up in Navy Regs and said OK, well let's not wear it for now. So we left it on the table and boy the EXO got mad. He threatened to pull my clearance and called me a commie. Every name in the book. I just reminded him, I just said, we just elected not to wear it because we didn't have to. Of course, towards the end of the deployment and after the war was over we

went and grabbed the medal. We had to put it on because we were some of the few who had been to Vietnam.

**Interviewer**

So when you came home, you had a different kind of homecoming than a lot of men, didn't you?

**Mike Eldredge**

Yes. The Fresno LST-1182 I think, and us, we were the last two ships in our squadron to come home. And when we entered San Diego harbor on I think it was April 29th, we were the last two ships. We turned out the lights and closed the door. We came into San Diego harbor. The Navy pretty much owns all of San Diego Bay. The narrowest point is right at the entrance of the harbor you have North Island Air Station on the right and the submarine piers on the left. So if anyone was going to demonstrate they would have had to do it there, but they couldn't because that was federal property. So we came into San Diego Harbor. I think we were the last ship. Fresno was ahead of us. All these fireboats were squirting water in the air. It was a grand return. Both times we came back, the second time was just before Saigon fell, but they actually had a lei that they draped over the front of our ship. We really felt welcome and glad to be home. San Diego is a Navy city, and we turned south down the San Diego harbor and went under the bridge and then you're at 32nd street Naval Station. We pulled into the piers. Nobody could have ever gotten away with demonstrating. I don't think I saw anybody. And the band was playing on the pier and it was stormy that day.

It was really stormy so all the wives and dependents came on board the ship rather than us streaming down the bow towards the pier because it was raining. That happened to me two times, I was welcomed home. It wasn't like Travis. And actually, when I visited the Vietnam Memorial years later it was 1987 about 4 years after the dedication of the memorial, and we had gone back to Washington. There were 50 of us graduates from BYU who had been invited back there to be sworn into the Supreme Court. Rex Lee, who was our Dean, was the Solicitor General then, he had just gotten sick with the lymphoma I think it was. He was very, very sick. He was in a wheelchair and had no hair, was gray and he didn't look very good at all. He wanted to do this on the anniversary of the Constitution so we went in and we had a banquet afterwards. My wife Michelle and I went over that evening to the Vietnam Memorial, The Wall, and we entered from the northeast corner. You can't see the wall but then you come around and you can see it and it's really impressive.

We walked around and I thought I would look up some names of some friends from OCS that had been killed. Jack Everts. They had this big book. Looked like the Salt Lake yellow pages book and it unnerved me. I just froze. All these names and you see 58,000 names on the wall. That's a lot of names. And you just get stunned and overwhelmed and as I said it was rather cathartic. And so we just walked and it was so peaceful. But I thought this is closure to the war for me at least because I think it's personalized the way that The Wall has all the names.

That personalizes it more than say another memorial that doesn't have names but has a big grandiose statue. We saw pictures and we saw flowers and letters and there weren't many because I think they clean it off every night and they had cleaned it off already. Then when we came up the Lincoln Memorial side, there were tents pitched and there were a few vets sitting in the tents and I went up and started talking to him and the first thing he said was "welcome home." And I thought, no, it's me that should welcome home because I was welcomed home in 1973 but he wasn't. So I think it's more or less my duty to all Vietnam vets I ever see. I always welcome them home because I was lucky. But so many come into Travis. They were treated shabbily. So I owe it to them.

**Interviewer**

Do you want to say it to us right now?

**Mike Eldredge**

Welcome home.

**Interviewer**

Can I get you to say again that you owe it to them to say, "welcome home", all in one?

**Mike Eldredge**

I was welcomed home in 1973. I had a great welcome home, and I knew that so many of the soldiers, especially who went through Travis Air Force base were spat on and treated shabbily, and the first time it had ever been said to me was that night at the Vietnam Wall. This soldier, this vet who was manning the tent, and giving information and helping all the visitors he could, he said to me "Welcome home." And I thought for a minute and I said, "well, I should welcome you home because I was welcomed home. You weren't." And so I feel an obligation whenever I see a Vietnam vet to welcome him home. I just say, "Welcome home". And Vietnam vets seem to know what that means. Even though they've been welcomed home, they had the memorial and they're featured guests at airshows in Las Vegas and everything, it's still "Welcome home".

**Interviewer**

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about?

**Mike Eldredge**

What we used to do on the line. I remember one night it was really quiet. We were falling asleep. And once we had to keep ourselves amused so we had two scrambled radios. One of them was called PRI TAC and one was called



PRI CI. And the PRI CI was Combat Information. And the CIC Watch Officer came out on the bridge and was visiting with me so he guarded the radio on the bridge. That means he was listening to it. One night we were just talking silently, and pretty soon the radio would go "beep", and that meant it was in sync and you could talk. And so it goes "beep" "Short timers countdown. 33 days". And then "beep" another ship would come up "12 days". "Beep", another come, "23 days". One guy came up "beep", "3 days". And pretty soon an enraged officer came on the line and said, "This is the OTC (the Officer in Tactical Command), this is the OTC himself! I want to know who's out there disrespecting the use of this net!" Silence. "Beep" "I ain't that short."

A short timer was defined as someone who was going back to the world - back home in a few days. He said "I ain't that short". Then one time when we dropped the Marines off. We dropped the Marines off at Okinawa. We call it The Rock. I was the Junior Officer on the ship so I had to be the liaison, off-load the Marines and "cuming" them into I think it was Camp Butler. And they were all sitting around this amphitheater, grumbling, and the Marines were taking so long and they got pretty near dark. So my counterpart, the liaison Junior Officers, got on the microphone and says "OK, we don't have this done tonight so we won't have liberty tonight". And oh, grumble, grumble, grumble. And way in the back the voice says, "Give me liberty or give me death!" And this second lieutenant of course says, "Who said that? Who said that?" Silence. "Patrick Henry, you dumb shit!"

It was comical. I mean you had a lot of like crossing the line. I mean crossing the line is a big thing. It's a service jacket entry. When we went south from Vietnam in the middle just before the peace accords, we steamed down and crossed the line below Singapore and came back. And it is the most horrific hazing I've ever been through. I mean you have to kiss the Bosun's belly and he smears it with this axle grease and grabs my head and smears it. It's ghastly. I mean they would whip you with what they called sheleilles that were cut-off fire hose and they'd whack you and whack---it hurt! But I can see why it's a service jacket entry because if you ever go through it again you gotta have a new service jacket or you gotta got through the whole initiation again. But it's a time-honored initiation.

## **Interviewer**

Were you ever talking about the war amongst your fellow officers?

## **Mike Eldredge**

About my feelings toward the war. Maybe with Chuck and I. Chuck was a little more adamant than I was. But by then it was winding down. When I was in college in Weber State, there wasn't any prospect of the war ending. There just seemed to be all this uncertainty but by the time I got out there it was pretty certain the war was gonna end. We were surprise Operation Linebacker when they started up the bombing in December. I mean Ho Chi Minh; he was the devil incarnate as far as the Navy was concerned. President Nixon, I later found out, his detente moves to the Russians and the Chinese had put North Vietnam on the spot. Because if their relations aren't improved then maybe they wouldn't get the support from the Chinese and the Russians. As we saw it then, on January 27th when the peace accords occurred, we knew that it was time for us to leave and that North Vietnam would eventually come crashing down on South Vietnam eventually.

I mean it was Nixon's way of seeing we're getting out and shutting the door. He told the South Vietnamese president you can take it or leave it but we're getting out of here. Come 1975, it came to fruition. Also, didn't I talk to you about the second time when we went over, we went over a year later and just as we were relieved by the USS Frederick, we came home and we again were watching a broadcast and all this Cambodian turmoil started to arise and the North Vietnamese started marching on South Vietnam and it was the beginning of the end.

South Vietnam fell and then they captured the Mayaguez, the ship, and took it to Kho Tang Island. We had trained for months and months, always had that San Clemente for a secret insertion of Seals at night. They would paddle ashore and get all the captive pilots or whatever. It was always a pilot scenario in this battle plan. But it could have just as easily been the crew of Mayaguez. But they didn't use us. They didn't use the SEAL team for that operation. They just took Air Force helicopters from Okinawa loaded with Marines and landed at Kho Tang Island. It was a big mistake. I think it was 18 Marines were killed. They were pinned down on the beach. USS Henry B. Wilson was off shore, it was a destroyer, it was cruising the surf line point blank range shooting at the Cambodians trying to get the Marines out of there.

Finally with the Cambodians they were dropping so much ordinance on that island that they couldn't get their crewmembers with Mayaguez back fast enough. The last thing I think they dropped was a big bomb on a parachute and it blew the island to bits. Cambodia, I knew a lot of pilots that flew missions into Cambodia. Cambodia was the whipping boy. I mean it settled all the frustration of the pilots who had been flying for Vietnam for years and then it fell so they took it out on Cambodia. So it was a pretty bloody affair.

## **Interviewer**

Would you mind once again telling me the meaning of saying, "Welcome home" when vets say it to one another. Because we want to connect with the veterans out there, and you do it very well.

## **Mike Eldredge**

It was at the Vietnam Memorial when we walked up on the Lincoln Memorial side there were tents pitched and there were Army tents, and they had various items of information of various items you could purchase. This one vet talked to me, he said "Are you a Vietnam vet?" I said, "I am". He said, "Welcome home". I paused for a minute and I

thought well, no, it's me that should welcome you home. Because I had a fine welcome home in 1973. I had every bit that you ever hope for. He also gave me a little pin that is the Vietnam Service medal, the green and white ribbon that Vietnam ordered.

He gave me a pin and I still wear it on my collar on my jacket. And I decided that night, since I knew now that "welcome home" was a catchword that it was my duty to welcome all the other Vietnam vets home because, again, I had received a great welcome home and he hadn't. So, every time I see a Vietnam vet I say, "welcome home." I don't say "Glad you served" or "Proudly you served", it's always "welcome home". That has a special meaning for Vietnam vets. Even though they've probably been welcomed home several times over in the past 30 years, from Vietnam vet to Vietnam vet it's "welcome home." So every chance I get I say "welcome home" because I was welcomed home. Usually they can't reply. They've got tears in their eyes, like I'm gonna get. Dang it, I thought I was gonna get through it, but... Anyway, that's it. Welcome home.

### **Interviewer**

I'm very happy with what you've said to us, but it's your chance to talk to if you have other things you want to say.

### **Mike Eldredge**

No, I can't think of anything. I mean, the Vietnam War, if it was right or wrong, it happened. Thirty years later it's still a part of my life; it's still a part of every Vietnam vet's life. Oxford University did a study in the mid-nineties that I think claimed that there were more suicides among the Vietnam vets that exceeded the number of names on the wall. I don't know if that's true or not, but I know there were a lot of Vietnam vets who committed suicide. I know that a lot of Iraq and Afghanistan vets are having trouble with that. You call a VA, a hospital, and one of the first things they say is "Hey, if you think you're gonna harm yourself, call this number in a hurry". Because the stress of war is...I can't imagine. I wasn't a hero of the ground-pounders. Humpin' the boonies were heroes. I wasn't. I was a rear echelon mf, you can use your own imagination, but I never considered myself a hero I was just support. The ground pounders were the real heroes. Guys like Jack Everts, he died I think in 1971 just before I was commissioned. I don't know of any other Ogden High graduates that did but I'm sure there were many. There are a lot of vets up there, so.

### **Interviewer**

Well this is terrific. Thank you.