Thomas Davis
Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer
Give us your full name.

Thomas Davis
Thomas E. Davis.

Interviewer
And what year were you born?

Thomas Davis
I was born in 1948, May 1st.

Interviewer
And what was your rank when you left Vietnam?

Thomas Davis
E-4.

Interviewer
Where were you raised?

Thomas Davis
I was born in Seattle, and we left Seattle when I was 13 years old and moved to Montana for about six months. My dad worked for the Boeing aircraft company, and he was employed in the installation of the Minuteman missile system, so we would move from, like, Great Falls, Montana; we went to Rapid City, South Dakota; and then after about a year, we moved to Riverdale, North Dakota; and three months after that we moved to Sedalia, Missouri; and then to Kimmel, Nebraska; and then they moved back to North Dakota, and that's where I finished high school – in Grafton, North Dakota about 45 miles north of Grand Forks. So we were referred to as missile gypsies, and I guess it was a preempt to going in the service. When they said, "We got 30 minutes to go, and we're moving out," and I could be fully packed in ten minutes and ready to go because we went from a six-bedroom home to a 10-by-50-foot mobile home with about a 3-foot tip out in it. My bedroom was about the size of my closet back in Washington.
But it made me more adaptable to situations and being with people and that stuff because I was an introvert. And then after doing this and that, it was a piece of cake, you know, this was fun. And Grafton, North Dakota – I just attended my 45th high school reunion in June and, even though I moved to other places, that town accepted us missile kids better than any other town there was. So when people would say, "Well, where you from?" and I'd tell 'em I'm from North Dakota, and that was it even though my parents were transferred here to Utah in 1967.

Interviewer
How did you get into the Coast Guard?

Thomas Davis
Well, I registered in North Dakota when I turned 18. We moved right after I graduated from high school – we moved to Sedalia, Missouri. I had to re-register, of course – I was in a different state. And, I think it was the 23rd or 24th of July, like a month and a half after I registered, I got a notice to appear at the induction center in Kansas City for a physical. And I rode the bus from Sedalia up there, and I was only 18, and everybody else was older, like 20. And we went through the progress and everything, and I come out 1-A. And I asked 'em, "What are we going to do?" And they said, "We going to go in the room and enlist." And I said, "Well, I don't even know what I'm qualified as yet." This is my first time here, so they put me in the hallway. And when they came out, they lined up and got directions to go out and get on the bus and go to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. And this Marine come out and he said, "Two, four, six, ten. You ten stand over there." And they asked where they were going, and they said, "Camp Pendleton." And one of 'em said, "You can't draft us." He said, "You're government property, and I just filled my quota." And then he asked me, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm outta here is what I'm doing," and I got outside, and I thought about it and that, and I went there's no sense to this.
So I went to the courthouse in Kansas City and decided let's get it over with, and I went up to join the Army. I wanted to be an Army Airborne. And he was going to lunch and told me he'd be back in two hours, and the Coast Guard guy was there walking up and down the halls and said, "You don't want to go in the Army," and he said, "Come on in, and take a test." And I guess I did pretty good on the test, and he asked me when I wanted to go. And this was in August of 1966, and I said, "I want to go in two weeks." He said, "I can't do that," but he said, "I can guarantee you January 20th, so you'll be home for Christmas." I signed a bunch of papers, and he said, "The only thing you'll have to do is come in here and raise your hand and be sworn in, and you're done. Here's my card. If the

draft gets on you, give me a call." And January 20th of 1967 I went to Kansas City, and I joined, and we went from there to Philadelphia, and then to Cape May, New Jersey for 13 weeks of basic training.

Interviewer

How did you end up in small boats, and how did you end up in Vietnam?

Thomas Davis

Well, the Coast Guard deals with search and rescue and everything else. And the Navy contacted the Coast Guard and said, "We need people with experience and your smaller vessels. And if you are willing to give us 26 vessels, we'll build two for every one you give us and update the boats for the United States." And they said, “Great, this is what they'll do.” So they picked out, throughout the United States, the different vessels that could be taken, and they were put on a transport ship in different ports and that and then taken to Subic Bay, the Philippines, and then put in the water, and the crews got onto 'em and that stuff, and away they went. But we received training before we went there. We went through SEER training – I don't know if you've seen the movie G.I. Jane where they got beat up a little bit and that stuff – well, all of us went through that in Warner Springs, California, and it was an eye-opening experience.

It had physical contact, and when it went too far and you got aggressive back, they would stop it and say, "You're dead –” and these instructors were former POWs – “You can't do that in this situation.” And then after that training was done, we flew to Subic Bay and went to Jungle Survival School and was there two weeks and then left from there into Vietnam. We already had specific orders, what division we were going to go to. It was comprised of 26 vessels, and they were split up from Division 12 in the North in Da Nang; and Division 13, which was Cat Lo, South Vietnam about 55 miles southeast of Saigon; and then Division 11 started at the border of Thailand and worked back around up a ways on the coast, you know, the eastern coast of South Vietnam.

Interviewer

What was your specific mission in these boats?

Thomas Davis

To stop any interdiction of vessels and goods, materials, anything that was being brought in from outside. Up north, they did nothing but coastal patrols because they were along the north and stopping vessels coming across from the north. Down south, any boat that was moving in a specific area that we were assigned to at that time, we would stop and check all their identification. We had, I think, 12 crewmembers and one Vietnamese liaison, so he would do the interpretations and that stuff and check all their identification and then let 'em go. And we did fire support missions, harassment interdiction, mortar fires; we did Sealord's missions, which on that one board I brought you – I'm sorry, but it's been in my garage for years – but it was comprised of a sea-air-land mission.

We had people on the ground, people in the rivers, plus air cover from Cobra helicopters or OV-10 Broncos. And we would go 13, 14, 15 miles to a designated area, up a canal in a strongly held Viet Cong territory and destroy everything that was there, which is a terrible word to say, but that's what we did; any boats or transportation that they could use. That was one thing, my job. I was stationed on top of the vessel so I could see better than the people on the deck. And from the main canal, they would dig a channel back and then do like an L and then pull the boat in and leave it in there, so the only thing you saw was just like a little drainage ditch thing, but I could see that there was a boat on the other side – a dugout or whatever they called 'em. And so we just poked holes in 'em so they had to fix 'em, you know, which they did.

Interviewer

So you were going up rivers, and you were also in the ocean there.

Thomas Davis

Yes. We would transit from Cat Lo down the river to Vung Tau, and then we would go out into the blue water and then down the coast. We would go to the six fathom marker, it seems that goes out and then just drops off to six fathom, boom, like that. So we'd get out there and run that south and go to our designated patrol area. And it depended on getting into the Bassac River or whatever in the Mekong Delta estuaries that came out to the ocean. There was so much silt in that – that was out from the coast. You had to be in a main channel to get in there. I didn't bring my book, darn it – I couldn't find it – but on the Point Partridge, tried to cut from one channel over south of Dung Island, and we told the new officer that it couldn't be done, we're not supposed to do that. And he wouldn't listen to us, and the next thing you know we're stuck, and we're high and dry. And there's pictures on the web – the Coast Guard in Vietnam – shows the Point Partridge on a sandbar. And we had OV-10 coverage for hours until the tide come back in so we could back out of it.

Interviewer

Were these Navy aircraft that were covering you?

Thomas Davis

Army or Marines that would come in and fly. They could come outta Can Tho up the river a ways and do that.

Interviewer

Tell us about your Purple Heart.

Thomas Davis
We would go into an area that was known to be VC territory and held, and usually we would go with one or two boats. And we went up the Gianh River about 14, 15 miles, which is in the southern part of Vietnam, the Ca Mau Peninsula. And one thing that still bothers me is that here it is we're supposed to be at war, and the old saying is that Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "You must carry the beautiful with you." So “we travel the world over to find the beautiful, and we must carry it with us, or we will find it not." And here we are in this canal – it's totally enemy territory – and there's nice little huts there, two-sided roof, bed sheets pulled tight, chickens walking around, wild orchids growing and palm trees, and I'm thinking, "What in the hell are they fighting this for? This is beautiful." And about a half-mile up the river they had a cable stretched across the river, and that's when things broke loose.

Interviewer
What would the cable do?

Thomas Davis
The cable was used for, like, putting up a bridge – you know, a toll bridge – but it was to stop us from going any farther and stop us from any forward movement so they could fire upon us. And they did. I have some eight-millimeter films that I was sitting up on top, and I was taking the films of it and everything. And then, all at once, the other boat started going around the corner, and then it stopped, and then you could see water flashing up, and they started shooting, and that's when I stopped filming that one. But it was on the way out after we'd gone up there and came back, they had the cable back up.

Interviewer
Tell us about this mission.

Thomas Davis
We were on this mission, and it was a search-and-destroy mission. Any type of waterborne craft that they used, anything that the enemy could use to support their activities, we destroyed it along that canal, and I mean destroyed it. And it was to the fact that you would go up there, and of course the canal gets a little narrower and narrower as you go up. And it's really funny because the canals may be only 100 feet wide, but there's 45 feet of water underneath you. And that's what really was perplexing because you couldn't believe how much water was underneath you. But you'd get up to some point where you needed to turn around, and you'd have to run the bow of the boat clear up on the bank, and then it was twin engines and then rock it around so you could back out and then go. And the cable that the Viet Cong had put up – that was to stop us from going any further, plus taking advantage of us stopping so they could engage in fire with us.

Interviewer
So you approached this cable.

Thomas Davis
The boat in front of us approached it first. We were behind them.

Interviewer
Tell us step-by-step what happened.

Thomas Davis
It was quiet. We were going real slow, and it started to go up and around the curve, and then once you could see it back down, they put it in reverse and stopped, and then the firing started. And I don't have sound on my eight-millimeter film, but it was an instamatic camera that held just a cartridge and a 1967 model. And as soon as that started, I put it down.

Interviewer
Tell us about the battle.

Thomas Davis
The bullets start flying everywhere, and they sound like bumblebees if they don't hit you, and zing, zing, you know, and everything. And then they cease fire and cut the cable with bolt cutters and proceeded up the canal. And we went up probably another four, five, six miles, something like that – and this started at sunrise in the morning, before sunrise when we went into the mouth of the river, and we didn't come out until, like, noon or more – and we were coming back, and sure enough there was a cable. It was back up again. So you knew it was going to get hot, and it did. Bullets were banging in the tree where I was up on top of the boat there on the cabin, and they were hitting the radar tubes and stuff, and it was a little hairy, but you can't see where it's coming from. That's the worst part about it because of the jungle foliage and that, you can't see what's going on. You get an idea where it's coming from, but you're like a duck in a shooting cavalry, is what you are. And then we got through that, we cut the cable, and the fighting stopped, and everything was fine. And we went a ways more, and bingo, I started yelling at 'em, "We're taking fire. We're taking fire." And they said, "No, we're not." And about that time one of the windows went out. And they said, "Yeah, we're taking fire. And I had this M-60 shooting it like this – I was sitting down on my butt and shooting it, and I was getting rounds coming this way – I knew that; I could hear the fire – and I swung around, and I was shooting like this. And then my helmet kinda moved, and I took a round in the back of my helmet.

And I swung around to the left to engage on the portside – nautical terms – of the canal, and a round went into the belt feed of my M-60, and of course the bolts going in, it – boom – blew up. And that was the end of my situation for that day.
It cut me along here. It opened that up right to the bone. Down in here and on this hand, old scars and that stuff. And I wasn't wearing a long-sleeve shirt because it was about 105 degrees, and I just had a flak jacket on. So thus when the gun blew up, all the brass and unspent powder hit me on the arms and up to where my flak jacket was up and some up here. And then the firing stopped, and then they called to a ship that was outside of the coast out about six miles for medical help. And they took me out there, and they picked unspent brass and unspent gunpowder out of me for about an hour and a half on my arm and that and then bandaged me up and said, "Okay. You're good to go." And I said, "Yeah, I'm good to go." And to tell you the truth, nothing was done about it.

Interviewer

What do you mean nothing was done about it?

Thomas Davis

Like, I was wounded and that, and they never put me in for a Purple Heart, and I asked and that, and, well, my CO had left, and he'd returned to the United States and everything else. And I'd come back for a second tour – I did two tours – and it always ate on me and ate on me. And it wasn't until 1991 that I did a reserve deployment to Stockton, California, and there was a warrant officer with me – and he's a patriarch in the LDS Church here – and I told him, I said, "I'm going out." And I come back full of liquor and that, and I'm feeling no pain and that stuff, and he's laughing at me and everything. And I started telling him about this and how pissed off I was that nothing had been done. And I said, "We didn't have a good welcome home anyway," and I said, "I get teased because I'm in the Coast Guard, and nobody knows about it, and you're a puddle sailor. Well, I don't think so." And I told him about this incident, and he never said another word. And that was in October. And in December, we had a four-striper, a full captain, like a bird colonel, equal to a colonel, come here from California. And the warrant officer got me and took me down there and sat me down and said, "Now, you're going to tell him exactly what you told me. Okay?" And I didn't talk about it. My parents didn't even know about nothing about this. And so I went ahead and told him, and he said, "You take them super eight films and get 'em made into VHS and send it to me," and he said, "I'm giving you an order." He said, "I better have it in January." And so I did, you know, and not knowing anything about this. You know how the government rolls – this gets tucked under somebody's paper file somewhere. But it was Armed Forces Day in 1982 – I have to correct that; I think I said '91 that we were out there, but it was '81 – and Armed Forces Day of 1982 I was having drill right here at Fort Douglas at the Navy Marine Corps Center. And they called us to attention and that, and I looked over, and I saw my wife and two kids and her mother and father, and it seemed strange, but it was Armed Forces Day, and they told me they were coming to shop or something in Salt Lake. And they called me forward, and he awarded me my Purple Heart, two Presidential unit citations, I think three Navy meritorious commendations, a Navy commendation, and there was some other award that I got and gave me the day off, which I was more pleased with at the time. But it felt like things had finally caught up, and they'd made amends with things. But if it wasn't me pushing or being drunk and stupid and letting the truth serum work, I'd have never got it. Never.

Interviewer

How did you feel when you got it?

Thomas Davis

Elated. I don't know. The military's probably one of the only things that I really excelled at. I mean, I've excelled at a lot of things, a job that I had and everything – very, very successful. But my personal life was in shambles – terrible – and this happened, and I went, "Someone finally believes in me." It was like that. And one of the good friends of mine was an Army helicopter gunner and got blown up real bad, and I'd told him that I'd been wounded. And he said, "Well, why don't they give it to you?" I said, "It's a different deal. I don't even know where these people are at anymore." So I just kept my mouth shut about it. But it got to the point where you'd go to reserves, and here you got all these ribbons, and you've got an admiral coming to inspect you, and he's got like five or six or seven medals or something, and here you're sitting with a whole chest full, and he's going, "Where'd you get them?" And I'd just tell 'em, "Oh, I bought 'em at the base exchange." And I said, "I was pretty active, sir, in my first four years." And he said, "Good. Proud of you." And that was it, you know.

Interviewer

Talk about being on the water during war. I'm sure in some cases it's harder than being on land.

Thomas Davis

Well, in some cases it is. We were lucky because our vessel was 82-foot long, and it was bigger than a Swift boat that was 55-foot or a patrol boat river, a PBR, that was only 30. We had birthing area down in front that would sleep six, and two people on, what we called, the mess deck. We had two tables there and a little galley. And we had an air-conditioner, and that was a lifesaver, let me tell you. But to get acclimated, you'd be down in the air-conditioning area, and you'd come up topside, and it would feel like somebody hit you in the face with a paddle because of the humidity and the temperature being over 100 degrees and that stuff. And it took me almost a full year before I could

be outside all day with my shirt off. It was that hot. I mean, you'd still get burnt. When we were in port and that, we wore full uniforms.
When we were on patrol and that, especially maybe on a Sunday if we weren't in an area that was highly contested or whatever, we would lay back. We wore shorts, cutoffs and your boots and no shirt. But we did maintenance on the boat when we had a four-to-eight watch. I was assigned on that from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., and then in the morning from 4:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. And we were self-contained and this and that. We'd run with our lights off all the time except when we went out to sea, when we were transiting from one area to another. But it made it a lot better for us, and I feel sorry for some guy out in the bush that's sweating to death or an advisory group that doesn't have any air-conditioning. It's humid and terrible.

Interviewer
Are you fighting at night a lot?

Thomas Davis
Yeah.

Interviewer
Describe being up on that crow's nest.

Thomas Davis
They called it Mount 50 up in the front; 51 and 53 were on the starboard side; 54 and 56 were on this side – on the portside – even numbers, you know. And they had sound power phones on. It's an apparatus that fits on your ears and comes up, and when you talk into it the rest of the crew and stations can hear it. So the captain up on the top, which was a lieutenant, a full lieutenant, he would talk you through things and that, and of course their radar's running all the time. They can see what's going on and that and move into position and this and that. And then he would say, "Mount 50, go ahead, and 51 get the mortar illumination ready, and we're going to go for that." So many bags, so many degrees, and that's what you did.

Interviewer
Do you have headphones?

Thomas Davis
For a while I'd run a cord up to the back, but then they would just yell at me up through the window. They finally just told you any target of opportunity, you take it. You take the lead on it and go from there because we're going to let you be in charge of what you're doing because you can see a lot better than we can.

Interviewer
So you're the eyes and ears of the boat?

Thomas Davis
Well, from my position I could tell 'em, "Hey, we got people moving portside 20 degrees off the port bow, and they're behind the bushes, and they're running," and you don't know whether they're going to set you up for an ambush or come back to the canal because the foliage along the canal was dense. But you could get 50, 60 yards or 50 feet on the other side of the mangrove trees and everything, and it'd be wide-open rice fields and stuff.

Interviewer
Besides the hum of the engine, what would you hear at night?

Thomas Davis
Water on the hull. The picture I gave you where the numbers are up front, where it says 82305, I slept on the portside right on the water line, and you could hear the water because the hull's not very thick. And you always had the constant running of the generator. And we did a generator change once and they gave us a shore tie, took electricity off the dock to run the ship, and they shut all the engines down and everything, and none of us could sleep. There was no noise. It was terrible. For three days we were tied up to a dock, but we didn't have the humming of the motors or the diesels or nothing, and it was hard for us to sleep.

Interviewer
Could you sense when something was going to happen?

Thomas Davis
We had a cook named James Navarro – Filipino. And he would always ask me, "How's your stomach feel?" I said, "My stomach don't feel good today." It just hurt. You can be tense, but you know something, and your gut tells you this isn't going to be a good one. And we would run small boat operations also. We had a 16-foot Boston Whaler with a 30-horse Mercury motor on it. And we'd take three of us, and we'd carry an M-60 and M-79 grenade launcher and 16s. And at night we would go to what they call a waterborne guidepost – fancy college name for something from where we're supposed to be – it was an ambush is what it was. Anything that was moving on the water, we would take care of it. And we would go from the main canal, up a small tributary, up maybe a quarter-mile and then put the boat in on the side. And then your only communications was the PRC-25 radio that you had.

Interviewer
What's the kind of thing you would run into?
Thomas Davis
The junk boats, the dugout thing with the long-shaft motors on 'em. People moving at night, and they're not supposed to be moving. VC tax collector collecting taxes off of people. And we took care of his business, took care of him. That was a (Long Thanh)(32:54) Province on the Bassac River. And real funny because one time we'd put the boat up, and it's a sensor that they put in the ground behind you that can detect footsteps, and one guy was listening to that, and I had a PRC-25 radio. And the canal – the bank was maybe three, four feet, something like this, and then it dropped down and went muddy, you know, where I could stretch my legs out, and I had the tripod of the M-60 out. And I always carried 200 rounds because I didn't want to search around for another hundred at the time because once you start shooting, I'm going to shoot until it stops or whatever. And we had a junk boat coming down the canal at us. We were right in the bend. And I radioed to the boat out in the canal – the main one out in the main river – I said, "We got one coming at this checkpoint. He's at checkpoint B." And I said, "When you get to C, they're going to drop illumination round and bring it in and light up the day so we can see what's going on," because they were heading right at us. And I felt something moving, and I didn't know what it was, and I kinda leaned down and looked real hard, and there was a snake about this big around that was going across my legs. And I just pulled the gun back and cut loose and started going because I cannot stand snakes.
I'm not kidding. I can fight a Kodiak bear maybe, but I'm not going to fight that snake. I don't care what it is. It could be a little one. I don't like it. Rubber even. And I tell you what, I tried to stand up, and my feet slid out from underneath me, and the gun went in the air, and there's tracers going in the air, and they're yelling on the radio, "What's going on? What's going on?" And then the illumination comes in. And I shot the guy next to me. I shot him through the foot, through the sole of his boot because I was going back and forth. And he kept saying, "What's the matter? What's the matter?" And I said, "Snake. Snake. Snake." And he said, "Good. Shoot it. Kill it." And we didn't know what was going on. And then when everything died down, you know, the junk boat that had turned like that had flipped over, and sad to say, two people drowned because they didn't know how to swim. So we did take the other guy in control and took him back.
Interviewer
Those were enemy guys that drowned?
Thomas Davis
Yeah. No I.D. Nothing. They were Viet Cong. And took them to the coastal group. Turned 'em over to the Vietnamese, and what they did with 'em probably wasn't very pleasant. But that was scary.
Interviewer
Did you get the snake?
Thomas Davis
Oh, yeah. I shot that baby up. I probably put 100 rounds in it because I wasn't letting off of it until the thing quit flipping around. But it was long as a Union Pacific freight train, let me tell you. I don't know what brand it was or what, but it was big like this, and it was long. And that was a standing joke for a long time.
Interviewer
Why were you referred to as "puddle sailors?"
Thomas Davis
Puddle sailors. Well, the standing story from the Navy they always give the Coast Guard and all this stuff, you know, first you gotta be 6-foot tall to join the Coast Guard in case the boat sinks, you can walk back to shore. And then they'd tease us, our reserve group, "Oh, you're going puddle sailors today or this weekend?" And we'd do boating safety around here in Utah, and it was embarrassing. But you know what, I'm proud of it. I've been in the Coast Guard two-thirds of my life. I get a check every month, and that provides for me. I'm buying a new car with it, you know. And, I mean, my grandkids. If they didn't pay me anything, I'd still be happy because I served my country. And the Coast Guard, well, they're trained for combat, yes. They're geared for saving lives and that, where the other services are pretty well geared for combat. But let me tell you what, the Coast Guard has been in every action from Iwo Jima driving in landing craft to Utah Beach, Normandy. They've been in it all. And a lot of people don't know that.
Interviewer
Did you have any rescue missions?
Thomas Davis
Not in Vietnam, no. We had none of that. We were combat geared at the time. We were geared up for combat. We didn't have any search-and-rescue missions. We never had any of that at all.
Interviewer
What about bringing in the wounded?

Thomas Davis
We would rescue sometimes. We would move some Army people up by Phan Thiet. Got ambushed and that, and they were pinned down. And we got in real close to the shore there and provided mortar fire and that stuff so that this platoon could get out. We run a small boat in and out and in and out and in and out so they could finally get 'em out. There was maybe 12, 13, 14 guys but helped them out. And there was a Marine LOH – light observation helicopter, looks like a little egg – and he was doing observation and that stuff, giving air direction and that stuff over one area where the Marines were in there and that stuff. And the VC shot his little chopper full of holes, and it was smoking pretty bad. And he crashed into the water about a quarter-mile off the beach and got out of it, him and the other guy and got out, and none of 'em were hurt. They were just pretty well scared. He kept saying, "They shot me down. They shot me down. Can you believe that? They shot me down." He was shaking. And I said, "Yeah, yeah." We provided a lot of civil aid to the Vietnamese in different hamlets. We would take medicine and medical things into 'em and that stuff and leave it at the Vietnamese outposts. And one of the films shows us going way up this one canal to this little down, and then we pulled right up on the bank and the outpost is right below us. And we gave 'em, like, building materials and stuff like that. If they needed something, we would transport it for 'em. The one area where the Navy SEALS operated out of, we would take them supplies also. They love food. They could get other things from the Navy and that stuff, but we had pretty good access because every 15 days we'd go back to Cat Lo for three days or four days, and we could trade a weapon for extra commodities. And a tube of bologna like this was like gold to somebody that hasn't had any for a long time. It was great.

Interviewer
So you shot the eight-millimeter films?

Thomas Davis
Yes.

Interviewer
Do you have those films?

Thomas Davis
I have 'em in my bag here, but they're on a VHS tape.

Interviewer
That's fine. But do you have the eight-millimeters as well?

Thomas Davis
I could not tell you where.

Interviewer
What's on those tapes?

Thomas Davis
Well, like, the MACV 88 Advisory Group, there was like six or seven Army guys from the advisory group, MACV 88. And they were down in the Delta, and they were in a little compound. They had 30 troops there that were all ex-VC, which I wouldn't have spent a night there for nobody, but I did. We traded places with an Army guy for a night, and knowing that these people in the village were all ex-VC, that didn't make you very comfortable to say the least. It was probably wrong for what we did by trading people, but we worked with them and that stuff, and we provided gunfire support for 'em several times when they were ambushed and that. And the thing was that in the morning when they started doing body count and that, there were several of the people that were their troops that were the ones that got killed. So that's why I say it's an uncomfortable place. But we would just take 'em things, cases of beer, something like that, and soda that we had that we could buy, which they didn't have. They would get supplied, but we would help 'em out, and it was good. It was a good thing.

Interviewer
How long are the tapes?

Thomas Davis
I don't know. Maybe an hour, something like that. But it's just different things that I shot. A lot of stupid things, helicopters flying over and that. But, like, the first one was sometime in January of 1967. We went up into an area, and we were shooting at this village, and the helicopters were providing us support because they were getting a lot of VC activity out of the area. And you have to realize, you could be in a canal, and it be a free-fire zone on the portside. Anything that moves, you'd call it in first. You'd say, interrogative, "We've got people at x-ray, Romeo, such and such. This is a free-fire zone." And they'd just say, "Dust 'em." That'd be it. The other side of the river is friendly. And then one occasion we went up, and we have people on the free-fire zone, and they're waving Vietnamese flags, and we're taking shots from the friendly side. And we said, "What do we do?" "Extract. Get outta there." And I said, "This is not right." They said, "Get outta there. Just turn around and leave." And that's what we did. But we always traveled with two vessels at a time. We would never go, whether it be a Swift boat, a WPV, which stood for Coast Guard, or two Coast Guard vessels. Always traveled with two vessels so if something happened to one of 'em, you could rescue the other one. And not a good situation. I've seen death firsthand where Navy guys in a Swift

boat got shot up real bad and through the neck, and we had to put 'em on a ***dust off helicopter, take our boom and swing it clear outta the way, and they come right on the end. Take the .50 calibers off the stern, and they come down and sat right at an angle right on our boat, the landing skid, as we put the bodies in.
And it seemed like three days you couldn't get this guy's blood off your hands. I don't care if you washed it five times a day, you'd still look at it, and you could see the blood, even though it wasn't there. And that's the thing that bothers people. That bothered me. It caused a lot of problems in my life later on where they talk about PTSD. I used to joke at that word. Some soldier from Vietnam holds up a bank in Oregon or something and says that he's got problems from the war. Well, I had problems, and I never admitted it, never admitted it for a long time. And finally, I was going to shoot myself. And I'd stopped my car and pulled down the visor, and I had pictures of my two girls in there. And I grabbed the gun, and I fired it out the window. It was about 1:00 in the morning. Says, "Okay. It works. I'll just put it in my chest and pop it off and then these problems are going to go away. My marital problems, everything."
And then I pulled the visor down and saw my kids. Just said, "Who's going to take care of them?" That's when I called for help. And a guy in our reserve unit worked at the VA, and I went to outpatient therapy for about three years. And it made me realize, “Wow, I've got a problem. They should be reading about me in Oregon robbing a bank here maybe, you know.” But it bugged you when they asked you, "Do you have flashbacks?" I got 'em in color. I can smell WD-40 right now, and I'm looking in the breech of an M-60 spraying it down. That's what I smell. And I use it on my old hotrod and stuff, and I can spray it on something and then boom, I'm gone. I can see the brown water behind a PBR boat that we were working with and the turn. We were right next to the mangrove trees and that. And they give the throttle to move away, and you could see the water churning up and that stuff, and it was brown but it'd turn white and that stuff. I see that today. And I said, “Wow.”
The three years I was in outpatient therapy, I said, "Okay. I'm done. I'm good." Well, I wasn't good. And I suffered with it from '86 through '89 that I did that outpatient therapy. And then I didn't go back at all. And caused havoc with my family, with my wife. I've been married to four different girls, and two of 'em a couple times, if not three times apiece. I get mad, and that's the end of it. Because if we had a problem in Vietnam, we could take care of the situation. There would be no problem. Now the problem's over.
Well, when you're dealing with wives, step-kids and that, you can't do that. Here I am, a supervisor for the government. I got two crews working; I got like 39 people working for me. I'm getting outstanding work performance deals and everything. I had no problem at work. It's easy dealing with your personal life. And it was tough. And so there was a period, you know, I was divorced for about eight, nine years, something like that, five years, something. Maybe six years. And I dated and that stuff but wasn't serious.
And I'd met a lady in California. My kids had introduced me to her where they were living in California. And I thought, well, this would be nice, but geographically it's going to suck. And I have a home here, and she had a home, and we just stayed friends, and that's it. So I had a work dinner, and I had called my ex-wife to see if I could take her daughter to the dinner. And of course she razzed me, you know, "What's the matter? Can't you get a date?" And I said, "No. I just thought I'd see if Celeste wanted to go." And she called me back on Friday and said, "No. Celeste's gotta work ,or else she'd go with you." She said, "I'll go with you." And I started laughing. And I sent, "I want someone sober with me, okay," which made her mad and that stuff. And she was going to some birthday party that all these girls that worked at this one place had birthdays in December.

Interviewer
So how many months of combat did you see?

Thomas Davis
I got there in December of 1968, and I left in July of 1970. I went back for a second tour.

Interviewer
Finish your story.

Thomas Davis
So my ex-wife and a bunch of ladies worked together, and they all had birthdays in December, so for five or six years, they were all getting together and having a little party and that stuff in December. And so she went to this party, and one of the ladies there was single. And they started, "You should go with him," and all this stuff. And she asked Kim, "Is he really sound?" She said, "Yeah. He's a nice guy." And the other couple that was there, Joe said, "No. Go. He's okay." So she came with her daughter to where we were having this dinner. And my hair was quite long. I had a full beard, and my hair was about down to here that I wore in a ponytail. And I'd cut my hair and everything else up at Thanksgiving, and this was, I think the 20th of December. And it was really weird because when I walked in, I saw this beautiful Hispanic lady in jeans and a leather coat and this other girl sitting with her. And I walked across and, you know, I was dressed up. And she said, "Excuse me. Are you Tom Davis?" and I said, "Yeah." She said, "Cathy sent me." Lucky me. And gorgeous, gorgeous woman.

Interviewer
So she supported you in your PTSD?

Thomas Davis
She really supported me with this PTSD thing. Her sister had come back from Iraq and was pretty well messed up. And she had her sister contact a counselor to get me into counseling. And I went in there, and I've been going five years, and they put me on medication, which I soundly was against. I don't like pills or nothing. That's the best thing that's ever happened to me. Best thing because I'm not yelling, I'm not screaming. I don't care how much medication you take, you can still get pissed. But it's the fact that my family – even my two daughters, which I'm surprised even talk to me now from what I put them through in their childhood – "Where's the old dad at? Where's this guy that throws things in the garage and that? Are you going to come back?" And I said, "No, I like this dad a lot better. This is what I felt like before I went to Vietnam." And it's pretty good.

Interviewer
What made you go back to Vietnam?

Thomas Davis
I wanted a new Corvette. My dad told me if you want something you work for it. If you want something, you've gotta pay for it. And I thought well, I probably won't have enough money to, but I'm still going to do it. And we were doing this Vietnamese transfer, and I took interest in 'em. I wanted to know what made 'em tick. And it was just the fact that a couple of 'em took interest in me. And I got along with 'em great. Some of 'em I didn't trust, but I did like a few of 'em. So when it got to the point where we were going to hand this vessel over to the Vietnamese Navy, the Vietnamese Navy went to the Coast Guard and the Third Coastal Zone Advisory Group that was run by the Navy and asked if I could be loaned in to the advisory group and stay with 'em. And everybody said, "You're absolutely crazy."

But I thought it was quite an honor. Here I am, 21 years old. This is adventure, adrenaline push. That's what it was. And I said, "Fine, let's do it." In the first part of '70 there – March or something like that – I started riding with 'em, and I rode with 'em until I came home in July in 1970. And actually, I didn't want to come home. I wanted to be transferred back to an American unit and be on the last boat turned over. And they said, "No. You're going home. You're done." I only had six more months to go in active-duty service, and I thought I might as well do it there where I enjoyed it and go back.

But I wouldn't go on the base. I told 'em I would not stay on the base. I wanted to be on patrol because on base you had to wear full uniforms, salute everybody and all this stuff, and I didn't want any of that. I had my own style of doing things. I don't want to disrespect any officer or anything, but I didn't want any part of that base. If you didn't have your hat on, someone's yelling at you. So out on the boat, you could get all the sun you wanted, so it was a good deal. And I had a couple times where I had to tell the Vietnamese I didn't like what they were doing and have a good discussion with the DaiUy, the captain, and tell 'em, "Hey, this ain't going good. These guys can't sleep when we're sleeping. You got that?" And that's it, you know.

So I've got the last American flag here that flew on that vessel in Saigon when we turned 'em over, did a reenactment of the turnover for the news and all that stuff. And I saved that. And in one of the video things, it shows us going across this rice paddy area. It's called Frenchie's Canal from Six Delta Echo over to Seven Charlie. And it's just a deep canal that goes across, and it's not very wide. And we'd been in there the night before and given 'em a bunch of gunfire support and that stuff. So we went back in there to cross that area that night, or in the morning, and stopped at the little place and that stuff. And they gave us a genuine Viet Cong flag that they'd picked up that night. I don't know whether they shot him or we shot him, but the group had come in to ambush 'em. We'd come down the canal and gave 'em fire support in the night and did that.

But as far as the Vietnamese go, I had a wonderful experience with 'em. They gave me a good sendoff. In fact, on the third patrol they kept measuring me, had my arms out and doing this and that, and I didn't know what the hell they were doing. And four days later they came back. We were in port, and we started to leave, and they all got me down below in the galley and that stuff and said that they got me a present, and here I got black pajamas like the Viet Cong wore, and the shirt, you know, with the slits up the side and that. And I wore my combat boots, and when I was on patrol with 'em that's what I wore. And there was sometimes we'd come back into port at, like, 7:00, 8:00 in the morning, and everybody's lined up. And we'd been on some mission the night before, and we were full of mud. And we'd take chalk and put it on our faces and that to do these waterborne guide posts. And we didn't have any camel stick then. We used our charcoal or anything we could get to darken our faces.

And I'd come off the boat not in too good of shape looking, you know, pretty dirty and that stuff with my bush hat on and my M-60 and about 400 rounds on me and a little briefcase. And up the dock I'd come, and I'd hear the one group said, "Who is that?" He said, "That's (inaudible)(59:00) Davis. He's been here a long time. He's nuts." He said, "I wouldn't ride with them people for a million dollars, and he thinks it's great." Yeah. I thought it was great.

Interviewer
Why did you think it was great?

Thomas Davis
I guess I was in charge. It was scary, but I thought I was doing something. I really thought I was doing something good. I said, "This is cool. Couldn't be an airborne soldier, I'll be an advisor." Huh, I just loved it. It was different than

what everybody else was doing, and that was just my niche. That's what I liked to do. And even goes today, I guess, in some things I do. But I liked what I did. I thought I made a difference. I wonder where the people are today, whether they're alive or dead. But friend, Vietnam friends and that stuff say, "Would you ever go back?" And for years and years I've told 'em no, I won't go back.

Interviewer

Why?

Thomas Davis

I don't know. I don't really know. But this last September, my wife and I went to Hawaii, and we were in the Polynesian Cultural Center, and our tour guide was with us – young boy, young man, and he was from Ho Chi Minh City. And the Church had gone there and asked him if he'd like a free education, to come and go to school and then work in the Cultural Center and that stuff as a tour guide. And I looked at him and went, "No kidding?" I said, "When I was there it was called Saigon." He said, "Oh, very, very friendly." I said, "When I was there you packed a gun or two of 'em. It wasn't all that friendly then." But he said the country's changed. They have major hotels, I guess the Marriot or Hiltons and all this stuff. Up by Nha Trang, one of the most beautiful beaches and big hotels and that stuff. And I thought that would be something to see. So I'll give it a year or so and think about it and investigate a little bit, and maybe we'll go. My wife wants me to go back.

Interviewer

What was your last day in Vietnam like?

Thomas Davis

Coming off of patrol in the morning and went and got cleaned up and that stuff and went ahead and went down to the Coast Guard Headquarters thing there on the base in Cat Lo. And I went ahead and signed all my paperwork out and everything. And they told me, "Okay. Be back tomorrow at 0800. We got a helicopter ride for you." Because they asked me, "You want anything? Is there anything we can get you?" I said, "Yeah. I want to ride back Saigon in a helicopter if you can swing it." "Okay. Be here in the morning." He said, "You'll turn your weapons in, and then you'll go."

And that night, with another Naval advisor, we got pretty well slouched. Pretty well drunk – well, really drunk. Smoke grenades – where they pop, the helicopter coming in or something – I run through the Navy barracks and started popping a couple and smoked 'em out. They didn't know who it was because it was like 1:00 in the morning. And I was not feeling good the next day on the helicopter ride. But I flew home, flew to Saigon to get my flight home. And it's such a transition because you go from combat in one morning to being with your friends. The next day you're on a plane leaving. Everybody's cheering and that. And you come home to Salt Lake, and you're still scared, but everything's changed. To go into Albertson's and look on the shelves, and where everything else was olive drab, syrup, corn, whatever in an olive drab can – your commodities, they were all like that – and to go into the grocery store and see all this abundance of food. And you can probably tell by my size I've taken good advantage of it, too.

But it's just the fact that it's so much different, in a 36-hour period going from shooting guns and everything to taking a shower and flying home. And people say you get over it. You never get over it. Never. And that's why these poor guys coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan and that, young men like I was, they've got a problem. Somebody better address it because you just can't go from shooting Taliban and all this other stuff like they're doing, or me shooting at the Viet Cong or this and that, and then come home in 48 hours and you're supposed to blend in with the civilians. I was just getting shot by them. It's tough. Real tough. My best advice would be you've gotta talk to somebody. because I never talked to anybody for years, and it caused problems in my personal life. Doesn't now. Hopefully it doesn't. Except for my WD-40 and the flashback of the water and that. But they should be recognized for their good job and deeds.

Interviewer

Did getting that medal help?

Thomas Davis

Yeah, because that was in the back of my mind, too. I always wanted to be a soldier as a kid. Always did. And whether you're a sailor or a soldier or a Marine or Air Force guy, you served your country. You served it the way that you thought best to serve your country. And we got some guys in our military awarded the Purple Heart, was in the Air Force. He was getting supplies, and they did an air raid thing. And next thing you knew, he was running for a bunker, and the lights went out, and three days later, he woke up laying there with a Purple Heart on his pillow because a mortar round had come in and really took him down. And, of course, some of the guys always teased him about getting a paper cut or some shit like that, you know, because he was in the Air Force.

I got a good friend that's a colonel that was in charge of the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing, and he had 200 missions over North Vietnam. And, in fact, he's got the Meritorious Service Cross, I believe it is. And he said them SAM missiles would come by your F4, he said looked like a telephone pole on fire and screaming. Don't you think that bothers him today? You bet it does. And he's single. But I tell you what, him and I bonded on our motorcycles. And that's how we met each other, and we e-mail or call each other once a week.

Interviewer
Do certain things bring back the war?
Thomas Davis
Loud bangs or something. I'll jump, you know, really jump. A group of us that rode motorcycles, we would go on Thursday nights to different restaurants and that and have dinner together. And we were at the Golden Corral, and we were sitting at a table, and Roy was to my left, and Steve was in front of me, and his wife. And some kid just on the other side of us dropped one of those plastic cups. And when it hit the floor, it started rattling back and forth, and it sounded like a machine gun. And I knocked Roy right outta the way and pulled up like this and said, "You're dead, you son of a bitch." I'm sorry. You're taping this. And everybody stopped and that kid just looked at me, and he said, "I'm sorry." Well, I got up and walked out and stayed outside for a little bit, and then I came back in. And there was a guy about my age sitting at another table, and I walked by, and he reached over and grabbed my arm, and he said, "You can never get rid of it, can you?" I said, "No. It's been 40 years," and I said, "Jungle's still there with you. Quick reflexes." And sad, but I can still move quit for a fat guy.
Interviewer
Tell us your thoughts on the war.
Thomas Davis
I was a happy-go-lucky 18-year-old boy. I had my moments with temper and that stuff, but I was happy. And I went and went through training. I was proud to do it, everything else. Thought I was doing some real good. And then when everything stopped, you could see the way it was being handled. Just up above you, it was just terrible. They weren't there to win the war. I don't know what their reasoning was. But to see people scared, knowing that if you guys leave we're dead because we associated with you, we're absolutely dead. And the feelings that they had and thinking I know what I felt like when the plane lifted up. I thought the war was needed.

I believed in our government's alliance, and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, I thought that was good. But it wasn't run like that. Even the Vietnamese government was crooked as heck and wouldn't take advice or anything like that. So I was pretty sad that knowing that we had gone there and done so much. For what? The communists are going to take over anyway. The North was. Their thought was, “We want to unite this country. Come hell or high water, we're going to do it.” And they did, and it's sad. I can hold a grudge and say I don't think it's right. I wonder what I would have done. Maybe I'd have had a farm up in North Dakota growing potatoes. I don't know. Could have been that way. But it didn't happen that way. I could've gone to school and got good grades and never got drafted. Would have been just fine. But I didn't feel it was right.

I felt that everybody needed to serve their country, whether it be for two, four, six or whatever amount. I felt that everybody that was physically qualified should do something for their country, and their country decided that that's what they needed to do. It has ruined a lot of people. It's changed my life. I'm not real bitter, but I often wonder what I would've been like if I hadn't have gone.

I have a pharmacist at Wal-Mart, beautiful woman, Vietnamese. She was ten years old when they evacuated Saigon. She suffers from PTSD. And what a beautiful woman this girl is. She's been through as much as I have, probably even more. But she came and finally got to the United States, and her sisters and brother are throughout the United States here. And they're all educated, smart. She had two brothers that came later from Ho Chi Minh City to visit, and they said they didn't like it. They were going to go back. So her goal is to travel there and meet her brothers and other family.

But her life changed, too. It's just not us. Those poor people over there. I mean, I'm not talking poor people, but, I mean, I'm saying that they suffered a lot, too, from the atrocities from the communists, the Viet Cong. They got a lot, too. But bitter, no. I'm just glad to be alive. And I felt so sorry for myself for years. And finally, I went back to The Wall in Washington, D.C., and I saw Hernandez's name, Coast Guard guy, and it finally realized to me that all these years you've been feeling sad about yourself. You know why? A lot of GIs and that can't understand why the guy next to him got shot and he's on The Wall and I'm living. Am I supposed to go through hell? He's at ease. And I finally came to realize that. I'm glad I'm not there. I'd have never had kids or anything like that. And I finally came to realize that I have to make out my life, I have to make it as good as I can because if I keep grieving about that damn war, I won't be any good for anybody, let alone myself.

So it took me about 30 years. I went, "That's enough. I'm done." And maybe by going back to Vietnam and being able to go to Cat Lo and to Vung Tau and see where things are at, see if I couldn't get a trip to Can Tho and then down the river to where I was at, it'd put a damn end to things. Maybe I wouldn't get them flashbacks of WD-40 and the mangrove trees and the smells and stuff like that. Maybe it'd stop it. Maybe it wouldn't. But maybe it'd put it at peace so you can go on a little bit and take it from there. But I'm proud of what I did. So I don't know. Anymore questions?
Interviewer
Anything we haven't talked about that you wanted to tell?
Thomas Davis
I think it's really tough on people our age. Two years ago they said the average age of a Vietnam veteran was, like,

63 or 4. Now I think it's 66, something like that. You know, and I got in the store, and I see guys and go, "Geez, we're getting old." When I hired into Hill Field, all the supervisors were World War II or Korean veterans, see. And then after 25, 30 years of working there and being in management and everything, we looked around the table one day and said, "Now we're the old boys." And I'm 63, and there's a few things wrong with me that we're trying to keep me from dying, I guess. But I just go okay, gotta do what I gotta do. I'm not as fast as I used to be. I just take things at ease, and I look at my grandkids and say well, I want to spend time with them. My six-year-old – he'll be seven in January – he's very interested in the military. And that's what I want to do. I want to make sure that this kid gets an education and knows what happened to me so the legacy will live on because I don't think he's being taught in school much. They're too interested with an iPad or something. I don't know. I don't know how the education system works now, but it's sure different from when I went to school.

Interviewer

Talk about when you got wounded again.

Thomas Davis

I was sitting on top of the cabin and had the ammunition strung out. And we were taking fire from the starboard side, the right, and then all at once it started coming from the portside. And the back of my helmet was hit, and it moved my head around, so I swung around and started shooting. And the belt feed was pulling in, and a round went in and jammed the gun and slammed everything together and, boom, laid me on my back from the explosion. And the shrapnel went through my fingers here, and in fact, you could open this up and see things moving inside of it. And along here, here. On this hand over here was hit real bad. And then it put hot brass and expended powder up through my arm in here, which I got in trouble for because I didn't have a long-sleeve shirt on. But it wasn't anything that was devastating where it disfigured me or anything like that. But it was quite a bang.

Interviewer

I like his tattoo.

Thomas Davis

Yeah, my wife's not too thrilled about that.

Interviewer

It's a pretty new one, isn't it?

Thomas Davis

Yeah. I got that in September. I got this in Hawaii, and then I had this one done about the 13th of September, 14th or 15th, something like that. But see, I was in this corporate management thing at Hill Field. And another thing, when I was in the service there was only two people that wore tattoos: sailors and convicts.