

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
JOESPH J. KUJAR  
United States Navy, Vietnam War  
2003

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**Kuhar, Joseph J.**, (1939- ). Oral History Interview, 2003.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

### **Abstract**

Kuhar, a Wauwautosa, Wis. native, discusses his service with the Navy during the Cold War and the Vietnam War serving aboard the USS Phillips, USS Taylor, and the USS Eperson; upon his discharge from the Navy he enlisted in the National Guard and then the Naval Reserve and served until 1999. Kuhar, who enlisted in the Navy directly after high school, talks about radio school at Bainbridge (Maryland), and duty at "Dismal Swamp" (Virginia) where he radioed the location of unidentified ships and planes to Norfolk (Virginia). Transferred to Formosa (present day Taiwan), he touches upon monitoring the radio traffic of Chinese Nationalist forces and seeing President Eisenhower and Chiang Kai Shek. He was discharged in 1961 and reenlisted due to lack of employment in the United States. Assigned to the USS Phillips, he comments on a six-month cruise of the Western Pacific, duty as a "lifeguard" ship at Yankee Station (Tonkin Gulf) rescuing pilots who could not land on an aircraft carrier, screening for submarine destroyers, and assisting ships from a Philippine base in the Manila Bay associated with the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Kuhar mentions shore duty, work at China Lake (California) missile test facility, and work aboard the USS Eperson. After a brief stay at a Philadelphia naval hospital, Kuhar joined the USS Taylor and recounts a typical day in the life of a radio operator. He describes a voyage where his ship and others it traveled with encountered problems with the Russian navy where he saw Russian ships collide with the USS Walker. He talks about providing naval shore fire from Da Nang and Nha Trang, seeing the explosions caused by night combat, and communicating with ground troops. He touches upon shipboard life including saltwater showers and swimming alongside the ship, joining the National Guard and participating in Reforger 1987, and joining the Naval Reserve.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2003

Transcribed by Rebecca Berhow, 2007

Transcription edited by Abigail Norderhaug, 2007.

KURTZ: Kind of bad to sit here and not have you know -- have this recorded. All right? You were a Janesville native?

KUHAR: That I am.

KURTZ: You are. Okay. Where are you from, Joe?

KUHAR: I was born in Kenosha, but I -- grade I lived in Janesville, that's how I met Pat and then I did my high school in Wauwautosa.

KURTZ: Oh yeah, so you got around a bit? August, 2003 and this is an interview of Joe Kuhar?

KUHAR: Kuhar.

KURTZ: Kuhar. That's K U H R A R and my name is Jim Kurtz. I am the interviewer. Joe, could you tell us what year you were born and where you were born?

KUHAR: I was born in 1939 in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

KURTZ: And what was the date?

KUHAR: April 18th.

KURTZ: April 18th. Where did you grow up, Joe?

KUHAR: I -- my father was a salesman and so we traveled a lot, but my grade school years, beginning school, I lived in Janesville, Wisconsin, and from Janesville in my high school years I moved to Wauwautosa, Wisconsin and graduated from Wauwautosa High School in July of 1957.

KURTZ: Okay. And what did you do after high school, Joe?

KUHAR: I went -- from high school I went directly into the Navy.

KURTZ: You enlisted for how long?

KUHAR: Four years

KURTZ: Okay. And where did you take your training, or your initial training?

KUHAR: Was Great Lakes.

KURTZ: Okay. And how long was your training at Great Lakes?

KUHAR: Eight weeks.

- KURTZ: Okay. And is there anything that stands out from that experience from you?
- KUHAR: Well, I can vaguely remember my first experience when I was still in civilian clothes getting off the bus with a group of guys and standing at the entrance to the training center and sort of wondering this was going to be a strange, strange experience and wondering maybe did I do the right thing.
- KURTZ: Okay. When you completed your training at Great Lakes, what were you -- where were you sent from there?
- KUHAR: I was -- my test scores from Great Lakes indicated that I was gonna be a radioman and I was going to Bainbridge, Maryland, radio school in Bainbridge Maryland, but there was a waiting period. So out of boot camp in Great Lakes, I went to receiving station, Norfolk Naval Station in Norfolk, Virginia for about three months and then from there I went to Bainbridge, Maryland to radio school for 24 weeks of radio school.
- KURTZ: Okay. And that was for radios for being on ships and stuff like that?
- KUHAR: Ships and shore.
- KURTZ: Okay. And after you completed radio -- is there anything about radio school that stood out?
- KUHAR: Well, in 1958 that's when I was in radio school--
- KURTZ: Uh-hum. [Affirmative]
- KUHAR: -- in Maryland. You wouldn't think of it but we had a blizzard there while we were there and the barracks were flat topped barracks that were made for the second world war and I can remember we had to go up on top of the barracks, these were big tall, two story barracks and shovel snow off of the barracks to keep the barracks from collapsing and I thought that was -- wouldn't expect that in Maryland. I could expect it in Wisconsin but not in Maryland. And it was -- it wasn't an easy school. It was pretty tough because we had some electronics we had to learn for basic repair of radio equipment.
- KURTZ: So you learned both how to be a transmitter and a repairman?
- KUHAR: Very minor. We had to build our own power supplies out of scratch, stuff like that, but once we got out of school then electronic technicians did all of our repairs. So I never did repair any equipment.
- KURTZ: Okay. So some time in 1958 you completed radio school. Where were you sent then or what was your next duty station?

KUHAR: I was sent to naval base, back to naval base, Norfolk and they transferred us. I was only there a short time and they transferred us to the radio receiving station in northwest Virginia, which is about 35 miles south of Norfolk, right on the Virginia/North Carolina state line. It was out in the middle of a swamp.

KURTZ: Okay. The Dismal Swamp?

KUHAR: There was only like about 200 people on the whole base.

KURTZ: And what was the duty there?

KUHAR: We were operating with the North Atlantic picket ships and they would radar picket ships and they would send us coded information about unidentified surface craft, unidentified aircraft and we would relay this to Norfolk, Virginia where they would plot these contacts that these picket ships had until they could clarify who they were and I did that for a little over a year.

KURTZ: Okay. So that takes us to some time in 1969 -- 1959, excuse me.

KUHAR: Right.

KURTZ: Okay. And what was your next duty?

KUHAR: From there I was transferred to the Taiwan defense command.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: In Taipei, Taiwan, Formosa, that's called Taiwan now, but it used to be Formosa.

KURTZ: Okay. And what was your job there?

KUHAR: I was a cryptographer.

KURTZ: And what type of -- where were the messages going to and from out of Taiwan?

KUHAR: They were messages relating activity in the Straits of Taiwan, Straits of Formosa between Chinese air forces and Navy and the Taiwan or what nationalists Chinese, Chaing Kai-shek military.

KURTZ: Okay. So what were you -- you intercepting Chinese and Russian messages or were you--

KUHAR: No. It was the Chinese military would make contact with, I want to say nationalist Chinese military would have contacts with Chinese military and this would be relayed to the United States command and the United States command would -- we would take these messages and send them higher up the line to higher authorities.

KURTZ: To analyze if there was anything of value?

KUHAR: Of value, right, and we did daily reports on the off shore island shelling Matsue, Kinman. That was like a daily where the Chinese military were shelling these Formosa islands.

KURTZ: Were there any incidents that stand out in your mind, either in the Straits of Formosa or the island shellings?

KUHAR: No, it was -- there was, you know, incidents happening daily but there was nothing to the extent that would spark U.S. intervention in it.

KURTZ: Okay. Did you live on a American base on Formosa?

KUHAR: There was no base. We lived in civilian housing, and we worked in like an office building. But this building was guarded by Chinese nationalist soldiers so --

KURTZ: Were you in uniform?

KUHAR: Yes.

KURTZ: Okay. So how long were you in Formosa?

KUHAR: I was there until I got discharged in June of 1961.

KURTZ: So June, so you got discharged --

KUHAR: While I was over there, the big thing while I was over there was President Eisenhower went over there and there was like 500,000 people listening to this speech that the president gave, and they were packed, you know, like 8, 10 blocks away from this speaker stand and only the first 2 blocks could probably hear what was being said. But the Chiang Kai-shek's Government said everybody was gonna be out there.

KURTZ: Did you get close enough so that you could see?

KUHAR: Oh yeah. The American servicemen, we were up in, you know, like the first 50 rows.

KURTZ: Okay. Okay.

KUHAR: And it was one of the few times that Chaing Kai-shek ever rode in an open car.

KURTZ: So you actually saw Chaing too?

KUHAR: Right. Right. He wouldn't ride in an open car, but he did with President Eisenhower

and I gave articles, newspaper articles to the museum showing all this. That was kind of interesting.

KURTZ: That is very interesting. So you said you got discharged in June of 61, then what happened?

KUHAR: I went back to Janesville and I was out of the service for maybe a month and the job that I was looking for didn't come open, so I reenlisted for six more years. So --

KURTZ: Okay. So you said you were in ten so this brought you to the end then, okay.

KUHAR: Right.

KURTZ: So -- and when you reenlisted, were you promised anything, as far as duty stations or anything?

KUHAR: I was promised a bonus because I was a critical rating and at that time it was like \$1300.

KURTZ: So that's why you chose six instead of four because your reenlistment bonus was different. Is that --

KUHAR: No. I chose six because I figured I was going to be a lifer now.

KURTZ: Okay. So where did you get assigned when you got back in the Navy?

KUHAR: I got assigned to the real Navy. I got assigned to the USS Phillip.

KURTZ: And where was the USS Phillip operating in--

KUHAR: Pearl Harbor.

KURTZ: Pearl Harbor. And what was your job on the USS Phillip?

KUHAR: I was a radioman.

KURTZ: Okay. And where did the Phillip cruise or I don't know, operate when you were there, so you got there at like in August or September of 61?

KUHAR: Right. And in February of 62 we made a Far East cruise to West Pack.

KURTZ: And how long was that cruise?

KUHAR: Six months.

KURTZ: Six months. Okay. And where did you go in the Far East?

KUHAR: Well, we stopped at Midway Island on the way over to Japan.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: And after Midway, we didn't touch ground again until the Yokosuka, Japan.

KURTZ: Can you spell Yokosuka?

KUHAR: Y O K O S U K A.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: Some people say Yokosuka, but when I was there I was Yokosuka.

KURTZ: Okay. And was that -- did you operate out of Yokosuka or did you -- did you just stop there?

KUHAR: It was just stops. On that cruise, besides Yokosuka, Japan, we also went to Yokohama, Tokyo, Sassabo, and after we left Japan, we went to Buckler Bay in Okinawa.

KURTZ: Okay. Go ahead, say what you said after you left?

KUHAR: After we left Sassabo, Japan, we went to Buckler Bay in Okinawa and we weren't there -- we were probably overnight and then we left again. And then we headed to Subic Bay in the Philippines and we replenished and did some upkeep on the ship.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: And then we went out to Yankee Station in the Tonkin Gulf.

KURTZ: Okay. And that was off of North Vietnam?

KUHAR: Right. And we were plane guard for aircraft carriers that were flying flights to wherever they were.

KURTZ: What was a plane guard?

KUHAR: We would follow the aircraft carrier and if a plane missed the deck, we were to life guard for the pilots, pick up the pilot.

KURTZ: And was this typical of the way the Navy operated then?

KUHAR: At that time, right.

KURTZ: Did your ship have other responsibilities other than retrieving pilots?



KUHAR: Right. We were also screening, submarine screening.

KURTZ: Okay. Screening submarines?

KUHAR: For anti-submarine destroyers is what we were.

KURTZ: Okay. And were there any incidents that -- how long were you on Yankee station roughly?

KUHAR: I would say we were probably out there for two, three weeks.

KURTZ: Okay. And that was in 1962 yet?

KUHAR: 62.

KURTZ: Okay. Were there any incidents there?

KUHAR: Not that I remember.

KURTZ: Okay. And you were still a radio operator?

KUHAR: Right.

KURTZ: So what kind of -- were the activities, radio activities that you're dealing with just between the American ships that were out there?

KUHAR: Yes. Yes.

KURTZ: So after you left Yankee Station, what happened?

KUHAR: Then we went to Manila, and -- back that up. After we left, we went back to Subic Bay and we had a period of R and R.

KURTZ: Subic Bay was a major American Naval base in the Philippines?

KUHAR: Right in the port of a Olongapo that was the city that was --

KURTZ: Do you have the spelling of that?

KUHAR: Okay. It's O L O N G A P O.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: And then we had some R and R in Bagnio [??] this was John Deere Air Force Base, it was up in the mountains in the Philippines and we just went up there and kicked back for about a week.

KURTZ: Okay. Was there kind of an American facility there?

KUHAR: Right. This was -- they were sending all branches of the service for R and R up there. It wasn't just the Navy, there was Marines that went up there and they have golf courses and one horseback ride and stuff like that.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: Then we went to Manila.

KURTZ: Okay. Anything happen at Manila that is striking?

KUHAR: Well, there wasn't enough -- while we were operating, we were operating in a Southeast -- what is it, Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. SEATO and we had ships from all kinds of nations in there. Australia and Japanese and Taiwanese and whoever was in the Southeast Treaty Organization. And they didn't have room for the ships to tie up in port, so we all had to anchor out in Manila Bay, and when they held liberty you have to take a, that's -- liberty is your free time, you have to take boats, small boats from your ship to the landing and then when you went back to your ship you had to catch a boat to go back. And liberty expired at midnight for all these Navies, and there was a big fenced in area at the boat docks where you had thousands of sailors trying to get on boats back to their own ship. Well, and they'd been a lot of partying going on, and in the morning people would wake up and they were on the wrong ship. They'd just get on a boat and you might end up in -- on an Australian destroyer and then in the morning it was like water taxiing scurrying all over trying to get people back to the right ship. And I remember waking up, I was in an Australian naval uniform from the top up, the hat and everything, I don't know where my uniform ended up, but it was kind of funny that you went out as an American sailor and you came back as an Australian sailor.

KURTZ: Were people pretty understanding about some of this stuff?

KUHAR: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, right. The captains of the ship -- just so you didn't miss your ship when it was taking off.

KURTZ: Yeah.

KUHAR: And from there we went to Hong Kong and then back to Colby, Japan, Osaka, Japan and then back to Pearl Harbor.

KURTZ: Okay. So when did you get back to Pearl Harbor after this? Was this all the six months?

KUHAR: Six months. We left in February so October maybe.

KURTZ: Returned August of --

KUHAR: October.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: Yeah. August -- no, August, I'm sorry.

KURTZ: August of 62?

KUHAR: Yeah.

KURTZ: Okay. Then what happened?

KUHAR: Well, then in September we just -- we, never took another cruise while I was aboard, just operated locally and in September of 1963 I was transferred to shore duty in Pearl Harbor as a flag radioman for the commandant and Destroyer Flotilla Five.

KURTZ: Okay. What were your duties there?

KUHAR: I was a radioman, and basically we didn't have -- we didn't have any radios with, I was a radioman, we didn't have any radios. We worked in the commandant's headquarters and every hour we'd have to go over to the 14th Naval District Communications Center and we'd pick up all of our -- all of the messages pertaining to the commandant, the Destroyer Flotilla Five and we'd take those back to the office, type them up on a form and then distribute them to whoever was supposed to get them.

KURTZ: How long did you have that duty?

KUHAR: I did that until November of 1964.

KURTZ: Then what was your assignment?

KUHAR: I was transferred to Naval Test Ordinance Station in China Lake, California.

KURTZ: Okay. What were your duties there?

KUHAR: It was -- I was still a radioman but I was second in command. So I was a -- it was my duty to make sure that all of the, call it a check -- traffic checker. I had to make sure that all of the messages that we went out, went out to the right people and all of the messages that came in were distributed to the right people at the Naval Test Ordinance Station.

KURTZ: What was your rank then?

KUHAR: I was E5 first class.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: And Naval Ordinance Test Station they tested Navy missiles, ground to ground, surface to air missiles out there. That's what that was and kind of hard to understand what a Navy man was doing in the middle of a desert and there wasn't any water for thousands of miles. But that was a pretty interesting job.

KURTZ: So how long were you there?

KUHAR: There until September, 1966.

KURTZ: Then did you -- then what was your next assignment?

KUHAR: I was back to Pearl Harbor on the USS Eperson.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: Another destroyer.

KURTZ: And what was your duties on the Eperson?

KUHAR: I was senior radioman.

KURTZ: Okay. And where did the Eperson go?

KUHAR: Okay. We -- November, 1966 we took a cruise back to West Pack.

KURTZ: West Pack, and what was West Pac's responsibilities?

KUHAR: It was same thing. We were screening aircraft carrier that was headed to Vietnam.

KURTZ: Do you remember what the name of it --

KUHAR: Now this was anti-submarine, it was the USS Hornet I believe.

KURTZ: Okay. And so you took the Hornet across the Pacific Ocean screening for --

KUHAR: Right, to Yokosuka, Japan.

KURTZ: Did you have any contacts with submarines on this trip across, do you know?

KUHAR: No. No, we didn't.

KURTZ: Then from Japan did you continue on with the Hornet to --

KUHAR: No. We took it to Yokosuka, Japan.

KURTZ: Then what did Eperson do?

KUHAR: We went to -- we visited Tokyo, Japan, Kamakura, Japan.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: And then back to Yankee Station.

KURTZ: Uh-hum. [Affirmative]

KUHAR: And we, in January of 1967, we went to Subic Bay for upkeep and I had some -- a medical problem with hives. So I was transferred to the Subic Bay Naval Hospital and they couldn't find out what was causing these hives, so I was sent to a naval hospital in Philadelphia.

KURTZ: Okay. And how long were you in the hospital?

KUHAR: I was in the hospital from February, 67 to April, 67.

KURTZ: Okay. And did they clean them up then?

KUHAR: They never really found out what was causing it all, but I had to change my shaving cream, my soap, my toothpaste, everything that -- I stopped drinking coffee and stuff like this. But it never did clear up. It was good enough to where I was sent back to duty.

KURTZ: So you got sent back to duty in April of 67?

KUHAR: Right.

KURTZ: Is that back to the Eperson?

KUHAR: No. It was back to Pearl Harbor to the USS Taylor.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: Another destroyer and I was leading radioman on that ship.

KURTZ: Okay. And what did the typical duty day for a radioman on the destroyer like lead?

KUHAR: Well, at sea we worked 12 on and 12 off, and so we had two duty sections and as a leading radioman, I didn't -- I wasn't on a duty section. I just the overseer, but with all of the traffic that we were sending out about our duties and off the Vietnam I would -- there would be 16 to 20 hour days that I'd be working and we were at sea for 43 straight days without hitting port.

KURTZ: And so --

KUHAR: They were long days, 12 hour days and then on top of it then you had other duties like compartment cleaning, not myself, radiomen, mess duty, things like that, so --

KURTZ: What was your general quarters duty station?

KUHAR: In radio central?

KURTZ: Radio central?

KUHAR: Right.

KURTZ: How much contact did you have with the ship captain in that position?

KUHAR: Quite a bit. Quite a bit. The radio on a destroyer, the radio central on a destroyer is right below the bridge, and it was only like 10 steps down the ladder to -- from the captain's sea cabin to the radio central and it was a lot of face-to-face.

KURTZ: I'm going to switch the --

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A]

KURTZ: August 11th interview with Joe. Please continue, you were talking about your relationship with the CEO of the USS Taylor?

KUHAR: The captain. The captain always wanted to see a message -- messages that come in. The chain of command for radio messages from the bottom up was the communications officer, who --and who is normally the most junior officer on the ship because it was probably the worse job for an officer, and after the communications officer, there was the operations officer. And from the operations officer was the executive officer and then from there it was the captain and the captain instructed that he wanted to see these messages immediately and the executive officer said he wanted to see them before the captain, and the ops officer said he wanted to see it before the executive and the communications officer wanted to see it before the operations officer did. So the captain saw it immediately and those other three saw it before immediately.

KURTZ: Oh yes. Did you have any problems fulfilling that impossible task?

KUHAR: Well, we probably sent four people out with the same message at one time. But the most experience, the most interesting experience I ever -- I had while I was in the Navy happened in this last year that I was on this USS Taylor.

KURTZ: Please share that with us.

KUHAR: We left Yokosuka, Japan and we were going around the northern tip of Japan, down the Sea of Japan and right after we made the turn to go south on the Sea of Japan, we were only maybe like 200 miles from Vladivostok, Russia, and there was a aircraft carrier and eight destroyers operating together and one day on the horizon from -- this looked like an old junker of a ship. It wasn't a military ship, but it had probably 20 big antennas on it and what they were doing was they were spying on us and trying with their antennas here, trying to measure our radar frequencies, our radio frequencies and they followed us and harassed us, trying to get inside the circle of destroyers for a couple days. And after we chased them off, then a Russian destroyer appeared and was playing the same kind of games, trying to break into the inner circle of destroyers. Well, while they were trying to do that, this Russian destroyer, all I remember it had a number 022 on it, collided with the USS Walker and so that Russian destroyer limped away and we continued on and the Walker sustained some structural damage, but nothing to stop it from continuing. And the next day a Russian guided missile destroyer, 025, came on the scene and they tried, they tried the same maneuvers to get inside of our circle and the USS Walker again had a collision with this Russian destroyer 025. And we had -- the Walker was in destroyer division 252, and that the Taylor was also in this division and we had the commodore of destroyer division 252 riding in our ship. So this Russian destroyer, this 025, sent a flashing light, international code flashing light to our ship and wanted us to board their ship to check the damage that was done. So our commodore sent a message to the admiral who was riding in the aircraft carrier and relayed the message that they wanted us to board to check out their damage. Well, I was lead radioman, so I was getting all of our portable radio equipment ready and we had an officer on board ship that spoke Russian, so we were getting this little boarding party ready to go aboard this Russian ship to see -- check their damage out. Well, we had to wait for the okay from the admiral, and so we sent the message telling the admiral we see this flashing light request that we board their ship and the response from the admiral was since when can you copy international flashing light? So we never did go aboard, never did go aboard. And also during that period of time there was Russian like U2 Queens, I think they might have been called Bears, and they would swoop down on the carrier to try to keep them from putting their planes in the air, and the anti-submarine carriers all they carry is fixed wing and helicopters, they don't have jets fighters or nothing like that. So these planes, Russian planes would be swooping around the area and we sent off to 13th Air Force in Japan and they'd send out some U.S. fighter planes and U.S. fighter planes would chase these Russian spy planes away. There was never any shots fired or anything like that. They'd like fly underneath them and then fly up in the air and just like either going to move or we're going to have a collision, that's what it looked like.

KURTZ: So if I could just interrupt, the aircraft carrier that you were with was an anti-submarine aircraft carrier?

KUHAR: Right. So all they had was fixed wing planes that would search for submarines.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: So this happened a couple times. The Russian planes left the area and then they'd come back and then we'd have to get the Air Force out there again to chase them off. This happened a couple times. So that was why we were in the Sea of Japan.

KURTZ: Okay. So how long did this all take place in the Sea of Japan, over what period of time?

KUHAR: Probably four, five days.

KURTZ: Okay. Then what happened next?

KUHAR: Then we went to Subic Bay and replenished and then we headed for the coast of Vietnam.

KURTZ: Okay. What time period was this then?

KUHAR: This was in May of 1967.

KURTZ: Okay. What happened --

KUHAR: And we went into Da Nang and Nha Trang are the only two ports we ever went into, but nobody ever left the ship.

KURTZ: So then obviously you had no contact with the Vietnamese people then?

KUHAR: Not, you know, face-to-face. But we had all kinds of fishing boats all around us, you know. Little two, three man fishing boats, and they -- I don't know if this was ever proven but what we were thinking was that they were -- these fishing boats would go out and sort of grid us for shore fire and the ship I was on, never got hit by shore fire, but the ship north of us, the farthest north of us got hit by shore fire and I think four sailors were killed during that time, during that fire.

KURTZ: Did your ship ever get fired on?

KUHAR: No, we didn't, but we did shore fire.

KURTZ: Okay. And can you describe that?

KUHAR: It was -- this was second time that I was there and I was writing my wife a letter one day, telling her that she didn't have much to worry about because it was a one way



battle, as far as my ship was concerned. We were firing and never receiving anything back. And that's when the ship north of us got hit and we sort of scrambled a little farther off shore. But I can remember when we were doing night cruising. It was real hot, so the uniforms were relaxed. It was like we were in cut-offs, dungarees and t-shirts and baseball caps because it was probably 110 at night time there, and we weren't firing at the time, we were just like cruising up and down the coast, and we would sit out there and it would be like being in a big drive-in movie. You could see, you could hear bombs landing, you could hear helicopters flying around, you could see the flares being shot in the air and you can only imagine what was happening on the ground there, and we were out there having the cigarette, a cup of coffee.

KURTZ: How far off shore you were you?

KUHAR: We were probably 8 miles, 8 miles off shore.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: And that stuck with me that we're just thankful that I was sitting out there having coffee because this was, you know, this was like a big thunder, lightening and thunder storm. It was -- you can only just about imagine what was happening on land there. I've got a good friend that was on shore and he never talks about it, and he got a Navy cross. Never told me what it was about.

KURTZ: That's a very big deal.

KUHAR: But I took some movie film of these Russian ships. I took some movie film of us firing on Vietnam and I donated that.

KURTZ: I understand that you're going to narrate that later today?

KUHAR: Right. Right. So --

KURTZ: Did you have any contact with these fishing boats? Did you ever have people board them or chase them away or --

KUHAR: Well, I know that they would warn these people to stay out of these areas, you know, combat areas, but they would still go out there. And at night time, one time when we were steaming and we steamed darkened shipped so we're not a big target that it sounded like we ran over -- maybe ran over some fishing boats, but we never stopped and we never turned our lights on to look. But that is probably the closest contact we ever had. But they'd float around. Nothing to it.

KURTZ: Did you have any contact with the Vietnamese Navy?

KUHAR: No, never did. What would happen is when we got to Vietnam waters, a swift boat would come out.

KURTZ: What's a swift boat?

KUHAR: It's like a PT boat, only it's a river boat that they use in Vietnam, cruising up and down the rivers and this swift boat come along side and they'd have Army, Marine personnel on there and they would come and meet with our captain and we'd get the maps, coordinates of where we were supposed to, you know, do our firing. Then these Marines, Army ground personnel let's say, would contact us by radio, and they'd give us coordinates and we'd fire, then they'd contact us back to bring it up, lower it, right, left, you know, to zero it in, zero in on a targets.

KURTZ: On the radio operation there, were there radios in where the guns were or were they in radio central?

KUHAR: In radio central, but see they -- we could patch them to the bridge.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: So then phone talkers on the bridge would relay the information to the gun crews. And more than once we'd lose contact with the spotter and we wouldn't hear from them and we wouldn't hear from them and then all of a sudden we'd hear from them again and it was sound like they were like winded, like they were, you know, getting out of there while the getting's good. That's how close they were. And there again, I was sort of glad that destroyer, our main battery was a 5 inch gun mount and we could fire a 5 inch shell 8 miles or better and hit a target.

KURTZ: How many 5 inche guns did your destroyer have?

KUHAR: We had two. One in forward, one in aft and we had -- actually our main weapon was torpedo, the torpedo tubes because we were anti-submarine and then we had some 3 inch guns that were anti-aircraft guns. We had machine guns. 50 caliber machine guns that we had out while we were cruising around all these fishing boats in case they tried to do anything. But we never, never shot on a fishing boat or anything. All we ever shot on was land.

KURTZ: Did you have any contacts with submarines when you were in the Vietnam waters?

KUHAR: No, we didn't. Submarines had contacts with us. Our own submarines were so stealth that they would, while we were cruising, we didn't even know they were there and they would take periscope pictures and send them to our ship and say on this date, longitude, latitude, you were sunk by the -- by this submarine and we didn't even know they were there, which, you see, these ships that I was on, the Phillip and the Taylor, the Phillip was 499 and the Taylor was 468, they were all commissioned in 1940. So I mean, these were --

KURTZ: Old boats?

KUHAR: I think in the full blown naval battle, a ship to ship battle, their life expectancy would be like about five minutes. So if you could fire your guns for five minutes or longer you'll outlive your life expectancy, which wasn't really good to hear, but it never, never happened.

KURTZ: That's good. That's very good. So what happened? Is there anything else on that Vietnam tour that we didn't cover?

KUHAR: I can remember once back, I can't remember the location though, there was an ammunition dump on the shore that either got set off, you know, accidentally or incoming set it off and that was a pretty big display, all this ammunition.

KURTZ: Were you up north when that happened up towards Da Nang?

KUHAR: We were in DMZ in the area. Four ships operated together and they's be up and down the coast and maybe two miles apart. And then we'd go out, get more ammo and four more ships would take the place. But it seemed like the two times that I was there, I could have swore we were shooting at the same tree, you know. We didn't move north. We didn't move south. It was just a year later and we're shooting at the same targets. Didn't seem like we were making much headways.

KURTZ: So when you said you went out to get ammunition, were there supply ships over the horizon?

KUHAR: Right. Right.

KURTZ: That you could get food, water, ammo?

KUHAR: Well, we could get ammo. Food was secondary. I ate a lot -- we ate a lot of powdered food, and another thing these ships are 1940s, when we were operating at general quarters, you know, they'd have to close down all the vents and we'd be on water hours, fresh water hours. You can only get a drink of water maybe twice a day. They turn the water on because they needed them for the revaporators, they needed fresh water. So we -- we're out 43 days and you might have eight uniforms, sea uniforms and salt water laundry, salt water showers, and when we went off the firing line one time, we went out to get supplies, we just anchored out and had two sections swim call out that was something different too. You couldn't even see land, and you're out having a swim call, just half of the ship would go swimming for a half hour and the other ship goes swimming for a half hour, diving off the ship and then climbing up the ropes back to the ship, that just --

KURTZ: What happened if you couldn't swim?

KUHAR: You wouldn't go swimming. You worked for somebody that so they could stay longer or something I guess. But then I -- my -- after we came off the firing line, we went

back to the Philippines for -- to bring our stuff up to snuff and it was time for me to get discharged.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: So I was sent off the ship in Manila in July of -- early July of 57.

KURTZ: Or 67?

KUHAR: 67. I'm sorry, right. 67. Flew back to California and got discharged. That was --

KURTZ: Where did you get discharged in California?

KUHAR: At Treasure Island Naval Station, San Francisco.

KURTZ: When you flew back from the Philippines to California, did you go on a commercial aircraft?

KUHAR: Commercial. We flew to Tokyo, Japan and got on a Northwest Airlines, Northwest Orient Airlines and flew to Almadore (ph) -- no, we flew to Seattle.

KURTZ: Did you have any contact with civilians while you were still in uniform?

KUHAR: With who?

KURTZ: Civilians, I mean, were you harassed or anything like that?

KUHAR: Oh, no. No. In China Lake, California there was more civilians than there was Navy, but no, I never had anybody give me a hard time.

KURTZ: So then when you came back from Treasure Island, when you got discharged, did you come back from Wisconsin then?

KUHAR: Right, back to Janesville.

KURTZ: And you then took a job with the Janesville Police Department?

KUHAR: Right, and after I was out 18 years I decided I'd go back in the reserves and finish my 20.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: And I went to the Navy recruiter in Madison and they said because I was out 18 years that I'd have to drop two pay grades.

KURTZ: Okay.

KUHAR: And I wouldn't go -- I didn't want to go back in at two pay grades and a priest at the church in Janesville that I go to was a chaplain for General Matura, (ph) who was the commandant of the National Guard.

KURTZ: [Inaudible] General?

KUHAR: Of the National Guards. So this priest called the General and said he had a guy who wanted to go back in the service. So the priest and I came up and met the General, had lunch with him on the General, he took me back to his office and he told his -- told his staff there that he was bringing me back in, he was bringing me into the National Guard at the rate that I left, which was E6 which was a staff sergeant. So he asked me what I wanted to be in the Army and I said well, I didn't know anything about the Army. And he said well, right in Janesville we had an MP unit and my being a police officer, he told his clerk that I was gonna go to this MP unit in Janesville. It was detachment 1 32nd MPs, actually out of Milwaukee. We were at the detachment. So his clerk told him there was an availability for a staff sergeant at -- in Janesville. And that General asked him where there was a -- where there was a vacancy and it was up in Superior. Well, they transferred that Bill up to Janesville and I went in National Guard in 1985 as a staff sergeant with the MP detachment. During that time we went to Alabama for some training and we went to Reforager in Germany in 1987. And it took me couple years to realize that the Army wasn't the life for me, after I went to Camp McCoy and slept in a jeep for a few days, I realized the Army, I liked the Navy, even though it was crowded, I liked Navy sleeping and eating. So I recontacted the Navy and they said they'd take me back in, but they still lowered me a rank, but I would retire at my highest rank. So I transferred from National Guard to the Navy and I was drilling out of Chicago and my summer duties were on the USS Guam on LPH in Norfolk. Never went to sea, I just we sat in port for two or three weeks and then I transferred from the reserve, active reserve to they had a IRR, individual ready reserve, and all I had to do to give me a good year was take so many correspondence courses and every year I applied for summer camp, I mean, summer training anywhere, any station, any ship, anywhere and the Navy kept telling me they didn't have any money to send me there. So I finished out my like last five years at home doing correspondence courses and I retired February of 1996 and I had -- with 20 years and I had to wait three years to get paid because the reserves you don't get paid until you reach the age of 60. So I went and retired with pay on April 18th, 1999.

KURTZ: Okay. Have you got anything else you'd like to share with us, Joe?

KUHAR: No. My wife might. No. No. I think that's about it.

[End of Interview]