

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
**JOHN SUMPTER**  
USS Wiltsie, Navy, Korean War  
2002

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**John Sumpter**, (b. 1933). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 videorecording (ca. 55 min.); ½ inch, color.

**Abstract:**

John Sumpter, a Beloit, Wisconsin native, discusses his Korean War service as a sonar man aboard the USS Wiltsie beginning in 1949. He explains the duties of a sonar man, as well as the sonar equipment. Sumpter discusses locating mines, dangers for sonar men, and the use of depth charges. He also reflects at length on the force and noise from battleship gunfire. He relates stories, after returning home, of his membership in the VFW Military Order of the Cootie and Veterans of Underage Military Service.

**Biographical Sketch:**

John Sumpter, (b. 1933) served aboard the USS Wiltsie as a sonar man for three tours in Korea before returning home and joining the VFW Military Order of the Cootie and Veterans of Underage Military Service.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002.

Transcribed by John Maerzke, 2012.

Transcription checked and corrected by Amanda Axel, 2012.

Abstract written by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

## **Interview Transcript:**

- McIntosh: Okay, it's the 17th of July, 2002. Talking to John Sumpter. Where were you born, sir?
- Sumpter: Beloit, Wisconsin.
- McIntosh: And when was that?
- Sumpter: April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1933.
- McIntosh: Now when you left high school, did you get a job right away or did you go to school?
- Sumpter: No, I never finished high school, I left home when I was fourteen years old.
- McIntosh: Oh my goodness, was it on purpose?
- Sumpter: Well, I think it was economics, I think. My family was rather poor. I went south to work the Kansas wheat harvest, and when that ran out I went to Arkansas and started picking peaches. I did that for two summers.
- McIntosh: Did your folks know where you were? You didn't lose track of them?
- Sumpter: Oh no. It wasn't against their will.
- McIntosh: I see. Well you were pretty young to be out on your own.
- Sumpter: When the peach harvest ran out, so did my money. So I joined the Navy in Arkansas. That's how come I joined the Navy in Arkansas, instead of in Wisconsin.
- McIntosh: And at age what?
- Sumpter: Sixteen.
- McIntosh: Well you were in a hurry to do everything. So early, that's really ? something. Well, how did that go
- Sumpter: Real well.
- McIntosh: When was that, that you entered the service?
- Sumpter: August 7, 1949.
- McIntosh: Where was your boot training?

Sumpter: In San Diego.

McIntosh: They trained you to be what?

Sumpter: A sonar man.

McIntosh: So they sent you to school for that, where was that?

Sumpter: It was actually right across the road from the Naval Station in San Diego.

McIntosh: Was that training long and hard?

Sumpter: It was quite extensive. The six month course was equivalent to an associate degree. And just prior to me graduating was when they found out how old I was, when they were clearing me for security purposes.

McIntosh: So in six months, you were only a year older than when you came in?

Sumpter: Right.

McIntosh: You were only seventeen then?

Sumpter: Right, I turned seventeen when I was in sonar school, they gave me the choice of staying or getting out; and I liked it, so I stayed.

McIntosh: You had no time to be a difficult teenager.

Sumpter: No, not really.

McIntosh: I guess not. You were under control right off the bat. So did you find sonar school interesting, or difficult or what?

Sumpter: It was a tough course. I graduated towards the top of my class.

McIntosh: Excellent, did you have to learn code and that sort of thing? Sending and receiving?

Sumpter: That's right, sending and receiving, and Morse code.

McIntosh: In addition to watching a sonar screen. And did you learn any radar training with that?

Sumpter: Oh no, just strictly under water sonar. And the purpose of the Morse code was to challenge any unknown contacts and listen to their response. That was the reason for the security clearance, because that was top secret.

McIntosh: What part was top secret?

Sumpter: The codes.

McIntosh: Oh, the code that you used, but wasn't that changed—

Sumpter: Every four hours.

McIntosh: Every four hours? Jeez, I thought daily was often.

Sumpter: Well we had a manual that would show, it was just a series of four letters at that time, and they would respond with a correct series of four letters.

McIntosh: The book that you had, that wasn't too difficult then?

Sumpter: Oh no, and we didn't have that many contacts during the Korean War, although we had a couple.

McIntosh: Okay, so where did you go after, now that you were a sonar man?

Sumpter: Well I came home on leave.

McIntosh: Did you have a third class rating?

Sumpter: No, I made seaman, first class seaman out of sonar school. I came home on leave, and while I was on leave the Korean War broke out. I was called back to my ship that I hadn't actually reported to yet, the ship I was assigned to. By the time I got back to San Diego they had already departed. So I was considered a Class A passenger, because of my technical rating, and they flew me to Japan to meet the ship, and I was there for two weeks before the ship got there.

McIntosh: Oh yeah, I imagine. Now what kind of ship was this?

Sumpter: Destroyer. I spent the rest of my naval career on one ship.

McIntosh: On the same ship? That's unusual. What was the name of the ship?

Sumpter: USS Wiltsie DD 716.

McIntosh: Oh I see, W-I-L-T-S-I-E, D-D-716. So you met that in Japan?

Sumpter: That was my first airplane ride, across the Pacific.

McIntosh: You did everything early. Really you're not even an adult yet, you were still a kid and you're doing all that stuff. That's fantastic. Now, was Japan a surprise for you?

Sumpter: Very interesting, of course they were still under the occupation when we arrived.

McIntosh: I was there the same time.

Sumpter: Really?

McIntosh: Yeah, I had been ordered to Korea a month after the war started, and directed a hospital ship at Inchon. So I was rushed into the fray.

Sumpter: What hospital ship was it?

McIntosh: The Haven.

Sumpter: The Haven? I've been aboard that.

McIntosh: Have you? I spent a year on it. So anyway, you found Japan interesting I'm sure.

Sumpter: Yes, I had time to get acquainted there until our ship arrived.

McIntosh: Sure, that was nice. There's a lot of interesting things in Japan. I enjoyed the country very much.

Sumpter: So did I.

McIntosh: So when the ship came in you greeted them, as a veteran here now.

Sumpter: Yeah that's true, it wasn't all that simple in order to hook up with them, but we finally hooked up with them. Actually we hooked up with them in Sasebo, Japan. I went aboard a destroyer tender which went to Buckner Bay, Okinawa, and then back to Sasebo, and I met them in Sasebo, Japan.

McIntosh: Were you relieving someone, or were you just the initial sonar man?

Sumpter: Oh no, I was just part of the original sonar crew.

McIntosh: How many were on the sonar crew?

Sumpter: It varied, usually from five to seven men.

McIntosh: And you rotate watches? Usually two men on a watch at the same time?

Sumpter: Right.

McIntosh: You'd be on for eight and then off for—

Sumpter: Well it depended where we were at, and what we were doing. Condition three was eight on, and sixteen off. Condition two, was four on and four off, which we stood for ninety-six days at one time.

McIntosh: And condition one?

Sumpter: Condition one is right at battle stations where you never leave.

McIntosh: Got it. Now tell me about the sonar set up on the ship.

Sumpter: Well it was located in the lowest part of the ship, because of the necessity of the transducer located there. In case of ever having to abandon ship, we had five hatches we had to get out of to get to the top side.

McIntosh: I don't like your odds.

Sumpter: We were quite fortunate.

McIntosh: I guess so. You would have really had to scramble to make it out of five hatches. So was the space down there for the sonar men adequate?

Sumpter: Oh yeah, very adequate. It was small, but of course we had a small crew. It was actually located in a corner of our sleeping compartment so we only had about six feet to go to our battle stations.

McIntosh: Can't beat that. Did you make records, as you were on duty? If you picked up something how did you make a permanent record of that?

Sumpter: Well actually I reported it to the bridge. We had direct communication, and they would make the decision. I mean we would make the decision as to evaluate what we had contacted.

McIntosh: Right, but did you put it on tape or anything?

Sumpter: No.

McIntosh: Didn't do any of that?

Sumpter: The bridge would record it on the ships log.

McIntosh: Right and that's all. It's the only way you would keep track of it by hand. And was that pretty boring sometimes?

Sumpter: Well, yes it is. That's how we got the nickname pingheads. I'm sure you heard that.

McIntosh: Yes, I've talked to other sonar men.

Sumpter: To listen to that for hours on end, it is boring. It was kind of exciting if we ever did get a contact. During the Korean War we actually searched for mines more than we did anything. We could locate mines.

McIntosh: At what level were those mines generally? Fifty feet below?

Sumpter: A lot of them were actually floating. Some of the mines we detected they determined were from World War Two that had broke loose. Then we would proceed to—

McIntosh: Could you pick those up if they were on the surface?

Sumpter: If you were on the ball you could.

McIntosh: That's why I say, everything is designed for below surface, so something on the surface might escape your attention.

Sumpter: You could actually detect them.

McIntosh: I know, but you should have lookouts on the top side anyway.

Sumpter: But at night you couldn't see them. We had a couple of close calls with mines, but we never hit one. One time we came up on two of them chained together, and they backed the ship down just in time.

McIntosh: Yeah, I was going to say, if that blows, we wouldn't be having this interview.

Sumpter: Right. In fact, I lost five sonar friends on the USS Brush. They hit a mine, and of course being right at the waterline they blew a hole. They lost thirteen people, and five of them were sonar men.

McIntosh: They go first, because of where they're located. How was the chow aboard ship?

Sumpter: I never complained about Navy chow. There were times when we were at sea for extended periods where we would run out of fresh stuff. Actually we ate pretty good compared to other people.



McIntosh: You were refurbished by—

Sumpter: A replenishment group. There was actually always a replenishment group following the task force.

McIntosh: Was your duty in a task group all the time?

Sumpter: No, we were the flagship of our division, and we had a commodore aboard that had thirty-two years of consecutive sea duty. To be quite frank he was quite gung-ho.

McIntosh: I think you get a little funny after that many years.

Sumpter: Well that's another story too about him. That was the reason we had eight battle stars. I don't think there was another ship in the fleet that had eight battle stars. Instead of sending somebody else, we'd go. He was pretty gung-ho. That was one of the reasons we spent ninety-six days one time, all the other ships in our division had gone back to Sasebo, but he thought they needed a rest in Sasebo.

McIntosh: Sasebo is okay, we spent some time there. That wasn't very thrilling.

Sumpter: We made Sasebo quite often. I mean, I made three—

McIntosh: There's huge numbers of ships there, that's a big naval base.

Sumpter: Of course when we first got there, we were the only American ships, other than some supply ships that were there. My division of destroyers was the first ones deployed during the Korean War.

McIntosh: I got to Inchon, in the hospital ship, in October, right after the landing that they made in Inchon.

Sumpter: We were there.

McIntosh: We didn't go to Japan though for, I think it was about two months later.

Sumpter: We were in drydock there for a while. We hit something while we were in Wonsan Harbor, and bent one of our screws, our propellers. We went in circles for a long time. [laughs] In fact, we spent thirty days in Wonsan when I was enemy help. That's one of the sea stories that stick in my mind.

McIntosh: Tell me about it.

Sumpter: Well of course Wonsan Harbor is huge. I mean people visualize a harbor, sometimes you couldn't tell if you were in at sea or in a harbor. It's big. We spent thirty days in there.

McIntosh: Your function was to attack shore, I assume.

Sumpter: Well two functions, that and also to relieve the spotters on one of the islands there. We would relieve the Marine spotters every twenty-four hours. That's where, like I say it was an interesting experience for us. I got to see the USS Wisconsin in action there. Every day we would steam around a peninsula that was just honeycombed with caves. They would roll their little artillery out and shoot at us everyday at the same time. We had some shrapnel hits, but no direct hits. That's why we were in there.

McIntosh: What kind of stuff did they shoot?

Sumpter: I don't really know how big they were, I would guess probably .105 or something like that. And they weren't very accurate at all, it was more harassment than it was anything. By the time we get our gun turrets turned around and shoot back at them, they'd pull them back into the caves.

McIntosh: You had five inchers?

Sumpter: Five-inch. Dual five-inch .38. We would fire white phosphorous right into the cave sometimes. The next day they would come right back out and shoot at us. Well, like I say, it got to be just harassment more than anything; although there was always the danger that they were going to hit us. So the Wisconsin was laying off shore about fifteen miles, and that's what the Marine spotters were doing. They were actually firing over—

McIntosh: [unintelligible]

Sumpter: Right. They were shooting their sixteen-inch guns, fifteen miles over the top of us, under the direction of the Marine spotters. And like I say, the harassment got so bad they called the Wisconsin in, and they came in through the entrance to the harbor and pulled up parallel to this peninsula, I would guess they were about a half mile off. They turned all three turrets of sixteen-inch guns broadside, and let one broadside go, which I happened to see. I happened to be up on the big binoculars with the handles, you know, looking. Because it was just a sight to see, the battleship that close anyways. And when they let loose, and when the dust settled, there was just piles of gravel, we never got anymore harassment out of that. I have pictures of this by the way. The harbor, even though it was that large, the Wisconsin couldn't turn around in the harbor, because of the depth. So they backed out about nine miles to get out of there. So that was one of my exciting things that I was involved in.

McIntosh: That's unique. And the noise from the big guns?

Sumpter: Oh you could hear it, believe me. You could feel the whole concussion. We were probably three or four miles from them but it was close enough, and they let all nine barrels go at one time. Like I say, it was just piles of gravel.

McIntosh: I've talked to guys who were on battleships, I've interviewed them. They said that when the big guns are unleashed, on the top deck where the command post is. They have to open all the windows.

Sumpter: Keep them from breaking.

McIntosh: Otherwise they're gone. From their own guns, and the concussion, they'll break. It will break every closed window that's up there.

Sumpter: Well the concussion from dual five-inch .38s is pretty severe. You can soon realize why they call them tin cans; when you don't hear the actual explosion, you just feel the concussion.

McIntosh: Did your ship roll quite a bit when those guns shot?

Sumpter: No, they wouldn't actually roll; it just sounded like somebody hit the side of the ship with a sledge hammer.

McIntosh: I know that big battleship rolled.

Sumpter: They claim that they would actually move sideways like six foot.

McIntosh: Right, it's hard to believe, but that's a lot of power.

Sumpter: And that's another reason, which you're probably aware of, they still have wooden decks on them battleships. On the Wisconsin, the New Jersey, the Missouri and the Iowa.

McIntosh: I never recall that.

Sumpter: They're antique.

McIntosh: I thought they did that because it was easier to walk on.

Sumpter: No that's the reason, because of the concussion. It's sound-absorbing.

McIntosh: Okay, so when you're up there, generally you're out for two weeks and then back to Sasebo? Or longer?

Sumpter: Oh no. Thirty days was the normal patrol for us, and one time we stayed ninety-six days.

McIntosh: Were you on the east side of Korea? All the way around?

Sumpter: All the way around the country. We patrolled constantly; in fact, one time we were within just a few miles of the Russian border. That was our first action.

McIntosh: So, on the east side?

Sumpter: On the east side. We come upon a tugboat, pulling a couple barges. They were heading south, and they were identified as North Koreans. We sunk the barges, and when we started shooting at the barges, they cut the line that they were just towing and they ran the tugboat ashore. After the barges were sunk the ocean was covered with apples. They were loaded with apples, not ammunition. Then we went in close and destroyed the tugboat too, but by that time the crew had already ran off. That was our first action, sinking a couple of barges of apples.

McIntosh: So how long were you in the Korean water?

Sumpter: I made three tours of duty over there.

McIntosh: Now tour duty was a year.

Sumpter: Well normally it was a year.

McIntosh: Yeah that's what a tour on my hospital ship was.

Sumpter: Normally it was a year. We stayed like fourteen months the first time, I think the second time was probably a year, and then I went for a third time and I only spent six months there and then I was discharged.

McIntosh: By this time you were almost a chief.

Sumpter: I was Second Class, getting ready to take the test for First Class.

McIntosh: Between tours you went home?

Sumpter: We went back to Long Beach here in the drydock.

McIntosh: How long would you be there?

Sumpter: I think the longest we'd be there is two months and then we'd come back.

McIntosh: Come back home?

Sumpter: Yeah.

McIntosh: See the folks?

Sumpter: Seen the folks. On my second trip back, prior to making my third tour of duty, I got married. I went with my wife for two weeks, I did things fast, and then married her.

McIntosh: And early.

Sumpter: With a ready-made family. I was married twenty years to that woman; been married thirty years the second time.

McIntosh: Excellent.

Sumpter: I also became a young grandfather, and now I'm a young great-grandfather. I'm sixty-nine, and I've got five great-grandchildren.

McIntosh: Boy you've done everything in a hurry. It took me that long to get that many. I only have two great grandchildren.

Sumpter: Just had another one last week. I have a grandson that's making the Navy a career, he's on a nuclear sub.

McIntosh: Oh really?

Sumpter: Yeah, he's got ten years in already.

McIntosh: I understand that when you were shelling the coast, if that's what your occupation was on that particular day, your sonar job was to look for enemy submarines?

Sumpter: Any contact. Usually we were looking for mines if we were in close. I mean any metallic contact will, you know?

McIntosh: Sure, reflect. So, if it's a mine, what was the drill?

Sumpter: They would have to spot it visually then. They would know where to look.

McIntosh: But if it was under water, John, how are they going to find it?

Sumpter: They would just avoid that and call in a mine sweeper.

McIntosh: I see. They could sweep that—

Sumpter: We had the equipment on board to sweep, but that wasn't our primary duty.

McIntosh: You had paravanes?

Sumpter: Paravanes, right. You're familiar with them. To my recollection, I don't think we ever used them.

McIntosh: Right, from the experience of my people, I have friends who were around destroyers, never could get the goddamn things to work. [laughs] It was a lot of fucking around. They said they would rather just see them and shoot 'em.

Sumpter: Well we fired our depth chargers just once in my three tours of duty on board.

McIntosh: What was the purpose of that?

Sumpter: We contacted a submarine. We were on the Formosa patrol at that time.

McIntosh: Maybe it was an American submarine, or Russian I suppose.

Sumpter: No, we never did know what it was. It was never confirmed or unconfirmed what it was. We identified it as a submarine. And it didn't answer the challenge.

McIntosh: No damage was apparent?

Sumpter: Nothing was ever confirmed.

McIntosh: Well that got everybody excited.

Sumpter: Oh yeah, very exciting. You know, you train that long, and spend that much time at a sonar counsel, and when the time comes it's pretty exciting.

McIntosh: I'll bet it was.

Sumpter: It was quite an experience dropping the depth charges. We dropped a pattern of, I forget what it was now, eleven or twelve.

McIntosh: On this contact?

Sumpter: Yeah. That was even more concussion than the five-inch .38s. It actually lifts the sternum.

McIntosh: Oh, it did?

Sumpter: Yeah it actually lifts the sternum. Knocked out every light bulb on the ship.

McIntosh: I know, but that didn't explode until it was a hundred yards beyond the sternum.

Sumpter: Yeah, but each one was over four hundred pounds.

McIntosh: That's a lot of dynamite in those things or whatever the hell is in there. A lot.

Sumpter: That was when China was threatening Taiwan.

McIntosh: I'm sure it was a Russian sub, not an American. So, when you went back to Sasebo, were you on the beach, or did you stay on the ship?

Sumpter: We were able to stay on the ship, but there were a lot of liberties, a lot of fun.

McIntosh: Tell me about your ship again, how many guys?

Sumpter: It varied from 300 to 320. It would vary.

McIntosh: Living quarters were adequate or pretty crowded?

Sumpter: Crowded, but I think they were quite adequate.

McIntosh: And you got used to the roll?

Sumpter: Never sea sick a day in my life.

McIntosh: You're very fortunate.

Sumpter: Yup.

McIntosh: I suppose they had to put some guys off who could never get used to it.

Sumpter: Well to my recollection in the three years almost that I spent aboard, it was only one I think that had chronic sea sickness. A lot of guys would fake it, trying to get out of chore duty. No, I actually enjoyed my tour of duty aboard the ship. One thing I do remember about first reporting

aboard, and I've told this story a lot of times too. I went from boot camp right to sonar school, and sonar school was regimented almost as much as boot camp was where we stood captain and admirals' inspections. Then I was in transit for almost two weeks, different receiving stations and that. I wasn't able to get a haircut, or I wasn't able to do my laundry—

McIntosh: Not paid.

Sumpter: Well I had my pay records right with me, you'd carry them right with you.

McIntosh: Oh, I know a lot of guys who had trouble that way.

Sumpter: Yeah, you could. You could take them to an authorized place. They were sealed, but they could open them and reseal them. So anyways, when I finally caught up to the ship in Sasebo, I got aboard like 20:00 on a Friday night and they were having a personnel inspection at 08:00 Saturday morning. Of course being used to boot camp and sonar school, I was quite concerned. I hadn't had no laundry done, and hadn't had a haircut, but the Operations Division was on the port quarter deck and I got up there, and I was just new aboard ship, didn't know anybody. I looked down the line and I thought, "Oh my goodness what in the hell is this?" You know? Guys with tailor-made uniforms, pressed neck kerchiefs, at that time the D.A.'s were popular and hats cocked over on the side of their head, and I thought, "Oh my goodness, they're going to kill this whole crew." I happened to be standing right where the inspection party stopped and reported to the division officer, and he said it was the best-looking division on the ship, and I thought I had died and went to heaven. It was a completely different world than what I had been used to; I guess maybe that's why I enjoyed it. When they'd set the special sea detail, of course on bigger ships there was a uniform of the day.

McIntosh: Right, they used to announce that, every morning at 8:00 o'clock.

Sumpter: But the destroyer I was on, they were wearing baseball caps, Levi's and penny loafers. But they would ask them to stay out of sight until we cleared the harbor. It was a different way of life for me.

McIntosh: Things were not that loose on our hospital ship.

Sumpter: I'm sure, and they weren't on the cruisers or the aircraft carriers.

McIntosh: On my ship we had two captains, you see. We had one captain to run the ship, and the other one ran the hospital. So those of us underlings had to keep our eyes **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** on both.



Sumpter: I've got a friend in Janesville that was on a hospital ship in World War II, and he's told me a lot of stories.

McIntosh: Where was he?

Sumpter: In the North Atlantic.

McIntosh: In the North Atlantic? Most of the hospital ships usually come out of the Pacific.

Sumpter: I think he told me there were only one or two guns aboard the whole ship.

McIntosh: On the hospital ship?

Sumpter: Yeah, I mean hand guns. That was it.

McIntosh: That was the paymaster, you know?

Sumpter: Yeah I think he said the paymaster had a gun. [laughs]

McIntosh: You're damn right he had a gun. And he laid it on that table, when it was payday. We always knew that. It was a shock, on my first pay, coming into the room, you know, and standing in line. I come up and it was my turn to give him my number, you know? That gun, .45, was sitting right there, and I thought, boy—

Sumpter: What I remember about payday was the corpsman at the end of the pay table. We had a short-arm inspection [medical inspection of a male soldier's genitals] every payday, if you didn't—

McIntosh: Oh, we didn't do that in our ship.

Sumpter: We did over there, and if you didn't get a short-arm inspection you didn't get paid. Of course, V.D. [venereal disease] was so common over there.

McIntosh: Oh yeah, I treated tons of them, but we never did that.

Sumpter: I don't know if that was just our ship's rule, or what.

McIntosh: Perhaps, I think that's a local rule.

Sumpter: Yeah, and I remember the corpsman sitting there eating apples, while he— [laughs]. I had the occasion where I ran into him. I'm in charge of our ship's reunion; I started about five years ago, and we had one in San Antonio last year. He ended up making the Navy a career. Of course he retired as a chief and he's got a heart problem, but he was able to make his

must, and he was able to make this first reunion we had in San Antonio. He came in, and everyone introduces themselves, you know, and he made the remark, “You know, I don’t remember many of your faces,” he said, “but if you drop your drawers and spread your cheeks, I might recognize you.” Them are the memories, you know.

McIntosh: That’s right, now have you kept in contact then with your shipmates?

Sumpter: Very much so, in fact, I just started five years ago. We’re having one every year now, this will be our fifth one this year; something that just a friend of mine that I stayed in touch with started five years ago. Of course we each knew a few guys, and they knew a few more guys, and we had twenty-three at our first reunion. This is our fifth one, and we’ve got over a hundred registered this year.

McIntosh: Great, the skipper?

Sumpter: No, the skipper is passed away. Both of the skippers, and the commodore are both gone. They were old men, they were probably thirty-five, forty years old.

McIntosh: You thought they were old right? When I first got to West High School, my homeroom teacher, I kept thinking how old she was. It turns out she was only seven years older than I was and she was just out of college. But at time I thought—it’s funny how your perception is.

Sumpter: It sure is.

McIntosh: So anyway, there’s nothing more about the ship you want to tell me?

Sumpter: Well, no. Other than a couple things that we did on our first patrol out in Korean waters when I first got aboard. We went up a river, that’s when the Communists had the South Koreans pushed just about pushed out of the country, they call it the Pusan Perimeter. We went up a river about not much bigger than the Rock River, although it was deep enough for us to get up there. We relieved a ship that was already up there. Actually, the headwaters of it was a lake and we anchored in the middle of that lake. On one line was red territory, and on this line was friendly forces. We spent a week up there, with close fire support and medical support. Being the flagship, we had a doctor aboard. There was only one doctor in each division.

McIntosh: Divisions, how many?

Sumpter: Four, four destroyers.

McIntosh: And there was one doctor per four?

Sumpter: Right, he was aboard our ship.

McIntosh: You had a hospital aboard your ship?

Sumpter: It was a sick bay, very small sick bay.

McIntosh: Nobody got injured severely?

Sumpter: No, but I saw my first signs of war when they brought people aboard for medical aid, you know. Most of them Koreans.

McIntosh: And the purpose of you being there?

Sumpter: Close fire support. It was pretty exciting for a seventeen year old boy.

McIntosh: You sure as hell didn't need any sonar up on a lake.

Sumpter: No, we did receive some small arms fire, it put holes in our stack, nobody got hit. The ship was hit in Wonsan in 1953.

McIntosh: That was after you left?

Sumpter: Just prior to me leaving. They took one hit, and there were no fatalities or injuries.

McIntosh: So you came home on that ship then, too?

Sumpter: No, I got the chance to fly home again.

McIntosh: Lucky. I flew over to Korea, but when I came back, I came back on that hospital ship. Eighteen days.

Sumpter: Quite the experience me coming back to, we had trouble getting off the ship because we were in the Yokosuka at that time. We had trouble getting off because you had to be signed off by each division officer. If you didn't have a baseball glove, then you know. I had a .45 that I had to turn back in. Just a matter of crossing the t's and dotting the i's; we missed a troop ship leaving Yokosuka Harbor by about a half an hour. We were late getting there and they were heading for the States. Of course we were pretty disgusted; they sent us over to a receiving barge that was just made into barracks. We went on liberty that night, and I ran into a guy that I hadn't seen since boot camp four years prior to that, just by coincidence. He was in the transportation department. Of course, I told him my story. The next morning they called about five of us to report to the office with

our sea bags. I just spent one night in those barracks. They put us on a bus and took us to Tokyo, and put us on a Pan American flight home.

McIntosh: A civilian?

Sumpter: A civilian flight that was full of officers, wives, and children dependents. And there were extra seats on there; they took five of us. And to this day I don't know how that came about. I think he pulled off something, and I haven't seen him since. The final chapter to it was they took us to Treasure Island for discharge. I think we were there for fourteen days. I climbed into a cab to go back to Oakland, to catch a train, the General Sherman was coming underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, the ship that we missed.

McIntosh: Oh my. [unintelligible]. That's the only part I didn't like.

Sumpter: So I flew over, and flew back after three tours of duty.

McIntosh: That's a big ocean, boy. Took a long time.

Sumpter: We were the first destroyers that steamed non-stop from Pearl Harbor to Japan. We were doing nine knots, the only way they could make it. They did it as a drill as much as anything, if we went slow. It took us thirty-one days to go from Honolulu to Yokosuka. They just wanted to see if the destroyers could make it if they had to. Normally we would refuel at Johnson Island or the Marianas or something.

McIntosh: Seeing nothing but ocean is-

Sumpter: We lost two men on that trip, to this day they don't know what happened to them.

McIntosh: Off the side?

Sumpter: They think that they tried to swim to an island and didn't make it. These were the kind of guys who might try something like that. They were always skylarking and carrying on.

McIntosh: So when you got back to the States, you were discharged shortly after. Did you use your GI bill?

Sumpter: No I didn't. Like I said, I married a woman with a ready-made family and I went to work.

McIntosh: Where and what?

Sumpter: Well I've done four different things in my life. I went to work at Taylor Freezer, where I became a partner after a few years.

McIntosh: I don't know where that is.

Sumpter: That's in Rockton, Illinois. They're the world's biggest manufacturer of soft ice cream machines.

McIntosh: What's the name of it?

Sumpter: Taylor Freezer.

McIntosh: In Rockton?

Sumpter: Rockton, Illinois.

McIntosh: I know where that is.

Sumpter: I spent ten years with them. Then I went with Pepsi-Cola, became plant superintendent. I was there fifteen years. Then I went to work for ACON Laboratories as a project manager putting in different kinds of plants. Their home offices are in St. Paul, but they had an engineering office in Roscoe, Illinois.

McIntosh: Where the hell is that?

Sumpter: Just south of Beloit, about five miles. I was the only non-degree engineer in the division of forty-five men. I traveled internationally with them. I started up breweries in Germany, I started up breweries in Australia.

McIntosh: What expertise did you bring to these places?

Sumpter: Production. Well actually made automated plants, or breweries. I put in an intravenous solution plant for [unintelligible] North Carolina. Built baby food plants, just the process end of it. I went to work for them as an electrical designer. The controls and the computers became so complicated that nobody could start them up except the people that designed them. So we got involved in the projects first-hand and then they made me a project manager. And then the last ten years that I worked, we were in business for ourselves.

McIntosh: In Janesville?

Sumpter: In Beloit and Janesville, actually Southern Wisconsin. We were the distributors for broasted foods. We took on broasted food distributorship. It's still in the family. My nephew is still running the company.

McIntosh: What do they do?

Sumpter: I don't know if you've ever heard of Broaster Chicken or not?

McIntosh: No, it sounds familiar.

Sumpter: It's very familiar, it's a registered trademark. We sold the machines, everything you needed to make chicken except chicken. You know, the condiments, the boxes, we at one time had 167 Sentry stores that we serviced.

McIntosh: That's funny, last Sunday I roasted a chicken on my grill.

Sumpter: Broasted Chicken is pressure fried. It's kind of ironic, because it was actually invented by Taylor Freezer who I first got involved with when I first got out of the service, and like thirty years later I become involved with it again. The business was good to us and I retired at the age of fifty-nine.

McIntosh: Looks like you did everything ten years earlier than you're supposed to. Incredible.

Sumpter: Well right now, I don't know how I found time to work. I'm pretty active. I'm getting ready to be commander of V.F.W. [Veterans of Foreign Wars] for the third time, at the Janesville post, the largest post in the state. I was also a Seam Squirrel, the Cooties. I don't know if you're familiar with the Cooties or not?

McIntosh: Nope.

Sumpter: That's the honor degree of the V.F.W.

McIntosh: What is that honor from?

Sumpter: You have to be nominated. You have to be an outstanding V.F.W member to be nominated.

McIntosh: What does one do to be an outstanding member?

Sumpter: Usually hold an office. I've been on the firing squad for many years. Last year we did 156 funerals.

McIntosh: 156 funerals? Jesus Christ, are all the people who died veterans?

Sumpter: You know how many World War Two veterans are passing away. And we perform for any veteran, not just V.F.W. members.

McIntosh: Any of those guys in that paint[?] company?

Sumpter: There's two or three left.

McIntosh: They'd be fun to interview.

Sumpter: There's probably only one left.

McIntosh: Who's got his wits about him?

Sumpter: Yeah, there's probably only about one left. I obtained a tank for display from Fort McCoy, an M60 tank a few years ago. When we dedicated it, he was up there. We dedicated it to the Janesville 99.

McIntosh: That was the name of the paint[?] company right?

Sumpter: Right, well there were ninety-nine men lost.

McIntosh: Oh that's where the ninety-nine comes from.

Sumpter: It was actually Company A I guess. Anyway he walked away from the ceremony, he broke down.

McIntosh: Couldn't handle it?

Sumpter: Couldn't handle it.

McIntosh: What's his name?

Sumpter: I knew you were going to ask me that. I can get it for you. Have you ever heard of that little booklet? *The Janesville 99*?

McIntosh: Nope.

Sumpter: I would be glad to send it to you, if you would return it to me. It's out of print now. It's just a small book telling the whole story about the Janesville 99. It's very interesting.

McIntosh: Well I can take it, and copy it and send it back to you.

Sumpter: Then I'll be sure to get it to you, if you give me an envelope with your address on it.

McIntosh: I take these home, and make a regular video tape to send to you.

Sumpter: Oh, wonderful!

McIntosh: So that will be a trade-off, I'll send you the tape, and you'll send me the book.

Sumpter: Like I say, I'll have to have the book back because it's out of print.

McIntosh: Oh yeah. I don't want the book, I just want the information.

Sumpter: You'll find it very interesting.

McIntosh: Or you could find somebody to copy it.

Sumpter: No, I trust you.

McIntosh: I'm just saying that would be safer.

Sumpter: It's not real thick, if I recall it's maybe thirty, forty pages. You know many of them were killed on Japanese prisoner ships that were actually sunk.

McIntosh: Oh really? That one ship that was-

Sumpter: Yeah. And all the statistics are in this book.

McIntosh: I know the ship; it was full of prisoners who were American.

Sumpter: I'll see to it that you'll get it.

McIntosh: That would be very nice. I guarantee to you that I'll take good care of it.

Sumpter: I'm sure you will.

McIntosh: All I'm going to do is put it on a copy machine to copy all the words and then I'll ship it right back.

Sumpter: Well there's no hurry, as long as I get it back.

McIntosh: You will. My book just came out two weeks ago. All those pictures, I recruited all those pictures, and called everyone on the phone, and sent letters for it.

Sumpter: A lot of leg work.



McIntosh: 157 people I asked for pictures from when they were better-looking and young when they were in the service. I managed to get all of those back and made copies and took them to the photographer and had him make prints. So I'm used to this back and forth stuff.

Sumpter: I was pretty tender looking at sixteen in my uniform, believe me.

McIntosh: We're all good-looking at that age.

Sumpter: Oh getting back, I don't know if you're familiar with the Cootie organization [The Military Order of the Cootie] or not. But like I said it's an honor degree and the only purpose is hospitalized veterans. That's what all of our work and fundraising is for.

McIntosh: I send them money on a regular basis.

Sumpter: Our saying is, "Keep 'em Smiling in Beds of White." That's our slogan. Of course I also belong to the Underage Veterans Association. That's an interesting thing.

McIntosh: That's an organization that I haven't heard about.

Sumpter: We've got over 2000 members.

McIntosh: What's the criteria? That you're in service before you turn twenty-one?

Sumpter: Legal age, before legal age. Do you remember Admiral Booth that just killed himself here a couple years back? He was an underage veteran. He joined the Navy when he was fifteen years old. We've got two senators who are active right now, that belong to our organization. The youngest member we have, turned twelve on Okinawa, a Marine.

McIntosh: I wonder how the hell he got past?

Sumpter: Well there are a lot of stories. In fact our book is in its second printing, the second volume is being printed right now. That's another story. It's an active organization, our state commander lives in Clinton, Wisconsin. He joined the service when he was fourteen and retired as a Major. He was an ace, ended up being a pilot and retired as an ace. Many interesting stories.

McIntosh: Where does he live?

Sumpter: Clinton, Wisconsin.

McIntosh: That's not far. I should interview him.

Sumpter: You'd find him very interesting.

McIntosh: When you send me that book, send me these two guys' names. That one guy who still has his wits about him, and this other guy.

Sumpter: Bob Thorpe is his name; you'll find him very interesting.

McIntosh: Do you think I can get him up here to interview him?

Sumpter: He'd be anxious too.

McIntosh: Bob Thorpe, in Clinton. If I can remember this conversation I'll call him when I get home.

Sumpter: He's a big promoter of the V.U.M.S. Which is the Veterans of Underage Military Service. Like I say he's a state commander, and he's also a director, one of the trustees.

McIntosh: Bob Thorpe. Okay, that's great. Well you seem real active, more than anyone I've ever interviewed.

Sumpter: Well I made All-State Commander a couple years ago.

McIntosh: I bet you have. You're farther ahead in every organization you've been in. You must be the oldest member in each of them.

Sumpter: You know everybody is looking for volunteers. I've never been able to say no, that's my problem. It still is, that's why I say I don't know how I ever found time to go to work.

McIntosh: Now you say you married a lady who already had kids. Did you ever have any of your own?

Sumpter: Oh yeah, we had three more. She just had one, but I had three more.

McIntosh: Are they around?

Sumpter: Oh yeah, they're all around in Beloit and Janesville. Then I married the second time with a woman with three children.

McIntosh: Well you're just full of youngsters; that's great.

Sumpter: Oh yeah. All doing well.

McIntosh: That's excellent.

Sumpter: I have a couple of grandchildren that are teaching school. My daughter's on the police force in Beloit; they're just all doing real well.

McIntosh: Super. You're very fortunate. I'm sure you appreciate that, because so many kids nowadays-

Sumpter: Oh yeah I do. And we have a wonderful family relationship, you know. The divorces aren't friendly to start with, but cooler heads prevailed. Everybody was happier. She remarried, and I remarried, and we're still friends. Actually our kids just picked up more grandmas and grandpas. [laughs] Everybody gets along, the step-children and the-

McIntosh: Does your first wife still live in-?

Sumpter: She lives in Beloit.

McIntosh: An amicable divorce is a rare thing.

Sumpter: Well it didn't start out that way, but it ended up that way. Like I say, everybody is happier. I'm sure getting married at that age had a lot to do with it. Like I said, I was only with her for two weeks when I married her, I was on my leave.

McIntosh: Yeah but, Jesus Christ, everything you've done is lightning speed.

Sumpter: Like there's no tomorrow. I'm slowing down a little bit now, I'm reaching that seventy next birthday. It's kind of a rude awakening.

McIntosh: Yeah, I'm about to turn eighty.

Sumpter: My oldest daughter, actually my step-daughter, I raised her as my own, she turned fifty in December.

McIntosh: Remind her of Oliver Wendell Holmes, the famous Supreme Court Justice. I always tell the story about him. You know he was on the court until he was ninety-three or something like that. They say, one time during lunch hour, he was walking down the mall in Washington with one of the other justices, and some pretty girl came walking past the other way. He turned and said, "Oh to be seventy again." I thought that was just a wonderful story.

Sumpter: Yes it is. We have an old gentleman who comes up to the club every day. He's ninety-seven years old. Comes up and has his half a dozen glasses of beer every day, and if we don't see him we worry about him. He's a fixture, but his mind is just as alert as can be. Not only about the past, I mean the present. He's well read, he reads two or three newspapers a day.

You can discuss any current events with him, but yet he can tell you the White Sox batting averages back in the thirties. You know, I mean it's amazing how sharp his mind is at that age. After he gets a few beers in him, he gets a little carried away. His favorite saying is, "If you help me off this stool, I'll kick your butt." It's so gratifying to see a man at that age and have such a clear mind.

McIntosh: That's wonderful. Okay, your experience in the Navy was exceptional.

Sumpter: It was probably the most important period in my life.

McIntosh: Well you learn a lot that you will use the rest of your life. And you have reunions for your destroyer on a yearly basis?

Sumpter: Yes, I try to get it every two years, but we're losing so many shipmates. That we know of, we've lost seventy-five or eighty already. They've just voted to have it every year.

McIntosh: How many are left now?

Sumpter: Well, we really don't know. It's ongoing, because we're continually picking up new members. We're starting to pick up a lot of younger members; we advertise it in the various veterans' publications.

McIntosh: The bulletin board.

Sumpter: Well, we originally just started during the Korean Era. But then some of the fellas contacted us from the sixties who had been aboard, and wanted to come. And you don't say no, you know. Then we finally realized we need these younger guys to keep it going.

McIntosh: It's not still afloat, is it?

Sumpter: No, it was actually turned over to Pakistan sometime in the early sixties I guess. It has since been returned and salvaged. I learned something about that, and maybe you knew that too. Why they return these ships that really are useless. Because the gear boxes that are in them, are never owned by the government. They're leased from the companies that manufacture them. The gear boxes in big ships are quite elaborate as you can expect.

McIntosh: Is that true of all naval ships?

Sumpter: Apparently, they're actually just leased.

McIntosh: So when they decommission a ship, they just pull the gear box out? So the country that they give it to has to devise their own?

Sumpter: It's actually kind of like lend-lease. When they give these ships to foreign countries, apparently it's with an understanding that eventually they'll be returned.

McIntosh: I don't think so. I think eventually they plan not to have them back. It's too expensive, like everything, the Americans are always giving things away. They say they're loaning, but they're really giving it to them. Just to save that country's face.

Sumpter: When we entered Yokosuka Harbor, there was a whole line of patrol frigates which is a hundred foot long, that were lend-leased to the Russians, that was a return. It was just a pile of rust, they were all tied together. I'm sure they weren't worth returning to the United States.

McIntosh: Right, well scrap.

Sumpter: Scrap, sure.

McIntosh: Alright, I've ran out of questions. I thank you for coming.

Sumpter: Okay.

**[End of Interview]**