

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

WILBUR A. SUNDT

Career, Officer, Navy
Radioman, Navy, World War II
Amphibious Operations, Navy, Korean War
Officer, Intelligence, Vietnam War.

2001

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Sundt, Wilbur A., (1926-). Oral History Interview, 2001.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 83 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 83 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 83 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Wilbur A. Sundt, a Stoughton, Wisconsin native, discusses his career in the Navy spanning World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. Sundt touches on enlisting, boot camp at Great Lakes (Illinois), radio school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and joining the Pacific Fleet in March of 1945. He relates duty as a radio operator aboard the USS Argonne (AG-31), being in Ulithi Atoll during the Battle of Okinawa, being in a "Recreation Island Working Party" on Enewetak Atoll, and patrolling the Leyte Gulf area for remaining Japanese troops. After entering the active Naval Reserves, he touches on using the GI Bill to finish undergraduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and a Master's degree in education administration at the University of Colorado. Sundt mentions being recalled in 1947 to the Midshipman Training Squadron as the admiral's tactical radio operator aboard the USS Wisconsin. He talks about his recall to active duty for the Korean War and receiving a direct commission to ensign. Sundt relates attending officer radio school at Monterey (California), duty aboard the USS Munsee (ATF-107) as a communications watch officer, leading a rescue mission at Afognak Island (Alaska), and assignment to Service Squadron 102 in Japan and Korea. He speaks of patrolling the East coast of Korea with the USS Jason and the USS Hector, which were flagships and repairships. Sundt talks about organizing a radio school at Sasebo (Japan) where he taught radio operators who patrolled the "bomb line" off the coast of Korea. After the Korean War, Sundt returned to teaching in Rocky Ford (Colorado) and remained active in the Naval Reserves. He states he taught for a year at the Army Dependent School in Schweinfurt (Germany) and, because he didn't make money teaching, gave it up and became a full-time career officer in 1955. He touches upon serving as 1st lieutenant of amphibious boating aboard the USS Cavalier (APA-37), practicing amphibious landings, attending Naval Intelligence School at Anacostia (Maryland), and duty aboard the USS Monrovia (APA-31) as the operations and intelligence officer. He describes conducting operations in the Mediterranean and the Marines' boisterous celebrations in Barcelona on the 10th of November. Sundt describes serving as the Naval attaché in Rangoon (Burma) and reporting political, economic, and military activities in Burma; shortly after he was assigned the duty, he witnessed the 1962 military coup d'état and, a few days later, the massacre of protesting university students. He reports gathering intelligence on Chinese out-of-country road building, shares his impression of the Burmese people, and tells of having his wife and three sons living with him in Burma. During the Vietnam War, Sundt discusses duty with the Mobile Riverine Force as the commanding officer aboard the USS Gunston Hall

(LSD-5) and participation in campaigns near Hue. Sundt comments on his assignment as intelligence officer for the Commander Amphibious Forces U.S. Atlantic Fleet in Virginia, duty as a MACV-SOG intelligence officer with a special operations group in Da Nang (Vietnam) that directed amphibious special forces units behind enemy lines, and work based in Stuttgart (Germany) with the headquarters of the U.S. European Command as intelligence officer in charge of all the attaché offices in Europe.

Biographical Sketch:

Sundt (b. December 12, 1926) served with the United States Navy from 1944 to 1974 in the Pacific theater of World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. He attained the rank of four-stripe captain, was credited as an expert in the fields of amphibious warfare, mobile logistics support, and intelligence, and wrote several Navy Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps textbooks. He and his wife raised four children, and he retired from duty after thirty years of service. Sundt was an active member of Kiwanis, serving as governor of the Wisconsin-Upper Michigan Kiwanis District from 1985 to 1986 and elected to the International Board of Trustees. He eventually settled in Fort Atkinson (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2001
Transcribed by Joshua Goldstein, 2010
Corrected by Channing Welch, 2010
Corrections typed by Erin Dix, 2010
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010

Interview Transcript:

- Jim: Okay. Talking to Wilbur Sundt and it's the 20th of February, the year 2001. Where were you born, sir?
- Wilbur: Stoughton, Wisconsin.
- Jim: And what year was that?
- Wilbur: 1926.
- Jim: 1926.
- Wilbur: 12-12-26.
- Jim: 12-12-26. Okay. So what were you doing, I guess in '26 you were still in high school when the war started.
- Wilbur: Yes, I graduated from high school in 1944 from Fort High, and five days later I was in the Navy.
- Jim: You volunteered?
- Wilbur: Yes, I never was drafted. I always volunteered.
- Jim: You didn't want to be a dog soldier [possibly slang for infantryman or alternative for "grunt"], and that's what stimulated or—
- Wilbur: Well, no, that had no bearing on it. I simply wanted to get into the Navy, and I did so as soon as I could.
- Jim: Were you any relation with to Guy Sundt who used to be the athletic director?
- Wilbur: Yes, he was my uncle.
- Jim: Guy Sundt was someone I knew very, very well.
- Wilbur: Really?
- Jim: He and my folks were very close friends, and I've known him since childhood.
- Wilbur: Really?
- Jim: Oh, yes.

- Wilbur: From Stoughton—good ol’ Stoughton, huh?
- Jim: “Tuffy” Sundt—my father used to run with—that’s what they called him here when he was a student. He played fullback, and he was a little shrimp. He played fullback for the team. He was the toughest guy on the team and probably the smallest, but he was something special that guy. “Tuffy.”
- Wilbur: All American in several different sports and ended up as athletic director here.
- Jim: Yes, I know. I went all through—’cause as I say, he used to be over at our house often. He and his wife and so, as I say, his is a name that I grew up with.
- Wilbur: Right. Well, now that’s interesting.
- Jim: Rollie Barnum and Rollie Williams—two of the other famous athletes in Wisconsin. All those folks lived in Madison. Well, Rollie Williams lived in Iowa, but they were all Wisconsin folks, and, as I say, they were friends of my folks so I in turn knew them, too. All right, and so you entered the military service in 19—
- Wilbur: ’44. June of, well, actually the end of May of 1944.
- Jim: Okay.
- Wilbur: And—
- Jim: They sent you to Great Lakes?
- Wilbur: I went to Great Lakes boot camp and graduated from that in August and came up here to Madison and became a radio operator.
- Jim: Went to Radio School?
- Wilbur: Then I went directly to the Pacific Fleet in March of ’45. When WWII ended—
- Jim: Wait a minute, not so fast. You went to, into the Fleet when?
- Wilbur: In March. I left San Francisco on the 10th of March of 1945.
- Jim: 3-45. On ship?

Wilbur: Yes.

Jim: On what?

Wilbur: The USS Omar Bundy. It was it was a troop transport type ship.

Jim: An AK or AA, or I mean an AK?

Wilbur: An AP.

Jim: AP.

Wilbur: AP. It carried the first contingent of 500 WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] to Hawaii.

Jim: Is Bundy D-Y?

Wilbur: B-U-N-D-Y.

Jim: Okay, and an AP, right.

Wilbur: I was, of course, just a passenger on it. I wasn't a crew member on that ship.

Jim: Oh, I see.

Wilbur: I transported to—well, I joined the USS Argonne which was a flagship [the lead ship, the ship used by the commanding officer of a group of ships] for a service division.

Jim: Where?

Wilbur: In Ulithi Atoll. [Approx. 20 sec. pause in recording] USS Argonne, an auxiliary ship that was a service division commander's flagship.

Jim: Where?

Wilbur: At Ulithi Atoll at the time that Okinawa was going on. That is the invasion of Okinawa and all the kamikazes were flying around.

Jim: Okinawa invasion?

Wilbur: Mm-hmm.

Jim: And what was your duty aboard the Argonne?

Wilbur: I was a radio operator.

Jim: Was that tough duty? Did you have to memorize a lot of stuff?

Wilbur: Well, I enjoyed it. I could take code forty words a minute. That is International Morse Code. And we stood seven hour watches, and uh—

Jim: Did you do—do you mean it was like the signalmen who were fluent with the signals?

Wilbur: No. We strictly with earphones on our heads and listening to “diddy dum dum diddys” for hours on end [both laugh]

Jim: Right. Did you do any, try to intercept any radio intercepts, other—

Wilbur: We had one unit aboard within our communications organization. We had a large communications organization because we were a command ship. So we had about 80 radio operators on that ship. There was one segment of it that was the secret section that listened to unfriendly broadcasts.

Jim: I knew that was a command ship because all the command ships are named after battles.

Wilbur: At one time they were, yes.

Jim: Yeah, right.

Wilbur: They aren’t any longer—

Jim: Oh, I know. I was just—

Wilbur: But they were then.

Jim: In the Navy of the old days where we belonged [laughs].

Wilbur: Mm-hmm.

Jim: And would you get ashore at all?

Wilbur: Well, yes I did a few occasions, but it wasn’t a liberty such as a fleet would aspire to today. It was what we called them were “Recreation Island Working Parties.” Go over with a machete and a huge rake and a few cases of beer that were stored in the ship’s vault along with the money. And chopped away in the underbrush; did that on Enewetak Atoll. Did that—

Jim: For whose benefit?

Wilbur: For the—it was a break for the people on board ship because there was no place else to go on leave.

Jim: You were cutting in the underbrush?

Wilbur: Chopped in the underbrush.

Jim: For whose benefit was that?

Wilbur: That was for our benefit.

Jim: The Army's or the Navy?

Wilbur: It was simply an out to give you some exercise away from the ship.

Jim: Right. That's what I thought it was. Yes, it was work—

Wilbur: Yeah, and you have a couple of beers afterwards, and it was 100 degrees, and make sure you didn't sit on a centipede or a scorpion. And all around the periphery we had to have guards with rifles because there were Japs still in the underbrush.

Jim: In Ulithi?

Wilbur: No, this was in Leyte when the Leyte invasion was going on. A little bit—just a few months—just a little over a month later at Leyte in the Philippines.

Jim: Later you went to Leyte?

Wilbur: Mm-hmm.

Jim: What did you do there? Did you just sit off shore and do your listening?

Wilbur: Yes, and we were communications relay ship.

Jim: But you didn't make the landing there?

Wilbur: No.

Jim: In October of '44?

Wilbur: No. We didn't make the landing in Leyte. We were backing it all up. When we got there they told us there were still a hundred thousand Japanese soldiers on the island. But they were no longer organized, and so—

Jim: I know, but they were armed.

Wilbur: They were armed, and they did even sneak into chow lines.

Jim: Oh, really?

Wilbur: To get something to eat.

Jim: They were starving to death.

Wilbur: That was their big problem was getting something to eat. And—

Jim: So how'd they deal with that? Just shoot them when they saw them?

Wilbur: Ah, I would have to say yes.

Jim: Really?

Wilbur: Yeah.

Jim: It's the simplest way to deal with it.

Wilbur: Most of them didn't make it to where we were. They were picked off before they got into our—they were all disorganized and hungry.

Jim: Did you have any other duties aboard your ship?

Wilbur: No, it was—

Jim: Was that a battle station kind of—

Wilbur: Our battle stations principally were what we called combat radio in the event of a general quarters call. And our primary duty was communications, and that is what we did. We had plenty of other people on the ship to man the guns and all the rest of it.

Jim: Sure. I'm trying to think, how big was that Argonne?

Wilbur: As I recall we had 900 people aboard that ship. A huge foundry and repair ship in addition to being a communications ship. So ships were always alongside having major repairs done.

Jim: Gee, I thought the LSDs [dock landing ships] did all that.

Wilbur: No, no, this was—actually the official title of the ship was a Miscellaneous Auxiliary/Repair.

Jim: [Laughs] I believe it.

Wilbur: We had huge foundries. We had machine shops, everything you could imagine, even chronometer repair people and everything else. We had all the technicians you could imagine on that ship. So a destroyer or an amphibious ship could come alongside, and our specialists from our ship would swarm aboard and do whatever had to be done.

Jim: Huh. Okay, and so by the time you got out of the Navy in '46?

Wilbur: Yes.

Jim: What was your rate then?

Wilbur: I was a Radioman Third Class, Third Class Petty Officer.

Jim: And then did you use your GI Bill when you got out?

Wilbur: Yes, I stayed active in the Reserve and went to school at Whitewater and graduated there in three and a half years.

Jim: In what?

Wilbur: Education and social studies and then went off to teach. Then I went to Colorado and got most of my Master's degree done, University of Colorado.

Jim: In teaching?

Wilbur: Yes, administration and then the Korean War started.

Jim: And you were still on the Active Reserve?

Wilbur: Yes, sir. And I was by virtue of the various programs I had been in and done, I received a direct commission to Ensign from Third Class Radioman after my college degree. And I was recalled to the Korean War.

Jim: When was that?

Wilbur: That was in 1951, I believe.

Jim: June '51?

Wilbur: June of '51 after teaching a year in Rocky Ford, Colorado.

Jim: Now you are rated as a communications officer?

Wilbur: Yes. Now I was—the first thing I did when I went back on active duty, I had three months of a communications officer short course. So called twelve weeks of intensified communications training at Monterey, California, in what is now the Navy Postgraduate School.

Jim: Well, now tell me, what did you learn here that you didn't know before?

Wilbur: Well, as a radioman I was a hands-on code taker.

Jim: Got it.

Wilbur: As an officer I was in charge of a watch as a Communication Watch Officer. And had to do with code work and managing a given radio watch. Again I was with a staff on board that ship and did all the things that a Communications Officer did.

Jim: What ship did they put you on? The Munsee, do I see here?

Wilbur: Yes, I went aboard the Munsee as a Communications Officer.

Jim: What kind of a ship was that?

Wilbur: That was an ocean going fleet tug. It's a major war vessel. It had a three inch gun at that time.

Jim: Oh, my goodness. How long this Munsee? I can't envision that one.

Wilbur: About eighty-seven feet long I believe. And we became the search and rescue vessel in the Aleutian Islands for awhile. And during that time, I led a rescue mission to save some people.

Jim: You mean civilians?

Wilbur: Yes.

Jim: Where was this? Tell me about that episode.

Wilbur: Afognak Island in the Gulf of Alaska, next to Kodiak Island where we were home based. A fishing boat with five people aboard including one

woman ran out of fuel during rough seas. And they crashed on the beach of Afognak Island and were soaking wet of course, and it was freezing weather. They tried to make it across the island. The four men made it. One of the men's wife—the wife of one of them didn't, and they had to leave her, and she was frozen stiff as a board in the snow. They made it to a little lean-to on the other side of the island, and I brought a rescue crew in with a 36 foot motor wheel boat. And we rescued the men and went in and retrieved the body. We saved all the men even though some of them couldn't move much more than their eyeballs by the time we got to them. They were almost frozen stiff. That was an interesting experience.

Jim: Did they have a radio or how did they contact someone?

Wilbur: Just before they crashed they managed to get a call through that they were foundering and were going to be hitting the beach through the rocks.

Jim: Their ship broke up?

Wilbur: Nothing left of it. It hit the rocks and completely disintegrated.

Jim: One first wonders why they didn't just stay on the beach. It would have been easier for you to find them.

Wilbur: Yes, but there was no cover. No cover.

Jim: Just rocks.

Wilbur: Nothing but rocks. Yeah.

Jim: Oh, that's tough, that's tough duty.

Wilbur: But that was successful. And after that then I was assigned to the staff of Service Squadron 102 in Japan and Korea. And was Communication Watch Officer and that—

Jim: When got to Korea?

Wilbur: Mm-hmm, and then while—

Jim: How'd you get there?

Wilbur: Flew over.

Jim: Flew?

Wilbur: Flew.

Jim: Into Pusan?

Wilbur: Flew to Yokosuka, Japan. And then went down to Sasebo where I picked up the ship was—spent most of its time but not all of its time. It made at least monthly forays over to Pusan and--

Jim: That was in '51?

Wilbur: Yes, '51.

Jim: We probably crossed paths.

Wilbur: Yes [laughs].

Jim: Did you ever see the USS Haven Hospital Ship?

Wilbur: Sure.

Jim: I was on it.

Wilbur: Yeah, it used to be parked right over there.

Jim: Right, I went to Korea in '50. Three months after the war started I was in Inchon on that hospital ship. I spent a year on that. Okay. Now, your staff work there, was there anything different about the staff work that was new to you?

Wilbur: Well, I was an officer now and was a Communications Watch Officer so I had anywhere—

Jim: But you were on shore now.

Wilbur: No, aboard a ship; aboard the Flagship.

Jim: Which was the same Munsee?

Wilbur: No, no.

Jim: Now you are on a different ship?

Wilbur: Now I am on the USS Jason and the USS Hector. Both service squadron flagships and repair ships. Much like the one I had been on as an enlisted man in World War II, only even bigger.

Jim: Sure.

- Wilbur: And then after I had been a Communications Watch Officer for several months then the fleet on the bomb line was experiencing shortages of qualified radio operators. And so I informed the admiral that I was qualified as a radio operator, and I was qualified as an educator, and if he wanted me to I'd start a radio school and train radio operators for the bomb line.
- Jim: Tell us what the bomb line is.
- Wilbur: That was where the ships went up and down principally the east coast of Korea, Wonsan and Pusan and on up as far as it was safe to go.
- Jim: Lobbing stuff ashore? Shells—
- Wilbur: Yes, and with the battleships giving heavy gun support for troops on the beach and patrolling. Sending in aircraft carriers or they're sending attack flights into the action on the beach. It was not all that easy either because we lost several ships to mines that they floated out of the rivers. One ATF like the sister ship of the old Munsee I had been on was hit and sunk.
- Jim: One mine sunk it?
- Wilbur: Mm-hmm.
- Jim: Oh, my.
- Wilbur: Yes, it sunk it, and I think they lost eleven men I believe, and the ship went down like a rock because it was a small enough ship. So that a mine of course carries a huge charge, and it blew the whole side of the ship off, and she went down like a rock. The ones that were lost were below decks and never managed to get out.
- Jim: So you started a school, an overseas school for radio operators?
- Wilbur: In Sasebo, Japan in a Quonset hut. The admiral gave me everything I wanted. He says, "Go ahead. Do it."
- Jim: So you—now you offered this skill to whoever enlisted man wanted to switch ranks?
- Wilbur: Usually seaman from aboard ships, all ships up and down the bomb line, and the commanding officers were delighted.
- Jim: They could have an opportunity to join your group and learn something else.

- Wilbur: Exactly. I had 'em there for three months, and in that time frame taught them to type. Taught them to take code twenty-five words a minute; taught them fundamentals of electronic technician work and sent them back to their ship on the bomb line.
- Jim: With a new rating.
- Wilbur: With a new rating; qualified to be 3rd class radiomen.
- Jim: Very good. And like how many guys we talking about?
- Wilbur: During the course of the time I was there, trained 120. And after I left to come back home the school continued for a couple of years. Over a year in Sasebo and then it moved to Yokosuka, and they gave them a big suite of spaces up there, and it continued to turning out radiomen for several years.
- Jim: Well, this is certainly better than painting red lead on the bower [anchor carried at bow](??) of a side of ship, getting this kind of skill. I am sure that attracted a lot of young men.
- Wilbur: Yes, they need those, too, but—at that time, but I felt very good about doing that.
- Jim: Oh, I am sure, I'm sure. Anybody flunk? Or you just keep after them till they all got it?
- Wilbur: We didn't flunk anybody because nobody was allowed to fail. [Jim laughs] I mean they had to work eight hours a day on code and typing and—
- Jim: Have to just start the class over if they didn't have enough skill?
- Wilbur: They had to succeed. We didn't allow non-success.
- Jim: Yeah, I think the Navy in all their schools are predicated on this basis.
- Wilbur: That's right. And it behooved the men to do well personally because that meant—
- Jim: More money and better rating.
- Wilbur: They had a good rating, and their ship wanted them, and they had a sense of—
- Jim: At least they had a skill which, you know, they didn't have as a deck man.

- Wilbur: That's right.
- Jim: That's not much of a future there. Okay, that's good. So how long did you do this now?
- Wilbur: In the best part of a year. And then, you know, at that time they were sending people back. And they began—the thing in Korea was winding down. It finally ended in '53.
- Jim: You said—your slip goes to '52, September. Is that when you returned home?
- Wilbur: Yes. The Navy, I asked them to let me go if they could so I could start the school year again in Rocky Ford, Colorado. I came back at the end of that month and walked into the classroom, and the teacher who was there substituting said, "Hi. Goodbye." And I started teaching sixth grade. Forty- four kids in the classroom, half of whom were Mexican Americans. It was a wonderful experience. I enjoyed it, very much.
- Jim: What town was this at?
- Wilbur: Rocky Ford, Colorado in the Arkansas Valley due east of Pueblo.
- Jim: That's [unintelligible]. I assume that's the southwest of Colorado.
- Wilbur: Out in the middle of the desert.
- Jim: Right. Okay. So you were there 'til—you stayed in the Naval Reserve of course?
- Wilbur: Always, yeah.
- Jim: Active duty?
- Wilbur: I always had active duty almost every year for a period of time.
- Jim: You had monthly meetings and you had some two week sea duty?
- Wilbur: Two weeks and I was recalled to active duty. I didn't put it on that list, but I was recalled to active duty once to be a radioman. I went aboard the USS Wisconsin, the battleship and went to Europe in 19—
- Jim: Well, that was just a show mission though, wasn't it?
- Wilbur: Well, it was for—it was what's called the Midshipman Training Squadron.

Jim: I see.

Wilbur: And ROTC and Navy Academy people went out, but I was recalled at that time to be a radioman. The fleet was so short of personnel at that time, and so—that is trained personnel.

Jim: Had you got a promotion by this time?

Wilbur: Well, yeah, I was moving up.

Jim: Yes, so you must have been now at least a two-striper or more.

Wilbur: In '47 when I went aboard the Battleship Wisconsin I was a 3rd class. I was made a supervisor of the watch on the battleship.

Jim: Oh, really?

Wilbur: Yes, and I had one of my most powerful experiences. I was the admiral's tactical radio operator. And I had my own little radio shack which was about five feet by feet immediately back of the admiral's chair on the flag bridge. And he would turn around to me and say something like, "Sundt, give them turn nine" and I would send them turn nine on the hand key. And I could look of my porthole; I had one porthole, and see two aircraft carriers, two battleships and six destroyers just doing what I told them to do.

Jim: That's power, man. [Wilbur laughs] But you were still only a third classman?

Wilbur: I was only third class at that time.

Jim: After all this.

Wilbur: '47. 1947, yeah.

Jim: All right. Well, then I thought you became an officer earlier?

Wilbur: No, I became an officer after that, after I graduated from college. So I –

Jim: But you were teaching school?

Wilbur: Yup, I taught school and went back in when I came back from Korea. I taught another year in Rocky Ford and then went up and finished my first master's degree at University of Colorado. Came back and taught school at Crystal Lake, Illinois.

Jim: Was that where you became an officer?

Wilbur: I was already an officer. And then I went over and taught for one year at the Army Dependent School in Schweinfurt, Germany. And then I—

Jim: As a Navy occupation?

Wilbur: Yeah, and then I—

Jim: I don't understand how the Navy is sending you over there.

Wilbur: No, the Navy didn't send me. I was on inactive duty in the Reserve at the time. And so then I decided that I had done enough of that. And I wasn't making any money as a school teacher so I went back in the Navy as a full time career officer.

Jim: When was that?

Wilbur: In, let's see, I was commissioned in 1950, and I went back on active duty in 1955.

Jim: '55?

Wilbur: '55 as a Lieutenant and went to sea right away practically. Was in amphibious ships and —

Jim: In '55, see that's a space here, nothin' about active duty. What ship did you go to then?

Wilbur: The first ship I went to was the USS Cavalier.

Jim: Cavalier. L-E-R, no—

Wilbur: I-E-R. APA37. There was an amphibious attack transport. And I was the 1st Lieutenant on that in charge of all the amphibious boating.

Jim: You're straying away from communications now [laughs].

Wilbur: Yes, because a line officer has to be a master of all trades.

Jim: Ah!

Wilbur: Yes.

Jim: How was that work?

Wilbur: And then after the Cavalier I went to the USS Monrovia.

Jim: Monrovia?

Wilbur: M-O-N—

Jim: I see that. That is '59 it says.

Wilbur: Yup. I went there and was the Ops Officer and Collateral Duty Intelligence Officer. Ops was—

Jim: You had to go to a school, though?

Wilbur: Yeah. I went to—

Jim: In '55 you went aboard the Cavalier. How long were you aboard that?

Wilbur: About a year.

Jim: So in '56. '56 to '58 you don't have accounted for here.

Wilbur: I was on inactive duty then teaching school, but going on cruises.

Jim: Yeah, I understand if you were on inactive duty. In '58, though, you went on active duty and went to Postgraduate School Naval Intelligence?

Wilbur: That is right, in Washington D.C., or Anacostia.

Jim: How long was that course?

Wilbur: The course was about nine months of advanced master's degree on higher level. Became a full-fledged intelligence officer. So what that—

Jim: What learning did you acquire then that you didn't have before?

Wilbur: Okay, all aspects of intelligence work, human intelligence, electronic intelligence—

Jim: Map reading?

Wilbur: Everything to do with intelligence, spy work, and—

Jim: What do you mean, spy work?

Wilbur: Legitimate spy work. I became a Naval attaché.

Jim: Oh, where?

Wilbur: In Rangoon, Burma.

Jim: Jesus Christ! You don't have any of that down here.

Wilbur: Yeah, I do.

Jim: You do?

Wilbur: Yeah.

Jim: Well, maybe—I'm just trying to get you up to 1958 and '59. Then in '59 you're on to the [USS] Monrovia I see.

Wilbur: Monrovia, I was the Operations Officer and the Intelligence Officer while we went to the Mediterranean and to the Caribbean.

Jim: Was the Monrovia—was it different—as an APA like—

Wilbur: Also was an APA.

Jim: I see that.

Wilbur: APA-31. So I was moving up. I became not only an intelligence specialist, but I was also an amphibious warfare specialist.

Jim: You didn't mention about any training like that.

Wilbur: I learned that the hard way.

Jim: You picked up a book, you mean?

Wilbur: No, I was assigned the duty.

Jim: They shot you overboard [laughs]?

Wilbur: No, when I went on the Cavalier I was made a First Lieutenant which is principally a deck officer, and I learned how to be a deck officer very quickly.

Jim: Mm-hmm. By necessity.

Wilbur: I had twenty-six amphibious boats. And we conducted operations all over the Pacific. That is training operations.

Jim: With troops?

Wilbur: With troops and we—

Jim: And Marines?

Wilbur: Marines, with Koreans, with Filipinos. We landed on many different islands.

Jim: Was that difficult duty?

Wilbur: It's hard duty because it is a lot of responsibility.

Jim: You must have been busy.

Wilbur: Yes, to keep twenty-six boats running at the right time and loading them at the right time and getting them into the beach at the right time; yes.

Jim: You carried those aboard, those amphibian boats?

Wilbur: Yes, we could carry 1500 Marines aboard the ship.

Jim: And what kind of boats would you use to land on, those Ducks [DUKW, WWII six-wheel drive amphibious trucks]?

Wilbur: LCVPs [landing craft, vehicle, personnel or Higgins boat].

Jim: Oh, I see. How many? A couple of those?

Wilbur: We had twenty-six, and we –

Jim: Twenty-six L-C—

Wilbur: That we carried on our ship. Learned how to get them all off, to get them all off, all loaded in twenty minutes.

Jim: You carried the diesel aboard for those?

Wilbur: Yup. We had our own fuel tanks for manning our own boats.

Jim: I was going to say if you had all those boats on deck, I was thinking it would be a logistic problem getting them all fueled up at the right time and not screwing that up. Because they're sitting one on top of each other I suppose.

- Wilbur: Exactly. They nested in each other.
- Jim: That's right, and then you have to make sure each one has enough fuel before you throw it overboard.
- Wilbur: Yup.
- Jim: I can see this presents a problem in logistics to make sure that everything goes off in order.
- Wilbur: Yes, in amphibious operations you have thirty seconds of grace.
- Jim: Between?
- Wilbur: Between waves. Between the times you get each wave to go and then they hit the beach three minutes apart.
- Jim: When you put them over the side they usually string out in groups of what, twelve and start circling?
- Wilbur: It varies from six to eight usually, and they go in circles on either side.
- Jim: Until they are all ready.
- Wilbur: Yes, and they go in assembly circles, and then they come alongside the ship, and the troops go down nets on both sides of the ship, and then they move ahead.
- Jim: How—you can load four or six at a time?
- Wilbur: Exactly. Yes, usually we would do three at a time—
- Jim: Oh, two on one side?
- Wilbur: On either side.
- Jim: Oh, three on each side?
- Wilbur: Yeah, we could do three on each side. We preferred doing two, but we could do three.
- Jim: They go down on nets?
- Wilbur: Yes. Climb over the lifelines and down the nets into the boat.
- Jim: I think that's easier than any other way of running it.

- Wilbur: Well, it's the safest way, too. Even though the boat is going up and down a lot, why they learn to do it.
- Jim: There is always a foothold with a net, and that's better than—
- Wilbur: That's right, and you're lowering the boat on cables. You don't want to have all that weight in the boat when it's on the cables because the cable might break, and then you'd lose all the men because they are all combat loaded.
- Jim: Well, you don't load those boats before you put the boat in the water, do you?
- Wilbur: No. We put them in the water, and then they climb down the nets into the boats alongside the ship.
- Jim: But they are still attached to your ship until they get loaded.
- Wilbur: That's correct, mm-hmm.
- Jim: So there is a problem there if the wind is up and—
- Wilbur: That's right. The boat—
- Jim: You must have some limitations if the winds were too high.
- Wilbur: If it is really severe then you don't do it because you are going to lose your people. So after they get loaded then they go out and they make a line of departure. And then the LSD [dock landing ship], which I later commanded, sits on one end of the line of departure and dispatches them to the beach so they land.
- Jim: Theoretically all at the same time.
- Wilbur: Each wave lands at the same time because the next wave is coming three minutes behind.
- Jim: Three minutes?
- Wilbur: Three minutes and by that time –
- Jim: Assuming everything is going well [laughs].
- Wilbur: Assuming everything is going well. And by the time they get ready to land why the first wave has peeled off to either side.

- Jim: Oh, now tell me what's the orders from a small boat operator when he discharges the boys. Does he turn a certain way to avoid the group coming in and so forth and so on?
- Wilbur: That's right.
- Jim: How does that traffic work?
- Wilbur: Half of the line goes to the right; half of the wave goes to the left and clears the beach off, and the next wave hits.
- Jim: Now generally your ship would just send in one wave like that and then come back, or would they come—
- Wilbur: Well, we'll have—the whole amphibious task force will be out there. And even with twenty-six boats that's not enough to land 1500 people, so we had boating from other ships that comes alongside, too.
- Jim: Well, then it couldn't—but I mean the LCVP comes back to your ship for another load or –
- Wilbur: Or someplace else, wherever it's dispatched by our radio control.
- Jim: What else would they be doing?
- Wilbur: Oh, bringing in jeeps, bringing in communications.
- Jim: Oh, from another ship.
- Wilbur: From another ship or –
- Jim: So your responsibility of the LCVP is just taking 'em over in the first place, and you may never see them again?
- Wilbur: Not until it is time for them to come back to the ship. They may be dispatched anywhere to a dozen other ships in the amphibious task force.
- Jim: Right. But they are yours?
- Wilbur: They belong to us.
- Jim: Okay [laughs]. That's what I mean. Ultimately they'll get to come back.

- Wilbur: Yeah, the control of the boats after the line of departure goes to the LSD; the landing ship dock. It controls the boating after or at the line of departure into the beach.
- Jim: They're responsible for their boats then?
- Wilbur: For dispatching them to other places where they may be needed.
- Jim: Right. So you don't find out that your chickens are coming home to roost until someone tells you.
- Wilbur: That's right because we have other things going along. We are sending succeeding waves.
- Jim: Do those small boats have communication with you?
- Wilbur: Yes, they have a mobile communications with the boat officer.
- Jim: Limited range.
- Wilbur: Each boat has a boat officer. Each boat wave has a boat officer. So he's—
- Jim: Not on each boat but each wave.
- Wilbur: No, each wave, yeah.
- Jim: I'm trying to get all this down here so we get it organized here.
- Wilbur: [Laughs] Yeah, it can be pretty complicated.
- Jim: Did you lose that many people in these exercises?
- Wilbur: No, I don't recall, and all the exercises I did that we lost anybody—we had a number of people severely injured, usually as a result of them doing something—
- Jim: Distracting between the boat and the ship.
- Wilbur: Yeah. Once in Mindoro we had heavy surf, and we had told the men, "Do not get in the well of the boat." This was in boats that were carrying in heavy equipment. One of them did, and when they hit a wave, why the load shifted and crushed his legs alongside the boat. Really, safety was always paramount, *always* paramount. But in operations people get hurt.

- Jim: Yes, I understand. So this was—and let me see, now '59 you took the school and the [USS] Monrovia in the '60s, and you went to the Med and the Caribbean.
- Wilbur: Yes.
- Jim: What went on there?
- Wilbur: Well, various operations, regular deployment, six to seven months deployments to the Mediterranean. Doing operations, amphibious operations all around the southern coast of Europe, Spain, the Balearic Islands, Corsica, Sardinia, Italy, Turkey.
- Jim: Generally, when you were doing these, did you have a problem—did the boys get shore leave in those countries?
- Wilbur: After the operation. After the operation was over we would normally go into some visit port for five days.
- Jim: In that country?
- Wilbur: Yeah. Ports in the Riviera, ports in Spain, ports in Greece.
- Jim: And that experience was okay? You didn't have serious trouble with the troops?
- Wilbur: No, never had any trouble. Oh, sometimes [laughs] some of the men had a little bit too much to drink during on liberty.
- Jim: Some of the time [laughs]?
- Wilbur: Yeah, not too often.
- Jim: Oh, really?
- Wilbur: We always advised them to be very careful.
- Jim: Yeah, because they're in a foreign country.
- Wilbur: Go aboard—they were ambassadors. They understood that. Sometimes the Marines would get a little boisterous if it goes on 10th of November, their birthday.
- Jim: Those guys have too much energy.

- Wilbur: [Laughs] But not serious problems, not serious problems. Funny problems, more than any other kind of problems [laughs]. They make good sea stories.
- Jim: What's that?
- Wilbur: Some of the problems they had.
- Jim: Like what?
- Wilbur: Oh, in Barcelona for instance, which was a favorite port of call. We were there one time. I was a senior shore patrol officer. It was the Marines' birthday, the 10th of November, and the Marines got a bit boisterous. They expropriated a few pieces of gear along the street, and we had to have it returned. But nothing serious—nothing—
- Jim: You brought some money ashore to trade their—
- Wilbur: Oh, yes. Yeah, the bills were paid from welfare and rec or whatever was necessary. Nothing serious; no international incidents.
- Jim: I would have known about 'cause we would have had it in the papers here.
- Wilbur: No international incidents, just funny service experiences that get better as the year goes by.
- Jim: They always do.
- Wilbur: Yes.
- Jim: Your commanding officers generally in all these places were good people?
- Wilbur: *Always*, in my experience, always.
- Jim: Mostly trade school boys, almost universally?
- Wilbur: Ah, in the amphibious force not necessarily.
- Jim: Oh! Civil Service? Oh, my goodness.
- Wilbur: No they were—
- Jim: Mustangs? [officers promoted up from the ranks of enlisted personnel through an in-service procurement program]

Wilbur: No, they were the schools of hard knocks and Mustangs and a mixture, but not necessarily trade school people. They usually went to the cruisers and destroyers.

Jim: Yeah, I suppose this would be a downturn for them.

Wilbur: Well, it wasn't in their career pattern.

Jim: [Laughs] Well, that is a nice way to put it.

Wilbur: Yes. The people in amphibious and mobile logistics support were the nuts and bolts to make the thing work. The destroyers and cruisers came alongside and got served and then went off and played their games [both laugh]. We worked.

Jim: Oh, that's cute. Oh, that's good. Well, this brings us up to '62, and you became a Naval attaché in Rangoon, Burma. Tell me about that experience.

Wilbur: That was a tremendous experience. It was fascinating from beginning to end. As a diplomat accredited to the ambassador's staff in the embassy, I first went as the Assistant Naval Attaché. There was a Navy captain was the attaché, and then he departed, and I became the Naval Attaché. So I was in charge of or cognizant over all aspects of Naval intelligence to be gathered within the country to inform our government what was going on politically, economically, militarily through both overt and covert sources from within the Burmese military and diplomatic force.

Jim: Did you wear a uniform?

Wilbur: Yes, to the office and also for social affairs which we had to go to many, many times.

Jim: I was gonna say, did a lot of that.

Wilbur: And social affairs were very important business.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Wilbur: Because that was—

Jim: Show the flag(??).

Wilbur: Yeah, that was the place that you talked to the people who were in charge of everything. Not only in the Burmese government but in the other embassies that were represented in Rangoon. And so you cross fertilized

each other with intelligence information, what was going on. And I have to point out that this intelligence is not bad intelligence. It's to keep our government and our Navy informed about what is going on in the country to which we were accredited.

Jim: Not necessarily secret at all, right?

Wilbur: Not necessarily. Sometimes you gathered it in conversation. Sometimes you went out and observed it. Sometimes you simply talked to the right people.

Jim: Did you have money to spend on this purpose?

Wilbur: Yes, but not a great deal.

Jim: For someone who might have some information—

Wilbur: Yes.

Jim: You'd buy it or not?

Wilbur: Yes, very minimal out go of funds. For instance, a bottle of Scotch cost a dollar and 75 cents, and that sometimes that would help you get information as a gift.

Jim: To a person who was at your same level or?

Wilbur: Ah, not necessarily.

Jim: Right. [Approx. 13 sec. gap in recording]

Wilbur: --ago. I can give you some very interesting experiences.

Jim: That's why you're here.

Wilbur: As a Naval intelligence person in Rangoon. A month and a half approximately after I arrived a Burmese coup d'état took place. I was on my way to the embassy in the morning in my car. We always had to have a driver because we couldn't be involved with the mundane [laughs] affairs of driving a car in traffic. We were to be observing everything all the time. And I observed this morning that there were no people on the streets and very little traffic. The closer we got to the embassy which was right down in the center of town there became clusters of officers and military. We got in front of the embassy and there were a lot of military, Burmese military, around. I put one foot out of my car and I had a machine gun right in my belly [laughs]. As it turned out, I reached in and

picked out my diplomatic passport very gingerly. And about that time a Burmese officer came up and told the soldier to go. I knew the officer, and he knew me. That was helpful.

Jim: No kidding.

Wilbur: They weren't doing anything around our embassy. It happened that the Union Bank of Burma was next door to the embassy and immediately behind the embassy was the Central Telecommunication Center for Burma. They had had a coup d'état at three o'clock in the morning, and the government was in custody. There was only one casualty and that was as a result of a young man in one of the Burmese homes thought it was bandits coming in to his house and reached for a spear that was on the wall, and the soldier shot him. But there was no intention of killing anybody. Anyways, as a result of that coup d'état every government office, that is the leadership in every government office, was taken over by military. And we had Burmese lieutenant commanders trying to become CEOs of banks and the lumber industry and the forestry and every conceivable thing. Everything was run by the military. By virtue of that fact, we in the military attaché offices, Army, Navy and Air Force, had entree to virtually everybody who was anybody in the new Burmese government. They were all our social friends. And so information flowed freely. And so we knew and our government in Washington knew because of us exactly what going on in Burma.

Jim: Did you have counterparts in the Army and Air Force?

Wilbur: Yes.

Jim: So it was two other guys with exactly same as you job?

Wilbur: Exactly, except the Army attaché was interested in the Army people; the Air Force attaché to the Air Force people.

Jim: You get along okay with those guys?

Wilbur: Fine, fine, they had no problem. Everybody helped everybody else.

Jim: I was gonna say, you shared information?

Wilbur: Yes, yes. One aspect of this job was to go throughout Burma and gather all health information, hospital information. All this was encyclopedic intelligence/information. So we learned the country very, very well.

Jim: You went out into the boonies?

- Wilbur: In the boonies.
- Jim: What did you learn out there?
- Wilbur: There were military units everywhere, and so we were assigned to go there and talk to them, and okayed by the Burmese government.
- Jim: What did you hope to learn from out there?
- Wilbur: Well, I'll tell ya. We needed to know what the Burmese government was doing and why. They were espousing their own version of what was called the "Burmese Way to Socialism." And so they were getting their information principally from communist countries but then modifying it to do it the Burmese way. I had sources that enabled me to know what was going on in all the major Burmese Embassies in the world. Tokyo, Moscow, Karachi, New Delhi, everywhere. And I got the reports of what was going on in those embassies faster sometimes than the Burmese officials got them. It was most interesting. I intercepted a letter from Nikita Khrushchev to General Ne Win and was able to have that transmitted instantaneously to Washington. I learned by myself from English language newspapers in Rangoon that the Chinese were building roads from interior China across hooking up with the old Stillwell and Burma roads.
- Jim: Ledo Road?
- Wilbur: Ledo and down to Rangoon. They used the Port of Rangoon as a departure point from interior China into the East African countries principally of Tanzania, and others on the east coast of Africa. Fortunately, all those Chinese enclaves in Africa have gone the way of all flesh at this time, but at that time they were very significant. Among other things, for instance, a 300 mile railroad was built in Tanzania by the Chinese. Also learned that the Chinese were building roads from interior China because Vietnam was just starting building roads to connect with these roads, and they were expanding the roads systems down through Laos and Cambodia from China in anticipation of the Vietnam War which was just beginning. We found out they were expanding roads, widening roads in various areas, and we learned that those widened spaces were air spots, airports.
- Jim: Oh, really wide.
- Wilbur: Yeah. So lots of things of that nature.
- Jim: How did you get along with the Burmese people?
- Wilbur: Wonderful. We enjoyed them very much.

- Jim: How was their English?
- Wilbur: The King's English by virtue of the fact that Burma was part of the British Empire.
- Jim: So they still taught English even after later on they got—they didn't become part of the empire and all that?
- Wilbur: I think it probably is quite different now because of all the years that have gone by. But at that time everybody who was anybody in Burma spoke beautiful King's English. Yeah. Good people, hard working people.
- Jim: Honest?
- Wilbur: The people we knew, yes, but like so many people in tropical countries they sometimes have a different standard as to what it is that belongs to them and what belongs to somebody else. But we enjoyed the Burmese people, and they were very hospitable to us.
- Jim: Now let me ask you this, were you married at this time?
- Wilbur: Oh, yes. I had three small sons at that time, my wife and I.
- Jim: Were they with you?
- Wilbur: They were with us.
- Jim: That must have been a terrific experience for the kids.
- Wilbur: Yes, at one time we had seven servants.
- Jim: Really? Your wife was totally spoiled.
- Wilbur: Including the gardener and the chauffeur and the mali [servant gardener] and the several echelons within the household. I at one time was supplying food for thirty-six people. The families all became, I was "daddy" to provide everything that they needed including their medical care and their—
- Jim: And how did they learn—to teach school?
- Wilbur: I beg your pardon.
- Jim: Did any of those kids go to school?

Wilbur: Our kids were too small. Although, our oldest son I think was in second grade.

Jim: There wasn't any school—

Wilbur: My wife taught in the International School.

Jim: There was an International School?

Wilbur: Mm-hmm. So—

Jim: So there were a lot of dependents in other words.

Wilbur: Yes, and the International School taught not only American dependents but from all the other embassies in town, too.

Jim: Oh.

Wilbur: So my wife had—

Jim: She had a ball.

Wilbur: Oh, she loved it. She had Japanese kids and Cambodian kids and Polish kids and Russian kids and everything else in her class. Second grade she taught. It was a wonderful experience, yeah. But I would go into, by virtue of previous arrangements, would go to a coffee house, and I would have a package under my arm. Then I would sit it on a seat that there were more than two seats at the table and order a cup of coffee and a roll. And my friend would come in, and I would wave at him, and “Come on over and join me.” He'd have a package under his arm, usually a newspaper, and he set it on another empty chair, and we'd talk, and when he left he took my package. When I left I took his package.

Jim: Jeez, just like the movies.

Wilbur: Just exactly, “Double O Seven.”

Jim: And what were in these packages?

Wilbur: All the secret dispatches from the Burmese Embassies around the world.

Jim: Oh, this is a Burmese fellow then. My goodness; just like the movies.

Wilbur: Yeah, it was fun; it was a lot of fun.

Jim: Yeah, I am sure [laughs].

- Wilbur: Then when the revolution, a few days after the revolution the students of the Rangoon University decided they didn't like the situation of the coup. And so they began demonstrating in a square that was, oh, six blocks from our house, and General Ohm Gee, Brigadier Ohm Gee brought the troops around about a semicircle around the square, and he got up on a flatbed truck with a loudspeaker, and he told the students to go home or go to their classes. And he says, just like the old story, "That's once." They kept milling about and not doing what he told them to do. And he told them again to go home, go to your classes, break up this demonstration. They didn't, and so he got up there and said once more, "This is the last time," he says, "I'm going to tell ya to go home and go back to your classes." And they didn't, he just raised his hand like that, and the soldiers opened up on them, just mowed them down.
- Jim: With bullets?
- Wilbur: With live bullets.
- Jim: No water cannon?
- Wilbur: No water cannons.
- Jim: Wow!
- Wilbur: Estimated about seventy or eighty were killed and maybe over a hundred wounded. They threw the dead and wounded on the flatbed truck, hauled them out to the country, buried them in mass graves, live ones and dead ones.
- Jim: You say the wounded went in that bunch?
- Wilbur: Yeah, everybody. Anybody that was lying on the ground went on the flatbed truck and went in the mass grave.
- Jim: That was quick.
- Wilbur: It ended opposition to the revolution.
- Jim: No kidding.
- Wilbur: It also ended the opposition on the University campus, and it closed the campus for several years. The following morning about 7 o'clock in our house, about a block and a half from our house was the student union building for the campus. At 7 o'clock in the morning a huge explosion took place. In fact it knocked my youngest son out of bed. This was a

tropical type house, very high ceiling, and above every doorway in the house was a transom, you know one that went down like that, they all fell down [laughs]. It was a huge crash all over the house, and everybody was, "What in the world happened?" you know. So I went out in the court and my servants were all coming around "what went on" ya know. And so I asked George, who was our head bearer, to go over and investigate and see what happened, and he did. The Burmese Army had surrounded the Student Union building. They thought some students were holding out in there.

Jim: A couple they had missed the day before.

Wilbur: Yeah. They had told anybody in the building to get out and nobody came. They don't know to this day, I don't know, whether anybody was in the building or not. But after—they blew it. There were not two bricks standing on top of the other [laughs]. They surrounded the building with plastique and plunged, and that was the end of it. So that ended the revolution.

Jim: That certainly dampers one's enthusiasm for a revolution.

Wilbur: Yes, but those were interesting things that happened.

Jim: You had no trouble with food or anything like that, food was good?

Wilbur: Not a bit.

Jim: You ate local food?

Wilbur: Yes, for the most part. Our cook would go down to the market and buy.

Jim: You weren't worried about diseases or anything like that?

Wilbur: We had to be careful, but we didn't have any—

Jim: Was that a malaria area that you had to take Atabrine or Cloroquine?

Wilbur: No, we didn't have to, we didn't have to. We had to have cholera shots and plague shots and stuff like that.

Jim: Now your next duty is in '66, and it said the U.S Gunston.

Wilbur: I was the Commanding Officer of the Gunston Hall in the Pacific.

Jim: An LSD?

- Wilbur: Yes.
- Jim: Boy, that's a—I'm always impressed with LSDs. It's like a huge factory.
- Wilbur: Yeah, well, its principal purpose is to ballast down.
- Jim: You can sneak down or hunker down in the water and let the small ships aboard. That's really fascinating.
- Wilbur: Yeah. It was a good job, I enjoyed it very much.
- Jim: And you got to be commander of that?
- Wilbur: Yeah, I was the Commanding Officer. I was a Navy Commander at that time, by that time. And I was Commanding Officer for two years. And made two deployments to Vietnam and then—
- Jim: Your principal duty then was to repair small boats, or small —
- Wilbur: Principal duty was to carry boats and amphibious craft in the Mobile Riverine Force [a joint U.S. Army and U.S. Navy transport and combat force in the Vietnam War] that fought on the rivers, two different sites along the coast.
- Jim: Bring in new ones and repair old ones and that sort of stuff?
- Wilbur: Carry them in, bring the Mobile Riverine Force and insert them in rivers. When I did that one time, why, I had come from Taiwan, and I had gone to, where did I pick them up? Cam Ranh Bay, I believe. Anyways, I took the Mobile Riverine Force aboard the LSD. I was under orders to carry them to the Perfume River which was where Hue, the city of Hue was, and put the Mobile Riverine Force there. When we got to sea and got en route along the coast we were getting desperate calls from the Cua Viet River which was the DMZ river and asking for assistance of any kind because the North Vietnamese Army was north of the river and about to cross. And the American forces at Cua Viet were reduced to a few holes in the ground with refrigerators and cars around them as strong points. This happened—I anchored off the beach about a mile, which is pretty close. I told the commander of the forces on the beach that because of the tide I couldn't do anything at this point, and that I was under orders to bring the Riverine Force forty miles further south to Hue, and that I would notify my seniors that situation existed. I got no answer from anybody on the radio.
- Jim: Oh, my. I think they'd better call in an air strike.

- Wilbur: And nothing, nothing. At about 7:30 in the morning there was a rather heavy fog, and things were very desperate on the beach. And so I choose to send my executive officer in a boat from the ship to see if he could contact the commanding officer on the beach. And he was able to do so, and he says, "It is awful in here" [laughs] he says, "The shells are flying all over the place." He said, "They really do need help." And so I made one last call to my seniors. I said, "Unless I have heard from you within an hour I am going to take upon my own authority to insert the Mobile Riverine Force because our forces are desperate, and if the North Vietnamese get successfully across the river that opens the road to Quang Tri and other areas and even to Da Nang." And I got no answer, no reply from either my squadron commander or from Com 7th Fleet. An hour came, I sent 'em in.
- Jim: You sent—how many? Who?
- Wilbur: Seven Mobile Riverine Force boats, the monitors and the armored boats.
- Jim: With Marines in them?
- Wilbur: With their crews, their crews, their own crews to block anybody from crossing the river. They did, they succeeded in making it so that the North Vietnamese Army could not cross the river.
- Jim: These boats have what kind of guns on them? .50 Caliber?
- Wilbur: .50 Calibers, yeah, and heavy mortars.
- Jim: And how many guys on one of those boats?
- Wilbur: Oh, it varied from five to ten.
- Jim: You sent how many in?
- Wilbur: Seven.
- Jim: Seven of them. Well, that's good.
- Wilbur: The whole Mobile Riverine Force. I had them all in my well deck. Then I sent another message to my seniors, and I said, "If I have not heard from you within the hour I am proceeding on other duties assigned," which was to go to Taiwan and get some more boating. I didn't hear a word, and so I weighed anchor and headed for Taiwan. Things were under control on the beach.
- Jim: But you left your boys there?

- Wilbur: I left the Mobile Riverine Force. They were only mine to carry. I was supposed to originally bring them in to Hue.
- Jim: Sure, just put them in a different spot.
- Wilbur: I put them in Cua Viet instead. Well, I thought my career was over [laughs] as I proceeded to Taiwan. About 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock in the afternoon a message came in from Com 7th Fleet. And all it said was the operation at Cua Viet was well done. And nothing more than that but it exonerated me from—and indicated I had done what was prudent.
- Jim: Jeez, the admiral must have been out drinking or something.
- Wilbur: [Laughs] I don't know. I suspect that they were very much on the situation. They realized that I was on the scene and had assessed the situation correctly.
- Jim: They could have just said that.
- Wilbur: They could have, but they didn't, and so I did what a commanding officer is supposed to do [laughs].
- Jim: Oh, sure. Make a—
- Wilbur: Made a decision.
- Jim: Arbitrary decision, right.
- Wilbur: Yeah, and it worked out all right.
- Jim: They give you a medal for that?
- Wilbur: I got a Navy Commendation Medal at the end of my deployment.
- Jim: Oh, nothing special for that(??)?
- Wilbur: No.
- Jim: They should've. Well, that is too bad. So then in '68 you were back in the United States? You had two deployments in Vietnam.
- Wilbur: Mm-hmm.
- Jim: Between '66 and '68 you mean?

- Wilbur: Yeah. I was CO '66 to '68, and I made two deployments over there.
- Jim: That your LSD was—
- Wilbur: The USS Gunston Hall.
- Jim: Gunston Hall, and then the second one? Second deployment.
- Wilbur: On the same ship.
- Jim: Oh, the same ship.
- Wilbur: Mm-hmm. Yeah.
- Jim: All right, and that brings you back to 1968, and you were back in the United States.
- Wilbur: Yes, I was assigned to be the Intelligence Officer for the staff of Commander Amphibious Forces U.S. Atlantic Fleet.
- Jim: That's an office job?
- Wilbur: Principally, yeah, the staff was housed at Middle Creek, Virginia. We did go aboard the Taconic which was the Flagship on a number of occasions, but basically we were on the beach. And I was in charge there of all intelligence operations amphibious-wise in the Atlantic and Caribbean.
- Jim: Then it's in July of '70 you became the Officer-In-Charge of the U.S. Naval Advisory—
- Wilbur: Detachment.
- Jim: Detachment. MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, "mack vee"]?
- Wilbur: Yeah, uh-huh. That's the U.S. headquarters command for Vietnam, MACV, and I was with the MACV-SOG unit, studies and observation group, which was a secret, clandestine organization in charge of sea commando operations in all of Vietnam.
- Jim: Commando operations? With the SEALs [Navy sea, air, and land special operations force] type?
- Wilbur: SEALs and Special Forces.
- Jim: How'd you get involved with those guys?

- Wilbur: It was all intelligence gathering and intelligence action. And I would go up in a small airplane and see trails coming down from the north, and then I would insert my —
- Jim: In Vietnam?
- Wilbur: In Vietnam. I was headquartered in Da Nang.
- Jim: I was going to say, you were off the ship then.
- Wilbur: Oh yes, this was on the beach in Vietnam.
- Jim: So you'd go up in a helicopter?
- Wilbur: Oh yeah, lots of times and lots of times in a small Piper Cub type aircraft.
- Jim: Those get shot down easy.
- Wilbur: Yeah, we did get shot at a few times [both laugh]. But I would plot and see the trails from the air and then insert my troops.
- Jim: Communicate by radio?
- Wilbur: Mm-hmm. Well, I would go back to my headquarters, and then I send out the PTFs [Patrol Torpedo Fast boats], the patrol craft that had Vietnamese Special Forces and U.S. advisors. They would land at night, swim into the beach from the boats and lie in ambush on the trails. Wreak whatever havoc was possible to wreak. And I conducted 116 of those operations during my year in Vietnam.
- Jim: That was busy.
- Wilbur: Almost every night.
- Jim: When you were flying you couldn't see the trails at night?
- Wilbur: No.
- Jim: You did that in the daytime.
- Wilbur: I did that in the daytime. In the dry season it was very easy to see the trails because in northern South Vietnam the terrain is very sandy. It is not tropical rain forest like in the south.
- Jim: Did you photograph what you saw?

Wilbur: No.

Jim: You just described it or took notes?

Wilbur: Yeah, just had my map in front of me and made it—identified the spots where—

Jim: So you just took notes and then brought back and then you contacted with—

Wilbur: Then I would set it up with my operations people, and we would plan an operation, and they would go out. I went out on them a few times with them.

Jim: Oh, you went out to play soldier?

Wilbur: Oh, yeah. I had to see how the troops were doing.

Jim: [Laughs] I understand.

Wilbur: Yeah.

Jim: And what did they give you to defend yourself with?

Wilbur: An M-1.

Jim: Was that exciting?

Wilbur: Well, it had its moments, [Jim laughs] yes.

Jim: Well, tell me about one of them.

Wilbur: Well, it was mostly a matter of—the hardest part was getting into the beach, swimming with a gun and stuff into the beach. And then setting up your defense perimeter and your—

Jim: You weren't in training for this sort of thing.

Wilbur: Ah, I had had a little training in Little Creek before we went over, not much, but I had all the expertise with my group. The American Special Force guy would be there, and he'd—

Jim: He'd help ya along?

Wilbur: He'd be right at my shoulder. Yeah, we had a few people that we caught.

- Jim: You didn't get shot at then.
- Wilbur: Not to speak of, no.
- Jim: Okay. Well, now we are getting down there in the '70s here. You went to Germany.
- Wilbur: Yeah I was the—in the J-2. That's the joint staff of the headquarters of the U.S. European Command in Stuttgart, Germany. In that capacity I was in charge of all human intelligence gathering, all the attaché offices in Europe and the Berlin Brigade Intelligence from the staff standpoint; that is overall overview.
- Jim: You had an Army and Air Force component, too?
- Wilbur: Oh yes, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, everybody. Headquarters European Command. That's a NATO command, but it was the U.S. aspect of NATO.
- Jim: I understand. Was this boring or was this active or—because you are getting near the end of your career now.
- Wilbur: Well, it was a different kind of assignment, and it was an “overseeing” kind of assignment to see to it that things were coordinated and that messages and information came into the headquarters European staff from all of the offices that were under my cognizance.
- Jim: It's just so different from charging around the rice paddies in Vietnam. I just feel the contrast must have been outstanding.
- Wilbur: It was different, and it was challenging. Not as challenging as the other.
- Jim: No watching your rear end, right.
- Wilbur: Yeah, but it was interesting, and I had to go around quite a bit making talks and one thing and another.
- Jim: To who?
- Wilbur: Oh, to the attachés. I went to London about six times. I went to Berlin several times.
- Jim: What did you have to offer them?

Wilbur: Well, it was a matter of what we were looking for at the headquarters. What we wanted them to look for. How they should make their reporting more efficient. It was a matter of coordinating the effort.

Jim: A lot of cocktail parties.

Wilbur: None.

Jim: None?

Wilbur: Not that I recall. I think maybe we had one reception in London one time, nothing significant.

Jim: But you were based in Germany.

Wilbur: In Germany, yeah.

Jim: Was your family with you?

Wilbur: Yes.

Jim: Boy, they really have been around the world.

Wilbur: Literally. When we came back from Burma we continued on around the world. So we did a complete around the world trip.

Jim: Jeez, Fort Atkinson doesn't really offer really much excitement after having all of this.

Wilbur: Well, maybe I don't need any more excitement; Fort Atkinson is a good place to be [both laugh].

Jim: Away from all this.

Wilbur: Yeah, I enjoyed it. Well, you know, it has been a long time now since I retired already.

Jim: That's right, that's right, it's thirty years. You retired as a four-striper [captain]?

Wilbur: Yes, mm-hmm.

Jim: And that ended, how many years?

Wilbur: I'm sorry?

Jim: How many years, thirty years?

Wilbur: Thirty years, yes, thirty years of federal service, yes.

Jim: And you retired at three-quarters pay?

Wilbur: Yes, as a thirty year service person, yes, 75 percent of base pay.

Jim: That's pretty good, seeing you were a captain.

Wilbur: It's very helpful.

Jim: Yeah, no kidding.

Wilbur: I don't have to worry about whether I can pay for breakfast.

Jim: I believe it, I believe it. That's nice. Your career was everything that you had hoped it to be?

Wilbur: Indeed, more!

Jim: You certainly had far, far more experience and a variety of experience than anyone I've talked to.

Wilbur: I was blessed.

Jim: Maybe the right person at the right place.

Wilbur: With—I was a three ex—I was credited with being an expert in three fields: Amphibious Warfare, Mobile Logistics Support—that's underway replenishment of task force at sea, and Intelligence. Every one of them was challenging, interesting.

Jim: I'll bet, I'll bet.

Wilbur: And if I could start over again tomorrow morning, I would.

Jim: Would ya?

Wilbur: Yes, indeed.

Jim: Right. And would your wife come along with you?

Wilbur: I think so. It takes a special breed of cat—

Jim: Oh, I know.

Wilbur: But—

Jim: She must not mind traveling.

Wilbur: No, we—

Jim: Or changing.

Wilbur: We like to. In fact, we just got back from ten days in Costa Rica, a week ago. So, yes, it's been a wonderful experience.

Jim: Right. Tell me about decorations you received—must have been several unit citations.

Wilbur: Yes, twenty-seven decorations in all.

Jim: Twenty-seven?

Wilbur: That's including Theater Medals. Yeah, the Legion of Merit with a Combat V, Joint Service Commendation Medal, two Navy Commendation Medals, Meritorious Service Medal, and Presidential and Unit Commendations among the Campaign Medals.

Jim: Sure. Well, I'm sure you deserved them all for the yeoman's work you did.

Wilbur: It was a good life.

Jim: Right. So when the youngsters ask you today about whether it's worth joining the Navy now, what would you tell them?

Wilbur: "Join the Navy and See the World."

Jim: [Laughs]

Wilbur: It's still in effect.

Jim: I think the Navy's still good duty, don't you?

Wilbur: I do.

Jim: I know they're having trouble recruiting.

Wilbur: Yeah, they always do.

- Jim: Because it never pays quite as much as the outside.
- Wilbur: We have three sons and a daughter. Three sons, two of them are career officers. One is—
- Jim: In the Navy?
- Wilbur: One is a graduate of West Point, is a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army, Air Defense Artillery. One is a graduate of Annapolis, he is a Commander. He just began this week his training to become Commanding Officer of his own destroyer in December.
- Jim: He's moving along faster than you did [laughs].
- Wilbur: Yeah, I hope he surpasses me. The third son was in submarines for six years and then chose to get out. He lives in the Madison area, Waunakee, with his family.
- Jim: He was in submarines?
- Wilbur: He was in submarines for six years.
- Jim: In what period of time was he in(??)? Not during any conflict or—
- Wilbur: No, it was in between the wars.
- Jim: I've never interviewed a submariner. I can't find them. Maybe I could call him and I could interview him some time?
- Wilbur: Well—
- Jim: He may not want to, of course.
- Wilbur: He was in the Pacific and what not. The second son that went to Annapolis also is a submariner, and then he chose to go into line when he went to the Naval Academy.
- Jim: Where is he?
- Wilbur: He's in school now at Newport, Rhode Island; just began his prospective commanding officer training.
- Jim: Does he ever come here to visit Wisconsin to visit you?
- Wilbur: They were all here for the first time in seven and a half years at Christmas.

Jim: Wonderful, I just missed him. Yeah, I'd love to interview him.

Wilbur: Yeah, well, go to Newport. He'll be there two and a half months.

Jim: Well, just tell the governor to send me, and I'll be there tomorrow.

Wilbur: Okay.

Jim: I do all this stuff free, but I'm not going, you know, buy plane tickets [Wilbur laughs] on my—

Wilbur: Okay.

Jim: Well, I can't think of anything else to ask you. Is there anything you forgot?

Wilbur: Sure, but I've told you enough.

Jim: Oh, that's all I get?

Wilbur: That's all you get [laughs].

Jim: As an Intelligence Officer you have to withhold something?

Wilbur: Yeah.

Jim: Thanks a lot, appreciate it.

[End of interview]