

*Cara:* This is Cara Vanderree of the Ashland City Library. It is May 11, 2023 and we will be interviewing Jerry Baker. The interview is being done by the Ashland City Library through Humanities Kansas, in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read Project, which is provided through Arts Midwest. Jerry, you served in the Vietnam War. What branch of service were you in?

*Jerry:* US Navy.



*Cara:* What was your rank when you left?

*Jerry:* E5. I had passed the test for E6, but I would have had to extend to sew that on. It was Petty Officer Second Class.

*Cara:* Where did you serve?

*Jerry:* Well, our squadron was based at North Island Naval Air station in San Diego, where we were attached to the USS Yorktown that was based in Long Beach. But when we left the States on the first cruise in late '64, they had told us that they didn't have any money to operate on. So we were going to just go from port to port to port and see just about everything in the Far East and Australia and all that stuff. We always stopped in Hawaii to do qualification cruises. Anti-submarine warfare was our basic job, so we stopped in Pearl Harbor and then did the qual cruise and then back to Pearl Harbor. Then we went to Sakusaku and Japan and around Sasebo, Japan. We spent Christmas in Sasebo and then we stopped for a couple of days at Whitebeach, Okinawa and then went to Hong Kong. We spent a week, I think, in Hong-Kong. We were just leaving Hongkong to go to Manilla when they started bombing North Vietnam. So they pulled us off station and we spent like a 120 days out at sea the first

time. They had our airplanes, like I said, anti-submarine warfare was our job, was our mission. But they put us to watching the boat traffic coming in and out of the rivers from the Macon Delta clear up to the De-Militarized Zone. We had two squadrons, 10 planes in each squadron, and we had two of them in the air, all 24-7 for that 100 and some days they didn't have anybody to replace us with. Finally, I think the patrol squadrons from over in the Philippines went ahead and came over and started doing the same job so we could go on. We did SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization consists of the U.S. and the English and the Australians and New Zealand. We went out and did a kind of a mock contest with them and submarines and then went back to Yankee Station there at Vietnam, and flew another 90 days or so. Then they pulled us off-station and came back to San Diego and stopped at Honolulu on the way back. Then six or so months later we came back for a second tour. Then they had the patrol squadrons taking care of the South Vietnamese rivers. They started us flying from the DMZ, the De-Militarized Zone, up to as far as Haiphong Harbor, up in between Red China's Hainan Island and North Vietnam. It was fairly uneventful. We didn't really do much except watch traffic. Occasionally, one of the pilots would eject out over the ocean, if they were hit in some of the bombing raids. We were a fixed-wing plane, so we couldn't land in the water, but we could fly around and keep... The North Vietnamese military or government or whatever would pay the citizens the equivalent of a lifetime's wages if they could pick up one of those pilots and bring him in.

*Jerry:* So when one was in the water there were lots of sampans and stuff out there. The whole family lives on this sampan, about 25 feet long or something like that, and we had to just kind of fake them out. We didn't shoot at any of them, but we kind of flew around. You'd be surprised how intimidating it is to fly about 15 feet off the water and open the bomb bays on the plane. It tends to get their attention.

*Jerry:* Anyway. We weren't really in combat. We were getting combat pay because we were in the area, but we didn't really... Anyway, that cruise, we didn't have to do the 90 or 100 day sea things because they had other people to spell us. We had a couple more SEATO exercises and at one time we went around to Bangkok. The aircraft carrier was needed to deep-water so we just went ahead and they anchored out, but probably 20 or 30 miles south of Bangkok and then had buses running up to Bangkok from the ship. About five of us just went over and got a cab. He said, "Where do you want to go?" And I said, "Wherever they're not going."

*Jerry:* So we went down. There was a little Army R & R deal down the coast and we spent about three or four days there. Then we did go... The SEATO exercise that we were talking about was based in Manila and we had our aircraft carrier and all of the other ships that go with the aircraft carrier. The Limey, English aircraft carrier, and an Australian aircraft carrier and a New Zealand aircraft carrier were all in Manila at the

same time and everybody had to anchor out. There wasn't enough ... and Manila was wasn't anywhere near prepared for that many people. They hadn't seen that many Americans or anybody else since World War II. They had one other situation. We anchored out off of Cebu Island down in the Philippines and then had to take a Liberty Boat out to the pier. Then the town was probably 15 or 20 miles a way, we'd run back and forth with the cabs. That was the first time, Cebu had seen any Americans since World War II as well.

*Cara:* Going back to when you first joined the service, were you drafted or did you enlist?

*Jerry:* Enlisted.

*Cara:* Why? j

*Jerry:* Because I wanted the training. I got really good electronic training. As a matter of fact, I spent just about as much time in school as I did on active-duty. The electronics training was down at Memphis, well, maybe Memphis, at Millington, Tennessee. I think that was 6 or 7 months, I think, and then another three months to get the training on the anti-submarine equipment that we were going to use. Then I went back to San Diego and I had training on... Well, the squadron had gotten all brand-new planes right before I got there. They were the AS2 Echo. The gear was, I guess you'd call it an analogue computer that had a screen between the pilot and co-pilot that had a little arrow that floated around in there so you could fly the airplane. When we were in an ASW exercise, when we'd drop bouys, they'd mark that on that on that screen. We dropped listening bouys first, with no pinging or anything, so that we could just listen to the water for a while. We could set the depth of the of the microphone at whatever level we wanted to. And we dropped the bouys around and if we found the sound print of a submarine (or surface ship as far as that's concerned) then we could go ahead and start dropping pinging bouys that would localize and find the ship or submarine.

*Cara:* What dates are we talking? When did you join?

*Jerry:* April, 1963.

*Cara:* Where were you living before you joined? Were you still at home?

*Jerry:* Here in Ashland.

*Cara:* With your parents? Who were your parents?

*Jerry:* Errol and Rachel Baker. Mom was an RN. I think she finally gave up her nursing license when she was 81.

*Cara:* Why did you join the navy? Couldn't you get electronics in another division?

*Jerry:* Probably could have, but my brother was already in the navy. He went in as an enlisted man and then he got into the NavCad program, naval aviation cadet, and got flight training that way and then became an ensign when he got out of flight training. I passed all the tests and everything to get that same thing, but then I flunked the physical. My sinuses are always kind of plugged up. If I'd have known that it was that bad of a deal, I just wouldn't have told anybody about it.

*Cara:* You couldn't get into that. So you chose electronics.

*Jerry:* Yeah, well, actually when I joined, the only thing that I really enjoyed very much in school was drafting, and so I told them I wanted to be a draftsman. They said, "Oh yeah, you can do that." And then when we got into boot camp, the first councillor that we talked to there, I told him I wanted to be a draftsman and he said. "No, you don't."

*Jerry:* "Well, yeah, that's why I joined."

*Jerry:* He said, "Well, in the first place, it's a school that's got a four or five-year backlog of people to get into it, because they don't replace them. I mean there aren't that many draftsmen in the navy. It's the Seabee rate, the Seabees are the construction people in the Navy." He said, "So here's what you want. This CX is a new rate that just opened up and you won't have any trouble getting in and advancing in it or whatever, and you'll get electronics training in the meantime."

*Jerry:* I said, "Well, all right."

*Cara:* And here you are! Do you recall the first days in service? What was boot camp like besides fibbing to you?

*Jerry:* Mostly standing at attention, but the first two weeks we were at Camp Nimitz, right out on the sand dunes that run over to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot. That's where they run the marines in the soft sand all day. We did a lot of marching in it too. But we didn't have to try to run in soft sand. Mostly, it was just getting up at 3:30 in the morning and standing at attention for three hours waiting for breakfast. Basically, it was just everything in your locker had to be clean all the time, so you'd get in at night and take the clothes that you're wearing and wash them by hand and take them out and put them... We put everything on the clothesline and tied square knots in and all that stuff.

*Cara:* No clothes pins?

*Jerry:* No, these little pieces of rope. This is the Navy, you know. But anyway, a lot of times, it would be 10:30 or 11:00 by the time we'd finished up everything and got ready to go to bed. San Diego's cold at night, it matter what time of year it was. The temperature of the ocean pretty much commands that. The sea breeze comes in off the ocean all day. We had a couple of guys get pnemonia in the camp; George Vandevere and I went in at the same time and he did get pnemonia and was out for about a week, but we still graduated together.

*Cara:* Do you remember any of your instructors?

*Jerry:* The company commander was an engine chief and he was a pretty good guy. I don't remember his name, but the rest of them were kind of come go. Camp Nimitz was the first two weeks over there. That was when we had real drill instructors. Right after we moved back over to the regular naval station, a guy from Nebraska went home and died of... I forget the name of the disease. But anyway, they they decided he must have gotten it in boot camp. So they really cut down. Instead of having people sleeping on the top and bottom bunks, they'd have one guy on the top here and bottom here. They also quit getting us up at 2:30 to 3:00 in the morning. They lightened up a little bit on us. I guess that's why. .

*Cara:* So a few things improved.

*Jerry:* Yeah, but really I was taking tests for that NavCad program so much that I missed most of the rest of the training. I passed the college level GED and a lot of... I don't know, I've always been good at taking mulitple choice tests.

*Cara:* So you went to boot camp in San Diego. Where did you go next?

*Jerry:* Well, straight down to Memphis-- Millington, Tennessee, to do advanced training and that kind of stuff. I think I was in Millington, I'm going to say probably nine months. I'd been in almost a year when I finished and I got back to the squadron at San Diego. I had training on that new analog system but it took inputs from the altitude and the compass and all of the anti-submarine gear was all tied to it. Nobody in the squadron had any idea how to set up the phasing on all the stuff. First class \_\_\_\_ and I spent about three months over in the tech shop for the carrier. They let us have the whole shop from midnight till six in the morning so that we could use whatever equipment. And we figured out a way to get the phasing all right on all the stuff so that they could talk to each other and all of the units could talk to the main computer.

*Cara:* When did you sleep?

*Jerry:* Daytime.

*Cara:* So you had a year of training before you were assigned.

*Jerry:* Pretty much.

*Cara:* What was your first assignment?

*Jerry:* Well, the squadron next door to that training squadron was ES25. That was the squadron that I was in. Normally, when a new new airman comes into a squadron, he'd wind up washing airplanes for the first six months or so. But since I had that training on that equipment, they needed me in the shop. So I got right in the tech shop. Nick Somebody and I were the only two that were trained in the squadron and we kind of switched off on being aircrew and flying with it or working in the shop there on on the electronics lab there on the ship. He didn't like to fly that much and I did, so I wound up... I think I had about 200 carrier landings in two years. We just flew several times a week.

*Cara:* So you received a lot of training.

*Jerry:* Oh yeah, well, I basically got out because of the way they treat people on the

ship. The chiefs and the officers are the only ones that can even speak up and say anything. Everybody else are second class citizens. Hopefully, they've changed a lot of that now, but I don't know. I just hated living on the ship. In fact, I told them that I would probably reenlist, if they'd put me in the the patrol squadrons that were all based on land. But, oh no, you can't do that, you can't change your MLS.

*Cara:* But you had a two-year enlistment then.

*Jerry:* Well, four years. I probably was in training about as much as as I was actually doing anything, but anyway I've used the electronic training to make a living ever since.

*Cara:* So you used it. You did not see combat personally, though.

*Jerry:* No. Every once in a while, when we were doing well, either either the north or the south, every once in a while we'd find a bullet hole in the airplane. The sampan people would all wave at you like this when you're on your way and then they'd probably take a shot at you. I suppose it could have been a lot worse, but it wasn't.

*Cara:* Were you awarded any medals or citations?

*Jerry:* Just the good conduct and and the Vietnam Expeditionary Medal, and there was one that the South gave us a medal of some kind. I don't remember what, but I didn't have any.

*Cara:* When you were on the ship, how did you stay in touch with your family?

*Jerry:* Letters is about all you could do. We didn't have any way of calling. Nowadays, they're all on the internet, you know.

*Cara:* What was the food like on the ship?

*Jerry:* It wasn't bad. Well, the first crews, when they pulled us off of this, supposedly, going from port to port and put us into flying 24/7. The ship just about run out of stuff because they weren't used to feeding people 24/7. In fact, in the first cruise, the ship had breakfast, dinner and supper. Those of us who were taking off... Well, our shop worked 24 hours a day and we had people working both shifts. There wasn't any place

to eat except just to go down and and they'd make you a little lunch box. But finally, probably before the first cruise was over, they had one of the mess cooks or one of the cooks decided that he'd open a taco line down there and start making tacos. They had all the stuff to do that. They'd only let you have one taco at a time, so people would just go get back in line and eat the taco. I don't know the second cruise, they were set up a little more for it. They knew that we were going to be out at sea a lot.

*Cara:* What kind of things caused you stress? Did you feel any pressure when you were there to perform?

*Jerry:* Well, yeah, of course. Anybody that has any responsibility feels a little bit, you know.

*Cara:* Just the pressure of not having any say on how your life was conducted.

*Jerry:* Very little. You pretty much do whatever you're told.

*Cara:* Is that not true across the board with the services, or do you think it was worse on a boat?

*Jerry:* I think it's about the same in all of them. I think it was then and now they've relaxed that quite a lot.

*Cara:* How could people entertain themselves on a ship?

*Jerry:* Go sit out on the fantail behind and watch the sharks go after stuff. I don't know, they had a ship's library; I probably read every book in the library at one time. I don't know. A lot of them played cards.

*Cara:* Did you ever get to go on leave?

*Jerry:* I took a week in Tokyo when we were at Cusca, I took maybe three or four days. I don't remember, and about five of us went up to Tokyo and rented a couple of hotel rooms. The Japanese students were just all over us about asking questions and all that kind of stuff. I mean, we had to wear uniform all the time, of course, but they didn't let the officers wear uniforms off the ship. They had to change to civies. I don't



know, it was Japan and not that long after World War II. I guess that's the reason, I don't know.

*Cara:* Was there anything that happened that you thought was funny when you were in the service?

*Jerry:* I suppose , but I can't point to any one thing.

*Cara:* If you have any pictures of yourself or things that you took, I would really love to share them. I'll just copy them.

*Jerry:* I'll see what I've got at home. Jennifer can send you that one that she had in that facebook post.

*Cara:* Did you have any officers or fellow soldiers that you became good friends with?

*Jerry:* I've got two or three that when we were back in the States between cruises, well, the first I didn't have enough rank in the first turn around, but then when we came back, I was a Second Class Petty Officer and then we could go live off base. So about five or six of us rented out a three-bedroom house or something like that and live off the base.

*Cara:* Did that improve things? To have a little privacy?

*Jerry:* Well, of course, leaving the barracks out at the Naval Air Station there. There's no privacy in a barracks either.

*Cara:* Did you keep a diary?

*Jerry:* No, I don't remember doing any.

*Cara:* So very shortly, tell me what your assignment was on the ship. You said you did electronics, but then you were also getting to fly planes.

*Jerry:* Well, we were working on our own planes, our tech shop was responsible for all the electronics on the plane and, and you know, there was always something.

*Cara:* What type of planes were you flying?

*Jerry:* S2. It's a Gruman airframe that was also used as the carrier onboard delivery plane. It was that same airframe and they had one with a radio up on top. That was an early-warning version of that same airframe, but Ramon made a lot of. I think you know, I don't know if they're still making it, but there.

*Cara:* So you were flying a fixed-wing and what was the purpose of this plane? Was it a bomber? Was?

*Jerry:* Well, submarine warfare.

*Cara:* What do you call the armament? What do you call what you dropped?

*Jerry:* Sonic boueys. In real war-time, we could have dropped depth charges. We had practice depth charges. So if we had our own submarines that we were looking at, or even if it was English or New Zealand or whatever, there were always judges on board the submarine, so that when you finally dropped two PDC's right at once and if they were close enough they would have done damage to the ship, then they considered that a... you know, and then we surfaced the ship.

*Cara:* What is a PDC?

*Jerry:* Practice Depth Charge. Yeah, it's just more or less like an M80 or some kind of a loud firecracker..

*Cara:* So that part was fun, it was playing cat and mouse.

*Jerry:* It was.

*Cara:* But the North Vietnamese did not have submarines.

*Jerry:* No, they didn't but Russia and China did.

*Cara:* So you have a real purpose for being there.

*Jerry:* Yeah. We'd drop a bouey in the water just about.... the sonic boueys, there were three different versions. One of them is just for listening. It doesn't make any noise, doesn't do anything. Then the pinging bouey actually sends out a ping and you can drop two of them a ways apart and triangulate the echoes. Or three, especially, you can triangulate those echoes. That's what this ASED 30 screen was that I was talking about. That's basically what it did, look at the bouey. You'd get a get a return from a ping and you could triangulate that, kind of like the way they watch you. They can triangulate your cell phone wherever you're at, too. It's the same same principle, I guess, except a sound instead of...

*Cara:* So there really is no privacy. Do you remember what the day was like when you left the military, when you left the Navy?

*Jerry:* Well, I got out two months early to get enrolled Wichita State. They were just getting ready to go on another cruise and I think they they didn't argue about giving me an early out because they would have had to fly me back from the far East somewhere, if I hadn't gotten it.

*Cara:* So you went to Wichita State. Were you on the GI Bill?

*Jerry:* I just took about 12 hours, but then I went to work at Beech Aircraft. We started out doing night classes and working days at Beech. But then Beech switched me to second shift and not all of my classes could be switched to daytime. I tested out of a couple of them.

*Cara:* What were you doing at Boeing? What were you doing?

*Jerry:* John Swayze has pictures of plane that he was on that was a twin-engine. That plane was a cross between the Queen Air and the King Air. The military wanted the fuselage size of the Queen Air, but they wanted all the electronics and the turbo props and stuff from the King. So we were trying to make the wiring harness for the King fit in.

*Cara:* Did it work?

*Jerry:* Yeah, I think. But you know, the King Air fuselage was about probably eight or 10 feet longer than the Queen. So we had to do a lot of coiling up and things like that in the wiring harnesses. I think they thought it was a short-term thing and so they didn't really set up a special wiring harness for it. I don't know how long they made them, but I'm sure that one that John was flying in was one of the ones. I think I was out of the Navy before he joined.

*Cara:* And what was that plane called again?

*Jerry:* S2. Gruman.

*Cara:* And that was a combination of the Queen Air and the King Air.

*Jerry:* No, the one that John was flying, I forget what the designation was of it, but one of the pictures that he put on his facebook page, I'm pretty sure it was one of those Beech conglomerations.

*Cara:* Did you make any friendships in the service that you continued after you got out?

*Jerry:* Well, not really. You know, George and I went in together and he didn't get into the same school as I did. So we wound up not even seeing each other until after we were both out of the Navy. But well, we're still good friends. He and his wife lived out in western Colorado. I visited them out there and then they moved to Nebraska. I think they're back in Denver area now.

*Cara:* Did you join any veterans organizations after you came back?

*Jerry:* Yeah, VFW and the American Legion. I joined the American Legion first in Hutchinson. I worked for NCR at the time (National Cash Register), and they sent me out to Garden City, to a sub office out there. I went in the VFW and said, "I'd like to join the VFW." They said, "Oh, you've got to be a veteran of a foreign war." I said, "Well, I've got two tours in Vietnam." They said, "No, that ain't war."

*Jerry:* So I went down to the Legion and, of course, they were needing help. So I joined the Legion there. Then after I'd moved back to Ashland, I joined the VFW here. I've got a life membership and stuff and I'm a member of the Legion in Dodge, too. The GI forum in Dodge is another veteran's organization.

*Cara:* So your career, after you left the military, involved electronics all the time. What did you do here in Ashland when you came back?

*Jerry:* Well, my dad was a carpenter and Uncle Don. They worked together a lot and Dad had fallen off a roof and and got kind of broken up. They had a bunch of stuff to finish. I had remarried in Omaha, a girl who had three kids already. They were really, I mean, the kids, were kind of in the wrong neighbourhood and all that. We just decided to come back down here. I got in the contracting business with Don and worked at that for a while, worked for the City of Ashland as a lineman for a while, was county weed director for a while. I finally got back into company that that sold Sweda cash registers that were real strong competitors with NCR. I went to work for them and stayed there for 10 or 12 years, drove back and forth. We had a little office in Dodge, but it was just a place to put parts.

*Cara:* Did your time in the military influence how you thought about the war or about the military in general?

*Jerry:* I felt like there was no reason to treat enlisted men like they were just in the way. That that part of it, I really hated. But as far as the flying, I kind of enjoyed just being out. The two seats behind the pilot and co-pilot, we had all the electronics, all the stuff to hunt submarines with back there, like a big video game in those days. But we just had a little window about this big beside the fuselage. We didn't really get to see a whole lot of what we were flying past, you had to look kind of down under the wing and the engine.

*Cara:* You said that your brother was also in the Navy, but he got to fly full-time.

*Jerry:* He retired as a lieutenant commander.

*Cara:* What was your brother's name, please?

*Jerry:* Jim. Jim Baker. He died suddenly a while back. I still don't know why.

*Cara:* Do you attend reunions of your shipmates or anything?

*Jerry:* Back in the early eighties, my youngest son was in the Scouts and John Brunholz, Senior, had been on the USS Yorktown that sunk in the Battle of Midway. Then the ship that I was on, was originally supposed to be the Bonhome Richard. I think, according to some of the plates on down in the engine room, and but they renamed it the Yorktown just so that they could get a Yorktown back out there and make the Japanese think we could build an aircraft carrier in three months.

*Cara:* Were they fooled?

*Jerry:* I don't know, back then. I read something, somewhere, that there was a period of time in World War II, when the Enterprise was the only carrier in the whole Pacific that was functional. Everybody else had damage, so they would paint different side numbers on the ship. About once a week, they changed the side numbers, so the Japanese saw that it out there they'd think there were several. But I don't know how long that went on.

*Cara:* How did your experiences in the military affect your life then?

*Jerry:* Like I say, the training was excellent and I don't really have any complaint about it, other than that basically I don't know why they treated enlisted men that badly.

*Cara:* You think that's improved.

*Jerry:* I think so, yes.

*Cara:* So, in retrospect, how do you feel about your service during that time?

*Jerry:* I got to see a lot of stuff I would never have seen and did a lot of traveling in lots of places that I would never have gone, I guess.

*Cara:* Such as.

*Jerry:* Japan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Thailand. We were in Hawaii several

times, three times on each cruise because we'd always stop at Pearl Harbor on the way home from the western Pacific. I got to know Hawaii pretty well. We had a couple of guys that came in the squadron just as we were leaving on the second cruise, that had been stationed at Barber's Point on Oahu. Then, when they were servicing the Whisky Victors, the du line, big Super Connie (Super Constellation) aircraft that had all the equipment on it, ray domes and stuff like that for early-warning. They flew from Pearl Harbor down to Johnson Island and then back. There was another one that flew up to the Aelluetions and then back to Hawaii. They had them back every day. They had them in the air all the time. When they figured out that the Air Force's radar, up in the Aelluetions, was picking up stuff that they were flying right past. They decided they probably didn't need that new line any more, the early-warning line. But anyway, those guys knew Hawaii really well, they figured out where to go that weren't the tourist-type places.

*Cara:* Have you ever been back to Hawaii since?

*Jerry:* Yes, we took Mom and Dad over there in '83 or '84. Dad couldn't get around very well, but he could sit on the balcony of the hotel and watch what was going on. I got him in a car once and made a trip all the way around the island. I think it belongs to the Mormon church, but they have a huge display of Polynesian... You know, just like a big Polynesian colony down there, that was really interesting. I took Mom and Dad to that.

*Cara:* So your family got some benefit, too. Is there anything that I just didn't know to ask you about your time there. Is there anything you'd like people to know?

*Jerry:* I don't think so.

*Cara:* It's just that you were already in the service when things blew up.

*Jerry:* Yeah!

*Cara:* Did you have an inkling that war was coming?

*Jerry:* The Cuban Missile Crisis was just over with when I joined.

*Cara:* So you felt like maybe it was a time of peace when you joined?

*Jerry:* Yeah, pretty much, yeah, I really hadn't thought about it that much, to be honest.

*Cara:* But were you afraid that you were going to get involved in a full-blown conflict?

*Jerry:* I don't think so, and we didn't do all the stuff that... There are lots of other veterans down here that were right out in it, knee-deep in the swamps. I don't know how they made it.

*Cara:* Some of them did. Some of them didn't.

*Cara:* Jerry, thank you for your service. Thank you.





