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Oral History Project/ Robert LeCroy

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HIST 155, Fall 2015/ Michelle Quintero

Student Interviewer's Name: Michelle Quintero

Interviewee Name: Robert LeCroy

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview took place in Morning Pointe assisted living facility in Hixson, Tennessee, on November 4, 2015. Present at the interview was the interviewer Michelle Quintero, LeCroy, and several staff and others not part of the interview, but around the area. It lasted about thirty-five minutes.

About Robert LeCroy:

Robert LeCroy is from Chattanooga, Tennessee and was born on August 8, 1935. LeCroy was eighty at the time of the interview. LeCroy served in the U.S Navy submarine service for thirty years where he worked with nuclear filled submarines as a missile technician and other duties. The interview consisted of his experience during his service.

Interviewer: Michelle Quintero (MQ)

Interviewee: Robert LeCroy (RL)

MQ: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

RL: I enlisted...

MQ: You enlisted?

RL: At seventeen.

MQ: Seventeen... Don't you have to be eighteen to enlist?

RL: Well, you could going at seventeen with your parent's permission, so I enlisted, uh, in June or July of uh 1953, but they didn't take me until November 53' so I turned eighteen in August. So I was eighteen when I went in, but I had already signed up.

MQ: Oh ok, and where were you living at the time?

RL: In Chattanooga, ah well I don't remember if I was in Chattanooga or Memphis, I think I was in Memphis at the time I enlisted. My father and mother had been separated, mother lived here [Chattanooga] and father lived in Memphis, and I'd been living with him down in Memphis.

MQ: So you're from Tennessee.

RL: Yes I'm from Tennessee but I didn't go to high school in Tennessee.

MQ: Oh, where did you go to high school?

RL: Berea.

MQ: Where's that?

RL: Berea Foundation, it's uh a boarding school in Kentucky.

MQ: Oh ok.

RL: Berea College

MQ: I see.

RL: Uh, Berea foundation is a high school that um runs itself like a college, and in that you uh have history in this building maybe English over here, math over here uh and you have like ten minutes in between classes everybody lives in a dormitory, um it's it's a high school but its run like a college.

MQ: Hmm ok, so, why did you join?

RL: Why did I join?

MQ: Yeah.

RL: I... my father had been in the Navy, um and I think it was for independence than it was more than anything else, I just wanted... and I didn't want to go, at the time they were starting to draft people and I didn't want to get in the Army, so I said I'll go in the Navy, and that was much better than going to the Army and getting shot at

[Laughter]

MQ: That's actually my next question that why did you pick that service branch that you did?

RL: Well, actually I think that uh, I think that had something to do with it, I didn't want to get shot at, plus the Navy offered more opportunity, I'll put it that way.

MQ: Opportunity? As in how?

RL: Education.

MQ: Oh ok.

RL: Um, I came right out of, like I said, out of school and uh I went to Sand Diego to boot camp and then right out of boot camp they sent me to school in San Diego for nine months as a Sonarman which is sound navigation and ranging and uh I just it, it was better for education, I thought and that's what I did.

MQ: Ok.

RL: And then also my father had been in in the Navy.

MQ: So that also influenced?

RL: Uh, some influence.

MQ: Ok, um, do you remember your first days in service?

RL: Do I remember the first days?

MQ: Yeah.

RL: Oh yes...

MQ: How were they?

RL: I... I enjoyed it, San Diego I was in boot camp out there and of course you know San Diego is really is uh, it's a uh pretty wild town for a seventeen year old kid.

MQ: Yeah, to be alone.

RL: To be alone and nobody, oh, of course, you couldn't, I wasn't old enough to get into the bars to drink, but that didn't stop you because there were bars that would let you in.

[Laughs]

And on base, uh you could get a beer in most of the EM clubs on base because the thinking at the time was that if you were old enough to go get killed you were old enough to get a beer.

MQ: Well...

RL: Which I, I think it's correct, I mean if you're old enough, if you want to send this guy out and get him shot at then you ought to let him drink a beer shouldn't you?

MQ: I suppose, I don't know.

RL: [laughs]

MQ: I don't think my parents would agree with that.

RL: Well, they might not, but I think, I think logic to me.

[Laughter]

MQ: So um, how was your first time, when you submerged? In a submarine.

RL: Oh it, it wasn't that scary at all.

MQ: No?

RL: No, it, actually it, I knew little bit of what was going on um to begin with and that's the other thing, if you're submerging in a submarine you know what's going you know what

they're doing and what this and why that, so it it didn't scare me, it was something different.

MQ: How long did you spend in special training to be able to serve in submarine—?

RL: Submarine school in New London, Connecticut is where I went, um it's about twelve or fifteen weeks long, somewhere around up there and uh once you get out of that school and assign you to a submarine, each submarine you have to, what they call qualify on, which means you have to learn that specific submarine because all of em are different. And the theory is, you used to have submarine rooms, you have nine compartments, and the theory was that you could do the basic job of anybody in that compartment, so that if in an emergency, in a flooding casualty or something like that they had to close the water tight doors and you were the only ones in there, you on, you could operate the machinery in there to some degree so that the submarine could still go on.

MQ: So you just went through basic training for like every single--

RL: For everything in there, I learned to run the diesel engines, I learned to do just about everything on the submarine

MQ: Um ok, what was the longest time you spent being submerged?

RL: Bout seventy-five, eighty days.

MQ: Yeah you mentioned that that was unusual can you tell—

RL: Well it's just that, we uh, our patrols were sixty days or longer, and uh you'd go to sea, um, and usually the submerged time on the nukes, the nuclear submarines, was about forty days or something like that, forty fifty, but there were on occasion, in this particular occasions, where I would have gone a long time, um I think there was during, I'm trying to think, there was some national crisis going on, and so uh we weren't relived and we stayed on patrol longer than we normally would have, see cause usually like I said, there are sixty days cycles, or ninety day cycles. You uh, go to sea for thirty days, forty, or fifty something like that on the submarine then you come back to the states and then you train for thirty days and have R+R, rest and recreation for a while and then you train at the training center and then when you get through that training than you go back and relieve the other crew and then they come back and do the same thing you do, so we're at a ninety day cycle something like that that you're there.

MQ: Ok, but you said this time, you spent seventy-five days submerged and it was during like a crisis?

RL: Well there was a problem that, um, for some reason we couldn't get relieved, the other crew, and I'm not sure whether it was during the Cuban missile crisis, or what it was, something like that and they just didn't want us going up at that particular time.

MQ: Right, okay. So I have to ask, what's it like being in a submarine, cause I've obviously never been in one.

RL: [laughs]

Well the old diesel boats, the old battery operated diesel boats was like being in a sewer pipe.

MQ: In a what?

RL: A sewer pipe, that's what they used to call them! Sewer pipes, they stink, they, um, well you think about now for a second you got twenty, I mean, hundred people on there and they're eating and you know something that happens after you eat? Okay, well, that has to go someplace, well they store it in a tank in a submarine.

MQ: They don't just let it go?

RL: No, now wait a minute, think about it because what would happen if you were submerged and you were trying to stay undetected and they flushed that out and it floated to the surface and then, Ah there's a submarine down there!

[Laughs]

MQ: That's true...

RL: So and in order to keep our location secret we used to, well you could flush it out, but I mean it was done on a secretive basis and they stunk, the old boats stunk. Now the new ones, the nuclear boats, they're just like being inside, it's just like coming in here and staying for sixty or seventy days.

MQ: I did read that they were um, were they cramped?

RL: Yeah, um, well if you think about, 325 feet long and you got 160 men on it, 325 feet divided by 160, how many feet does that give per person? Not many does it?

[Laughter]

MQ: Wow, and like where did you guys sleep?

RL: Well, it accorded in the submarines, they have different areas, they have an, uh, bunk room.

MQ: Yeah.

RL: I slept when I was on the diesel boat I slept in the for—torpedo room and we had, we call then bunks or racks and you trice it up, that means it folds down at night and you get in there, when you get up you fold it back up.

MQ: Oh, ok.

RL: To keep it out of the way and I was in the fort torpedo room which meant slept right over a big torpedo.

MQ: Oh my goodness.

RL: Eh.

MQ: You got like— [laughs].

RL: It's no big deal, you don't think about it.

MQ: Yeah you got used to it?

RL: Mmhm.

MQ: Ok, um.

RL: Well when I was on the missile boats.

MQ: Yeah.

RL: The uh Polaris missile boats, I was in the missile compartment and I'm in there with sixteen missiles, each missile has a war head on it each war head can have between three and five warheads on it and each war head has the capability of atomic weapon that is more, stronger than Hiroshima.

MQ: Stronger than Hiroshima?

RL: Huh?

MQ: Stronger than the one that we dropped in Hiroshima?

RL: Yeah! Oh it make Hiroshima look like a fire cracker.

MQ: Oh.

RL: You, the new, the new bombs now you think about it darling, that was in 1945 when they dropped that one.

MQ: Yeah.

RL: Now you don't think that they've improved? Now look at the car in 1945 and the cars today, have they improved?

MQ: Yeah.

RL: You don't think they ain't going to improve that bomb the same? It's the same deal.

MQ: Yeah, wow, ok um.

RL: [laughs]

MQ: So I'm going back to more basic things.

RL: Ok.

MQ: The food, I was wondering what the food was like?

RL: Well on the submarines the food was excellent, we had the best cooks in the Navy, undoubtedly, and they, we got the best food, we used to get steak at least once a week, um I

was introduced to uh let's see authentic Indian curry on a submarine, you ever had Indian curry?

MQ: I have, but like—

RL: You know where you have all the different condiments that you put on, you know the shrimp curry and um we had sea food every Friday for the Catholics.

MQ: Ok [laughs].

RL: That's still that is a tradition in the Navy and in the service.

(Nurse off in distance)

Nurse: You're absolutely right.

RL: Well it is here too I guess, cause if you noticed they have a lot of seafood here on Friday?

Nurse: Do they? I haven't noticed... I'm gonna notice now!

RL: [laughs]

Nurse: I'm so gonna notice now!

RL: I don't say they have it every Friday, but they do have a lot of sea food on Friday.

But in the Navy you had to just about and that was, like I said, for the Catholics they didn't, you know they didn't have to eat meat on Friday.

MQ: That's okay, alright, um so how did you stay in touch with your family? Or did you stay in touch?

RL: Okay, um on the old diesel boats you didn't, you were gone for seventy days and they didn't hear from you. on the new nuclears, the Polaris submarine boats they had what they called "family grams" and you were allowed to send, um, two or three of those of patrols, and of course the submarine would send out messages it had to send out some messages to whatever let the Navy so they know where it was at so that they could do, well at that same time they send out these coded messages and then they would send them out to the family. So you did, so they had some, they knew you were alive in a way, to put it that way.

MQ: Okay, so in such a small space like, I don't know you're underwater, so how did people there entertain themselves?

RL: Well, most of the submarines had a movie every night or show a movie twice a day, we would keep, we would load up on boards when we were getting ready to go on the sea sixty movies and so they'd show one movie overnight, they'd show one movie and they show it twice a day, reason they showed it twice a day is because people were on the, uh, Polaris submarines, we stood what we call six hour watches you were on six hours and off twelve hours round the clock so that they if you had, if you had to be sleeping when they were showing the movie.

MQ: You had another chance to watch it.

RL: So they showed it twice a day so everybody...

MQ: Okay so, um what would you say was the most memorable experience that you had?

RL: Hmmm. That's hard to say...

MQ: Or just tell me one of them.

RL: Ok well, um I was lo—I was washed overboard and in the ocean for about six or seven hours; that was very memorable.

MQ: What happened?

RL: Um, well we had a I was a, in high school I was a swimmer, that's my sport swimmer or a diver, so uh when I got in the Navy and in the submarines I became the ships swimmer that means that if they have somebody that they goes overboard you need to get to em, they send us.

MQ: Hmm.

RL: Okay, we, uh, were getting ready to, uh, submerge and on the topside they have, they call 'em "Line Lockers" and when you tie up on port you have a uh a rope that's about this big round

does signal

That's about ninety feet long curled up inside this free flooding um locker or space on a ship and it's, you gotta bolts, got to bolt it down.

MQ: Okay.

RL: Well, the person that was 'supposed to check all of those had missed one and the last thing that the captain does before he submerges he looks his periscope around and he said "oh that line locker is open!" so they called away. "Simonies," I never will forget his name and Simonies was the man in charge of doing that line locker, so he went up topside and it was a little rough and he didn't. When you go top side on there, and the weather's tough they got a belt that your put around, and it's got a clamp on it and they gotta a safety tract it, once it runs down on the center of the top of the submarine so that you can't, can't get washed over, well he didn't put his on and he got washed overboard. So they called away the man overboard party which was sort of stupid of the captain part, anyhow, we went rushin' topside and as soon as I hit topside a wave hit me and knocked me overboard, me and about three other guys, so anyhow, make the long story short, I was in the water for about four and a half hours before they finally got to me and Simonies the boy that had gone overboard first, originally, well he drowned, and then half of the overboard party, it took us about four and half hours to get us back on board.

MQ: Why did it take so long?

RL: Because, the water is going up and down like this and this is a submarine out here and he's got the people floating away from it and it was just hard to maneuver it around to get everybody back up on board and they took about four hours to get everybody back on board, we were just lucky that it was, uh, not real cold water, if it had been real cold water I'd been dead. There ain't no two ways about that froze to death.

MQ: Ok hmm um, last time I talked to you, you mentioned that you were a missile technician.

RL: I was both a missile technician and a Sonarman, I was a Sonarman first and then missile technician.

MQ: Ok, can you tell me about the Sonarman first?

RL: Well Sonarman, you know, probably in all the movies you heard "PING whoop?"

MQ: Yeah.

RL: Yeah that's a Sonarman, what they do is that they put headphones on and they listen for the sounds outside uh, for approaching ships and things like that and the when you're hearing and it goes "PING whoop" that's what they call active sonar and it puts out a pulse, and it'll hit something, echo comes back and you know how far away it is. So that's for range finding and things like that. Uh, I was that for a number of years and then I changed rate and became a Polaris missile technician and that was on the Polaris submarines and I maintained the—and was a warhead expert on the Polaris missiles.

MQ: And it's just maintain the missiles I don't really---

RL: Well, there's a lot of things on the missile that you have to do or any or any piece of electronic equipment. Like that. You have to test it to make sure that when you pull the trigger its gonna fire, you have to make sure that if it's a nuclear warhead there are certain things that are going on with it and that its safe, and uh there's also all sorts of precautions safety precaution and that one's of the things that we did.

MQ: Ok um, you told me that you were a Chief Petty Officer.

RL: Yes.

MQ: And I did read that they have the other specialties and was missile technician your other specialty?

RL: Well no, a chief, in other words in the Navy you have a rankings and that, the Chief Petty Officer that your rank, in other words you start as an E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, and so forth and then being a missile technician that was my rating, that was the job that I did, I was a Sonarman and that was the job that I did. And you can be a chief missile technician or a chief Sonarman so you could be within your job you could go up and get rank.

MQ: You didn't start as a Chief Petty Officer.

RL: No you start off as an E1.

MQ: Yeah.

RL: And the Chief Petty Officer is an E7.

MQ: Oh ok.

RL: So there's, uh, and it goes up to an E9, which is what I was when I retired.

MQ: And do you remember how long it took for you to be a chief petty—and E7?

RL: Hmm?

MQ: Do you remember how long it was until you were an E7?

RL: Uh well, I was an E6 for, good Lord, I was about, it took me about twenty years to make an E7 or E8 somewhere right in there.

MQ: And the remaining ten?

RL: Well, I was an E8 or E9, it was, even at E6 I was at a supervisor capacity, but an E7, an E8, or an E9 supervises, they make sure everything goes the way it's supposed to go. They, the E8's and the E9's run the Navy.

MQ: Okay, well last time you told me that you had something with the Top Secret Clearance or something like that?

RL: Well, I have a TS¹ clearance.

MQ: Oh ok.

RL: Or I did have, to put in that way, I uh, if you are, I was a Sonarman that means I listen for all the ships and all like that, okay, I had to have T—Top Secret Clearance because I knew the exact position of the submarine at sea, that is top secret information, uh the Captain of the ship, the executive officer, the weapons officer, and the navigator, probably me and a couple of other enlisted men were the only people that would know that, and the President and the Chief of Navy operations would be the only civilians that knew that, and they keep that information secret because they don't want nobody to know where it's at! So, uh, the position of a nuclear submarine at sea is top secret and that's as high as you can get as far as secret classification.

MQ: And that was during the time you were a Sonarman, right?

RL: Yes, and a missile technician too.

MQ: So when you're a missile technician, you also know—

RL: I had to know too, well there's certain things that caused me to know that.

MQ: Okay, let me turn the page... well besides the getting thrown off into the water, what was another interesting thing that happened to you?

¹ Top Secret (TS)

RL: Well I told you, I got washed overboard, you know it was um, I got to go to a bull fight in Spain.

MQ: [laughs] is that, was that, I heard that there's stops that you make? Do you just stop--

RL: Well no, I okay, on the Polaris submarine we were stationed in Rota, Spain, and what we would do there was that there was a submarine tender over there and it the submarine would pull in there and we would exchange crews over there, and one crew would fly back to the states, the other crew would take the submarine they would do thirty days upkeep on it, changing, and changing things that needed changing getting everything ready load all the stores on it getting it ready to go on patrol, then they'd take it for patrol for sixty days, the other crew had gone back they'd take twenty to thirty days of rest and recreation and they do into training and they would train for two months or sixty days while the other crew was, had the submarine. Then at the end of that they'd swap and we'd do it all over again. Same way.

MQ: You said the training, the training you had to do in between um why do you have to train?

RL: Well you gotta learn how to operate the submarine, if it's a missile technician now, now this is just like anything else, everything changes, in other words, if I got a missile today, that missile tomorrow, I may want to do something different with it, so they may change it and I have to learn how to maintain it, so you were always training, uh when I was a Sonarman I would learn, um, I would go into training on how to recognize different sounds different ships and things like that and any number of things of training that you need to learn on a submarine.

MQ: Okay so it's just...

RL: It is a continuing education on there all the time.

MQ: Okay, you answered so many of my question already that I have to just keep going down the list. Um okay well, do you recall when your service ended?

RL: Umm yeah, I recall when my service ended I was in Charleston, South Carolina, I had been married and that was really the one thing that sorta ended—well I don't say ended my career but I was ready to get out then because I didn't want to go out to sea anymore.

MQ: Hmm.

RL: Well I didn't mind going out to sea and being gone seventy to eighty days but I hadn't gotten married so, I wasn't gonna being used to getting married if I was going to sea all this time. and um, I already put in my thirty years and in the Navy you got, it used to be and think it's still the same, if you served twenty years when you retired you get 50% of your base pay for the rest of your life, if you put thirty years in you get 75% of your base pay for the rest of your life, and so I just decided I'd go for thirty years so I could get 75%

MQ: Okay, sounds like a good deal. I uh—

RL: Well now, see I can't complain darling, beside the 75% of that and I also worked for TVA for twenty some odd years and I retired from TVA so I went fully vested in TVA's retirement system and then when I was sixty-five I started growing some Social Security so uncle sugar is sending me three checks.

[Laughter]

MQ: That was actually going to be my next question, did you work or go to school after, you did say that you joined the Navy for educational opportunities.

RL: Yes, in a lot of ways, I was seventeen years old, I was going to school actually I'd go in cause probably I'd stay out of jail um, I was pretty, um, my father had been in the Navy and retired then and he had been in the Navy a while and he encouraged me to go in because I was getting pretty wild and um and uh it's the best thing that ever happened to me cause like I said it probably kept me from going to jail because I was seventeen years old I didn't or eighteen years old and I didn't think anything could hurt me I was bulletproof.

MQ: You said that you joined the Navy, that when they accepted you was in November or September, I'm sorry.

RL: I joined in August, I turned eighteen August the 21st and I went down and joined, daddy had already signed for me before that because then back then you uh could go in at seventeen with your parents' permission, but I had joined already, but it uh it just so happened that there was no space available until November and that's when I turned eighteen in August and I went in in November.

MQ: And that was in 53' because I know.

RL: 1953.

MQ: Because the Korean War ended in July.

RL: Yeah, the Korean War had just ended when I went in.

MQ: Did that impact at all, like--

RL: I was ready to go, didn't bother me nothing.

MQ: Um okay, we—

RL: Hey when you're seventeen years old and you're a male and you got all that uh testosterone going so it don't matter

[Laughter]

MQ: Okay... um, did you make any close friends when you were in service?

RL: Yeah, I tons of em, but uh I had one real good friend that I made Lawson Leonard, he uh passed away now, but he and I were, we were in the Navy together we were also civilians together also too, I mean he he was, he and I were just real good friends, he was probably

good long-life friend that I made while I was in the service but I had lots of friends in the Navy, because in the Navy you make shipmates and friends but then you go to another ship and another ship and so you do make friends and you keep in touch with some but not a lot.

MQ: Did you keep in touch with any of them beside—

RL: No, just Lawson and I kept in touch and that's about all, um I went to ships reunion, God, one time and it of course I didn't, I saw maybe two people that I knew and it just didn't impress me very much so I didn't go back to anymore.

[Laughs]

MQ: Okay, did you join Veterans organizations?

RL: Not many of them, no.

MQ: No?

RL: I'm not that much of an, you know uh I um I did, I'm proud of it, but I don't want to hang around a bunch of people who did it.

MQ: Okay well um, how did your experience and service affect your life?

RL: Uh I think it matured me more than anything else, because I was like told you I had just turned eighteen years old and uh I, I thought I was mature, but like most eighteen year olds I'm not

[Laughter]

And I think that the big thing really, my first four years in the Navy, Lord, you know you get to see things, I turned nineteen in Tokyo, Japan. Now that's, not many kids do that.

[Laughs]

So it really, I got to see the world I got to experience a lot and it does mature you quickly, you learn that everything ain't it the way mommy and daddy said it was, you know when I was thinking the other day, I was stationed in Hong Kong, and to see dead new born float by because the parents thought it was more humane to drown it at birth than let it starve to death and I tend to agree with them but its, it's a shame to have to do something like that?

MQ: Yeah

RL: But that was not an uncommon occurrence, that happened over there a lot of the times it just and it's just very sad to think that people, you people would come to that point, but it happens, uh and you know there's nothing you can do about it.

MQ: Um wow, uh is there anything else that you would like to add that we didn't cover?

RL: Um no, I think you done a pretty good job darling.

MQ: [laughs] thank you, well that's all the questions I had for you.

RL: Okay.

MQ: And thank you so much, it's been very educational, I have never really talked to someone from the military, so this has been a new learning experience.

RL: A new experience!

MQ: Yes, thanks again!

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