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Oral History Interview

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Bibliography of Al Weaver

Al Eugene Weaver was born in Marian County, Georgia. He was born on June 30th, 1945. He has five sisters and one brother. He grew up in the country and loved to play outdoors. His father was a saw miller and a logger. They struggled economically. His father would work many jobs to secure food on their table. His uncle worked in carpentry. When Al was little, he would help his father and his uncle with their jobs. He learned a lot of life skills by doing this. During his teen years, the country took a turning point. Tensions were rising between the Soviets and the Americans. High schools across the country were teaching children about anti-communism. The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Red Scare was alarming to Americans. At schools, they had routine bomb shelter tests.

When Al was sixteen, he decided to enroll in the military with his buddies. Al's mother had to sign for him on the military transcripts because he was not old enough to. He enlisted in the Navy and went to San Diego California for Basic Training. They trained only for eight weeks. Usually basic training lasts a whole three months, but they let them go early due to a disease that broke out in the camp. Al's main job in Vietnam was to operate and repair the arresting gear and the catapults. He served on an aircraft carrier and spent most of his time on it. Periodically, he would take leaves and see the countries that they sailed by. He became captain of the catapults due to certain circumstances at the time.

In April of 1967, He finished his tour and was on his way home. After the war, Al moved to Chattanooga, TN because there were no jobs in Georgia. He got a job at a railroad company in 1970 and worked there until he retired thirty one years later. He married in August of 1967 and had three children, but that marriage was soon to end. In February of 1977 they ended their marriage. In April of 1977, he met my grandmother and married her in December. Al welcomed my grandmother's two children and she welcomed his three children. Between them both, they have a total of twelve grandchildren. Al Weaver is a Southern Baptist and attends Silverdale Baptist Church where he happily works with the maintenance crew. Every year at Christmas, they throw a grand party for all of our family. We bring loads of food and celebrate the birth of Christ. One of their traditions is baking a cake and singing Happy Birthday to Jesus. Al Weaver loves his life and loves his big family. He is well respected among the community and his family adores him.

Time and Place of Interview: This interview took place on October 24th, 2015 at five o'clock.

We met at his house and spent the evening talking about his past. This interview was conducted on one face to face meeting and one by the phone. My grandmother, Lynn Weaver was present during the interview.

Interviewer: Jessica Jones (JJ)

Interviewee: Al Weaver (AW)

Interviewee: Lynne Weaver (LW)

JJ: Where and When were you born?

AW: I was born in Marian County, Georgia, June the 30th, 1945.

JJ: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

AW: I have five sisters and one brother.

JJ: Tell me about your childhood. What was it like?

AW: Well, we grew up in the country and we... My daddy was a saw miller and a logger and I had a uncle worked as a carpenter. And I learned a lot from both of them.

JJ: Did your family struggle economically?

AW: Yes....

JJ: Did you have any family members serve in WWII or the Korean War?

AW: Uh... I had a Uncle and he served in WWII, in the Navy. And I had a cousin..first cousin that was in the Korean War.

JJ: What do you remember about what was going on in the country during the 1950s through the 1960s?

AW: I just knew that there was a war starting in the South East Asia.

JJ: How old were you when the Vietnam War Started?

AW Uh....I was sixteen years old.

JJ: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

AW: I enlisted into the Navy.

JJ: Did you support the war effort at the time?

Weaver: I didn't realize uh....what if I was supporting it or not. I just knew that I had to serve. I wanted to be in the Navy instead of the army.

JJ: What was your military branch?

AW: Navy

JJ: How long did you serve?

AW: Almost four years.

JJ: Why did you volunteer?

AW: Well I knew that I was going to have to go into the service and two of my classmates and I joined together. I was only seventeen and uh... my momma had to sign for me.

JJ: Did you enlist because of a patriotic attitude or did you feel like you were obligated to serve?

AW: I knew I would have to serve, uh, I served the duties

JJ: Where did you for basic training?

AW: San Diego, California.

JJ: Do you have any special memories from training?

AW: Uh, yes I do.

JJ: Could you give us a couple examples?

AW: It was nonstop training and we, we were at camp for eight weeks. It was normally three months, but there was a disease that broke out and they rushed us through it in eight weeks.

JJ: Do you felt like you were prepared battle or do you feel like in the eight weeks were neglected?

AW: We were trained in uh..... everything about the Navy had the rank and we were busy from the training and physically prepared uh... I was sent to a school. They called it a school because of the catapults arresting gear or...to be... on an aircraft carrier.

JJ: So, do you feel like the training that was given to you, you were confident in battle during Vietnam?

AW: Yes. I was proficient in... uh.... How to operate and repair the arresting gear and the catapults.

JJ: Upon arriving in Vietnam, what did you think about the country?

AW: I actually didn't see the country. I was actually on an aircraft carrier in the South China Sea.

JJ: What was it like for your daily experiences on the aircraft carrier?

AW: Well the carrier, it was like a floating city. We had five thousand people, five thousand men that ship when they would uh...when the squad was aboard and it uh.... I was in the catapult operations. So we, in our division we took the uh...the catapults and there was another section that took care of the arresting gear and engines. They uh...recovered the aircraft and we watched the aircraft. (Long Pause) I worked every position on the catapult and we went on several cruises that when I was aboard that ship. In the Mediterranean and I... Every time I came up for a rank, I would take a test and pass it. And I had a chief that took an interest in me and taught me a lot about the catapults and my last uh.... The Vietnam cruise was my last cruise before I got out and I was due to uh.... Circumstances I became a uh...catapult captain for that cruise on catapult number three which unusual part for an E-5 to be a catapult captain. So it was uh....quiet cruise

JJ: In your experience, did your ship ever experience combat fighting?

AW: Well we watched the planes doing the bombing of Hanoi. I mean they were land bases that were sorties across Vietnam dropping bombs but we launched three recovered aircraft that they sought of the bombing of Hanoi and I was seated waiting for the planes to come back with big holes in the wings and I didn't understand how they got back. They were very damaged.

JJ: This was during July, correct?

AW: Yes. We launched B-52 Bombers repeatedly.

JJ: Did you ever witness any soldiers going through PTSD?

AW: No I didn't. (Long pause)

JJ: So, What did you do for fun on your Ship?

Weaver: We played cards and uh... sometimes would if we didn't have any duty we would a throw the football some.

JJ: Did you ever take leaves to return to land?

AW: We had uh..... We pulled into port some. We had to go to Japan for some repairs in Yokoso it was uh a big port and we had to put the carrier in the dry dock. It's where they pull it in and drain out all of the water underneath from it and that's the first time I saw how big that carrier was. There was more under the water than there was above the water and we had something like a shaft that held the big propeller they had to do some repairs on it. It didn't take them about fifteen days to do that. So... but we had fifteen days in Yokoso, Japan.

JJ: Could you tell me about any memories that stand out to you about your time on the aircraft carrier?

AW: Well that uh.....three days of duty that uh.. we had to uh...you know had to do it thirty six hours about where we would have a little break and then do more. We were all exhausted and that was big memory I guess. I lost track of one day we were uh...got so exhausted that I passed out. They had to go on without me.

Jessica: Were you and your men ever worried of an attack?

AW: I actually wasn't um.... I don't know, I mean it could have happened but I wasn't worried about it.

JJ: At the time, how did you view the Soviets? Were you angry towards them like most Americans were?

AW: I didn't hate them, but I knew that they weren't uh.... Trying to do good for us and we had to stand our ground against them. That's how I felt about it. I knew we uh...had our military forces for a reason.

In the Background, Mr. Weaver's wife cuts in. She helps him remember certain events.

LW: Remember how we were all scared about the Bay of Pigs? That was during high school

AW: (Quietly thinking).

AW: Yeah, when we were in high school, umm the umm the president Kennedy was president and the soviets were trying to put missiles in Cuba and they did. And uh, they tried to the Bay of Pigs which at that time uhh... was supposed to be a secret operation to stop the Castro government that had just taken over Cuba and it failed. Of course and uh... but it was a very uh... scary time because uh... it could've been a nuclear war.

LW: The missiles were aimed at the United States and President Kennedy was at a what you call a face down and Kennedy stood his ground and everybody and we came up close from having a nuclear war. Well uh... he backed down with his ships and Kennedy was ready, we were ready to fight and it would've been on our soil. Yes, we did have bad feelings towards the Russians.

JJ: Do you have any more stories that stood out to you when you were on your aircraft?

AW: It just was a lot of hard work and I learned a lot.

JJ: Were your beliefs the same as you entered the war?

AW: Uh yeah, I was glad to get out because I didn't want to spend my whole life at sea and that's what it would've been if I would've stayed in.

JJ: When you returned home from the war, did you go to school?

AW: Uhh... no. Well briefly I did. But what I did was get a job. Uh... I moved to uh... from South Georgia to Chattanooga, I didn't move back to Georgia after I got out of the service I moved to Chattanooga

JJ: What made you relocate after the war?

AW: because uhh...job situation in South Georgia where I grew up was very slim to get a good job.

JJ: When did you get out of the war?

AW: I got out in 1967 in April and I had several different jobs and uh... I finally got a job at the railroad in 1970. And that's... I retired from Norfolk Southern thirty one years later.

JJ: After the war and you went job hunting, were you ready to settle down and get married?

AW: Uh... I married in uh....in August of 1967.

JJ: Did you have any Children?

AW: Three kids and that marriage didn't last. In 1977 in February we ended it. And then in uh...April the 29th I met your Grandmother and we married in December. We married on December 21st and we blended our families. We basically raised your daddy and your Aunt Kim and our my three kids. They didn't live with us, but I supported them.

JJ: Did you ever have nightmares about your experience of Vietnam or was it not as bad for you as for others?

AW: I did not. I saw some traumatic things. Like I saw uh... a man get killed, a young man and it bothered me for months. I could see it.....happen. But I got over it. I didn't have the ongoing nightmares like some soldiers do that go through uh.... Seeing all of their buddies get killed stuff like that. I saw an aircraft go in the water and sink with everybody die. That happened twice on uh... in my service but I didn't have nightmares about that stuff.

JJ: How did your supervisors and your officers prepare you guys for situations like these? How did they help you cope? Did they have pastors on ship?

AW: We had a Chaplin uh...but I cannot remember... We had training about uh.... You know don't get involved in drugs all kind of training like that. But I cannot remember any at that time I cannot remember at that time any training about um....about that kind of training about how to cope with seeing stuff like that. Well uh....my service was a lot different than being on the ground actually bullet being fired at you and stuff like that. Our jobs were dangerous but we had safety training on all of that how to do the job and if you followed the safety rules and you were okay. (Chuckles) But it was a very dangerous place to work. The flight deck because it was constant moving powerful catapults powerful aircraft.

JJ: Did your entire unit survive the war or did you end up losing members?

AW: Well we had a fire and we were coming back from the first Vietnam cruise and my catapult launched a plane and uh....the plane it has uhh...fuel tank underneath the belly of the plane and the pilot was transferring fuel from the tank to his aircraft and when he was launched that left the tank half fuel and the force of launching the aircraft all the fuel surged to the rear of the tank and blew it out through the tank. It took the back of the tank off, so fuel went all over the flight deck and the jet blast ignited it. And course the flight deck crew had to get the firehoses out and put out the fire. Well there's fuel that went down right into the catapult and the super-heated steam exploded that fuel and it blew every inspection cover of two hundred and fifty feet. It blew down to the bunk beds and the storerooms and working compartments.

JJ: Did you witness this?

AW: I saw the aftermath effects from it afterwards cause uh..... I had a man that worked at the other end and I could not get a hold of him and I.. So here I was trying to go look for him up there and find him and see if everybody else was okay, but we had one man he was running from the fire to the uh...catwalk where you go down below and that blast from the fuel and the catapult. He was jumping at the same time the blast and it just lifted him on up over the side and he fell seventy five feet to the water.

JJ: Did you guys rescue him?

AW: They had him pick up in about three minutes. We had helicopters that flew around the ship during launches all the time. The plane went on. I mean it was okay. The plane

went on and he is the one that caused all that havoc and he went on to shore base. He had fuel in his aircraft.

JJ: Did he realize what had happened?

AW: He found out very quickly and I am sure he got some reprimanding from the captain.

JJ: Was there something he did wrong??

AW: Yes, he should have waited to get into the air before he transferred his fuel but there were two planes behind him that it burned all the paint off and they didn't get to fly away. My catapult was disabled. I mean it was out of service for the rest of the fly away. So, all the planes were launched off. Number one and number two catapult and number four catapult. But we were going into uh.... When we got into port, we were going into port smith Virginia which they had a dry dock and that's where it was going into the dry dock and that the last cruise I made. So, this was in March I think, or February when we got back and I had... I was supposed to get out in June was supposed to get out the last of June and since we were in dry dock and nothing else to do, they gave some of us an early out so I got out in April.

JJ: Did you ever experienced hearing loss due to the constant noise of the aircraft carrier?

AW: We had uh....sound.....uh head gear and you couldn't hear a thing. So we had to be watchful all the time cause now they have that head gear with phones in them. But back then, it was just.....head gear and you had to keep it strapped all the time if you didn't you would get plunged into the jet intake it would jerk it off your head and it happened to a guy one time. He destroyed an aircraft engine. So that was one of the rules, make sure your helmet was strapped. It was a cloth helmet but it had these earmuffs that were really super.

JJ: Did your ship carry guns or was there no need to?

AW: I didn't carry a gun, but there was an armory, but we didn't carry one.

JJ: In your opinion, do you believe the U.S lost the Vietnam War?

AW: Uh....at the time I thought that we probably lost it, but it had to end sometime. I think it was a stalemate and so many lives were lost for political reasons.

JJ: When you returned home, were your family proud of what you did?

AW: Yes.....my uh....we were on a cruise and um in the Mediterranean one time and at the time I was operating a consul it was controlling all the movement from the catapult and there was a camera crew on board, in our division doing a uh...recruiting videos of films for TV. They were filming me.. I didn't know what they were doing and I was just doing my job, me and my recorder. He had to record everything that had to go off...uh... all the pressures and uh...everything that we were doing that launched sequence. So, we went about our business, had our launch and I got a letter in a couple of weeks from my mother and she said saw you on TV (Chuckles) and I wrote her back and I said what are you talking about? You were on a recruiting video (chuckles)

JJ: Did you keep a diary?

AW: No, I probably should have but I just didn't.

JJ: Did you keep any mementos that were special to you?

AW: Uh... I kept all my Navy hats and then gave them away finally to different people. I kept a sea bag for a long time but I don't know if I still have it or not.

JJ: I have one more question, were there African Americans fighting with you on your ship?

AW: Oh yes, they were part of our crew.

JJ: Were there any racial biased towards them?

AW: I cannot remember any, in fact I had some good mates that were African American. African Americans worked just as we did. My daddy was a racist. I knew where I was

raised that my daddy was a racist. He didn't think very highly of black people, but he worked them and hired them. My daddy thought that he was better than them.

JJ: Were you ever influenced by your father's beliefs?

AW: Some, but at my age, I was seventeen I went to basic training out in California we had... I mean there were blacks and whites. We lived and showered in the same area. I didn't know we were any different.....

JJ: Thank you so much for letting me interview you.

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- I spent about two and a half hours researching the Vietnam War. I watched videos, read letters, and read documents. I spent an additional thirty minutes thinking and developing questions.

List of Original Questions

How old were you during the war?

Where were you during the war?

How did the war affect your life?

How did you follow the progress of the war?

What is your most vivid memory of the war?

What was your attitude toward the war?

How did you feel when the United States withdrew its forces in 1973?

Do you think the United States won?

Did you enlist or were you draftee?

Were any of your friends fighting in the war?

Do you have any specific stories or memories from the war era?

Where did you go for basic training?

Do you have any special memories from training?

What years did you serve in Vietnam?

What was your job during Vietnam?

When you returned from the war, was your community and family welcoming?

How old were you when you enlisted?

What branch of military did you serve in?

Upon arriving in Vietnam, what was your initial thought?

At the time, how did you view the Soviets? Were you angry towards them like most Americans were?

Where did you grow up?

After the war, did you return to school?

Did you marry right away?

Did you ever keep a diary on your ship?

In your teen years, the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Scare was happening. What were your views on the subjects? I know a lot of people were afraid of a nuclear attack, were you one of them?

Were your beliefs the same as you entered the war?

Did any of your family members serve in WWII or the Korean War?

Why did you join?

Did you see combat?

Were there many casualties in your unit?