

Interview with Mr. John Otis

Veteran – Vietnam War

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Narrator: Miss Aubrey-Anne Fuller and members of the Composition II Class

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Narrator: This is Kinsley High School, 716 Colony, Kinsley, Kansas. Our guest is Mr. John Otis who was born April 27, 1947, at Smith Center, Kansas. My name is Aubrey Fuller, and I will be interviewing him along with the rest of the English Composition I class. Mr. Otis served in the Navy during the Vietnam War.

Narrator: Mr. Otis, why did you join the Navy?

Otis: I think it was either...it was back in the 1960, the early sixties when the missile crisis with Cuba was going on.

Narrator: You thought it was your patriotic duty, correct?

Otis: That's right.

Narrator: You were not drafted?

Otis: No ma'm. I volunteered in Vietnam and the Navy.

Narrator: When you were in Vietnam, and many of the men had been drafted, did your patriotism show more than the men that had been drafted?

Otis: Well, I think...several of us did volunteer. There were others that didn't volunteer...that were drafted...but once we were over there we knew we had a job to do and we did it.

Narrator: How was the food over in Vietnam?

Otis: Well, the Navy chow, I never had any complaints. It was always good...except there were sometimes we had to go to sea rations which was canned stuff dating back to World War II. But all in all, it wasn't that bad.

Narrator: What made you choose the Navy?

Otis: My dad was in the Navy (clears throat) and ever since I was a little kid...I always wanted to be in the Navy.

Narrator: How long were you in Vietnam?

Otis: February 1968 to February 1969.

Narrator: What was the most important...combat you were ever in?

Otis: I was mainly...we unloaded cargo when ships unloaded their cargo...during their convoys. There was one night in particular that there were only nine of us there and we were quite a ways away down the river working. They called and told us that we had a couple of North Vietnamese Armies (NVA) coming up our way and we had to hold them off until we got help...and we knew that nine of us...we knew that we didn't have a chance. Um...there was no opening; there was no cover, just had flat land. We just had to use our M16's. But thank God, praise God that they never came, but we were ready for them anyhow. We just...you...you, unless you've ever known the feeling of knowing that you're going to die, just knew there was no chance, that's a...I mean that's a...I can't describe it really (clears throat).

Narrator: Did you find any friendships in Vietnam that you still keep in touch with today?

Otis: No, I lost contact with most everybody that I was with.

Narrator: In Vietnam was the lifestyle much different than it was here?

Otis: Yea, over there I think that...I have to have admiration for them Vietnamese. They were very tenacious...they were very ingenious about coping with life and doing...you know, just getting along with, that was simple and that, and compared to ours, they were very...I can't think of the word I'm wanting now, but they would...they just coped with whatever came along. I think the kids over there were, I hate to say it, but tougher than...what we have over here because they never complained about anything. This one kid had his finger practically torn off, but he never cried. He just looked at it and asked for help. I just thought the people over there were just tougher with life than what we are over here.

Narrator: What type of emotional emotions did you experience while you were in Vietnam?

Otis: What's that?

Narrator: What type of emotions did you experience?

Otis: Oh, the first night I was over there, we got hit and they came in with the rocket rounds, mortar rounds and smaller rounds...we never actually saw hand-to-hand combat, but we were there to do a job. And they were trying to keep us from doing that...but it was quite scary. But you know, God--see I think God was...when you're in a situation like that, you know you...when you're under fire, and you're scared to death...I mean you're just scared (clears throat). But one time we were in the bunkers and they came in. It was kind of emotional. We were in there, scared to death. And this one guy came in, and was the last one in, I mean we all grabbed our stuff trying to get in the bunkers inside, and we were scared to death. But his helmet was dancing around, shaking. We were all scared. I got to laughing at him. I forgot to be afraid at that particular moment when he did like that.

Narrator: In the barracks, when you weren't in combat, what would you guys do for entertainment?

Otis: Listen to the radio. There wasn't much to do because we were a small detachment up north. The first month was in Danang and after that were a couple months in a smaller detachment, sandwiched between two villages. We couldn't really go anywhere, just stayed on the base. We did have access to the beach so we went swimming.

Narrator: Is it hard to talk about a lot of things from the war?

Otis: Nah, it's just emotional.

Narrator: Would you encourage my generation to join the military and go over and fight the war in Iraq?

Otis: Yes, the reasoning was...Kennedy said back in one of his speeches, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." I firmly believe that. The reason I believe that is...these people want to go out to college and make the big bucks. What good is it if you don't have your country to back you up? Then some of those countries over there are having elections and the rebels have killed the voters because their governments have failed, but if you can't defend your country or stand up for your country, what good is all that money that you put into education?

Narrator: As you just said that you agree with that, do you agree with President Bush, or are you just agreeing with patriotism?

Otis: I'm agreeing with President Bush and patriotism too because the reason is this; That he had information that was given on mass destruction. You know he went over there and if he hadn't, then they could've had all this stuff. They knew we were coming over there so they broke all the branches of the elements away from mass destruction. So when you go over there they didn't find 'em...mass destruction weapons per se but all the elements were close by that they could have gotten. And the

irony is that you know anytime that we have to defend a country, what is good also for us being over there helps other countries, other nations...now, you know we're not going to stand for this stuff. And if we didn't they would think of us as being weak and I don't think we should be portrayed as being weak.

Narrator: Were you married at the time you went to Vietnam?

Otis: No.

Narrator: On a regular basis, did you write your family?

Otis: Periodically. We wrote letters periodically...because we worked 12 hours a day six days a week and sometimes we didn't get a day off.

Narrator: Was it hard for you to come back to the States?

Otis: No. What was really rough was that we never got what these guys get now...I mean we never got that recognition. When we were over there, everybody was just kind of negative against it. When I came back and we were up in San Diego, they had signs on their lawns that said, "Sailors and dogs stay off the grass." When I got out of the Navy, I went back in later to the Naval Reserve and when I was in the regular Navy before, in different ports we were supposed to wear our uniforms, but later on in the Naval Reserve I was back on a ship, the U.S.S. England, that was pulling into San Francisco and all these boats coming out with profanities and all kinds of negative stuff. The Navy told us not to wear our uniforms on the beach because we had a chance of getting killed or mugged...that was in San Francisco and that was rough.

Narrator: When you went back in the other branch of the Navy, did you have to go through boot camp again?

Otis: No.

Narrator: Was boot camp very strenuous?

Otis: Back then...for some it was, but for me, it wasn't. Of course, I was looking for this point of going into the service. It is like anything else. You can make it easy for yourself or you can make it rough. If you take it with a negative attitude, it is going to be rough. I can guarantee you that.

Narrator: Once you got back to the United States, did your family want to know a lot about the war or did they let you have some time?

Otis: Both.

Narrator: If any, was there ever a pleasant experience while you were in Vietnam?

Otis: It's like any other part of life. You know...you have your good moments, and you have your bad moments. The good moments...we kind of joked around you know, and we joked around a lot to kill the fear. I'm always joking around anyhow. There are times, you know. Over there, we didn't have outhouses, I mean there were outhouses, but they didn't have holes. They were barrels cut in half. Anyway, this one guy was in there, and I had this forklift. I went behind and raised the whole thing and bounced it around. (Laugh) He was in there that day trying to read a newspaper. He never read it. You know; we did stuff like that to kind of joke around.

Narrator: As being a veteran, does it change your views on war any or is it still your patriotism?

Otis: War...no one likes to go to war. You can't live somewhere and see someone else dying without thinking about your country. I met some guys along the way, some prominent people, that refused to go into the service. I saw them with a Navy hat and I asked them, "Were you in the Navy?" They said, "No. My son was." One said, "I stayed in college. I didn't want to go get shot." And I'm thinking, "Where does he think that he got his freedom? People fought and died so he could make that choice and not go. But at the same time, he's a very prominent man. He got his rewards and yields for someone dying for him. They gave up their dreams for him to get what he's got."

Narrator: Would you go and fight the war in Iraq?

Otis: Yes. I tried to get back in, but I was told I was too old.

Narrator: Do you think that the military in this day and age has changed from the military in Vietnam?

Otis: I really can't say on that because I don't know what it is like now. But there are some things that the men back then, as well as World War II, our troops are tougher than some of our troops now. You know, back then I've heard instances where people called back home and said they needed armor for this and armor for that. Well, we never had armor. We had a job to do, we had to do it no matter what because in war...okay, they could have this armor on these vehicles, okay, that might protect them, but what happens if you got a group of other vehicles after you so laden down with heavy armor that you can't get away? Then what are you going to say? Are you going to need bigger engines? Then after that, what? Nobody likes war, but you can't complain about it. You put that uniform on...that's why you put it on. When you put that uniform on and sign that paper, there's a chance that you are going to die for it. If you're not willing to put the uniform on and willing to do what the country says to do, then why do it? But then again and you don't do it, then there are reaping the yield of someone who's going to do it.

Narrator: Do you feel that it is important to tell my generation about war?

Otis: Yes, that is why I wear this uniform. When I was growing up, everybody knew a veteran, and respected that veteran, and they admired that veteran. I'm not actually promoting me, but as a veteran, I think people ought to recognize veterans because without the veteran, you guys couldn't be here. There were kids over there in Vietnam that were just surviving. When I was over there...their country was being invaded by North Vietnam, and we went over there to try to help them. And these kids were eating rats, fried. They did everything they could to keep themselves going. I just think that we are very fortunate. You see, over there, they didn't have a country to back them up. They didn't have a military to back them up—the South Vietnamese. But we've got a good military. I think some of the armament that they've got now...we didn't have when I was in. In fact, I was on two ships...a cargo ship before Vietnam and then after I left Vietnam, a destroyer. The destroyer only had a three-inch gun mount and we had some torpedoes and we had what they called AZROCK, which is a combination missile and torpedo. This powered torpedo would go so far and go down in the water, and circle around to find a submarine and then go in for it. Then we had missiles. Now the men on the fighting ships have what they call the phalanx, a Gatling gun. This ship had two on the front and two on the back. The rounds would come out so fast and is the last defense for an incoming missile. It would knock out a missile before it even got to the ship. So we didn't even have a gun like that...I didn't even know what it was until I got onto the U.S.S. English, a cruiser.

Narrator: Do you think it is fair that the men over in Iraq have much more advanced technology than you guys did. Much of their combat is done within maybe a tank or something like that, or something with a bunch of technology?

Otis: Well, I think that is a change of the times. Back then, we didn't have the stuff. This time, it's technology. This time, they have more things than we had. We just didn't have a lot of that stuff. I think that with the way time goes, things change. You get more advanced in different areas.

Narrator: I notice that thing around your neck. Can you tell us about that?

Otis: Yes. This is called a bosn's pipe. It's been in the Navy since the Navy began. I'm not going to blow it loud, but I passed a word on a speaker. Back in those days, they didn't have a speaker so they had to blow the whistle to get the attention of the men. (*Otis blows the bosn's pipe and says "Now hear this."*) There are different calls for different situations...but I won't go through that now, but that's what this is. Every ship in the Navy has to go through efficiency testing, and when you go through the testing your weapons, your machinery, even housekeeping, everything on the ship has to be excellent. So when your ship passes through that testing, which amounts to several days, you get an E. That's for "excellence."

Narrator: Can you explain some of your ba

Otis: (He identifies and explains several of the badges—one for good conduct; the Vietnam campaign-1060; Vietnam Defense for three tours, one for each ship and a year in Vietnam; National Defense which is given to everyone who goes into the service)

Narrator: Have you ever made a trip back to Vietnam?

Otis: No, but I would like to.

Narrator: Do you think that would bring up too many emotions?

Otis: No, I don't think so.

Narrator: What is your impression of the Orientals?

Otis: The Orientals...I would say of all the nationalities, I would fear them the most. Because when I was in Hong Kong, they had this mural on this wall depicting nothing but different types of torture. I would hate to think that I would be in an enemy situation, but I noticed this too that when you have an Oriental for a friend, they will be there for you. The nationality is really a polite people. They really are polite, but I would hate to have them for an enemy and be in that situation where they are my enemy...like some of the POW's. I would hate to be in that situation. I thank God that I wasn't. But as far as the Oriental people as a whole, they are very friendly. Politeness is something that is bred into them. They are very courteous.

Narrator: Do they have a strong sense of survival?

Otis: Yes, they do. In Vietnam, a family...now can you imagine this? A family of four living in one of these lockers right here laid on its side and the door propped open and that was their shelter. They were very ingenuous. And they survived the best that they could survive. I can't imagine anyone in the United States surviving like that. And they never complained. They did it...a situation...They probably had homes before the war, but the situation came along where they had to compromise, and they compromised well. I saw two boys fighting over a balook...it's a rotten egg. It's a goose egg that's been in the ground for so long, but to them, it's something that they like. They put two holes in it – one at each end – and you suck the juices out. To them, it was a delicacy. To us, we wouldn't do that. They foraged whatever they could find and lived off that. They had plenty of rats. They would kill rats and fry them to eat them. They just didn't complain. That's one thing that I noticed about the Orientals...compared to the Americans. Americans complain too much. The Orientals, they never complained. They were just tougher...a tougher people. I was just impressed. When I was over there, I had to admire them, even as the enemy I had to admire them. You have to admire someone who can go through tough situations. Here we are. We had all of the technology, but they still held us off...with whatever they could find. One has to admire that.

That night, we were down the river about a mile. That's where we were, just the nine of us. We had a radioman plus an officer...so that just left seven other guys working. The way it was, we had the landing ships come in called LST's to the camp. Mud flats surrounded us. Mud flats are when the tide goes out. So you couldn't go there. We had one road coming in. We had all of the supplies on this ramp where the ships were...we were getting ready to load them out. They told us that a company of NVA's, which is a total of 80 men, was coming down our way. They wanted what we had. Our superiors told us to set up a firing line until we received help. "We only had our M16's, and when you've got a company of NVA's that's got mortar rounds and larger weaponry, we just knew that we were going to die. We just were resigned to that fact. The ground was level like this; we know – it's kind of emotional – when you know that you're going to die, it's quite emotional. But we never ran. We said OK. That's the way it's got to be, so we did it. Thank God, they never came. Because I heard before I went over there and after I went over there, torture was commonly used. I learned that from going to survival school. In survival school, we learned about counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency told us the ways of torture...that's what I feared most – torture. If they want to keep me, kill me. Don't torture me!!

Narrator: What role does the chaplain play?

Otis: We never had one over there. We were too far north. We were just a small detachment. When I first went up there, there might have been 100 of us...in that one small area. The service that we did have was some officer that was a Christian officer that might have held services, but that was very seldom...special occasions...Christmas or something like that. But then again, we were working so hard so we really never had time. On Christmas night in 1968, they were expecting us to get hit again. We spent Christmas Eve in different parts of the area, in different points, strategic points, just in case...but they never came. So we never really had time for church services. God was there, I don't deny that.

Narrator: What was the average day like?

Otis: We got up at 4 o'clock in the morning, got dressed, and then ate breakfast. They we loaded up on a truck and went down to the ferry and crossed the river...and then we worked until 6 o'clock that night. We have 12-hour shifts. Sometimes we would work longer depending on the number of ships that came in. My job was a boatswain mate, which means that we handled cargo. A boatswain mate drives a ship; he does everything that he needs to do on a ship. He unloads cargo. In fact, back then, even though I was third class petty officer boatswain mate, I had more seniority over a higher-ranking guy in particular situations. For example, if a ship was in a situation where the officer was killed, then the boatswain mates would handle the ship. There's a lot on a ship to operate; that's why I wanted it. I was proud that I was a boatswain mate, but we handled everything. A boatswain mate is kind of the backbone of the Navy.

Narrator: As you stated earlier, you thought it was your patriotic duty after President Kennedy and the Cuban crisis to serve your country. Would you say that Kennedy influenced you the most or your father?

Otis: I think my dad. I was always intrigued with the Navy. We talked about the Navy. He was on a ship too during World War II. But I have always had this sense of patriotism for the country even as a young child. Then when Kennedy came across and said that, that stuck with me. That just kind of coincided with the way that I felt. It became real.

Narrator: Is there anything you would like to say to us as a veteran to influence our thinking possibly?

Otis: Yes, I tell you. I always say this. In some countries, they require the people to go into the service...that's just a requirement. Here you have your freedom to go or not to go. But for me, based upon the way the world is changing, with the way that the world is turning, I think that everybody ought to go for at least two years after high school...men and women...Because what good is a country, what good is your career if you don't have that country to back you up? As long as we maintain a strong force, there will be less chance of someone coming over and invading us. Not only that, in the service, you learn a whole lot. I think society would be a whole lot better off if people went into the service because they would have more respect for each other, respect for themselves, more pride in themselves, more pride in what they do. I've seen kids that don't have any self-respect; they don't have any self-pride. I see that over in the little school. But I think that if you learn how to deal with people, the service is a good learning field...a ship, for example, is a little society. You learn how to deal with people. If you go out and use those skills that you learn in the service, you will make a better society. I just don't like to hear someone say that I want to get out of college and make big bucks. There are too many people who have fought and died to give you that choice to do that. For you to go to college and make the big bucks, you're doing that, and you're reaping the yields that someone else gave up their dreams for and they died for you. I think everyone, man and women, should go in for those two years. Not only that, get your education. Get your help on your education. Whatever you decide to go into on the outside, they've got that in the service. Sometimes the service will pay you while you're going to college. Instead of spending \$40,000 for college, let the service educate you. That's what they want you to do...you go in and serve your time, and they will help you through college.

Narrator: Do you think it should be a choice to go into the military or should it be like a draft?

Otis: My opinion...I think everyone should serve because when you put it to a draft, people aren't going to go in because they are afraid of this or that. So someone else will have to go for them. If it is mandatory, everyone goes in. Then everyone will reap the yields of what they put in. I just don't like these people that tell me they have this nice career, nice job, nice house, and say that they are afraid to go in because they are afraid that they will be shot. I don't have much respect for them.

Narrator: Would society be more or less violent if the service was mandatory?

Otis: I don't know if there would be less violence, but I do think there would be more respect for people. There probably would be more respect because if you have more respect for you and yourself, and for someone else, then they wouldn't want to go and hurt them. In the service, from experience, if one has a black person for a friend, you've got one for life. I've known so many white guys, and when it got down to the nitty-gritty, they were gone. If you get some friends that are black, I'll give you an example. My department was in the front of the ship...and this black guy was a machinist mate or something like that. The only time we saw each other was in passing each other in the chow line. He knew my name, and I knew his last name. I don't even know his first name. His last name was Chaney. In the Navy, just like in anything else, you've got rivals. My ship was the U.S.S. Decatur. Our sister ship was U.S.S. John Paul Jones, identical ships except that mine was DDG 31, and John Paul Jones was DDG 32. At Pago Pago, Samoan Islands, the two ships had a conflict. I was at this place, at a party. Those were the days when I wasn't representing God very well, but I saw Chaney in the room, and he had this look in his eyes. I thought that he was going to kill me. I couldn't understand what he was doing. He took a line for me, and he passed me and got the guy behind me. The guy behind me was going to hit me on the head with a bottle of beer. I didn't even know that they guy was behind me. But in situations where whites get right down to the nitty-gritty, they're going to run. I hate to say that, but I noticed that the blacks and the Orientals were there for friends. When they are there, they're going to stand up and defend you, as long as you have them for a friend.

Narrator: You talked about mandatory service. How would you define the word "service"? Are their various ways of service?

Otis: I think military. There are so many ways. You've the National Guard, Naval Reserves; you've got the Marine National Guard, Marine Reserves...whatever, Air Force and the Marines, the Army...

Narrator: Would the Peace Corps be an option?

Otis: That would be good in a sense; you're representing your country over there. I guess that might be a good option really. But I think the military because that shows your might. You know, the other countries probably thought that we shouldn't be in Vietnam, but you know what? In Vietnam, the world saw us, saw our might. They saw what we could do, and I think that is a good message to the world. In Iraq, the other countries are sitting back and watching. They know what we have and what we can do.

Narrator: What does war mean to you?

Otis: Freedom. You ask those poor kids over there what freedom is. They didn't have much freedom. They lost everything. Families lost everything. They didn't have freedom. They were under a

dictatorship; they didn't have what we have over here. You guys here in this classroom right now are free. I don't like war, but when it comes along, you've got to do it.

You're free. You're here in this classroom because you're free. You can walk out and do whatever you want to. You're free to do it. Some people can't do that. They were taken out and killed. The intellectuals in some places were killed because the government was afraid of them. That's why I go back...what good is all of this education if you don't have a country to back you up?

Narrator: What branch of the military do you think would be the most difficult?

Otis: If you want to go into the service, and you want to make something of yourself later on, I would say the Navy and the Air Force because it's so technical. It's much more high tech than it was. If you want to go into the service in defense as well as for technology and learning, the Navy and the Air Force overshadow the Army and the Marines. Now I'm not saying the Army and the Marines are any less; I'm just saying that the technology is greater in the Navy and in the Air Force. There are things in the Army and the Marines that you can get outside also...the greater field is technology, and technology is in the Navy and the Air Force.

Narrator: What kind of reaction was there in your household when you decided to go to war?

Otis: Well, I didn't tell my parents that I was going to Vietnam. On my first ship, I was on it for three or four months when I requested to go to Vietnam. On arrival back to the States from that tour, I left the ship and went in for training. But I never told my parents. I didn't want them to talk me out of it. I found out later that they wouldn't. My dad went to war in World War II. In fact, my dad was in college when they were hitting Pearl Harbor. He gave up his career and everything, and his chance for a degree. He was going to be a mathematician, but he decided that the service was more important and his country was more important. So he quit college and went into the service. And when he got out, it just didn't work out for him to go back to college because he was married. His dad, my grandpa, wanted him to continue on the farm. So my dad did that...until he went to work for the coop. My dad gave up his dreams to go defend his country. I think that's one thing that I admire. That's what helped me. You have to give up your dreams to fight for your country.

Narrator: We thank Mr. Otis for sharing so honestly.

Otis: I'm glad that you invited me. I think all veterans should have a chance to speak. That's one thing that I really admire about Patti (his employer, also principal of the school where Mr. Otis works as a custodian). When you came on board, we didn't have the "Pledge of Allegiance" or anything like that...until she came on. And then one day, knowing that I was in Vietnam, she wanted me to wear my uniform. So that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to get all of the veterans involved to show the kids how to fold and unfold the flag. I had Val Feyen the last time as well as other veterans to come along. The second week is when we do this.

That flag...when you see that flag, it's more than just a piece of cloth. What really gets me is when I go to a ball game, and hear the "National Anthem." They raise the flag, and nobody cares. They don't even stand at attention. They don't care. And I can always pick out the veteran or the person who had the "Pledge of Allegiance" in school...because those guys, they stand out. The people that don't care have no bringing up about the flag or anything...they're lolling-gagging, they're talking, they're doing whatever while that flag is going up...and the "National Anthem" is being played.

I'm going to tell you something. Before going to Vietnam, we were put into a mock POW camp. They could do anything except the intention to draw blood. Blood was drawn, but it wasn't intentional. But they treated us just like real prisoners. I was put in a box where my back was slightly higher than the edge of the box. When they closed the lid, they had to force my back down. We were in there for 45 minutes. The whole purpose of that training was to see who was weak and who was strong. The weak didn't go to Vietnam. I wanted to go to Vietnam. I made sure. I prayed that I would pass all of this because I wanted to go. Anyway, every hour upon the hour they played the Communist music. We had to stand at attention when they played the Communist music by record player while raising the Communist flag. That was a 24-hour ordeal, the last aspect of training for Vietnam...24 hours of mock-POW. Every hour, they would do everything to torture us...to break us down.

One time, we hadn't had anything to eat for several days, but they gave us all of these vegetables to make us some food. It was raining, and we had to be out there in the rain and they set the outhouse on fire. They made us take this vegetable stew that we had made and extinguish the outhouse fire. It's kind of demoralizing when you haven't eaten for several days. But my point is this; it's about the flag...and I don't want to take too much more of your time. At the last time of the raising of that flag, they put on the music like they did on every hour. They raised the flag, to about a halfway point. They told us to do an about face. We did. A moment later they told us to turn about again. At that instance, they played that "Star Spangled Banner" and raised the American flag. I tell you what. That makes you appreciate the old flag. Every man broke down. I respect that flag.

Not to be a war monger, I don't if they would take me in now, I'd go. I wouldn't hesitate. It's something that we have to do...to maintain a good country. That's my opinion. I have had two recruiters laugh at me for wanting to go to Iraq, but that is OK.