

Mill Valley Oral History Program

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ERNIE BERGMAN

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Alison Owings in 2008**

AUTHOR: Alison Owings
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In this oral history, Vietnam veteran Ernie Bergman discusses his life in Mill Valley and his experience serving in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War. Ernie was born in San Francisco in 1948, and his family moved to Mill Valley one year later. His father was a sea captain from Sweden, and his mother was a registered nurse from Iowa. Ernie discusses fond memories of growing up in Mill Valley, including his time as a student at Tamalpais High School. As graduation approached Ernie eagerly joined the Navy and later received orders that would take him to the Philippines, Vietnam and Japan.

Ernie describes the great feeling of camaraderie and brotherhood he felt as a serviceman, and also discusses the strong anti-veteran sentiment he experienced upon his return to Marin. Back in the States, Ernie began studying for a master's degree at San Francisco State and then midway through the program went to work for stock brokerage and securities firm Dean Witter.

Diagnosed with cancer in 1977, Ernie discusses his battle against the disease and his experience undergoing experimental treatments. After regaining his health, he resumed working for Dean Witter and later went on to work for State Farm Insurance. He eventually became a retirement investment counselor. During this time, Ernie also shared his life experience by lecturing at high schools.

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Oral History of Ernie Bergman

March 20, 2008

Ernie Bergman: I also have a tendency to talk fast. I'll try to slow down.

Alison Owings: Oh no.

Ernie Bergman: Actually, I grew up out here all my life and I don't know why I talk so fast. It doesn't sound fast to me.

Alison Owings: Why don't you say who you are?

Ernie Bergman: My name's Ernie Bergman. I was born in 1948 in San Francisco. My parents moved to Mill Valley in 1949. Tam Valley. We lived there for about four and a half years. I went to kindergarten at Tamalpais Valley School. And then we moved uptown in 1954 to Blithedale Canyon, Corte Madera Avenue, and that's where we stayed for 25 years.

Alison Owings: What did your parents do?

Ernie Bergman: My father was a sea captain. Very rarely saw him. He was from Sweden, from Stockholm, Sweden. He was out to sea probably 10 months out of the year. So he only came home twice a year. So my mother basically raised my sister and me. There's only one sister. She's two and a half years older. My mother was a nurse. For a while she did private duty and worked at Marin General for the longest time. She taught nursing over in the city. She died in 1973. My dad died in 1977. My mom was 58 and my dad was 77. There was 15 years difference between the two of them.

My mother was from Iowa. Good German stock. And I *loved* growing up in Mill Valley. It was one of the greatest things I could ever imagine, is being able to be here. Not only the best place in the world anyway, but in the '50s we were all just kids. We didn't pay attention to money and I didn't even know if there was a lot here. We knew where everybody lived. We could ride our bikes to school. We could hitch – well, we didn't hitchhike, but we could stay out and not worry about being kidnapped. Everybody left their front doors open and the keys in the car and everybody knew everybody. It was just a great place to grow up. As probably in the '50s most places were. Before all the crazy stuff started happening.

Alison Owings: What was downtown like?

Ernie Bergman: I was the *IJ* paperboy, the *Independent Journal* paperboy down there, so I knew all the store owners. But it was a fun place. The place that I remember probably the most was, there was an ice cream parlor called Esposti's. That got bought out and became La Ginestra. It's been an Italian restaurant ever since, but originally it was an ice cream store. Very familiar was men's Mayer's. On the corner where that coffee shop is and the dog place, that was a department store, a two- or three-story called Mayer's. That's where the women and the jewelry

and all that stuff was. And then where was Delicios? The restaurant? Just down on Miller Avenue? Delicios? Anyway, it's where Sweetwater's¹ going in, about two doors away. That was men's Mayer's.

D'Angelo's. D'Angelo's was men's Mayer's and that's where all the men's stuff was and that's where I got all my Cub Scout stuff. So I mean, there were certain places for all the kids in the entire city where you got certain stuff and men's Mayer's was where you bought your Cub Scout and Boy Scout stuff.

And Varney's Hardware, which was where Banana Republic is now. Jack Varney was an old family name around here. That's where you bought your chains and rings when you went steady in the second grade, or you went in and got nails or stuff for your models or whatever.

Mill Valley Records was just right next to the Sequoia Theater, the famous one. It used to be next to the theater and that's where you bought your 45s. And every Saturday afternoon we all went to Sequoia Theater for the matinees, and we went in there for 25 cents. For 25 cents you could get in plus get a Coke and a candy bar. All the kids sat down below. Up in the loge, that was the adult and the smoking section so no kids could go up there. But we were all down there in the bottom and a guy named Mr. Gilmore, who was the manager, he'd bring kids up whose birthday it was and we'd throw stuff at the screen. There was always a bunch of cartoons and then it was science-fiction stuff or horror stories like "The Tinger" and Vincent Price kind of movies. Or it was the Three Stooges and stuff like that. But every Saturday, if you didn't show up at the movie theater you just weren't in it. But it was just a great, great time.

Restaurants. La Petite. I mean, I didn't go as a kid, but my parents, my mom, I bring her there, was right where the Mill Valley Inn is now. That was a great little kind of restaurant. Where Sweetwater was, was Dowd's. It was a furniture place. You know, just a lot of different places around town that we had a lot of fun with. And of course Little League was a big deal and that was in Boyle Park.

Alison Owings: It must have cost your mother a lot since your father was away for 10 months of the year.

Ernie Bergman: Yeah, pretty much.

Alison Owings: To have an extended family.

Ernie Bergman: My sister and I call ourselves the original latchkey kids. Because many times we had to make our own dinner, or we showed up at our friends' parents' house and they kind of took care of us until Mom got home. Because sometimes she either had to work late or she had too much stuff to do or our schedule was different from hers. And when we came home, I was playing football at Tam and playing other sports, and Little League, and we always had something to do after school.

We didn't know any different. So that's just how it was for us is that we had to take care of ourselves.

¹ Sweetwater Music Hall & Cafe

Alison Owings: What house did you live in?

Ernie Bergman: 222 Corte Madera Avenue. Beautiful place. They remodeled it since. But the house I grew up in was built in 1903. It was a big old two-story shingled house. Because my father was from Sweden we painted it red with a green roof, because that's Swedish. It sat on a third of an acre of land with a creek going through the backyard. It had three redwood trees on the property and a big circular driveway. So it was a beautiful place.

When we first bought it, the land right behind us was just one big field with apple trees in it. And my parents bought our house for \$14,000. They could have bought the land behind there too, on the other side of the creek, for a thousand bucks more but they couldn't afford that. Or chose not to afford it. So that went and got developed later.

My house that I grew up in sold for \$2.6 million. So obviously real estate's been a pretty good investment for me, having stuck around for a long time. But it was nice. When the Corte Madera Avenue – when we first moved there it was two-way. My mother hated that because, if you know Corte Madera Avenue, just as you're turning the last right hand turn to go downtown, it's like less than one lane. And if a car was coming up the person going down had to back all the way up. Used to drive my mother crazy. So she went out and got a petition to get the thing changed to one-way. She wanted it one-way coming up, but I guess she didn't tell the city council that. They made it one-way going down.

But anyway, the reason it's one-way is because of my mother. And because I delivered the paper downtown and I also delivered the paper all the way up by Blithedale Canyon, so I knew every household all the way up Blithedale Avenue, West Blithedale, and also Corte Madera Avenue too. So I mean, I knew all the families. They knew me and I knew all the families.

Alison Owings: How were the tips?

Ernie Bergman: Terrible. I was a lousy mathematician too. The paper was \$1.50 a month and if somebody gave me \$5 I'd give them \$4.50 back. So obviously I wasn't very good at that. Until somebody told me and then I finally started actually making money.

Alison Owings: Did you read the paper too?

Ernie Bergman: I'm sure I did. I don't remember reading a lot when I was real young. Although I read *The Hardy Boys* all the time. There were a couple bookstores in town. I read two things when I was young. I read Superman comic books, which I was addicted to, and Hardy Boys books. And the Superman comic books were a dime. Hardy Boys were I think a \$1.00 apiece. Any time there was a new issue coming out, whenever, I would run and do some work or borrow some money or something and I'd sit down at the bus depot and I'd read Superman comic books and I'd go up to the bookstore and buy a Hardy Boys book. So I did a lot of reading but it wasn't necessarily current events. It was just a lot of fun.

Alison Owings: Where was your mother a nurse?

Ernie Bergman: Marin General. She also was one of the founders of [unintelligible] program at College of Marin. And then when she was teaching, which she did the last 15 years of her life, I guess, she taught at Galileo Adult School in the City on Bay Street. Bay and Van Ness. But she was from Iowa. She had a Master's degree. Very smart woman. And really enjoyed what she was doing too. She did it by necessity. But she was very good at what she did.

Alison Owings: How did she and your father meet?

Ernie Bergman: Interesting question. During World War II, in October of '44, my mother was teaching nursing at – I think it was University of Washington, up in Seattle. And one night during the war she and her girl friend, it was Marcia Vedan I think, decided to go out on the town and get a beer. My father was a sea captain during World War II, and he and one of his buddies decided they were going to go out on the town and have a beer. So they met at some bar somewhere, and I guess drawing to the end of the evening my dad said, "Well, you know, this bar's closing but I belong to some private clubs. But I can only bring one guest."

So he didn't really know who to pick so either my mother or my father said, "Well, let's flip a coin." And I don't remember if my mom won or lost, but she went to the club with my dad. And actually, probably the next day or the day after, I think he had to go back out to sea, but they wrote. They were both very intelligent people and my dad decided to ask her to marry him so she moved to San Francisco and they got married October 30th 1944.

The other coincidence about that is my mother had four brothers from Iowa. One was a B-17 pilot in Europe. One was in the Navy. A dentist. Fred, her brother, was in the Army and I forget the others. But when my father was coming back to San Francisco, they stopped off in Hawaii. They had a couple days there, which most of the ships had. He was Merchant Marine, not Navy. Anyway, he's sitting in the Officers Club in Hawaii, and he's sitting at the bar, and he starts talking to this Navy guy. And he says, "Where you going?" He said, "Well, I'm going to San Francisco."

"Oh, what you going there for?"

"I'm going to get married."

Turned out it was my uncle Cap, her brother, who was going to San Francisco also to go to her wedding. So my father and my uncle totally coincidentally met in Hawaii just before the wedding. So I guess it must have been meant to be.

Alison Owings: That gave me goose bumps!

Ernie Bergman: Yeah. It's really kind of a funny story.

Alison Owings: So tell me, if you don't mind, could you give me a chronology, from being the paperboy to going to Tam to going to Vietnam to coming back to Tam?

Ernie Bergman: Pretty tall order. We moved uptown when I was 5. I went to Old Mill School and met a lot of great people who I still know. Most of those are still my good friends. There were about five or six elementary schools at that time. There was Old Mill, Park, Homestead, Tamalpais Valley. I don't know if Strawberry existed yet. Maybe it did, but I never knew what was going on on the other side of the highway anyway. There were about three schools in

Sausalito. But the one I was most familiar with was Park, because they were kind of our rival. So I went there for six years, one through six. And then went to Edna McGuire, which was seventh and eighth. We called it junior high school at the time. And that's where we were when we met the rest of the kids, because when we were at our own elementary schools we didn't really travel that far away. Except for maybe Little League. But Edna McGuire was where you actually had to sit in the same classroom and create a lot of friendships that would go on to high school. Two years there and then I started Tam in '62.

My sister started there in '59, I guess, since she was two and a half years older than me. But I had a great time at Tam. Graduated in '66. Played a lot of sports. Played football. I was a three-year letterman for varsity. I was a cheerleader. I've always been very social, so I did a lot of stuff. In fact, when I graduated from high school I was voted – you know they have the senior polls? I was voted biggest flirt, most friendly, biggest clown and most unforgettable. Or something like that. I got all four of those things.

It was just a great time to live. I mean, in the late '50s, early '60s. I really think that my class in '66 was the last kind of old-fashioned conservative class before the drugs came in and all the hippy stuff and all the disobedience and all of the changes in society. My class was the last class that did *not* step on the lawn and *did* student government and had made theater and had pretty traditional values.

Alison Owings: And was it pretty much all white, or were there kids there from Marin City?

Ernie Bergman: No. We were the only high school that was integrated. There was one black kid who lived in Terra Linda. Went to school there probably from Hamilton Air Force Base. Otherwise, Tam was the only school that had black kids. It was interesting, because, especially with sports, a lot of the white kids from other schools, they were afraid of them. They didn't know any black kids and they didn't know how to deal with it. Occasionally, if I knew some kids from other schools, they said, "Well, how do you play sports with those guys?" Or whatever.

Well, we didn't know any difference. They were our friends. Some of my best friends still are kids I met in high school that were from Marin City. I guess the things that are familiar in my mind is on Saturdays when we all went to the show. The black kids would show up on the Greyhound bus, because that was the bus depot right down there. And they'd go to the show and they'd all sit in one section by themselves, which maybe hasn't changed that much. And then at the end of the show they'd all troop back to the bus depot and go back to Marin City. You know, we really didn't have a lot of contact with them because they all pretty much stuck to themselves, and we did too. I remember at the end of school, unless you were playing sports, the black kids were always hitchhiking in front of Tamalpais to get back to Marin City, or they were taking the bus. White kids would go that way and the black kids would go that way. So our socialization was really only when we were at school. Except for some of my friends, my personal friends, who had the guts to come uptown. There was only one black family that lived in Mill Valley during that time and that was Dr. Collins, and he had two or three sons. And I knew both the sons too. Chuck Collins, and I forget the other brother's name. But Chuck and I were friends, or at least acquaintances, but we knew each other pretty well.

Alison Owings: And when was the wedding in Marin City that you mentioned?

Ernie Bergman: 1980. Horace White. About 450 people showed up at his funeral. He died in '82. No. I'm sorry. 2000. I'm getting all messed up here. The wedding was in 2000 and he died in 2001.

Alison Owings: You were telling me earlier, before we started recording, about going to Marin City and never ever really having been sighted.

Ernie Bergman: Occasionally, if some of the white guys who had cars were going that way and one of the black guys would ask, "Hey, can I have a ride home?" [In response,] "Sure, come on in." But of course we would be very careful to drop them off right in front and never ever go inside. Because we were afraid to. I remember one or two times we ever went any further in than where the bus depot was on the corner. We used to have a sheriff station there too. But it was always kind of funny. The black kids would make fun of it, because we were friends. There was one guy, Henry Garrison. His name was Ripsaw. Everybody had a nickname. I remember one day we were driving him back down there, and he says, "Well, back to Hershey Hill."

That's what he called it. And of course we were all freaked out because we didn't know how to respond to that. There was always a little playing, bantering, back and forth when we were growing up. But we never went inside. There was really no socialization at all in Marin City because we were afraid.

Alison Owings: And there was no interracial dating either, was there?

Ernie Bergman: Minimally. There was a senior in my sister's class, a guy named Art Foster, who was going out with a woman. Margaret – I forget her last name. And he was very black and she was very white and he was a star athlete, and also a wonderful guy. And they're still married. But they dated. It was probably the only one that I'm aware of. And one of my best friends, Norm Martin, who lived on Manor, was very much taken with a woman named Geri Dinar, and she was black. They used to stand together at school but I don't know if they ever went out. It was socially still pretty separate, even at school. But like I said, by playing sports and all that, we were friends. I can remember maybe four or five, maybe not even that many, maybe three major fights the whole time I was at Tam. The paper was calling it a race riot. You know, there was a race riot in Mill Valley. There was a race riot down at Tam.

They weren't race riots. They were the black hoodlums versus the white hoodlums. The jocks never got involved. We were all student government. We were all friends. It was just the back parking lot crowd when the blacks and whites were fighting. But everyone was calling it a race riot and we knew it wasn't. But that's how it was portrayed.

Alison Owings: In your senior year in high school, what were you thinking of doing for a career?

Ernie Bergman: Well, probably ever since I was a freshman, I wanted to go to Annapolis. But I never had the confidence, and I never thought I had the brains. I wasn't a good studier. I was a B-/ C+ student. I never studied. I played most of the time. I always had too many things to do besides homework. So I got by just on my natural abilities, although I never had any confidence in those either.

I don't want to get too involved with this, but my mother my entire life always told me I'd never amount to anything. And I believed her.

Alison Owings: Your mother told you that?

Ernie Bergman: Yeah. My mother used to say things like I was a late bloomer. Or "At least you can play football because you can't do anything else."

And there was always a kind of competition between my uncle and her, but it all came down on us. When I went in the service she used to tell my friends, "Well, we didn't know what to do with him so we put him in the Navy."

So I never had a lot of confidence to do anything. So when I was a junior and senior, first of all, I was pretty apolitical. My mother and father were almost John Birchers². They were very right wing. Very conservative. My mother used to say, "Well, we're not John Birchers. We never got around to joining."

I mean, *very* conservative. I remember when I was a kid, in 1952 in Tam Valley, stuffing mailboxes with "I Like Ike" things. I went out with her. She was part of the Republican Party and my dad was too. But for me, I was always that way just because of my parents. Not as conservative as them, but as far as Vietnam goes, I could care less. For me, going into the service was an escape. It was just an escape and it meant getting out of the house

When I was a senior in high school I didn't really have any study habits. I wasn't mature enough to go to college. I had no motivation to go to college. My mother would tell me, my sister and my entire life, "If you don't go to college you'll never amount to anything."

She'd tell us that all the time. So I knew I *had* to go to college. I had to finish. Otherwise I'd never amount to anything. But I just was not ready. So one day a really good friend of mine, Bob Rogers, who lives in Tiburon right now, he and I just talked and says, "Let's join the Navy." I actually wanted to go in the Marines first, or be in the Army's Special Forces. My father, being Merchant Marine, said he wanted Navy. I think my parents thought that was the best thing for me because they didn't know what else to do with me. That really didn't have any – well, it had an emotional effect on me but not necessarily what I wanted to do. So one day after school Bob Rogers said, "Let's go up to the recruiter and join the Navy." You know, get it over with.

One thing I like to stress when I'm lecturing to kids in college, kids in high school. I went in the service. Going in the service was part of the deal. It was expected of us. It wasn't good, bad or indifferent. Going in the service was something you did and it was part of growing up and it was part of the process of becoming adults. So the prospect of going in the service had no really negative impact at all. It was just a matter of time when you did it. So when Bob and I were talking after school one day, Bob said, "Let's go up and get it over with. We're not ready to go to school, college. We don't have any money anyway. Let's join the Navy." So we jump in his Volkswagen, and as we were leaving the parking lot, another really good friend of mine, Barry Warnock, lives up in Oroville, and says, "Hey, can I get a ride home from school?"

"Yeah, no problem. But we're going to the Navy recruiter first." So he jumped in the back and he ended up joining too. He's never forgiven me.

² Referencing members of the John Birch Society

We lived on the buddy system. Back then they had an all-star football game at the end of summer between north and south Marin, and I was picked for the south team. I was an All-Star. And I wanted to play in this game, because I loved football and it was probably my last game. So we were able to get a 120-day deferred program which they had when we joined on May 2nd, so we didn't have to report 'til September 2nd. So May 2nd I raised my hand. We went over to the AP's for the physical. So I was underactive all the time, because I'd already joined. So I was already going in. I looked at it as just one exciting adventure. I could not wait to go into the service.

Now it's interesting. I went into the service because I had to get out of the house. I had no desire to go to college. I had no study habits. One half-hour in boot camp, god, I wanted to go to college! But I had to wait 4 years to be able to do it. I remember standing there at four o'clock in the morning with some guy yelling at me. I'm standing at attention and I didn't know how to do that. I'm like, "What did I do to myself?" But it all worked out okay.

Alison Owings: Did you know you'd be going to Vietnam?

Ernie Bergman: No. And I didn't care. Vietnam, like I said, was not a focus of mine at all. It was part of the deal. If I went, maybe that's more of an adventure. If I thought about it, and I probably did, it was probably maybe more exciting in a war, because I was a big John Wayne fan and I believed all the stuff you saw on TV and all that. But it had no negative impact on me at all. I may have had some apprehension but it wouldn't be anything that would stop me from going in or following orders.

Alison Owings: Did your father or mother give you any advice?

Ernie Bergman: My dad gave me some of the usual. He retired in 1965 so he was with me for one year of school before I went in the service. He and I still never talked, but when I went in the service, because he had spent most of his time in Asia, and he figured that's where I was going too. He went to Japan and China. In the early '60s he used to talk about the south end of China, or north end of China. And never had I thought that that's where I'm going to be too. But I grew up with all kinds of Asian artifacts and bric-a-brac in the house. When we were kids he'd bring us back all the Japanese wind-up toys and the dolls and all that stuff. So I was real familiar with that.

It's interesting. When I was overseas and when I was experiencing pretty much the same thing my father had experienced when he was active duty, that's when he started writing me, and we actually started talking, because he found a frame of reference for me. When I was in Manila or when I was in Japan, because [unintelligible] Japan. I never spent any time there, I was mostly in Vietnam. I started getting letters from him talking about his experiences and watch out for this and I have friends here and I was over here too. They were all very interesting letters. And then when I got home and got out of the service we quit talking. So just that little four-year period was when he and I communicated the most.

Alison Owings: How strange.

Ernie Bergman: Well, I was born when he was 48. He was the captain of his ship. He really didn't know how to be around kids. And because my mother ran the show 90 percent of the time, a lot of times my sister and I couldn't wait for him to be home but when he got there we couldn't wait for him to leave because he resented the hell out of us, his authoritarianism and his conflict with my mother, et cetera, et cetera. So I never really had a relationship with him. Except for when I was in the service. And of course, then we were 10,000 miles apart, so it was only by letter.

The way the service works is you go through boot camp and you take all these examinations, basically IQ tests. And for the most part most people go directly to the Infantry, in the Army, where they go into what they call Deck Force in the Navy. That's where you basically learn the skills of being a sailor and you chip a lot of paint and swab a lot of decks and you shoot a lot of guns and all that. Well, I'd scored high enough on my tests, amazingly, where I qualified for a special school. And they had me fill out Dream Sheets. They teach you about all the different jobs you can have in the Navy, so I put four of them down. And just coincidentally, when I was getting out of boot camp, one of the schools that was on my Dream Sheet was opening up at the same time. So I didn't go directly out to the fleet. I went to one of these schools. My specialty was celestial navigation. So even though I flunked math twice in high school, I was out there doing calculus and all this kind of stuff and not even knowing it.

That's always been weird about me. I have a mental block against certain things, but if I'm doing it practically, I pick it up. Like I was an accounting major in college. But I flunked business math because I've never been good at all these formulas. But for me accounting was Debit. Credit. No big deal. I could figure that out. When I was doing celestial navigation I was working with these huge publications and doing this, and logarithms and all that, but that's not the way it was explained to me. I learned how to do what it meant, but not why, necessarily. Although I know why. But so my specialty was celestial navigation, anyway – getting off the point.

Alison Owings: Where was the school?

Ernie Bergman: In San Diego. At 32nd Street station. San Diego. I went to boot camp in San Diego also.

Alison Owings: And then from there you went to Japan?

Ernie Bergman: Well, when my school ended, I didn't have orders yet. I had no idea where I was going. So after school I was sent to Treasure Island, stationed almost next to my house, so I went home every night. For seven days. This was in February of 1967. And all of a sudden I got orders and so I had to get up to Travis and jump on a plane. They bused me up there. I was not allowed to open up my orders until I arrived at the airport. I went up to Travis Air Force Base, I guess for some secret thing, and my orders said I was. I didn't even know where I was going. And when I opened up my plane ticket, I was going to the Philippines. I called my parents up early and said, "I'm going to the Philippines." And they said, "Well, I know you're going to Vietnam." Because that's where they knew I was going. But I was so excited. Philippines! Wow! What an adventure! I can't wait!

I flew over civilian on February 15th, 1966. I got on board a Continental or some kind of plane. And we flew from Travis Air Force Base to Hawaii, refuel, to Wake Island to refuel, and then to Angeles City in the Philippines. Clark Air Force Base. And then took a three-hour bus ride, which was amazing. I mean, talk about culture shock. Going from America to the far east, just some stupid kid who grew up in Mill Valley, and now I'm seeing little villages and grass houses and people cooking monkey meat on the side of the road on barbecues and smelling the smells and seeing water buffalo and all that. I took a three hour ride from Angeles City to Subic Bay, which was a huge Navy base there, and Olongapo City, and went to the transit barracks, and basically was waiting for my ship, which was in Vietnam. My ship was involved at the time, my ultimate destination was a ship called the Windham County. It was a very small LST, landing ship tank, which basically is an amphibious ship that used to do landings and support and all that stuff. I mean, usually you think about the Navy as being the destroyers and the aircraft carriers. Well, I was on one of these amphibious ship that carried troops. You know when you see movies of D-Day and they go right up the beach? That's what this thing did.

So we were not Yankee Station, so to speak. Some of the ships that went to Vietnam never saw land. They were 50 miles off. We were in country primarily, especially in '68 when I was in the Marine Force. But anyway, I spent two months. Because of the date when I got to the Philippines was February 17th, 1967. I was driven to Subic Bay. I checked into the transit barracks there. Two days later I was actually chosen to work at a whole different destination, which was the best thing that could have happened to me is the transit barracks. Which in the army, who was in transit going to their station, but not quite. That's where they stayed. Transit barracks in the Philippines had a terrible reputation. There was a masochist who ran the thing. I was taken out of there after two days and brought to some other. Just pure luck.

So I had a great time in the PI. I was eighteen years old. I'd never had any experience dating, because I was very, very insecure in high school. Subic Bay was an open port during the war, and probably now too. When you go to what we call a liberty port, one of the towns that people go to, the townsfolk provide exactly what military guys want. Women and alcohol. So you walk out the front gate in Olongapo City, and you look down the street, and you'll find probably a thousand bars on the side of the street. And probably 10 times that in prostitutes. And that was my introduction to adult life when I was 18 years old. Basically all you could drink, all you wanted, and as many women as you wanted. Of course, it always cost you 5 bucks. And that's how a lot of kids my age became adults, so to speak, by going in the service and going overseas. And having absolutely no restrictions. None whatsoever.

So I was there from February 17th until — and I was an E2. That's like almost as low as you can be. I had no rank, no authority whatsoever, except I lucked out by going to the separate barracks. And then basically I was sitting around for orders. My ship was involved in major combat operations in Chu Lai. Marine operations. Just south of Da Nang. What they would do is they'd try to find openings where they could get to the unit, and that's until you get orders. Two months. They were so involved and it was so dangerous they couldn't fly me over. So I stayed in Manila for about two and a half months. My nineteenth birthday was March 31st of '67. Two days later I got orders finally, April 3rd, to go to Da Nang, Vietnam. Which was scary, but also very exciting too. So four days after my 19th birthday I flew to Vietnam, to Da Nang.

Alison Owings: Do you remember your first flight over?

Ernie Bergman: Oh yeah. Absolutely. It was a military plane. We flew out from Cubi Airport, on Cubi Point Airbase, in the Philippines there. We landed at one o'clock in the morning so I didn't really see sights. I just saw some lights. But because we left a liberty fort I was dressed in very, very bright tropical white uniform. Summertime. April. Actual, PI's always summertime. We got there at one o'clock in the morning. It was scary but it was exciting too. They opened up the door. We were in an air-conditioned cabin. They opened up the door and when I walked out the door the heat. You've seen this on movies probably. The heat is so intense it almost threw me back.

My first experience in Vietnam was one o'clock in the morning, smelling the heat, smelling incense, smelling JP-5 fuel, smelling manure. Just an intense, intense smell and feeling of heat that you just never forget it. Got off the plane. There were about 10 of us that went over there. Brought us to a barracks that had not even been completed yet. We went to a place called Tien Sha. It was a Naval support activity. T-I-E-N second word S-H-A. It was a Naval support activity and they were still building the barracks, so at two o'clock in the morning I had to string my own rack. Canvas and put the strings in it and do all that. I was still dressed in my whites. They wake you up at six o'clock in the morning. And we guys were in transit. We had no place to go. We went to Chau. They marched us back. Then, because you have no job, they put you on work parties. So my very first day in Vietnam I was waiting around, wondering what to do. In one of my letters, which I still have, back to my parents, about my first day there, I say in that letter that I was scared and didn't really know what was happening, so I went down to the Armory and checked out a .45. Just to have one. Now looking back on it now, I don't know if that was true or not. But I said that in a letter. Because I don't know if they'd give me, a guy in transit who's an E2, a .45 of my own. There was no reason for me to have one, except I was scared.

I remember, I can visualize this: I remember the barracks were right next to the wire. And I remember looking out to the right and seeing nothing but open plains, and basically there were Viet Cong out there. And there was. It scared me that we were so exposed, but that's the way it was. But anyway – my very first day in Vietnam. I was nineteen. And I was put on a work party, and the work party had to go to a helipad near the hospital's MedEvac stretcher barrier. But of course I had no idea what to expect. But I was a big guy. I was very strong. Probably why I was chosen. And I never thought about this until about a year ago. When I was lecturing Tamalpais High School students, one of the questions they gave me was, "What was the most emotional time you had when you were in the service?" And I never thought about this. And I thought, I've never been asked that before. And all of a sudden it hit me. I actually started crying. What I did my very first day in Vietnam was take stretchers off helicopters for guys who were messed up. I had blood up to my elbows. And I had two guys that I saw die, right there. My very first day in Vietnam was when I kind of shut down emotionally. Because it was very, very scary. I realized, holy shit. This is serious stuff. And I think in that CD I gave you, I represent that too, but it was probably a little more shock than I needed or expected or had to have. But it certainly prepared me for the rest of the war.

Alison Owings: How were the other people you were working with reacting to it?

Ernie Bergman: I didn't pay attention. We just took each end of a stretcher and just did our job. We didn't really talk a whole lot, that I remember.

Alison Owings: Were some of the people you took off the helicopter already dead?

Ernie Bergman: I don't remember that. I don't think so. But I know at least one guy, maybe two, died as I was taking them off to an ambulance. I can remember what that guy looked like. Blonde haired guy, about my age. I remember he was pockmarked. I think he'd been hit by a Claymore or some kind of mine, and he was pockmarked from head to toe. His uniform was torn up but his face was all these pockmarks. You know, basically shrapnel wounds. I was looking right down at him and I still remember what he looked like. But that was a huge emotional point of my work experience.

Alison Owings: How long did that time last? That shock?

Ernie Bergman: The rest of my life. The shock of that, I mean, I still think about that. But the shock of that day didn't last that long. It maybe lasted during that period. Because we were there all day long. That whole experience I can't say really had a big effect on me, because I pretty much put walls up. Emotional walls. But as far as freaking out, it passed pretty quickly.

Alison Owings: Was there any kind of help or opportunity to talk to anybody about it?

Ernie Bergman: No. No. Your men knew that. And that's war. That's the way it is. And it was only one day for me, too. And then after that I flew to Japan. Next day my unit had detached from their combat operation and was heading home, back to Japan. So the very next day I jumped on a plane, on a C-130, and flew from Da Nang to Tachikawa Air Force Base in Japan. Took a bus down to Yokosuka Naval Base, which is about 30 miles south of Tokyo. I was there for a week and then my ship came in and I went aboard. I went aboard April 24th, 1967.

Alison Owings: Did that ship return to Vietnam?

Ernie Bergman: Oh yeah. That was my home. That was my ship. That was my new station. I was there for the next two years. That was my place. We went back to Vietnam all the time.

Alison Owings: Did you have conversations with fellow soldiers about the course of the war?

Ernie Bergman: No. We just did our job. When you're in the service, you're really apolitical. At least, that's the way it was back then. One of the things I tell kids also. They go, "What was the service like?" What boot camp teaches you – first of all, it teaches you to function no matter where you go. No matter where you are, if you're within the Army or within the Navy, it teaches you how to function. No matter what ship, no matter what duty station, they teach you the Navy Way. They teach you how to follow orders and they teach you how to work as a team. So when you go on board ship, and to the kids I usually describe it like a soccer game. Regardless of what your position is, every single position is vital. Whether you're the one scoring the points or the one defending the goal, if one person on that soccer team doesn't do their job, the whole team is going to fall apart. That's the same way the services are. For every one guy on the front line shooting guns and killing people, there are probably eight to 10 people behind him supporting

him. They may never see combat, but if one of them doesn't do their job then the guy on the front line fails. That's the way it is in the Navy too. I had a specific job. So you kind of erase from your mind the political aspects of it, or whatever emotional ramifications it might have. What you're concerned about doing is doing your job, taking care of yourself and taking care of your buddy. That's all that matters.

The guys in Iraq, they don't care about President Bush or anything like that. They care about doing their job and protecting themselves and protecting their buddies. When you're in the service, regardless of what your job is, it's not baseball, Mom and apple pie. Not even close. It's taking care of yourself, taking care of your buddies, and doing your job. And not failing your buddies. And that is the bottom line. It's been that way since the Revolutionary War. It was that way in World War II. And I'm sure it still is. And it's the way it worked for me.

Alison Owings: Do you remember the first time you met any Vietnamese?

Ernie Bergman: Well, I know I saw a lot. When I was in Da Nang, the first time I was there, we drove through town, and I remember seeing alongside the road. And that was my only time in Vietnam on shore, until I came back down there on the ship. Probably my closest experience. And I'd been to Saigon. Although I didn't have any interaction with any Vietnamese people. I saw them and they were right next to me and all that. And of course, when you're in Vietnam you're always tense. You're always scared to a certain degree. If you're in combat it's a high degree. When you're just sitting around having lunch, you're scared. You're tense. But it just depends on the degree. How scary it is. In 1968 – and I was an old veteran by now. 1968, I'd been over there over a year. And I remember getting up for — I was in the Mekong Delta in the Marine force. And this is probably an extreme example, but it's an example. I was walking down toward the mess decks, the kitchen, the chow hall, on board ship, to get a sandwich, because before we went on watch we always had something to eat, and then I was going to go up on the bridge and stand watch from midnight to four o'clock in the morning or something. And I was walking and all the lights were out, because we were a darkened ship, and I remember walking towards a really bright light. It was right near the armory, on board ship. And as I got closer, there was a detainee right there.

And I realized. He had a blindfold on and little handcuffs and all that. And a bunch of Army guys with guns on him, and I had to walk right through the middle of that. And that was a little scary, seeing this kid. He was probably that tall, and definitely a VC or whatever. But I didn't say anything to him. I just said, "Guys, I need to get by." So they raised their weapons, I walked by. But that was the only experience I had that close as far as having somebody right next to me. But I never had a reason to talk to any of them.

I'm jumping around a little bit. I apologize. In '68 I was in the Mekong Delta with the Marine force, and we would go through charts. We would tear them up. The charts were how we'd plot our position. I would have to go to Saigon every now and then and pick up new charts. We were in a place called Dong Tam, which was, I don't even know how far away from Saigon it was. But typically I would get on a helicopter and I would fly to a place called Nha Be, which was a big PBR base there. I could show you these things on a map if I had one. Then I'd take a big truck, with some other people that had to go up there, and I'd take that up to Saigon. I'd go to the oceanographic office at Ton Son Nhat Airbase, pick up charts, had lunch there, and then we'd go back. I was usually with an officer. I had a .45 assigned to me so I was armed also. I

remember one time, first time I was up there, we were assigned this Jeep with an Army driver. I'd never been to Saigon before, and neither had the officer I was with. So he gave us a whole tour of the city. I still have pictures of it.

So we're driving through downtown Saigon in an open Jeep in 1968. That was an interesting experience. I was scared, but I'd been there for awhile so. You know, you're just very, very alert. It was an interesting experience driving around. I remember seeing the presidential palace. I remember in the papers in '62 or '63 I saw where the Buddhist immolated himself to death, so I said, "Let's drive by that." And I saw that and took a picture of it. We went through Ton Son Nhat. We drove through the marketplace. So I was around a lot of Vietnamese, but I never had any chance to interact with any of them.

Alison Owings: What was their reaction to you all in your Jeep? Did they pay any attention?

Ernie Bergman: No. They were used to it. This was four years, well, three or four years into the war. So Saigon was full of military. We were just another Jeep. Didn't even notice us probably.

Alison Owings: What was your main job?

Ernie Bergman: My main job was aboard ship, and I was the person that would get us where we had to go. I was a navigator. So I took the sights of the stars. I was also a master helmsman and if there was any going in and out of harbor or whenever that had to be some real tricky steering or some real dangerous operations, I was on the helm. Because I was the best helmsman on the ship. But my main job was navigation. I was enlisted navigation. There was always an officer who was the navigator. We were kind of his assistants, but we did all the work. We kept the ship's log. We read the lights. We kept the officer on deck warned about weather. We were kind of oceanographers also. But mainly we made sure that we got where we were supposed to go at the right time. And safely.

Alison Owings: That's a huge responsibility.

Ernie Bergman: Oh yeah. I loved it though. It was great. We were chipping paint. I was always clean. I worked with officers and they weren't always the most fun, but at least we had intelligent conversations, if we had any conversations at all. I was the third person to find out what was going on. When new orders came in, the first people who got it were radiomen, because that's how it came in. The second person who got it was the captain. And the third person who got it was me. Because I had to plot the course. So I always knew what was going on.

Alison Owings: What was the main job or jobs of the ships themselves?

Ernie Bergman: Well, again, just like every person has a job, every ship has a role in the big picture. The LST job was to provide transportation support, resupply barracks, food, ammunition, whatever it took to support ongoing operations. In 1967, most of where we were was between Da Nang and a place called Cua Viet, which is about five miles south of DMZ. And

we worked with Marines, since we would have Marines aboard and we would land them. Just like you see in the movies. These big landings. We would frequently go up to Okinawa and pick up Jeeps or ammunition or other supplies, bring them back down to the operations. Place called White Beach. Red Beach. Da Nang. We would do resupply stuff. In the Mekong Delta we acted as a barracks ship and kind of a home base for the Marine Force. We provided barracks. We provided food. We provided ammunition. We provided all this stuff and kind of a home base for them. Plus security too. In the Delta, you always had to watch out for Viet Cong UDTs. In fact, one of my sister ships who relieved us two weeks before, got blown up and 26 guys died. The Westchester County. November 1st, 1968. There was a lot of news on that. I could show you articles.

But we provided boats to go around the Nest, we said. The Nest was this – all the Marine boats alongside, and then they would – this is basically where they would land and they would come up and get a shower. Get resupplied. So this was the Nest. We'd have a boat coming around there 24 hours a day throwing concussion grenades over the side to make sure there's anybody floating in the water, we would kill them. We also had people on board the decks fore and aft with .30 caliber machine guns and a .50 caliber machine gun to shoot any sticks we saw in the water, or anybody we saw swimming, or whatever.

Alison Owings: Did you shoot too?

Ernie Bergman: I never pulled the trigger on anything, but I did man a .50 caliber machine gun twice. And thank God I never had to shoot it. It scared the hell out of me. But I was prepared to do that. But that wasn't my job. And again, this is something we try to get across to the kids. We have maybe four people in the classroom and the kids are saying, "What's it like to kill people? What's it like to get shot at? What's it like to be – you know, this and that?" Well, it wasn't my job. You know? My job was to drive. My job was to get us there and keep us safe. Just like in the Army. If you get through boot camp and you become an Eleven Bravo. Everything has a code. Eleven Bravo is an infantryman. And the majority of the guys that go in the Army become infantrymen, because that's where you need them. But you might otherwise become a radioman or a postal clerk or a cook or a corpsman or whatever. Everybody has a job. There are certain people who shoot, and other people who do something else.

My job wasn't to shoot. If it got that bad, I all of a sudden became a rifleman. That's the way everybody is on the small boats. My job on the small boats might have been navigation and signaling and communication. But if the shit hit the fan I better grab myself a gun and shoot back. But that wasn't my primary job.

Alison Owings: Did you ever want to be an infantryman?

Ernie Bergman: No. No. Too scary. You always anticipate having to do that. When we were in the Mekong Delta we were very exposed. I don't know if you ever saw *Apocalypse Now*? The movie? But going up the river with no protection. That's the way it was. No protection whatsoever. So it was very scary going up and down the river. But I never hoped that I would have to fire a gun. I never had to.

Alison Owings: Is it a comfort to you now knowing that you didn't personally shoot anybody?

Ernie Bergman: Yeah, I think so. I mean, there are two things that veterans come home with. Everyone in the war, generally speaking – one thing is survival guilt. When you go to war and you don't get hurt like your buddy did or you don't get killed, a lot of guys have a tendency to be terribly guilty, that "why wasn't it me?" And that goes along with the fact that thank God it wasn't. But survivor guilt is rampant in the service. Because again, you're a team. Those are your brothers. If somebody gets killed, you didn't do your job. It's all over the place. And survivor guilt is a big reason why people commit suicide. Because they can't deal with that kind of pressure. I've known of at least six people here in Marin County that committed suicide in the last 20 years. That I knew personally.

Alison Owings: Who had been in Vietnam?

Ernie Bergman: Oh yeah. They don't get put in the paper though.

Alison Owings: Were you ever in a situation where someone was killed right next to you?

Ernie Bergman: Yes.

Alison Owings: On the boat?

Ernie Bergman: Yeah. It was on the Delta. I know it wasn't my fault, but it was a friend of mine, guy named Bob Aggers who was from Reno. But anyway. The other thing that's rampant in the service is feeling like you didn't do enough. You see these guys who have all these ribbons and all this and that and they were here and they were there and all that. When I first got involved with Vietnam Vets in America, which was 1991, I was in very, very bad shape. Because when Desert Storm happened, or whatever that was, The Gulf War³, when they declared it, I went off the edge. I hadn't realized how bad I had post stress, and how messed up I was because of the war. Because we kept it in all the time. And that's a whole nother story, but I'll [unintelligible]. But when I first started going to Vietnam Vets. It's a group of about 35 guys, at that time. Vietnam Vets is a safe environment for veterans to heal or have brotherhood or whatever. I would blurt out these stories, these experiences of mine, like when I was carrying the stretchers or saw this guy die or being really scared about some situation and I'd go, "But I was only in the Navy." I didn't measure up to being a real veteran. And that affects a lot of guys too. They don't feel like they measure up. "Well, my stories aren't as good as yours, so obviously I didn't do anything. I can't compare anything." A lot of guys, even guys who were heavy duty combat have a lot of that stuff too.

Alison Owings: Did you first recognize it then? Or did they help you recognize it?

³ Gulf War, August 2, 1990 – February 28, 1991

Ernie Bergman: No. They helped me. They helped me get through it. I had incredible anger for probably 30 years. And the only time I showed it was in private and usually it was in very political times when all these people are lying through their teeth.

Alison Owings: You mean politicians? Or friends?

Ernie Bergman: Politicians. When I was 17, 18 years old, I was the All-American Kid. And I believed. I was patriotic. And I still am, but I believed we were moral and we were right and we were this and we were that. I went in the service and I was proud of my service and I still am. And even today, if there was a reason for me to go back in, I would. I know that's kind of weird, but no. I enjoyed being in the service. The brotherhood was incredible. One thing I would have never forgiven myself for is to not be able to experience the camaraderie in the service. It's incredible. But no, Vietnam never messed me up. Going over there and doing my job, I never felt like I had to feel guilty about anything. I didn't necessarily agree with the war, after I'd seen the people, but I could defend it. Even today I could defend Domino Theory, and I could also defend never going there in the first place. I could take either side. I think both of them have legitimacy.

But Vietnam never messed me up. What messed me up was coming home. I think a lot of veterans will never admit that, but it's true for them too. Is that they did their job. They saved their buddies. They saved themselves. They feel very good about their service and their experience and they come home. I remember the first time I came home after two years being overseas was in 1969, and I was walking down the street. This was in July, '69, and I was due to go back over again. But I was a nice kid and I was happy and, you know. And I was walking down Broadway Street in San Diego, around Third or Fourth Street, in my uniform. A guy came up and spit on me and called me a baby killer. And I was just totally shocked. He spit right on my ribbons. So I got to pay for them and I wipe my uniform off a little bit. And I heard about this happens. Anyway, that was my first incident. I still remember what the guy looked like. Tall, skinny, dark hair. Probably in his early 30s.

But anyway. Then I went back overseas. I went for my second tour, which was a year. I had eight months. I'd already been there two years. I had to go over one more time. Then I got back and I got out of my service and I was going to go to College of Marin. I had already learned to not talk about it. But being a 22-year-old freshman in college at College of Marin, you kind of stick out, as all the veterans did. So people kind of knew who we were because we were older than everybody else. 1970. And twice at the College of Marin student center I got hot coffee thrown at me and got called a baby killer by girls. I was so angry. I jumped up. And she got really scared and she ran away from me. But I remember having hot coffee thrown at me twice and that just pissed me off. So you learn to kind of hide.

And then the thing that probably got me the worst was when I was a junior in high school. I don't know if you're familiar with this, but they call it Boys State to the American Legion. And Boys State still exists, a citizenship program, and every school gets to pick one guy and one girl, depending how many chapters are there, to represent the entire high school at the citizenship program. They take you for a week to Sacramento and you learn how elections work and democracy and blah blah blah. And I was chosen for Tam High School. I still have pictures of that too. I was so proud. And I was so full of patriotism for America and so proud that I would even qualify, because nobody ever thought I was going to amount to anything. And I remember being in a room full of 500 guys from all over the United States. I could not figure out why I was

there but I was part of these guys. And we sang the national anthem and all this. Just brought me to tears. So I could not wait to be one of the boys. I couldn't wait to get into the American Legion. But of course I had to be a veteran. So I went in the service and four years there and blah blah and get back. The first thing I did when I got back is I joined the American Legion. Paid my ten bucks or whatever it was and signed up. But because of everything that was going on I was just terrified to go to a meeting. Even in college there was a problem with being a veteran. But I was terrified.

So I waited five years before I even went to a meeting. In 1975 I finally went to a meeting. I walked in and some guy meets me at the door and says, "Well, can I help you?" I go, "Yeah. I've been a member for five years. This is my first meeting." He goes, "Oh, where'd you serve?" I said, "I served in Vietnam." He says, "Oh. Wait right here." So I wait for about a minute or so. Another guy comes out. Big guy. Says, "We're really sorry but we don't want you here. We don't like you guys. We don't think you're veterans. Don't ever come back." And I just. My world just crumbled. And I still have problems with that. But that was the big blow.

Alison Owings: Where was this?

Ernie Bergman: San Rafael. I just got there on the wrong night. Luck in timing. It's the way life is. But I just was devastated.

Alison Owings: These were full of themselves, World War II vets?

Ernie Bergman: Yeah. And that went on for a long time. I wasn't the only person that happened to. The World War II guys never gave us any credit for anything for a long time. They still don't. Some of them don't. But that's beside the point. From that point on, I never ever talked about being a veteran. Ever. Probably another 15, 20 years. And I had so much anger. I would sit here, wherever I was, and see what was going on to the government and see the lies and all the politicians and all the bullshit that was going on. And I would literally get up and yell at the TV. I said, "Why are you doing this?" And just – I was just crushed. But when Desert Storm happened – and I'd gone through life and I'm very successful in business and have a lot of friends. But I always had this underlying thing. Some of my friends said, "We're not vets." Never understood that. So I just didn't talk about it around them either. Maybe one guy I would talk to. But they never understood my anger. And I would sometimes tell some of my friends, "You know, this really makes me angry." [They would respond] "You don't have any reason to be angry. You didn't get shot at. You didn't do this."

I never really talked about my experiences. They thought I was just in the Navy. I just went over there and got back. Then in 1991 we invaded Iraq. I still hate that day. That week I just happened to have a cold. A really bad cold. So I took the week off. I'd never taken any time off ever, and it just so happened that was the week the war started. So I became obsessed with CNN⁴. And I cried and I couldn't sleep and I was yelling at the TV again. Ten thousand acceptable. What are you guys talking about? Ten thousand acceptable. Whenever they would say, "We're expecting 10,000." It just drove me nuts. So luckily a really good friend of mine

⁴ The Cable News Network

interviewed Corky Corcoran, who grew up in Marin. Mill Valley. 173rd Airborne. Great guy. He came by and saw me one time and he saw what kind of shape I was in. He *dragged* me down to this meeting. And of course my first meeting there I was so nervous, because I just was in the Navy.

Alison Owings: This was a meeting of Viet Vets?

Ernie Bergman: Yeah. Vietnam Vets. First one I ever went to in February or March of '91. We'd go around and introduce ourselves and talk about what was. Everybody had a chance to kind of vent. I don't remember what I said at that meeting but I said something like, "My name is Ernie Bergman and I was just in the Navy." And then somebody else would talk, and they would say something that would remind me, and I would blurt out these stories, things that really had just been with me for too many years. And most of the guys didn't like me that first couple weeks. First couple *months*. Because I was so rude. Because I was interrupting and saying, "Yeah, I know what that's like." They eventually got to know me. But for the next four years. And of course the woman I was with at the time supported me sort of, but she really wasn't sympathetic because I was just in the Navy. But she'd put up with me going to these meetings all the time. The next four years I went to Monday night, every night group counseling. Monday night, once a week, for four years, trying to resolve all this stuff. It helped me resolve my anger. I mean learn how to control it, because I don't – I get emotional sometimes when I talk about some things. Sometimes when I'm talking to the kids in the high schools, and I'll bring up this or that, something I never cried about before, I'll just break down right there. I never know when it's going to happen. Something I was able to walk through and talk about and this and that last time, I can't get through this time. It varies.

Alison Owings: Did you ever either go back to or send a friend back to the American Legion?

Ernie Bergman: No. I never went back, ever. I was afraid to, but no, I never went back. Never even talked about that until probably 10 years ago. And of course any American Legion guy doesn't believe it anyway. But that's what it was. When people would ask me about where I stood with Vietnam, from post stress or all these afflictions that they kind of stereotype of the Vietnam vet, I say, "Hey, Vietnam didn't mess me up. America messed me up. I hate my country. No, I don't hate my country, I hate my government. My government's the one that messed me up. The American people – seriously, I hated the American *people*. Not American, but the people. And I still have some of that in me.

Alison Owings: Well, these were all essentially civilians.

Ernie Bergman: Oh, I know. I know. But you know, it was so bad, and I was so angry, and still am to a certain extent, although I'm much more controlled now. Part of the Vietnam Vet goal was to get us – we call it in the Bunker – get us out of the Bunker. You know, when you go back to the bunker you're hiding. You're hiding your emotions. I fall back into every once in a while. I had a meeting last night with some guys. Part of it's to get us out of the bunker. So of course, because the Vietnam Vets of America didn't really build until the Desert Storm war. All across the United States, that's when all of a sudden. Because Vietnam was coming out of the

bush, coming out of the bunker, saying, “I need some help.” There was no place to go before. So when I went to my first Viet Vets meeting there was like 35 guys there, all really messed up. From *all* different parts of the service.

Alison Owings: Where was it?

Ernie Bergman: We first met at the Salvation Army in San Rafael, and then we went to Whistle Stop Wheels. And now we meet in Larkspur. I’ve been president about four times. But that’s beside the point. What we would do is we would march in Memorial Day parades. We decided this was a good idea; this was going to help us get out of the bunker. I remember the very first parade that I marched in was Mill Valley, Memorial Day Mill Valley. There were about 20 of us, because we had a lot of activity and we were all kind of into it. We were all supporting each other. The last parade I ever marched in was when I was in Little League, from Old Mill School to Boyle Park. And the next parade I marched in was this one in 1991 or ‘92, as a Vietnam veteran. Part of me was very excited about it. A lot of me was with my brothers, and that’s as far as it went. Just like in the service. You’re a team, you’re a unit, you’re with your brothers. There’s nothing outside of that. And part of me was very angry. Because I knew all my experiences and all the bullshit that went on down to vets. And I remember walking down Throckmorton. We were going right by the intersection here where Miller Avenue comes in, and people were applauding and cheering, “All right! Vietnam Vets!” And I got very angry. I got pissed. And I thought, It’s too late. I *cannot* accept this. It’s too late. And I got really angry. And I looked at the people and I couldn’t look at them. Because it brought all my anger back. And to this day I still can’t walk in a parade. I wish I could let that go, but I cannot – when it comes to people all of a sudden coming back and saying. I had some other things happen to me too that I forgot to bring up. I had a girlfriend who I just really, really enjoyed. First time I came back I wanted to go by and show her all my pictures. I was good old Ernie and look what I experienced. And she threw me out of the house. She wouldn’t see me. But that’s beside the point. I wish that I could accept. I wish I knew how to forgive. I can’t do that yet. I can live my life now. I can be friends with people. But I can’t forgive yet.

Alison Owings: So the people now cheering Vietnam vets going by on Throckmorton, are they the same grownup people who threw coffee at you.

Ernie Bergman: Oh yes. And intellectually I understand. Well, obviously things have changed and they’ve learned lessons from Vietnam. But I can’t forgive yet. And I get angry when. Now I am *very* against the Iraqi war. I understand the troops there. They’re doing their job. I know exactly how that feels. I hate Bush. I hate Cheney. I hate all this. I hate the whole war. But I get angry when they have war protests and marches and all that. Especially when they have a lot of people saying, “To hell with the war” before the troops, because to me that’s very confusing. Because I know when I was overseas, when I was in Vietnam and I heard about war protests or demonstrations, I took it very personally. I felt like I was being protested against myself personally. I knew that wasn’t true, but that’s how I took it. So I look at the people out there saying, “The hell with the Iraq war but we love the troops,” I find that very hypocritical. I know that may not be true, but I still have a hard time with that. We’re getting awfully deep in this.

Alison Owings: That's fine. Would you oppose people protesting the war other than privately? As you do? I mean, you're against the war privately.

Ernie Bergman: Oh yeah. I'll tell you where a lot of my anger is right now. I am all for draft. I am so pro draft I can't stand it. But not a military draft. A service draft. I would have everybody 18 to 24, whatever, male, female, black, white, smart, stupid, poor. Everybody has to go. Eighteen months, two years, whatever. You have three choices. You either choose to go and do civilian service: domestic, foreign service, or military. And it's first come, first served. So if you want to get it over with, you go in and get your choice. If you wait till the very end, it's military. You have a choice. But everybody has to serve. I also feel very strongly that if all the senators and all the presidents and all the decision makers have one of their kids or relatives in the front line, they would make decisions a lot different. I also say that if you want this war to end, don't go out and demonstrate. Get a draft in there and have something at risk. You're going to stop that war. That's the way it's going to stop it. You get Bush or Cheney or whoever else has their kids at risk, that's when you're going to stop that war. Government doesn't pay any attention to a bunch of demonstrations. It may feel good but it's not going to do anything. Does that answer your question? I don't know. Because of my kind of protection that I built up around me about all this stuff, I don't know if I have an opinion about people demonstrating. All I know is it makes me angry. When they bring up support the troops, although I thoroughly agree with that, and I certainly do myself, I have a problem with that.

Like I said, I have a problem forgiving, because of what happened to us. And maybe I take it too seriously. Maybe I shouldn't take it that seriously. And I was only in the Navy, and I don't really measure up to a real veteran. I'm being facetious, but why should I be so sensitive about that? And I almost feel embarrassed saying this. I was hurt too deeply. Even when they go now. I'll be 60 next week and I feel very strongly. It doesn't affect my life on a day to day basis. Still a lot of people I know don't even know I was a veteran, but deep down inside I have very strong feelings about it.

Alison Owings: What led you to talk to the students?

Ernie Bergman: Part of it was therapy. A lot of it. I like to talk. Obviously you can tell I talk to anybody. But I like teaching. I enjoy being in front of an audience and trying to give them something. A lot of it was – we have some guys in our chapter that are really messed up. We have some guys in our chapter that hate the Army, hate everything. Nothing about that war, nothing about the service, nothing about anything was any good. We have other guys in our thing that loved it. Guy named Mike Archibald. He was a Marine. Sniper scout. Boy, he just goes in there and he laughs. "Oh, we shot this and we did this. It was great!" One of the reasons I think it's necessary is that I provide balance. Because I can go in there and say one thing I will not accept is that the military is bad. I hate those people in Berkeley saying "Get the Marines out of here". Because the military for me was very good. And for some kids, the military is. Just like my pro draft. There's so many kids today who feel entitled, when they shouldn't. There's so many kids these days, young people, whatever, who have no respect for anybody. There's so many kids these days that don't know how to compromise, don't know how to play as a team, don't know how to interact with other people. And that's part of what the service does. You have to learn how to get along. You have to learn how to play as a team. You have to learn how to

focus on a certain thing and not just yourself. When I say I joined the service to see the world, which is one of my clichés. I saw the world. I tell you, I did exactly what I wanted the service to do for me. It grew me up. It gave me confidence. I saw the world. I met some great people. And I walked out of there a man. I went in as just a kid. So it gets me angry when certain veterans go in and say, “The Army sucks. No, don’t ever do it.” That rises the back of my neck just as much as anything else. Because I don’t think that’s fair.

Alison Owings: Talking at Tam High. Was it your idea?

Ernie Bergman: No. They were all ready. We have a thing called an Educational Committee.

Alison Owings: From Viet Vets?

Ernie Bergman: Viet Vets. It was part of what they were doing. You know, community service. And also, some of the high schools – in 1991, the war was only about 15 or 20 years old, so kids still could relate to it. You know if you had an uncle or a dad or something like that. And because the Gulf War was so confusing and these kids were 17, 18 years old, a lot of the history teachers around the county requested that we come in and talk about it. When the history books get around to Vietnam around April or May, toward the end of the year, that’s when we go in there. Because all of a sudden they’re reading about this thing, and they bring us in just to give them a frame of reference.

Alison Owings: Have you found that they’re well informed, or not?

Ernie Bergman: It varies. Some teachers require the kids do a lot of research. We walk into other classes and give our opening little spiel and say, “Okay [unintelligible].” And the kids won’t say a thing. Kids don’t even have a clue what you’re saying. And that makes me mad.

Alison Owings: You mean they thought you fought the Nazis?

Ernie Bergman: They don’t even know what that is. You know what I mean? I love history. It’s one of my passions. Do you watch Leno?

Alison Owings: A little.

Ernie Bergman: You ever see Jaywalking, where he asks questions of the people on the street? People have no sense of history. Some of the kids don’t have a clue. We had one kid one time a couple years ago say, “Well, I didn’t know. I can’t relate to Vietnam. I have no idea what you guys are talking about and I don’t care.” That’s fine. And it’s really the teacher’s fault. The teachers who pay attention and make the kids work a little bit, they have good questions and we’ve been in there when some kid wanted to join the service and he’d salute me. But it varies all over the street. For the most part we’ve had very good experiences. Some have been bad. We have the same questions. What’s it like to kill people? What’s it like being shot at? What do you think of Bush? One of the things – and this is on that other thing too. Probably the first thing that I try to get down to people is don’t stereotype a veteran. For every single guy who comes out

of the Vietnam. Oh, they ask me what movie was the most accurate. They ask me that too. For every one veteran that comes out of a movie and says, "God, that's exactly the way it was," ten thousand other guys are going, "That wasn't my war."

All those veterans may have some other jobs, maybe been to some other places. We all have different. Obviously, a lot of guys would be the same, but in the big picture, you can't stereotype a veteran. We all had our own wars. And one thing that I have learned since I've been in VVA is I also don't stereotype myself either. You have to realize that was your war. You have to appreciate your own war, your own experience. And you have to understand that that was as legitimate as anybody else's. These kids come in and they go, "Well, how many of you guys killed?" Because their impression of the military guys is all we do is shoot people. And that's not the point. That's a big point I try to make. "Wait a minute. You're a soccer team. You don't all kill and you don't all this and you all got to work together." Some guy who was in the central highlands in Vietnam has no clue what my world was all about because I was in the Mekong Delta. And some guy who was on an aircraft carrier 50 miles, he might have been at risk. He might have had a lot of stress. But he had a certain job to play and I don't have a clue what his job was.

And another thing they ask us too: Did you do a lot of drugs and race riots. How many race riots were you in? Did you do a lot of drugs? And I tell them this. I say, "Drugs? The first time I ever saw dope, grass, was at Bangkok on R and R. First time I ever smoked grass was on R and R in 1968. When you're on the front lines, drugs are not on the front lines. If you can't depend on your buddy, you're going to get him out of there. Race riots? Same thing. If you're in combat, not acceptable. Everyone's the same color on the front lines."

And it depends on when you were there. If you were there in '65, '66, '67, '68, that was when society was still pretty clean. But we went through a tremendous change back in America. So if you were there in '67, '65, whatever, the likelihood of you seeing drugs and having any *real* racial problems were not nil, but it certainly didn't show up. And it also depended where you were stationed. If you were where I was, where you are captured, you are in a small environment and you don't leave it. Or if you were on the front lines, you will not see drugs. But if you were stationed in Saigon, you got a lot of time on your hands, you've got a lot of people around, and you were there in 1970, guaranteed you're going to have fights and you're going to have drugs. So it depends on your MOS, Military Occupation Specialty. It depends on where you were stationed and what year you were there, as to the frequency or even the occurrence of that kind of stuff.

Alison Owings: And you were there well before fragging?

Ernie Bergman: Oh yeah. Well, fragging probably got a lot more, later. And this may be too strong, but when I look at society and the discipline of society really broke down in America, they broke down in the war too.

Alison Owings: Oh, that's interesting, like one mirrored the other.

Ernie Bergman: Sure. I'll give you an example. This is a poor example. But this is one that I remember. I went over in 1967, when black people were called colored. Now most people in the Army went over for 12 months, 13 months, and they came home. I was there for two years. So I

kind of bounded over a couple different generations of society behavior. When I got back, the blacks were called black. I remember standing in a line at a hamburger joint in Yukuzi⁵, Japan, late '68. And there was a white guy and a black guy, and somehow the word "colored" came up in and the black guy said, "I'm not colored. I'm black." And I'm going, "Wow. Things have changed. I mean, that's a stupid example. But the example I had depending on when you were there, you had a whole different frame of reference of things.

Alison Owings: Do you have any contact with Desert Storm or the others?

Ernie Bergman: No. Not personally. But I know that – even last night, we have a lot of money in the bank right now, so we want to directly contribute to help Desert Storm. So we're contributing money to these care package programs. Care packages where you send maybe cookies and candy and all that stuff overseas. We're contributing probably \$1,000 to that. We try to contribute to the family support programs for the injured vets and all that. When the war first started a couple years ago, Vietnam vets actually took a vote in the National Convention. Do we open up our doors to Iraqi vets? And we decided no, because we're Vietnam vets and we also want to make sure we have an outreach. Well, in the meantime, Iraqi vets have created their own organization, which they need just as much as we did. Because they get more support. But I feel sorry for those guys. All the injuries and all the PTSD. Most of those guys are National Guard. The worst thing they expected to do was go down and help put sandbags up for a flood. And now they're over there with this stupid thing going on and getting blown away. I really feel sorry for those guys. And they have a reason to bitch. I hear don't even have enough armor for their bodies. I can't believe it. But I support them totally. Like I said, I don't see any solution. Even if Obama gets in, I don't know if he would be able to stop that war. Is this going the way you want it to go?

Alison Owings: Yes! This is fine. I was curious anyway.

Ernie Bergman: I got back. I mentioned that when I first went in the service I had no desire to go to college at all. Thirty minutes into boot camp I wanted to go to college *so* bad, but obviously I waited four years. I actually got a three-month school cut when I was. I had enlisted for four years but I actually was only in for three years and nine months. Because not only was Nixon cutting back on the troops anyway, but I also applied for a three month school cut, and they approved it, because they were cutting down on forces anyway. So instead of being relieved of duty September 1 I got out June 1, 1970. I was 22. And a much different person than I had been going in, but still happy-go-lucky and full of fun and vinegar and all that. I was out of service for one month. I knew I had to find a job so I was actually doing maintenance work with a buddy of mine on apartments, doing maintenance work and all that. And he wanted to buy a shirt one day, so we drove down to Corte Madera Center, I had no clue this place even existed. Walked through a men's clothing store called Louis George. And while I was in there I thought, "Hey!" I had dirty jeans on. I was hot and sweaty. I was tired of that. "This looks like a nice job to have during college." I went up to the owner, I says, "You hiring anybody for the summer?"

⁵ Editor's Note: Yokosuka, Japan

He was so amazed that I was able to just walk up to him and say that, he hired me. And I stayed there for five years. Best thing that ever happened to me. Paid the bills. That plus G.I. Bill is what paid for college. Not my parents. I paid for the whole college myself. And G.I. Bill. And then working in the clothing store. Kept me in good clothes. Kept me clean. Kept me dry. Kept me warm. And the two owners there were pseudo fathers for me and are still good friends.

1974 – I became a business major because I didn't know what else to do. And I became an accounting major because like I said: debit, credit. It makes sense to me. I got straight As in accounting. Never read a book. Ever. Just did the work, took the tests. Debit, credit. Got me an A. About my junior year I switched back to marketing, because I realized it kind of got real boring and marketing was really where I should be. Graduated college in 1974. And I've always loved the law and I thought, You know, I think I want to go to law school. I took my LSATs. Did pretty well on it. Then I realized, again, going back to my mother saying I would never amount to anything, I had no confidence. And I also didn't know if I had the money, so I didn't go to law school. But now I wish I had. I went to work. I wanted a real job. Because I felt like I was four years behind everybody else, because everybody else had their careers going and I was 27, I just got out of college. And 1974 was not a good time to look for a job. And being a veteran, it was even worse. We couldn't get hired if we were veterans. They just wouldn't touch us.

Alison Owings: Did they say why?

Ernie Bergman: No. They just said no. A lot of times it was pretty obvious though. You know, when you mention you were in the war all of a sudden the interview stops.

Anyway, so I figured, God, I've got to do something. So I applied for grad school, and got into grad school. I took my Masters.

Alison Owings: Where?

Ernie Bergman: State. San Francisco State. Not really enthused about going to grad school, but I figured I'd get an MBA anyway. I learned one lesson there – don't do your MBA the same place you did your undergrad. Because I found all I was doing was having the same teachers nut different course styles. And if I ever did it over again I would say, go to some different school. Do whatever you want. Get any degree you want, some school that's fun, and then get serious about your Masters. But at some different school. But anyway. About halfway through grad school, and I didn't try that hard. I got good grades but I didn't try that hard. I got a call from a headhunter and the headhunter says, "Hey! You want to be a stockbroker?" I go, "What's that?" He says, "Well, investments." And I was a little, again, insecure about my mathematic ability and all that. But I said, "Sure."

It was a job. They were offering it. So I went on an interview and I got hired. So I quit grad school and I quit Louis George and I went to work for Dean Witter. And I was there for 10 years. Went through training. I was, again, with, just like Boys State, I was with guys who were so smart. I thought what the hell am I doing here? But I passed all the tests and did really well. One of my best friends there was a West Point graduate. Of course, I always loved the military schools, so he and I became friends. There were guys there who were just brilliant. I still couldn't figure out why I was there, but I was one of the boys. I started being a stockbroker up in San Rafael, at the corner of Third and C. No, Fourth and C. And after two years, and I was doing

okay, and then in September, September 25th, of 1977, and I was always a big jock. I was playing tennis. I was playing adult softball, which I *loved*. I was riding bikes. I was doing all this stuff. And it kept me in shape. Because I've always been a big guy. I'd had a softball game on a Sunday, and Monday morning I woke up with an incredible pain in my back, and I had no idea what the hell it was. I figured I'd probably just a muscle spasm or something. So I let it go for a couple days and I finally went to the doctor and I said, "What is this? This is really, really bothering me." And he says, "You probably just have some kind of nerve infection, [unintelligible] or whatever the hell that is. Here's an antibiotic and take aspirin for the pain and you'll be fine." So to make a long story short, in the next two months I was up to maybe twenty aspirin a day, and couldn't sleep and all that. And I went to about four or five doctors. Nobody knew what the hell it was. I finally got to an urologist and I finally went in for a CT scan. When they got me out of the CT scan. They'd taken me in and they'd removed my right testicle, and they said that was cancerous. But nobody had ever given me a CT scan and nobody would tell me. So December 14th, I checked in on the tenth. I had the operation on the eleventh. I have a very good memory for dates. And then Wednesday night, in 1977, I finally demanded to see my doctor, because nobody would tell me anything.

So I got one. Herbert Lee was his name. He came in the patient consultation or whatever the hell it is. This was about six o'clock in the evening on a Wednesday, at Marin General Hospital. I go, "Well, Doc, how's it look?" He said, "Well, you have cancer." I said, "Well, I don't really know what questions to ask. I've never had this." He said, "Well, I don't know what to tell you." I says, "How long do I have to live?" And he said, "Well, probably six weeks." And he walked out the door. I've never seen him since. So I go back to my room. And actually, my roommate knew that I was a dead man. He knew. I mean, the whole floor knew it. The nurses did and all that. And some of them came in and they cried. And I'm half full all the time. I had a lot of visitors. I mean, I was part of the ski club, the singles ski club here. I was part of American. Not American Legion. I was part of JCs. I was part of that. I had streams of people in my room. We had booze in the room and everybody coming in and partying and all that.

Somebody brought me a bottle of cognac. It was about eight o'clock at night. I looked at my roommate, Dick Ewald. I said, "Fuck it, Dick. Let's get drunk." So we opened up that bottle of cognac. This was right after I found out I was going to die. The nurse kept on coming in and saying, "Mr. Bergman, can I get you something for the pain?" I said, "Yeah. Bring me some more ice." We drank that whole damn bottle that night. It was weird because I was planning on taking a trip to Europe, but then I couldn't so I had to cancel. My sister was in Berlin, living in Berlin at the time. She was visiting there. So my cousin happened to be in the area with me, and she was here when I was told I was going to die. She called my sister up in Berlin and said, "Jody, get home. Your brother's dying of cancer." My sister and I didn't really have that good of a relationship. Well, my sister was there by Thursday night. Back from Berlin. And my sister and I, we started looking for someone to work on me. Two doctors, Gall and Eisenberg, here in the county, looked at my x-rays and said, "Sorry, we can't help you. You're going to die." And then we were referred to UC Med Center in San Francisco⁶, to a guy named Sam Newcomb. 34-year-old oncologist. We had an appointment with him, and he looks at my x-rays and goes, "You're going to die."

⁶ The University of California, San Francisco Medical Center

I was, “Well, what can I do?” It just so happened they were running clinical trials with 50 men across the United States, on these brand new cancer chemotherapy. And he says, “You know, they’ve never worked before. Everybody has died. You have less than a five percent chance. And you’re stage four. Forget about it. However, because we need the research, I’ll try to get special permission to get you in the program.” And he was able to do that. So I checked into UC Med Center on December 21st, 1977. I got my first IV and I spent the next few weeks – actually next six months – at UC Med Center. They’d let me in and out because I had to rebuild my strength and rebuild my white counts and all that. But when they found out what my cancer was, they found out that I had cancer all through my back, all through my abdomen, all up and down my spine. I had 12 tumors in my lungs and my entire lymph node system. And I was basically a dead man.

I figured, well, okay. I was smoking still. I smoked two and a half packs a day. Even in the hospital. They had me fill out sterility forms, malpractice forms, admissions. Because it was all experimental, HEW⁷ was paying for a lot of this stuff. And I had to get through my insurance. I’m, anyway, okay. I’m okay, let’s go. Let’s see what. Because I was mentally and physically very strong, and that’s probably what saved me, essentially. I’m Okay, let’s go for it.

To make a long story short, over the next six months I went through throwing up days on end, every 15, 20, minutes. I went through losing the use of my legs. I had deep vein phlebitis in my left leg, which I still have trouble with. I went totally blind for about a week. I was in so much pain that I was addicted to painkillers. I had every side effect you can imagine. I was on three separate types of chemotherapy. I was on Cisplatin, which is still very toxic, Bleomycin and Valdan. I was on those for six months. They told me if I lived I’d never walk again. I was in a wheelchair also and I was so weak. I lost 80 pounds. Best diet I’ve ever been on. I was so weak I couldn’t even hold my body up.

I have pictures of myself when I was sick if you want to see them. I was really skinny. They don’t look like I was dying, but I was. Anyway, we went through all the chemotherapy we possibly could, and they couldn’t give me anymore because it was going to damage my good leg. I went through a couple more CT scans. Twice I gave up. Twice the pain was so bad and I was so frustrated that I decided that death was a very attractive alternative. And even today when people come up, like [unintelligible] and all those guys who talk about death. I understand. The people that say, “No, you got to keep them alive.” Bullshit. I totally understand how death can be a very attractive alternative when you’re in pain because I’ve been there. Anyway, they decided to operate on me to clear whatever cancer was left over, and they opened me up, 10 hours, and they took a 117 lymph nodes out, which is why I still have a lot of circulation problems. And that was April 2nd of ’78. I spent two weeks in recovery. And interestingly, after one week of recovery – I had like seven tubes in me, IVs, nose breathing thing and all that, and every day they’d maybe take two of those out. And when they took the very last tube out, that’s when I broke down emotionally. After being *so* tough for six months, I just started crying like a baby. Because I finally was able to let go.

And I knew then, it didn’t matter what I did. I died or I lived. So I just – *poof* – let it go. Unfortunately, because I’m a guy, I only cried for 10 seconds. I wish I hadn’t stopped myself. It felt good. Anyway, they checked all my stuff and they realized that I was 100 percent in

⁷ Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

remission. First person ever. Then they said, “You know, you’re the first one and we don’t want to lose you, so we’re putting you on two years maintenance chemotherapy.” So I’ve had chemo for a total of two and a half years. So after my six months of being in the hospital, I eventually went back to work. I couldn’t go to work as a stockbroker anymore, because I could not take the chance of not being able to go to work. Because I still was very weak. I mean, I was tremendously weak. And I was still on chemo. So I called up the office, Dean Witter, in the city, and says, “Hey.” And everybody knew me. “Hey, this is Ernie Bergman.” [Witter responds] “How you feeling?” [Bergman responds] “Well, I’m feeling good. I’d like to find a job. You guys have anything over there for me?”

So I was hired to be the senior inspector at the national training center at Dean Witter. So I taught all the brand new stockbrokers hired how to be stockbrokers. I taught them math. I taught them margins. I taught them securities. I taught them all that stuff. And every single month for the next two years I’d have four weeks per month, and I’d have one really, really bad because I got my chemotherapy shot. And I just felt like. One time I fainted at the podium when I was teaching. And then I’d have a week when I felt like I had the flu or something, and then I’d have a week when I felt kind of normal, and then a week when I really felt good. And then I’d get another shot. And that went on for two years. But, you know, it cured me. So that was another. And I call this my Character Building Experiences. The war certainly was. And my cancer certainly was too. I’m getting so damn much character I can’t stand it.

I know what I’m being prepared for. But I worked there and I got through my chemo and I was finally clear and I’ve been clear ever since. And this is a little bit off the subject. For probably 10 years after that, people knew me. Knew that I was a cancer survivor. So if they’d have like forums or something with nurses, or Army, if they had – especially if people had friends who had cancer, they knew they could call me up. No, really. “Call this person, they have cancer.” I says, “No, I’m not going to intrude. When they want to talk to me, here’s my number.” Because I knew that me just going in there was *not* the right thing to do. Also they’d say, “Well, what do you think? About my friend who has cancer?” And the first thing I would ask is, “How physically strong are they?”

Because I know that you have to be physically strong in order to get through the cure. Chemotherapy probably kills more people than the cancer does. Because it beats you up so bad. I was lucky because I was 225 pounds and a jock. And strapping. So I went in there extremely physically strong. And even though I lost all that weight, I got down to – well, I was gaunt. I was skeletal. I was able to tolerate all that. But people go in pretty frail, you know, I don’t know what they do. My old boss from Witter died of cancer. He just starved to death because he couldn’t keep anything down. But anyway. I taught for about a year and a half and then I got transferred into retirement planning and became a retirement planning consultant, which is one of my specialties. And then I started wholesaling. I became a product specialist in funds or whatever else. And then after 10 years I got fired from Witter, which crushed me also because I’m a very loyal guy. I went to another company here in San Rafael and I became a national sales manager for the next 10 years. I just had the time of my life. I was thin. I was successful. I was making a lot of money. I was in good spirits. I was healthy. I was in my 30s and 40s. I traveled all over the world. I went first class. I saw things and went to 49 states. I just had a great time.

Then I got laid off from that in 1996, and ever since then it’s been a real struggle. Because I turned 50 – I don’t know whether you’ve experienced – well, you’re self employed so no matter. Turning 50 is a big, big change in being able to get a job. It’s almost like being a

veteran. People will still not hire you. So I've bounced around a little bit. But I've had good jobs and I'm still doing fine and I still have a good attitude. But that's basically been my life. I worked for GE Capital⁸ for two years and got let go from them because of 9/11. I was on the National Salesmen long term care division over here. I was there for a year. And then 9/11 happened and then two weeks later a memo came out and says, "Well, 9/11, we anticipate a real slow down. We're laying off 5,000 people."

I was one of them. And then I worked for State Farm for 16 months and they terminated their program. I worked for a real estate company for sixteen months out of southern Cal. Probably because of my – I will admit this, because of my cancer and how that kind of changed my outlook on life – and also because my military experience, I have to admit, although I'm very accommodating as far as environmental issues, I have a problem with authority. Especially when I don't respect it. And my last job I had I hated the CEO. And I couldn't stay there so I left. And that's probably because of me. Maybe I've always been that way, but my life experiences maybe taught me a certain amount of intolerance to people. [End of interview]

⁸ General Electric Capital