

ORAL HISTORY OF CAPTAIN BURTON BROOKS WITHAM

Introduction

Captain Burton Brooks Witham, USN (Ret.), was the first Commander River Patrol Force, Vietnam, designated CTF 116, and nicknamed Operation Game Warden. He is 84 years of age and lives in his home located in Englewood, Florida.

Commander Kirk Ferguson, USN (Ret.) and Commander Peter D. Shay, USNR (Ret.) had the privilege of conducting this Oral Interview with retired United States Navy Captain Burt Brooks Witham, USN (Ret.) through a series of phone calls over a period of several days in September, 2007. The following is a list of questions and answers:



*Captain Burton Brooks Witham
1923-2008*

Ferguson: What was the date and location of your birth?

Witham: I was born on March 18, 1923, in Portland, ME.

Ferguson: When did you join the U.S. Navy?

Witham: I was 18 years of age and had graduated from high school in Portland, ME when Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese on December 7, 1941. It was obvious that I would be drafted into the military service very soon, so I joined the U.S. Naval Reserve's V-1 Program, an inactive duty Reserve program, as a student in September 1942. In July 1943, I advanced to the Naval Reserve's V-12 Program, attending weekly drills at Harvard University, and in July 1944, I advanced to the Naval Reserve's Pre-Midshipman's School, at Asbury Park, NJ, with a number of military oriented classes. In October 1944, I was assigned to the Midshipman School, at Notre Dame University, in South Bend, IN, and on February 8, 1945, I was sworn into the U.S. Navy as an Ensign and later married Caroline.

Ferguson: Once on active duty, did you attend any other schools?

Witham: Yes, I attended the General Line School, in Hollywood, FL, followed by a six-week Mine Warfare School at the U.S. Naval Weapons Station, Yorktown, VA, from April to July 1945, and a Mine Disposal School at the Washington Navy Yard, Washington, DC, from July to November 1945.

Ferguson: Following these schools, where were you assigned as your first duty station?

Witham: I traveled to the U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot, Balboa, Panama, in November 1945, and became the Mine Disposal Officer as well as Assistant Ordnance Officer until May 1947. From June 1947 to November 1948, I was the Assistant Ordnance and Mine Disposal Officer at the Headquarters, Tenth Naval District, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Ferguson: It was after the tour of duty in Puerto Rico that you received your first tour of duty at sea?

Witham: Yes, in February 1949, I became the Assistant Gunnery Officer on board USS HARRY F. BAUER (DM 26), a mine layer, homeported in Charleston, SC, and in February 1951, I became the Gunnery Officer on board USS VAN VALKENBURG (DD 656), homeported in Norfolk, VA.

Ferguson: Your next tour of duty was your first as a commanding officer, was it not?

Witham: Yes, as a lieutenant, I became the Commanding Officer, LST-822, homeported in San Diego, CA, in August 1952. I was the skipper for nearly two years, participating in amphibious landings at Wonson, Korea, during a Western Pacific deployment.

Ferguson: Your next tour of duty at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, must have been a delight?

Witham: Yes, being assigned to do anything in Monterey, CA, is choice duty. I was assigned to the Naval Postgraduate School from March 1954 to February 1957, both as a General Line School student and a Mine Warfare and Gunnery Instructor.

Ferguson: Then came more command at sea tours of duty?

Witham: Indeed, as a lieutenant commander, in March 1957, I became the Commanding Officer, USS BOLD (MSO

424), a mine sweeper, homeported in Charleston, SC, for one year, and then became Commander, Mine Division 82, embarked on board USS AGILE, a minelayer, homeported in Charleston, SC, from April 1958 until September 1959. Both of these assignments included deployments to the Mediterranean Sea.

Ferguson: It was then time to rotate back to shore duty?

Witham: I was assigned as the Director of Enlisted Training at the Fleet Sonar School, Key West, FL, from October 1959 to December 1962. Then, having been promoted to commander, I became the Executive Officer, USS FRANCIS MARION (APA 249), a troop carrier, for nearly two years, from January 1963 to November 1964, and Commanding Officer, USS RUSHMORE (LSD 14), a landing ship, dock, homeported in Little Creek, VA, from November 1964 until December 1965.

Ferguson: You were now approaching the time of your tour of duty in Vietnam?

Witham: Before departing RUSHMORE, I called my Personnel Detailer, at the Bureau of Naval Personnel and found my next assignment might be in Mine Warfare on the CNO staff, in Washington, DC. I asked my detailer if another command was available and he indicated a new command had just been created by Commander, U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam (COMNAVFORV). I told my detailer I wanted the job. After being relieved as skipper of RUSHMORE, and a brief vacation period, I spent a week in Pearl Harbor, HI, then proceeded to Saigon and a desk at the Headquarters, COMNAVFORV, with three officers working for me as I completed preparations to become Commander River Patrol Force, Vietnam, designated CTF 116, and nicknamed Operation Game Warden. Rear Admiral Norvell G. Ward, USN, COMNAVFORV, was the initial commander of Operation Game Warden when it was created in December 1965 since he was in charge of all naval operations in Vietnam; its mission was to enforce curfews, interdict Viet Cong infiltration, prevent taxation of water traffic by the Viet Cong, and counter enemy movement and resupply efforts.

I was promoted to captain on May 1, 1966, and we moved the CTF 116 staff headquarters to a previous Vietnamese Navy base, at Binh Thuy, deep in the Mekong Delta. On May 18, 1966, I relieved Rear Admiral Ward as Commander River Patrol Force, Vietnam, at Binh Thuy, and became the first Commander of Operation Game Warden.

Ferguson: How many river gunboats were initially assigned to Operation Game Warden?

Witham: We had ten PBRs (River Patrol Boats) at Binh Thuy and another ten at Vung Tau. These assets were stretched pretty thin when one considers the vastness of the Mekong River and its tributaries in and around Binh Thuy, as well as the miles of swamps, canals and rivers in the vicinity of Vung Tau.

Shay: How were you selected for the CTF 116 position And did you feel qualified for the position?

Witham: I felt very qualified as I had served on mine laying ships, as a gunnery officer on a destroyer and as a commanding officer on an LST, which participated in amphibious landings in Korea.

Shay: What did you know about the mission to which you were assigned?

Witham: I did not know a lot. Nobody did. I was briefed by CINCPACFLT at Pearl Harbor while enroute to my assignment in Vietnam.

Shay: Did you have much knowledge of the Vietnam War or of the French Indo-Chinese War.

Witham: I had average knowledge acquired from news stories and other sources but nothing intensive and had no significant knowledge of Vietnamese history.

Shay: How much time after your selection for the assignment were you given to acquaint yourself with the mission and riverine operations?

Witham: I spent a couple of weeks in Pearl Harbor meeting with the people at CINCPACFLT after which I flew to Saigon to meet with COMNAVFORV staff officers. None of the materials I was provided during my briefings included any Vietnamese language training.

Shay: What was it like living in Saigon?

Witham: We had daily briefings and life was excellent as there was a private house assigned for navy captains with a Chinese staff doing the housework and preparing excellent meals.

Shay: How did you set up squadrons of PBRs, minesweepers and helicopters?

Witham: This was mostly taken care of by COMRIVRON FIVE, an administrative command reporting to me operationally. The initial use of Army helicopters and pilots was set up by my air operations officer who was also a helicopter pilot and who later helped to break in the Seawolves. In the beginning, all the Seawolf helicopters came out of Ton Son Nhut Airfield in Saigon.

Shay: What was it like when you arrived in Binh Thuy?

Witham: Binh Thuy was a Vietnamese RAG base. One of the American officers serving there was a military advisor named Cdr. Kronander who served as the senior naval advisor and reported to MACV. Sometime after we arrived there a small base was built a few miles north of Binh Thuy on the Tra Noc River. A hotel, which we called a Boatel, was built for us alongside the river as well a barracks and mess hall built for the enlisted men.

Shay: How were the sites in the delta chosen as bases of operations? And how was the positioning of LSTs in the major rivers decided?

Witham: The decision where to set up bases as well as the locations of the LSTs was made by COMNAVFORV operations and staff officers. I had no input. I believe that their plan was to scatter the bases all around the delta.

Shay: With all your experience serving on an LST, what did you think of their role as a support vessel for helicopters and PBRs?

Witham: I felt that it was a logical extension of their capabilities. With the booms and cranes that were added at the shipyard in California it seemed ideal to use them as support vessels.

Shay: Tell me whether you had any inputs into the equipment to be utilized by the riverine units.

Witham: There were no inputs asked for and we took whatever they gave us. Later we were able to give feedback to both NAVFORV and CINCPACFLT including my recommendations for upgrading the PBRs to an improved design, which resulted in the Mark II model.

Shay: How were plans made for material support?

Witham: We received some material support but it was not the result of any effort: it just happened. My staff maintenance officer, Lt. Tom Brugman, was the best scrounger who would disappear for a few days and then return with a truckload of Army equipment including food, clothing, and other supplies.

Shay: In the latter part of 1966 and just after HA(L)3 was commissioned in early 1967, there were incidents whereby two detachment OINCs reverted to preservation instincts in attempting to maintain their helicopters and went about trying to procure parts in unorthodox manners. Both got into serious trouble and were relieved from their assignments. Do you recollect there ever being a prioritization for helicopter parts? Were you aware that in order for the detachments to provide air support that these individual attempts at maintaining readiness were being made on behalf of the riverine units.

Witham: I recollect that there was no supply chain that existed for the UH-1 helicopters. It should have been provided for by either COMNAVSUPPAC or COMNAVFORV or both. In the beginning there was a nebulous set up of command and there wasn't any Type commander that might have facilitated the requests for parts. I do not recollect specifically being informed of any serious needs and had a very small staff focusing on trying to build up the boat fleet and provide for the needs of the new PBR squadrons.

Shay: How often did you meet with NAVFORV and CINCPACFLT?

Witham: On occasions, a Navy captain flew down to Binh Thuy to hold an obligatory inspection. Westmoreland visited occasionally and while we were not able to make direct inputs to him, we were able to speak to his aides. All travel to and from Saigon was courtesy of Army UH-1 Slicks.

Shay: Please describe communications and briefings held with your units.

Witham: Occasionally, we did have briefings for specific operations. Generally, no meetings were scheduled on a regular basis as the riverine units were so spread out; they were in MyTho, Nha Be, on the Mekong and on the Co Chien rivers. Remember, we had built up the force to 120 boats with 10 in each of the sections. Additionally,

there weren't any helos for us to use, with the rare exception of a Seawolf helicopter available. And we did not have phones available for coordinated communications.

Shay: Please describe intelligence gathering and sharing. Did you feel that intelligence received was accurate?

Witham: The Army command in nearby Can Tho had an excellent intelligence staff. We also received accurate intelligence from NAVFORV in Saigon. Intelligence from each source was passed into the field.

Shay: Can you describe your field visits and did you fly aboard the LSTs in Army Slicks or gunships? Did you ever actually participate in combat missions?

Witham: I made field visits, especially in conjunction with awards ceremonies. I did land aboard the LSTs while riding in spare Navy helos not scheduled for missions or aboard Army Slicks when we could hitch a ride. Sometimes while enroute to the PBR facilities we did get involved in firefights. And perhaps once a month I went out on missions with the PBRs. I enjoyed being out in the field with the men.

Shay: Lastly, please tell me about your relief in April 1967. Do you recall the day and the ceremony? Were you able to give an in depth briefing to your replacement: Captain Paul Gray?

Witham: Yes. I do remember the ceremony at Binh Thuy. Actually, it was held nearby at the PBR base where I lived, called Tra Noc, where we had an operations center located on a barge. It was not necessary for me to brief my replacement because Capt. Gray had been sent down after serving as operations officer on the NAVFORV staff.

Shay: What was your most memorable experience during your Vietnam tour of duty?

Witham: My most memorable recollection was of a major all Navy operation we conducted, called Quai Vat, meaning "monster", at the Plain of Reeds in the western delta area near the Cambodian border. The three-day operation was comprised of 20 PBRs, two PACVs (Patrol Air Cushion Vehicles) and a Seawolf Helicopter fireteam of two helicopters. By the way, we caught hell for the name we gave to it, "Quai Vat" which is Vietnamese for "monster." Lt. Brugman dreamt it up but NAVFORV felt that since it was not their creation we were out of order for using the name. There was some fighting during our clean up of maybe 10 hamlets sympathetic to the Viet Cong. Navigating our way through the mostly swampy indigenous terrain, some of our PBR sailors were able to leave their boats enabling them to discover and confiscate small caches of weapons and other equipment. During the operation we suffered no casualties. In addition, since we were able to make our presence known in this otherwise neglected area, we considered it to be a huge success.

Ferguson: What was the next chapter in your naval career?

Witham: I was relieved as Commander River Patrol Force, Vietnam, in April 1967, and became the Assistant Chief of Staff for Commander Amphibious Force, Atlantic Fleet, in Norfolk, VA, followed by a tour of duty as Chief of Staff for Commander Fleet Training Group, in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I retired from active duty on August 1, 1973.

Ferguson: You certainly had a diverse and colorful thirty-year naval career, Burt, with service in both the Korean and Vietnam Theaters of War. What were your awards/decorations?

Witham: My awards include the Legion of Merit with Combat "V," Korean Action, Vietnam Service, Vietnam Naval Distinguished Service Order Second Class, and Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Gold Star.

Ferguson: After retiring from active duty, have you been involved with any civilian volunteer work and/or fraternities?

Witham: I became a volunteer fire-fighter on the Virginia Beach, VA, Fire Department and eventually was promoted to Chief of that Fire Department. Later, I volunteered at the Virginia Beach Hospital for several years. After moving to Englewood, Florida I ran for and was elected as one of five fire commissioners and held that position for 12 years.

I am a 50+ year Freemason with membership in my home lodge in Westbrook, Maine, as well as a lodge in Charleston, South Carolina. I have periodically attended functions at the lodge here in Englewood.

Ferguson: With that, I will bring this oral history to a close.