

Interview with
LEE STEVEN WRIGHT

December 6, 2018

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LEE STEVEN WRIGHT

Lee Steven Wright was interviewed on December 6, 2018 by Randall J. Bunn at the Southern Utah Veterans Home in Ivins, Washington County, Utah. He related his military experiences.

RB: I am here to ask Lee a little bit about his military experience and other aspects of his life. Where were you born?

LW: [I was born in] Vallejo, California.

RB: When is your birthday?

LW: June 10, 1947.

RB: What are your parents' names?

LW: [My dad's name was] Glenn Forrest Wright and my mother was Dolores Evelyn [(Foy)] Wright.

RB: In your family, with your mother and your father, how many children were there?

LW: You had to ask!

RB: With just your mother and your father?

LW: Between them, they had seven [children]. My mother remarried and had two [children]. My dad remarried and had four [children]. My mother lost three [children] along the way.

RB: Growing up in Vallejo, what kind of work did your father do?

LW: He was a policeman in Benicia [California] about seven miles away. We liked Benicia; it was quieter and had less crime.

RB: He worked for the city or for the county? The sheriff?

LW: The city. He was well liked. He got to know people. It worked out well. I couldn't walk down the street without them knowing who I was.

RB: Did your mom work at all?

LW: Not originally. Later, she had to work to get by. I remember she worked at Woolworth's. She would bring home a bag of peanut brittle. Of course, we would [eat] that in two days!

RB: You were number two of the seven children, is that right?

LW: Right.

RB: Growing up in the 1950s in the Vallejo area, what was that like? What was your childhood like?

LW: [It was] more of an adventurous type. In Benicia, we would climb up Seven Cherry Hill. We would get a coaster and ride down it. [Gesturing down a hill.] You would have to remember to throw a "brody" on the end because there were no brakes. [A brody is when you spin in a circle and slide.] Of course, in Vallejo and Benicia, I got in to the Little League.

RB: You like baseball?

LW: I did then. We never lost a game.

RB: What did you like to play, what position?

LW: I got to try a few of them. My best was trying to be a pitcher. I was ten years old, and out of seven, I was [the] fourth [pitcher]. I even threw a no-hitter. I was kind of sensitive, and I didn't like it when everyone was hassling me, I started crying. My dad said, "What are you doing?" "It is what they are saying." "That is their job. They are trying to make a fool out of you!" That ticked me off and I got a no-hitter out of that one.

RB: Good for you. I never thought about it that way. It is nothing personal, but they want to mess you up, mess your mind up so you won't throw a good [game.]

LW: I am ten years old, what do I know.

RB: [Laughter] What did you do for fun, other than baseball, around the house?

LW: Down in Rancho del Mar [California], there was a place called Card's Forest and we used to go there and go walking through there. There would be six of us, and we would go around and go frog digging.

RB: Frog digging? Fun!

LW: Have you ever tried frog's legs?

RB: I have never tried them.

LW: They taste like chicken. We would check out the other animals. We would come back. It wasn't a large forest, but we didn't get to check out the whole forest. We lived out at Rancho del Mar and it was a little bit of a walk to get out there. It was a good place, isolated enough, good enough to a [youngster] to grow up and learn to get along.

RB: Was that with your siblings or other neighborhood [youngsters]?

LW: We had some other neighborhood [friends]. There was a [fellow] across the street. His son was my age. He was raising rabbits. Next to them were the Fox's, and they were raising minks. Then you have the other people spread out. When we got to junior high, they had to pick us up on a bus whether you were there or not. [Friends] got a little picky and they would try to hook me up with this one girl. They would say this seat is just for you. It was good, but I was shy so it took me awhile.

RB: What was school like growing up?

LW: You wanted to get into the sports. They had things like in junior high, you could see how far you could throw a baseball. Another part was see how far you could throw a football or kick it. They would write down how fast you could run the 50-yard dash. They had different kinds of sports like track. They would do sports when it was really early in the morning when it was real foggy. I know because somebody kicked a soccer ball right in my face. I was sitting there like I was stunned. I saw it coming, but I didn't know what to do. I got over it and it didn't do any damage.

RB: Were you a good runner?

LW: We had a race and I [ran] the 660 [yard dash] with the class president. By then, they let me have a forty-yard lead on him and he never could recover from that. It was just one of those things. Some [youngsters] could run just like they were a rabbit. One of them was an Indian, and he had the strangest run. He would go like this. [Gesturing.] We were trying to run, just to get our feet out there. But we were having fun. I went to school with Bill and Bob Buckner. Bill was in the 1987 Cubs World Series. And the ball rolled through his legs. He couldn't live that down.

[Bill Buckner played for the Boston Red Sox in the 1986 World Series against the New York Mets. Buckner made a tenth inning error in game six to become one of the most memorable plays in baseball history.]

RB: What team did he play for?

LW: When he played in the Majors [Major League Baseball], he played for the [Chicago] Cubs [1977-1984]. When we were playing Little League, he had twenty-five home runs in his first year. Where did this [player] come from?

RB: He was on your team?

LW: No. He and his brother were playing for; I can't remember all of them. I know they played for Hillcrest in Vallejo. I tried to get on that team, but no.

RB: What was high school like? What memories do you have from high school?

LW: I remember there was a [student]. Some of it is kind of stupid really. Bill Edward picked up a seventh-grader and threw him at me. He was very quiet so I picked up a seventh grade [student] and threw him at Bill. He called me out after basketball practice. We were both on the varsity team. Everybody showed up outside Room 72. You have to take everything off your hands, off your wrist, and out of your pockets. We went to it and Bill is trying everything he can. He was a little more successful than I was. I got ticked off and I went in with my fist. All of the sudden, he yelled that he quit. I said, "What do you mean, you quit?" He said that I chipped his tooth and cut his lip. I said, "But we just started!" He never bothered me again. It was just one of those things. He was the bully of the school.

RB: [Laughter] You stood up to the bully, and you beat him.

LW: I didn't have to go after him. Ralph Whitney used to instigate the fights on me. Even one guy, he was seventeen [years old] and I was fourteen [years old]. That went on and on. I tried to be a gentleman about it, because my dad, he would say if somebody would fight you, shake their hand, if they had enough guts to stand up to you, right or wrong.

RB: That is true.

LW: One time I was on the bus, and he was sitting next to Bob Buckner, and Ralph Woods was teasing the heck out of me. I finally put my books down. I turned around and grabbed the back of the bus seat and said, "Ralph, I have been listening to you ever since we got to school, and I don't like it. If you do it again, I don't care if you're asking what time it is, I am going to put your teeth in the back of your head." I sat down and he was quiet the rest of the trip.

RB: Sounds like you weren't a bully, but you were strong enough to stand up to the bullies.

LW: I didn't have to be; I didn't want to be a bully.

RB: Were you a big [youngster]? Tall?

LW: Yes, by junior high, in seventh grade, I had size thirteen feet. Don't ask me what it is now. People always ask me, "What size are those?"

RB: [Laughter] You graduated from high school in 1966?

LW: Mind you, it would have been 1965, but I did flunk the fifth grade. Three schools and I had four F's. I asked how I could flunk because I went to three schools. I should have; I was trying to figure out how I could do that.

RB: So if you stayed back a year, and repeated fifth grade, then you were probably bigger than the other [students].

LW: I did something most [youngsters] didn't do. I started doing my own way of doing behavioral science, studying people.

RB: What do you mean?

LW: Trying to figure out why they do what they do.

RB: Very interesting, you were an amateur psychologist.

LW: Some people thought so. I got to where I could call certain things that were going to happen before they happened. I amazed myself. It doesn't mean I was a brain, I just [was able to].

RB: [You had] certain skills. You graduate from high school. You said after high school you went to work at the hospital.

LW: I had a couple of jobs before that.

RB: What else did you do?

LW: When I was thirteen, fourteen, fifteen [years old], I worked at a fruit orchard.

RB: What did you pick?

LW: I didn't pick them. They would give us a bunch, I would cut the peaches in half, take the pit out and laid them out on a tray to be dried. At fourteen, I learned how to drive a forklift. The owner told me to get off his machine and asked me what I was doing up there, but his son said I was driving pretty good! [Laughter] So I got to do that.

RB: Do you remember what you made per hour back then?

LW: They paid you by the box or the tray. My first job that I got paid an hourly wage, I was working at Chicken Delight. That wasn't much.

RB: It was a fast food place?

LW: Yes, it was downtown on Tennessee Street. I got a \$1.00 or a \$1.25. I got on President Johnson's special job force for low-income families. It wasn't like we didn't have a lot of [children].

RB: Sure, there were seven [children] with mouths to feed.

LW: There were eighty-one of us selected in our town. We worked at Mare Island [a peninsula near Vallejo, California].

RB: That's in the San Francisco Bay?

LW: No.

RB: Mare Island, where is that?

LW: Mare Island, it is a little town practically by itself. It is across the river from Nut Hill.

RB: That is the Sacramento River?

LW: No, no.

RB: What river are we talking about?

LW: San Pablo Bay runs right by there.

RB: San Pablo Bay.

LW: Near Crocket and Benicia.

RB: What was your job?

LW: We did basic clean up. For some reason, I would get selected to be a rigger or be in charge of something. One [youngster was] ticked off. He called me out in front of his buddies. I saw what he was doing, so I said, "No." We didn't have a fight. When everyone else went away, I walked up to him and said, "You and me, on the bridge." He said, "Oh, no, no, never mind. It doesn't matter now."

RB: [Laughter] You were pretty astute as a youngster.

LW: I had my moments.

RB: When you [were] out of high school, were those some for the jobs you were working?

LW: That is true. When I worked at Mare Island, it was between my junior and senior year, the summer of 1965. After that, I went to work at a private hospital in Novato [California]. My dad lived in Novato.

RB: Had your parents split up by then?

LW: Yes, my dad had remarried. He already had four [children]. They hired me as a janitor.

RB: You said a transportation aide.

LW: Not this one. I worked more of a handyman, or whatever my job called for. My supervisor said if the head of nursing needs you, if she needs you to help one of the nurses, you go ahead and do that. Sure enough, they wanted me to help them move this lady from her bed to her recliner. This woman said every time they moved her, it hurt. None of the nurses wanted to be in charge of moving this woman. I thought this was stupid. So I jumped in and told them how to do it, what I wanted, we lifted the woman and laid her down gently. The woman said this was the first time she was moved that she didn't feel any pain. She asked me if I would like to come home and have dinner at her place. She said she had a daughter about my age. I knew enough about protocol that it was a no-no. After about three weeks, they fired me.

RB: How come?

LW: My supervisor, who was probably in his sixties or so, thought I was slow like in shaving patients. He gave me a job.

[RECORDING STOPPED.]

RB: How did you get into the [United States] Navy?

LW: They were drafting at that time.

RB: Yes, it was 1966, the middle of the draft. It was a big time.

LW: It was 1968. My brother went into the Navy, three and half weeks ahead of me as well as his friend, Mike Anderson.

RB: Which brother was that? Your older one?

LW: No, it was the one a year and a half younger than me.

RB: That would have been Von Martin [Wright].

LW: Yes, Von Martin. I knew that the Navy was better suited for me. There were actually three of us who went into the Navy, one in the [United States] Air Force, and one [in the United States] Army. I asked the one who went in the Army, “What are you doing, you have your twenty [years] in. What are you doing now?” He said he works for the Army. I asked what he does. He said, “Remember the job I had before? I teach the [fellows] who were taught to do my job. I teach them how to do their job for when they go to Afghanistan and all that.” So he has a job.

RB: He is a civilian, but he’s an employee of the Army.

LW: I asked him if he was a civilian contractor, and he said no, and he works for the Army. I don’t think he knows what he is talking about.

RB: The Army has military, they have civilians and they have contractors. It was the middle one, it sounds like.

LW: My stepdad was a civilian contractor. He was also a POW [Prisoner of War] in The Philippines.

RB: During World War II?

LW: Yes.

RB: Why did you decide to join the Navy?

LW: I wanted something that was a little more adventurous where you feel like you are getting something out of it. One, I wanted to go out in the war, and go out on a ship. In boot camp, they ask you if you wanted a station in the Navy, not a job, but a place. What would you pick? I said a carrier. [An aircraft carrier] What was number two? A carrier. What was number three? A carrier.

RB: You had your mind made up!

LW: I did. I wanted to float! I heard about destroyers, and they usually do a 360-degree turn. You had better be tied down then.

RB: How did you join the Navy? Did you go to a recruiter?

LW: You go to a recruiter first and then they send you to AFEES [Armed Forces Examining and Entrance Station] in Oakland [California]. They turned me down.

RB: They sent you where in Oakland?

LW: AFEES. It is close to downtown. They said I had to get my acne under control, so I took six months and I worked on that. Then I went back in. That was a trip watching some of these [fellows]. One [fellow] had a phobia about blood. He

didn't have to be stuck with a needle and he passed out. You wonder if he is kidding you.

RB: Going into the Navy?

LW: You passed your AFEES and then you got to go where you are going to go.

RB: From there you would go to basic training?

LW: You go to boot camp in San Diego [California]. They haul you down there and drop you off in front of this place. You get in there and you have someone tell you that your mama is not here, that kind of thing!

RB: When you were going through boot camp, did you have to know how to swim?

LW: No.

RB: Not even in the Navy?

LW: I didn't get drown-proof until I went in the [Navy] Reserves. And the pool was 72°. That is cold. I had to wear my boots, my pants and a long-sleeved shirt. You learn how to float, the dead man's float. This was in the reserves, in 1977. You had to learn to [tread water]. You had to take off your boots, tie them together and throw them in the bottom of the pool. Then you needed to get them by a different means – your hands, your feet, your teeth. Of course, dead man's float, you had to do that the length of the pool. [Water at] 72° is too cold, no matter what they say.

RB: Of course it is. Your body temperature is 98°. You are in a pool of water that is 72°. I don't think so! [Laughter]

LW: Some people said [it was not so bad] trying to convince me. I don't think so! We got that out of the way. My brother passed me out front where they were taking the new recruits. He said to ask for Pier 22, CRD11 [Coastal River Division Eleven was the Naval Inshore Operations Training Center], because he is in it. He was active; I am in the reserves. I go down there and sure enough, I get [in] it. We had fun. We had eleven SEALs [Navy Sea, Air, and Land team] in that unit. I use to go drinking with them.

RB: Let's come back to that. Let's go back to your active duty time. What time period are we talking about in 1968? The spring? The summer?

LW: [It was] spring, May 15, 1968.

RB: The Tet Offensive had already happened over in Vietnam.

LW: I am glad I missed it.

RB: That was not a very good Chinese New Year.

LW: I have seen documentaries on it.

RB: You went to boot camp. Was that about eight weeks?

LW: No, it was more like five [weeks]. Boot camp needs to be maybe six [weeks] to put them through it. There was enough for them to learn. They had a thing called 40-50. If you messed up, you are going to the brig [short for brigantine, a jail or guardhouse on a military installation]. And they weren't nice.

RB: You did boot camp. Did they give you your assignment at that time?

LW: No. We graduated and I went to Basic Electricity and Electronic school.

RB: That is what you were going to study. Did they give you a choice, or did they say this is what you are going to do?

LW: I was trying to get into submarines at the time. They said I wasn't going to make it. They said that I had acne and that I would bleed to death under pressure, which is true.

RB: I never thought about that – [being] under pressure under the water.

LW: You have to go down, they take the oxygen off and you have to swim at a steady rate up to the surface.

RB: And hopefully not get the bends?

LW: Some do that. I did basic electronics. I never took the heavy math courses. The first thing I had to do was take math. They take six weeks of algebra, trigonometry, geometry and I can't remember the other one. They crunch it into a week.

RB: That's kind of crazy.

LW: I went to the basic electricity-electronic school, and then they asked me if I wanted to go back through that math course again. I said yes. I wasn't that dumb. I did that and then I went to Treasure Island [in San Francisco Bay, California] for radar school. The first thing they taught you [was] fire training. They lit the can, it went up like this and the smoke took my breath away. They had to haul me out.

RB: What was that again?

LW: Fire training. They put you in a room, they have a can and they light it up with oil. All the smoke just fills up the whole room. I couldn't see, let alone breathe, and

my eyes were just watering like crazy. So they hauled me out of there. I didn't do that anymore.

RB: Up in the Bay Area [San Francisco, California] you went to radar school?

LW: You had to have 62.5 to pass and I was going on both sides of it. They finally said I needed to get six months OJT – on the job training. I went around to [the] personnel [office] and a [fellow] said to the six of us, “Anybody want to go to Vietnam?” Two of us raised our hands.

RB: You were one.

LW: I thought I was being smart on this account. We went on vacation a day ahead of everyone else. I had to be down to San Bernardino [California], and then they flew us out. The airplane was circling [above] LA [Los Angeles, California] and we are still going around and I am still looking at all these lights. I said, “Holy Cow!” We took off and went to Hawaii, our first stop. Everyone went into a bar to get a Mai Tai. One [fellow] couldn't. He had a more gray hair than you could shake a stick at. Then we flew to Guam. We were there for forty-five minutes. Then we flew to Vietnam. We got in there and were in our whites [Navy white uniform]. We got out on one of these cattle cars, and as we are leaving the airport, he pulled over and says, “Hit the deck!” Hit the deck for what? They were attacking the [United States] Marines on the other side of the base. I couldn't get down in those ice plants; these were whites. In time, they called it off. We went to the transit barracks where we were for two weeks. There are a few stories in there: Monkey Mountain [is right in front of the [Monkey Mountain facility was a United States Air Force and Marine base located on Son Tra Mountain east of Da Nang, Vietnam.]

RB: What is that?

LW: The VC [Viet Cong] had taken Monkey Mountain and nobody could get them out of there. They tried the Marines and all that. They finally called the Montagnards. [Indigenous people of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The name is French for “people of the mountains.”] They were taller than your average Vietnamese. They would go up and get them [the Viet Cong] out of the tunnels. That took care of that.

RB: What part of Vietnam was this, do you recall?

LW: Da Nang [Vietnam]. There are a few stories. After I finished with them, they put me on a U-boat, big enough that you could put a tank in there. We went seventy miles north to a town called Thanh Mai. That was the way it was said. It was fine. We were on the north end of a twelve-mile island. Right behind us was a fresh water supply that someone had caved in and the inlet part of the water, you could go up the road and straight in the way. When you are driving or arriving, you do

not stop. I saw what it did to them. I was at a POW [Prisoner of War] camp, and if you follow that it will take you over to Quang Tri. It was rough. They took our mail and our pay. We were in a small base. It was a fuel pumping station. It was a ten thousand gallon bladder sitting on the ground. The Vietnamese, they were smart. They cut these big manila bolts on the pipeline. They would work it by hitting it until the bolts were loose, and dripping. They would take the gasoline and use it for something else. One [fellow] was smarter than the rest. He put a hose feed up, [in the pipeline] and he ran a gas station in Hue [Vietnam]. [It is a city on the coast, sixty miles north of Da Nang.] They might have caught him. I don't know what the count was.

RB: [Laughter]

LW: We had different things that we did. We would throw concussion grenades off a barge next to a PBR unit.

RB: What is that?

LW: PBR is a piloted river patrol. You'll see them in the movie films. If you saw *Apocalypse Now*, the one he went up on was a PBR. We used to throw concussion grenades off there so the VC couldn't blow them up out of the water. They would float five hundred pound bombs in there. They did in Da Nang, too. They would take twenty-foot guns into shore. You would be surprised. Some of the things you wouldn't expect did happen. When somebody says that it didn't happen, more than likely it did. I was up there. On an R & R [Rest and Recuperation i.e. free time], I went to Taiwan and came back. We were coming back. We had to find a flight back from Da Nang back to our base. There was an observation helo [helicopter] that picked us up. We were in our whites, and he goes up about three thousand feet and follows the shoreline. When we get up by our base, the Vietnamese people see this observation helo coming in and they see us in our whites, they yell that it is an Admiral. Everybody comes running down, thinking they are going to greet the Admiral, and they just say, "Oh it's you."

RB: [Laughter] That's pretty funny.

LW: If it is your last day and they like you, they would pick you up by your feet and throw you in the water. So you make sure you don't have your wallet with you. That is their way of saying they like you.

RB: What was the scariest event that happened in Vietnam?

LW: I had one on me, and one on a Vietnamese fisherman. These concussion grenades that we used, one of these fisherman found one. How he did it, I don't know. He saw how we used to do it, so he took the tape off and takes it out of the container. He pulls the pin and he goes like this [gesturing a low to high throw] looking for some fish. He threw it out about ten feet out and it explodes. The next thing you

know, they are walking him down the road in front of our base, [asking] if we can help him. His eyes were just hanging out of his head. They put a bandage around his head.

RB: That was awful.

LW: We used to get some who would get too close to our beach. If you fire a shot, they are not going to hear it. I took an M-79, and pumped it around on the other side of them and they got the message. There was one [fellow]; he worked off base with us. He was showing off to some *mamasan* [local women in authority]. People have to understand this; as he pulls out his .45 and goes like this [gesturing a hand with a gun] and points it at me, he is showing off. So I pull mine out and I told him to put it away or otherwise make his first shot count because he won't get a second one. Wisely, he puts it back in.

RB: Was it a Vietnamese guy?

LW: No, it was just off our base. This is one of our [fellows]. I'm sorry, I don't tell the best stories.

RB: He was just showing off?

LW: Yes. People said I should have shot him, but I wasn't there to shoot Americans.

RB: No, no. I hear you.

LW: Because of him, two people ended up going to the hospital. That was on the base. I am trying to think. There was a General. We got a notice that said anyone who comes on the base that does not have a pass, don't let them on. This General, supposedly from the Vietnamese army, came up. I said, "Yes, sir." He said that he was here to see the CO [Commanding Officer]. I asked him if he had a pass and he said no. I told him that I couldn't let him on. He was ticked off. He had to walk all the way back wherever he came from. He didn't have it and I couldn't let him on. We had different things that happened.

RB: What was life like there, you know, on your time off? Where did you sleep?

LW: We all had hooches [living quarters]. We even had a bar that we could go in and have a beer that was filled with formaldehyde. That was to keep us from getting all these diseases. We had some Koreans. I don't remember how many Koreans. They were taught in school, the first year, how to fight. They could jump in the air and hit you nine times before they came back down. We had them on our base. One [fellow], he picked on the littlest Korean. The [fellow] said not to do this and it wouldn't do him any good. He kept shooting off his mouth. The [fellows] took a swing at him and this Korean jumped up in the air and hit him seven times [with

his feet]. He went down. Sometimes, you have to learn to take somebody's word for it.

RB: Don't mess with the Koreans.

LW: It is not something you learn after get out of high school. They were taught in school.

RB: Sure, martial arts. What was the food like?

LW: Our food, good question. We had a lot of C-rats [C-rations, a type of prepared meal], even from 1942.

RB: Oh, my gosh!

LW: We had to learn how to mix foods and cook them. Like you wanted a good coffee or a good hot chocolate, you learned how to put cream and sugar, and coffee and hot chocolate together. Some of the other meals you could mix, others you wouldn't want to. Spam was not exactly a favorite. The Army would come through and we would get some LRPs [long range patrol rations]. You would boil some hot water, just so much. You cut open the bag, and pour it in there. You hold it and shake it up, and you have a hot meal. They were pretty good. There were different ones, one of those where you would want to enjoy, because C-rations did not fulfil you as much as you would like.

RB: You were in [inaudible] at the time?

LW: We were in Thanh Mai, on the coast.

RB: Is that where you spent most of your time in Vietnam?

LW: Yes, one year.

RB: You got to Vietnam when? August? September?

LW: March 9, 1969.

RB: It wasn't too hot then, in March, when you first got there.

LW: No. It did later.

RB: At some point, it got pretty humid, pretty hot.

LW: I got fried out on the beach one time; I fell asleep. It was 130°. Bad, boy!!

RB: You [were] burned like a crisp.

LW: I got burned good. We used to have barbecues on the beach. Of course the jets and helicopters were flying by. We would throw things at them and hope they would quit running our beach. You could take a beach ball and practically throw it through a helicopter. We would try to tell them. We wondered why these [fellows] would do this. We had one [fellow]; he was on our beach. After we came off duty, and he was still on the beach. He would pump a [M]-16 [rifle] into a jet as they went by. Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord, I would never do that.

RB: You are there in 1969.

LW: Until March 1970.

RB: What was Christmas like that year? Did Bob Hope come over that year?

LW: Yes, he was in Vietnam twice that I remember. I could not get to him to save my life. We had Raquel Welch came on our base once. The Filipinos, they used to put a band together and come out. They really weren't that good and they were just boring the hell out of us. They came back three times. We finally said we don't want them. They are making like \$250.00 a show. We just thought if you are not that great then [don't waste the money].

RB: Don't waste our time!

LW: I tried to get to [Bob Hope]. There was a lady; I can't remember her name. She was an Australian version of Bob Hope. Somebody ripped off her hat. It thoroughly ticked us off. I don't think that was appropriate. Everybody started looking, but somebody who took it, isn't going to give it up. We did get some shows that were pretty good. You want to appreciate the fact that people come over to do this. I missed that Bob Hope show. That ticked me off.

RB: In March of 1970, you got shipped back to the States?

LW: Yes, I went back. They sent me down to Miramar Naval Air Station [now Marine Corps Air Station Miramar located in Miramar, San Diego, California] because my carrier was not in the dock. I said it was a long way to go, but I guess it was the only door open. I stayed there for three months. I began to notice things around the base. They have this big door, like a hangar, one jet slammed into one of these hangars, but they were smart enough to close the door. It made a mess on the door. It didn't hurt the door much, it was still operational. When it was ready, I went to Alameda [Naval Air Station Alameda, California on the San Francisco Bay]. I checked in there with the [USS] *Hancock*, CVA 19.

RB: What kind of ship was that?

LW: It was an advance attack carrier, CVA-19. At one point, they had two carriers being built and they ran out of money. They put all the money into the [USS]

Ticonderoga. The John Hancock Company put up the money for the insurance and helped complete the building of the [USS] *Hancock*. That worked out fine. [Built in 1943, the ship was originally called *Ticonderoga*, but because of money raised by the John Hancock Company was renamed *Hancock*. Another ship, CV-14, originally named *Hancock* took *Ticonderoga* as its name]

RB: When you were in Vietnam, what was your job again?

LW: I did security. I did mess [area where military eat] cooking. That was normal every time you go to a new base. I ran the Officer's Mess. I was in security. Usually you have somebody you work with on a bunker. Trying to stay up at night, we called it an ambush patrol. We didn't know what else to call it. You would go outside the base. You had a minimum amount of gear as well as a PRC-25 [a portable radio]. We would go out and guard the fresh water supply. I did that for six months. Even though I was an E-2 or E-3, [Enlisted Grade 2 or 3] I was in charge of guys that were E-5 [Enlisted Grade 5].

They didn't speak Vietnamese and they didn't know the call signs and all that. We used to talk to [fellows who] were running, what we called a; I have trouble remembering what we called them. A Marine and a Vietnamese, I can't remember what [they] were called; they would go into the villages to try and get people to go on our side [pacification program]. One [fellow] was with me. Everybody had his own gear. I just randomly picked one [fellow] to carry the radio. He got ticked off. I said, "What's with you?" He said, "You picking me because I'm the only Black [fellow]?" I said, "What are you talking about?" I came from a childhood that had a lot of people like that and it was the first time I was accused of being prejudiced. So I said, "Wait here." I went to the other bunker and pulled up his CO [Commanding Officer]. The CO said to put him on it, and I put him on it. The [fellow] played it up like "I'm in trouble." The CO said if I wanted he could get someone else to replace him. I said, "No, we will do fine," because I didn't want anybody behind me that I can't trust. I never saw him again.

RB: When you got back the [USS] *Hancock* up in Alameda, what was your job?

LW: Communications. First you start working, and they show you how the routine is, and what you are working on. I was on tele-type and mimeograph. Then you have to do your six weeks of mess deck [kitchen patrol, KP]. I think it was sixty days. No, it was ninety days because when I got ready to go back to my unit, they were in the office and they said we don't have anybody to run the mess decks. I was being a dummy. You put me in charge of the mess decks and I will extend for sixty days. I went down there. They said, "You've got it." And so I went down there. The [fellows] were giving me a hard time. I said a First Class Cook wants to see you [fellows]. I never saw them again. I straightened [fellows] out. One [fellow] was in the scullery [washing dishes] for a long time. He didn't think it was fair that he had to be in the scullery for sixty days, or six weeks, whatever it was. He was ticked off and we got into a fight. We didn't want to hurt each other,

I could tell that. He put up a good whack; I'll give him credit for that. A First Class Cook comes by and said [whispering] that I could use his back room. I gave the [fellow] credit and I took him off scullery. He learned different parts of the mess decks.

They would bring food out, and you got to get close to that stuff and smell it. If you are not sure, you taste it. We had a carrot salad they made one time and I said to tell the cook to come out. I asked him to taste it for me and he spit it out. He said to take it off the line. It was a trip. Mind you, everybody had a general quarters station. I did so much work one time; I went down two or three decks, I just lost my breath. I couldn't breathe. And then, the general quarters bell goes off. I said that I wasn't going up; I was too tired. I had go up five decks, and go to the end of the flight deck, and go up another three decks to get to a five-inch gun and wear the headphones. I was too tired. I was just beat. I had enough trouble trying to breathe. I could not catch my breath. But it works, you learn. I could go up on the singles bridge, and look at the jets flying in and going out. One time, I didn't have mickey mouse ears [protective headphones] on, and they were coming in, and I didn't have them on, and I got a pinched nerve in both ears.

RB: When you were on the [USS] *Hancock*, you went out on cruises for awhile?

LW: We wouldn't go out on cruises.

RB: I don't know what you call them.

LW: We would get on a carrier and we would go to Vietnam and back.

RB: So you went back and forth to Vietnam.

LW: Sure. We would come in to Olongapo [The Philippines] and stay there three to five days. We could go downtown, go into Olongapo and hopefully not get ripped off.

RB: Olongapo, is that near Subic Bay [on the west coast of Luzon, The Philippines]?

LW: Yes. I am trying to remember exactly where we were. We were on the north side. Later on, they gave the base to the Filipinos. They had a sign, when I was leaving Vietnam, which said, "Do Not Put Your Valuables In The Middle Of Your Flight Bag." Just to show you, as far as the "average bear", I was there six days, and then we were leaving. I had my camera and some film in the middle of my flight bag and I get on. When I got to Treasure Island [Naval Station near San Francisco, California], it isn't there.

RB: Surprise, surprise!!

LW: Yes. I went through that. Customs had fun with me. I say, "Why did you [fellows] check me so good?" "Well, you were smiling." "You would too if you were getting out of the service!" I get to Treasure Island and I go to the JAG [judge advocate general] office there. I tell them my situation. They said that I should put in a request and they would send it through. I came back and I was shut down, denied. I asked if there was anyone I could talk to or see. He said I would write to General Adjutant, and I did. I laid it on the line. I wrote that I had volunteered to go to Vietnam. I volunteered to go in the Navy. I volunteered to go to Vietnam. I am coming back and this is how I get treated on a United States military base. They sent me a check.

RB: Good, that was good. That was a good argument.

LW: I thought it was.

RB: Well, it worked. That would have been 1972. You were there from 1968 to 1972, four years?

LW: Right.

RB: You were smiling when you got out. Did you go back to Vallejo or Benicia or where?

LW: I went to Travis [Air Force Base, near Fairfield, California]. I took a taxi with another [fellow]. I stopped by my house and got my car and drove that to Treasure Island. I pulled into Treasure Island and was looking for parking. I parked where I thought it was a good spot. They gave me a ticket. I ended up with watch duty and they wouldn't let me go out to my car. When I finally got clear with that, I went down and sure enough, there is a ticket on my window. I can't tell you what I thought.

RB: You finally got discharged from Treasure Island?

LW: Yes, I sure did. Four days early. I went back to my hometown.

RB: Which was where?

LW: Vallejo. I had about \$900.00, so I got to celebrate with my family. I was running out of money, so I got a hold of my brother and we got an apartment together. We got one on the far side of town. We were fine. I went back to my hospital where I used to work, and they had already given my job to somebody else. Now, here's the catch, by law they have to give me my job back.

RB: Yes, Soldier Sailor Civil Relief Act. [Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act, initially enacted in 1918, was redone in 1940, and then updated in 2003]

LW: They had to tell this girl that she couldn't have that job. She wanted to know who this [fellow] was who had more pull than she did. She was a [ward] clerk up on 4East. Every time she saw me in the elevator she would chase me down.

RB: You got your job back?

LW: Yes, I got it. Of course, she wanted to, she invited me up to her place, which was real close by. She invited me to lunch. I don't know what her idea of lunch was, but it was salami, mustard and bread.

RB: [Laughter] You've been cooking for hundreds of [fellows] and she gives you a salami bread sandwich.

LW: Lordy! What did I do to deserve this?

RB: Right! How did you meet your wife, Rosanne [M. (Blackerby) Wright]?

LW: I met her through this girl, who was her sister.

RB: Okay.

LW: This is the younger one. Then, they had one who is a couple of years older.

RB: The younger sister is the one who you took her job?

LW: Yes.

RB: And then you end up marrying her older sister?

LW: She said, "You [folks] get along great." I sat in for dinner, and Rosanne is shooting her mouth off to her mother and sister. I'm not saying a word. I am biding my time. When I thought it was right, I put in my two cents and I went after her. I would do it so she would have trouble trying to figure out getting back at me. Her mother said to her, "I think you've met your match." Finally, as time went on, I ate there a lot. The first girl, she got mad at me and tried to scratch my eyes out with her fingernails. She said, "Do you have to eat here all the time?"

RB: You finally married Rosanne?

LW: Yes. I knew her. I was always nice to her family. There wasn't one I wasn't nice to, but yet, she took it out on my family. Holy smokes!

RB: From 1972 until 1977, you were working at the hospital?

LW: Right.

RB: And then you joined the Reserves?

LW: Yes.

RB: Why?

LW: Somebody said I didn't have to go to the reserves. They said, usually, they required you to do that. It depends on what you are doing: four out of six, two out of six. Six years. But because they said I had so much active duty time, especially in the war zone, I didn't have to do it. That worked.

RB: But you decided, anyway, to join the reserves.

LW: Yes. You know relatives talk.

RB: Didn't you say your brother was in the reserves?

LW: He was in the active. It was a reserve company but he was active, kind of helping them along. He and the SEALs, boy, what a crew!

RB: What did you do in the reserves?

LW: I got qualified on a PBR [Patrol Boat, River], and then I had to qualify for boat captain. It is called SNEC 9533 [Secondary Navy Enlisted Code combat craft crew member, who support Navy SEAL teams]]. You learn everything. My weakest part was radar. I told some [fellow] when we were tooling around in the bay; there was a [fellow] on the dock. I said to take a cup of coffee and put it on the bow. I would go close to the dock where this [fellow] was and ask if he wanted a cup of coffee. He said yes, so I eased, using the hand controls, not the steering wheel, and I would ease up to him, and he would reach down and pick it up.

You learned to control it. We used to take [youngsters] out on the front bow of the ship, and they would be wearing life preservers. When it would get close to the time, I would have one or two [fellows] go out and check, and make sure everybody was done up nice and snug and tight and they wouldn't come off. Then I have a couple of parents sitting next to me. Somebody took my window out. They took the front windows out on my boat. We are going down and we kick it up to thirty [to] thirty-five knots. And then I would hit it, hit reverse, and a big wave would come up over the boat.

RB: Through the windows, what once were the windows?

LW: It didn't help me. I said I could do it anyway, and hope the parents didn't get wet. The [youngsters] loved it, so it was pretty good. We did that a lot.

RB: What was your main duty? What was your job in the reserves?

LW: I was a crewmember on a PBR. At one point they shifted me over to the machine shop. They were trying to figure out what to do with me. I said, "You have water pumps, right?" because water pumps always go out. I asked where the water pumps were, so they showed me. I was trying to figure out how to put these water pumps together by using old parts. I couldn't do it. When you try to fine tune a diesel engine, it is very difficult because you have all these injectors, and you have to figure out how finely you have to measure for basically one-sixteenth of an inch.

I did a lot of work in the machine shop. Later on, when I needed a muffler, these are not small; these are big mufflers. The supply [fellow] said he had three, but he couldn't let me have one. I asked why not. He said they needed to keep an inventory. I told [him] that they have to keep an inventory for people who need mufflers, and I need a muffler! Even the master chief said they had to keep them on hand. There is something wrong there. I let it go and I went back to my boat and told them I couldn't get it. Then they got a new officer in charge, a warrant officer, and he came up and was introducing us to them. I asked the warrant officer if I could talk to him and ask him a question. I told him about getting a muffler on our boat, that we didn't have a muffler that worked and that they have three in supply, but they couldn't give them to us because they need them for inventory. He told the master chief to give me whatever I want. You have to know when to speak up.

RB: You were in the reserves for three years and then you got out?

LW: Yes, because my wife and [children] they were just going nuts. I got to the point when I didn't know if there was going to be anything in the house when I got back. So I said I wasn't going to play this game anymore.

RB: So that was enough, and you got out. What were you doing for work while you were in the reserves?

LW: I was driving for Greyhound [Bus Lines].

RB: You already started driving for Greyhound. What was your route?

LW: You have to figure out what you are going to do.

[RECORDING STOPPED.]

LW: It worked on a seniority system. I knew for me, the best place for me to go was Reno [Nevada]. This was June 21, [about 1976]. I got up there and, they said first you have to ride these different routes so you know where to go. I said, "Fine." The first one I did was to Bishop [California]. The driver could barely shift. In school, I was a good student. They paid attention to me. On the last day, they said before we go home at 4:00 p.m, does anybody have any questions, and both of the

instructors looked at me. The rest of the class looked at me. I said I couldn't think of anything. They said you shouldn't, you asked everything in the book and then some, which I did, on purpose.

I had one instructor say that I had a chip on my shoulder. I asked why he thought I had a chip on my shoulder. He said I thought I was better than everybody else. I told him that I didn't. He asked why I acted like I have a chip on my shoulder. I said because I was here to be a good driver and not here to play games or footsy with anybody. I am here to learn how to drive and I want to learn how to be very good, which I was. They have a thing about backing up on the opposing curb. You have to back, backwards, up to a barricade within a foot of the barricade. I backed up and mine was six inches. I knew enough to know where the pivot point was on the rear wheels. You look back there at the taillights, if you know how big the taillights are, you know how close you want to get.

RB: Let me ask you one more question and then we will close up.

LW: This is quite a bit.

RB: No, we've had a really good discussion. How long have you been here at the Southern Utah Veterans Home?

LW: It was May 25, [2017] so a couple years [time].

RB: What brought you here?

LW: I was 495 pounds. They had trouble finding a bed big enough for me. They said I had to go over here or to Yountville [California]. Then I lost 120 pounds. It opened up here and I got to come up here. I haven't gained all of it back, but I have gained some of it back, which thoroughly ticked me off. When I try to tell them how I lost weight before, they tell me it is commercial, the pills or whatever. I tell them I didn't have any side effects and that they worked fine. I lost a pound a day. It ticks me off every time I tell them that story.

RB: We will go ahead and end here. I want to thank you very much for sharing some of your stories from Vietnam and all over.

LW: I hope I didn't bleed too much. Will they be able to see all this film?

RB: Absolutely.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]