

Interview with Mr. Larry Fisher

Veteran – Vietnam War

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Place of the interview: Kinsley United Methodist Church, Kinsley, Ks. 67547

Narrator: Ms. Amanda Harris and Darleen Polson

Kinsley United Methodist Church, Kinsley, Ks. 67547

Transcribers: Darleen Polson and Amanda Harris

Narrator: Today is Wednesday, February 18, 2004. This is the beginning of an interview with Larry Fisher at the United Methodist Church in Kinsley, Kansas. Mr. Fisher is 58 years old having been born on August 28, 1945. My name is Amanda Harris and my partner's name is Darleen Polson.

Narrator: Would you like to tell us if you were drafted or enlisted?

Fisher: When I was 17 years old, I went into the Navy. In fact, I may have done a stupid thing. I quit school and went in and then finished later. My father signed for me to go in. It was during the Cuba Crisis. After going through boot camp, I was transferred to Hawaii and was put on a ship over there. Left for WestPac (the western Pacific), ended up in Vietnam during that cruise that was in 1963.

Narrator (Question asks where he was living before he went into the service):

Fisher: Right here in Kinsley. I was born and raised here.

Narrator (Question asks whether he was excited about enlisting):

Fisher: Yeah, I was very excited. I had those "patriotic bones" in my body.

Narrator (Question asks how long he served in the Navy):

Fisher: Twenty-two and a half years. It was an active time. My 30 years was up March 10 of '92.

Narrator (Question deals with his travel to different places):

Fisher: Probably been around the world about three and a half times, been on both coasts, made three cruises over to Vietnam, and I was stationed down at Barbados and West Indies. At one time I was an instructor at the Naval Academy for three years, and I was stationed at the U.N. for three and a half years. I was craft master at the U.N.

Narrator (Question deals with his rank achieved):

Fisher: I was first class when I went to the U.N., and ...let's see yeah, I made chief later and then when I was at the Naval Academy as their instructor and craft master up there; then I was a chief also, which is an E-7.

Narrator (Question deals with experiences in combat):

Fisher: We've seen some. I was on board ship and running boats so I wasn't on land. I was in the water.

Narrator (Question deals with specific memories):

Fisher: You kinda..., you kind of block out a lot of memories...running boats, sometimes I'd go in and pick guys up off the beach. Maybe they were under hostile fire or just needing to get out and we'd take them out to the ship. You know...feed them and clothe them, and they'd get sleep and later you might run them back into the beach and drop them off at a different spot they were like...ah, I guess you could call them spies. They're spotters, and they go in and they're the ones that call for your artillery fire from the ships and stuff like that. So sometimes they're in what you call a hot spot and you got to get them out because they have a place to go.

Narrator (Question asks if he had stress):

Fisher: Yeah, kind of. It gets kind of stressful, you go without a lot of sleep. You can learn to sleep standing up or sitting down or whatever.

Narrator (Question deals with quality of the food):

Fisher: Navy's got the best food. Got the best cooks.

Narrator (Question deals with comparing Navy life to civilian life):

Fisher: Yeah, I liked it. It was more organized...you didn't have class envy. You know where one guy's got this much money and his parents you know. This guy's got this much money from his parents. You know, whatever. You don't have that class envy...that's why is called the uniform. There, everybody dresses the same, you know, class-wise. It's what you make of it. You've got to take exams to be advanced to the next higher rank, you know. You've got to keep you nose clean, things like that. So you don't have the pressure of somebody looking down on you. It's what you make of it. You work; you can advance. If you don't work, you're out. It's just that simple.

Narrator (Question deals with communication home):

Fisher: Write letters most of the time. Uh, I didn't really write a lot. In boot camp they'd make you write, and you'd have to write a letter every week. You know back, but after that then you know, you write whenever you can, and you get letters, whenever you can.

Narrator (Question deals with conditions at boot camp. Was it pretty tough? Was your more learning to run the boats?):

Fisher: No, not really. No, in the Navy whenever you go into boot camp they teach you...they start teaching you discipline and you get self-discipline. You know, you know that you gotta get up at a certain time in the morning. You've got to go to bed at a certain time at night unless you're on watch and watches are usually four hours long. During that time you don't sleep. You don't goof off. You've gotta do everything just right. You even stand watch out on the clothesline. You wash clothes everyday and when the clothes all get hung up the guys are out there continually on watch and all through the night you're out there for four hours and you guard those clothes. It's just one of them things. You learn to iron your clothes with like a... what I used was a liquid Whisk can. After all the soap was gone, took that and they'd smash it on one side to make it flat like an iron, and you'd fill it up with hot water and you iron clothes that way. You know that way it would look a little bit neater. They weren't all wrinkled anyway, but that was the best way to do it, and your white hat. You've seen uh, guys with their white hats. You know with sailors' cracker-jack uniforms. You know the little flap back there and everything. You'd have to take your hats whenever you'd wash them and you've gotta roll them up to get the soap out of them. You dip them in different water and then you gotta blow on them. You blow bubbles. It seems like it takes forever to get the soap out, but it's a lot of self discipline. And if you don't have your stuff just right you're gonna get gigged for it. Maybe you'll miss a meal, you know, 'cause you're out there running or exercising or something as punishment. They do. They've got all kinds of ways of punishing ya!

Narrator (Question deals whether he was punished):

Fisher: Yeah, a couple of times. I got real hungry one time going through the chow line. Seemed like they never fed me enough, and uh, I kind of figured out that if I held my tray with one hand and put my other hand underneath I could reach in and get me some food..and I did that and I got caught once and cook took me outside. I had to stand leaning up the wall. They call it a bulkhead. I had to step back on my feet three, three steps and then lean and just touch my nose on the wall, and I stood there until I got rescued. But that was punishment. You don't steal from your brothers, you know, and that's basically what I did. I stole some food that wasn't what I was supposed to have (laugh).

Narrator (Question deals with if there were humorous moments or entertainment):

Fisher: No, we didn't have a lot of free time. We had about an hour every night, you know. That was for writing letters, studying, 'cause you got tests. You got a lot of studying to do. A lot of stuff that

you've got to try to remember, and it's just like your service number, you know. You've got to memorize your service number, what company you're in, what your rifle number is, things like that. And you learn all the shipboard terminology. You know, like a bulkhead, a deck. You know they're not walls; it's not a floor, it's a deck, and a bulkhead. Oh, also like what you'd call a kitchen, we call it a galley. Your dining room we would call a mess deck. You know, your bathroom we'd call that a head. Topside course is topside; below decks is anything on the inside of the ship, where you tie your lines off to the peer, you got ballards out on the peer. You got bits up on the ships. You got cleats on the ship, things like that, stanchions, lifelines. There's only one of them that's a lifeline that's at the very top and we usually got three, so it's a lifeline, houseline, and foot line. You know, a lot of terminology like that is what you learn, and it's just like folding your clothes. They have to be folded just right. You're..., almost everything gets rolled, your socks get rolled, and the edge has to point to the left. If you've got them in your locker pointing to the right, you'll get gigged for it.

Narrator (Question deals with schooling):

Fisher: I was in school continually in the Navy...always took a lot of courses. I took and what I did, I had about nine months in the Navy, and I wanted to take a G.E.D. and that was the only way to do it at the time, so I went and took the G.E.D. Made that, but then they wouldn't give it to me because I was still high school age. So I had to wait...so after I waited they finally gave me my certificate. I came back though Kinsley and they gave me my diploma from here. But I got college credits. I don't know how many I got from different courses that you can take in the Navy, like you can do math...which I've done, metric course, and of course all the courses for advancement. You know you've got books there...a lot of its professional or technical like that. I took a course in admiralty law, metric system, Navy orientation, which was a hard one. Even after eight years in the Navy, Navy orientation is a hard course. You got a course sheet that they give ya'. Some of them got 100 questions, some of them got 500 questions, and you got to sit and answer those questions. A lot of it you can get out of the book. But just like Navy orientation...I just did that one goofing off. I thought that would be an easy one so I could get a couple of points. I found out it wasn't so easy. It went way back into the days of sailing, back to like the Constitution, you know. So it was a rough course. It wasn't that bad, but it wasn't what I thought it was going to be.

Narrator (Question deals with preparation):

Fisher: You have a lot of schools in the Navy that you get to go to. You do firefighting; you do gunnery, damage control. Damage control is, anybody on board ship, they are going to learn damage control. And you learn firefighting, and they even got schools for it. And one of the schools for like damage control they've actually got a small ship, it's like a tug, up next to the pier. You go on there for your damage control and what that is to fight the fires and to keep the ship from sinking. So whenever the gun that they got over there in Hawaii, or did have, I guess they still do, it's sitting in the water, and

the water is all the way around it. It's tied up to this pier and when you walk on board just like you would any ship and you get on and you're sitting in the classroom, and all of a sudden you hear like a bomb go off, and water starts coming in and you have to stop that water. If you don't stop the water, you're going to be swimming. But you actually think the ship is sinking. You know water will start popping in down here, and the next thing you know it's coming in up here. Your job is to try to get that water stopped anyway you can. You have mattresses, everything that's on the ship that you can use to plug a hole. Even if you got a dead buddy plug him. Put him in there. It sounds cruel but that's your job is to save your ship. Even if you're dead you can still help save. You learn things like that.

Swimming; you can be out there 15 miles, 500 miles, it don't make any difference. All your clothing is a life-saving equipment. You never take off your shoes, or you take them off but you don't drop them. Say if you're out there in the middle of the water...take them off and tie em and drape them around your neck. You learn that as long as you got your shirt tail tucked in you got all your buttons; you can blow in your shirt and make an air bubble to help hold you up. As long as it stays wet, once it starts drying out you got to put a little bit in the water. You can take your pants off, and you probably noticed how they got bell bottoms. That's so that you can get them off your feet easier. So you take your pants off there in the water and you actually have to do this too. You take them off and you zip them up and button them and tie the legs shut. And you take and put them behind you and throw them over your head. So then you got two-like pillars of air there and you can lay on them till it dries out then you're ok. Once they start drying out, dip them again, throw them back, and swing them over the top of your head, so that they fill up with air. That's life saving equipment.

Narrator (Question deals with having to do that):

Fisher: Yeah, we did it in class and everything. You learn all that basically in boot camp. You can even take your white hat, you know the Dixie cup, that's what we call it. You can pop it out, and get it wet. Pop it down on top of the water and hold on to it. There's enough air there as long as you give it a little bit of help it will keep you afloat. You can stay afloat out there indefinite...till a shark eats ya or something. That's basically...basically you learn that you can do that.

Narrator (Question deals with friendships):

Fisher: O yeah, made a lot of friends. In fact there was another guy from here in Kinsley. We used to run around together. He eventually ended up stationed over in Hawaii while I was still there. He was on one ship and I was on another. We would run into each other when we went out of liberty. Liberty is where you know, you go down town and do whatever. That's what liberty is.

Narrator (Question deals with good experiences – was the Navy a good experience for you?):

Fisher: It was one of the best. I'd recommend it for a lot of people. (*Even today?*) Sure...I did a lot of career counseling in the Navy...as I advanced, you know. Everybody does that. And we used to have

guys in there, kind of like smart guys, who thought they were smart. They were misfits more or less. They didn't care anything about advancement. They weren't going to stay in and make a career out of it. Of course everybody can't, you know. There are some guys that got to get out. You know, but a lot of them guys 18-19 years old, you ask them what they're going to be on the outside and they say well I'm going to be a manager of McDonalds. Well, that's a real goal, as far as I was concerned. I told them if you can't make it here in the Navy, then you're not going to make it on the outside. There's just no way because you don't have the discipline. Guys that stay in, well, a lot of guys that get out too got a lot of discipline and are self-starters. They can do just about anything. All you got to do is put your mind to it.

Narrator (Question asks about the experience that were blocked out):

Fisher: Uh yeah, like in Vietnam there's things that you kind of, you know block it. It's back there but you try not to recall it.

Narrator (Question deals with what Mr. Fisher's thought about the Vietnam War):

Fisher: We did what we had to do. Just like they're doing over there in Iraq now, freeing the people. I am all for it. If I was still your age, physical enough, and I was still in I would be there. I'd do it in a minute. I think everybody ought to be free to make their own decisions. And those people weren't. Dictatorship never works. We've got free society. That's the best way, freedom of religion, and everything. I don't like flag burners. You know, none of that.

Narrator (Question deals with him telling what he wants to tell that wasn't asked):

Fisher: No, not that I know of. I got to do a lot of traveling. I was on both coasts...Spain, Italy, down in the Caribbean. I was stationed in quite a few different places.

Narrator: (Question deals with if there were places he didn't like):

Fisher: No, not really. Home is where you hang your hat. You can like any place. All you got to do is make up your mind to do it. If you're going to be sad, and you got your mind make up that you're going to be sad, or you don't like the place then you're not going to like it. All you got to do is make up your mind to like it. In New York I didn't know if I was going to like that. It was all right. New Yorkers aren't all that they're cracked up to be. You know, everybody says that they're not courteous and everything. Not all of them are. But you're going to find that anywhere. For the most part they're courteous. So there wasn't a problem.

Narrator: (Question asks about the tattoos on his arm):

Fisher: Yeah, a couple of my buddies did that to me. They had it done at a tattoo parlor, this one and that one. My nickname there for awhile was “Popeye.” I was pretty young at the time. A couple of my buddies, I got in a little bit of trouble, and that’s how I got to be call “Popeye” there for a long time. They said, “Ah hell, a couple of stick anchors, to match your stick arms.” That’s what happens whenever you drink too much.

Narrator (Question deals with having fun):

Fisher: All the time. A lot of fun. Yeah, you have a lot of fun in the Navy. You learn different people. You become real good friends. It’s just like my daughter’s wedding this last weekend. There’s a lady that my wife met. She was the first Navy wife..who’s the wife of a buddy of mine. We were sanctioned together. And they met 36 years ago. And she’s been out here for the last month and a half, helping prepare for the wedding. You know, we see each other every now and then. Sometimes, once a year, sometimes you know, it’s every two years. We have ship reunions every year. I could go to a reunion almost every month, I think. Got chiefs’ reunion, cruiser reunion, different ships I was on...we have reunions. Now you can’t do them all, but you can do some of them.

Narrator (Question deals with if there were many people he served with still alive):

Fisher: Yeah, there is

Narrator (Question deals with what he did after war):

Fisher: When I got out we were living in Virginia Beach, and I became a contractor, a general contractor. We did mostly painting of houses, custom work, lot of new housing. Probably more custom work, residential, and commercial buildings, or anything. And I was in going in and painting when there’s brand new carpet down. I taught my wife how to paint.

Narrator (Question deals with if he met his wife in the Navy):

Fisher: No, she was from here too, here in Kinsley...clear back in high school. I guess you could say she was my first girlfriend, my first love, whatever.

Narrator (Question deals with how they kept in touch):

Fisher: We wrote letters back and forth all the time. Sometimes, I could call. I know I called once from Spain; this was clear back in 1970 or 1972, back in that area. I think we talked about 5 minutes, and it cost me about \$125. But a lot of times on board ships, if you were on a big enough ship, you had radios and you could work through the radio through the telephone. People here in the States like your ham

operators and stuff they could relay or you could actually talk, but every time you were talking you'd have to say "over" and then she could say something and she'd have to say "over." Just going back and forth, it seemed like forever.

Narrator (Question deals with what Navy awards he received):

Fisher: Navy Commendation, Vietnam National Defense, Good Conduct, trying to think, Sea Service, Pistol, Rifle, that's about it. Some of them I got three times. Some of them I got four times. Anything else? Think of something. Out at sea it isn't like a cruise on board a ship. We call them a cruise, but it's not what you'd think because you actually work. You get to see the world, but you have to work at it.

I was in Hawaii, Samoa, which is down across the equator, been through the Panama Canal five times I think. You go across the equator in either Australia or Samoa. When you go across you get initiated. Just like hazing that they don't allow in the Navy or in colleges, stuff that people do do, we still do it. I got hung up on a gun barrel with my hands handcuffed together, because I was the wise guy. It makes it fun. If you're real timid and you don't say anything, then you'll have no fun. You have to smart off to the guys that are doing the initiation. They're already shell backs. If you're not a shell back, you're a pollywog or an eel or a skate. Once you go across the equator, and go through the initiation, then you become the shell back. So then if you every have to go back across again you're the one giving the initiation. You got to crawl under a cargo net and like two guys might stand on each side of the cargo net, and lock you down where you can't go anywhere. You can't go through it, and you can't get back out. Then you get beat on the butt quite a few times, but that's how it goes. Then you might have to eat part of an octopus, go through a garbage shoot. It's like one of them kids' tunnels, and they'll save the garbage for maybe a week and they put it in that shoot, and everybody's got to crawl through it. They do all kinds of things. You have to kiss the baby. You got the baby. You got King Neptune. You have to kiss the baby to make him happy because he's crying. He was usually the fattest guy on board ship. He has grease all over him and you have to kiss his belly, like you would a baby, and of course he'll grab your head and rub it in. I did the same things to them when I was a shell back. You darn right.