

Lasswell, James US Navy

[00:00:14.01] JAMES LASSWELL: I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii in September of 1941. My mom moved to Japan when in 1924 at age eight, and my grandfather put in electricity into Tokyo. My father was a Marine enlisted guy who went to OCS, volunteered, did the thing you're not supposed to do and volunteered to go to Japan and learn how to speak, read, and write Japanese.

[00:00:47.85] So later in the 30s, my parents met up. My dad became fluent in Japanese and codebreaking and was sent to Hawaii to work on breaking the Japanese naval code JN-25. He spent the entire war doing that, was not really recognized even though he broke the code that disclosed the Battle of Midway.

[00:01:17.84] He broke the code that announced the movement report of Admiral Yamamoto that let us shoot him down. All that was classified. He spent his entire war experience buried in the dungeon there. And as a Marine, that was not beneficial to his career, he wondered why he wasn't out fighting the Japanese. And so the bottom line was he was doomed to secrecy for his life.

[00:01:51.65] So anyway, I spent a couple of months there. My mom and I were evacuated, moved back to the mainland, in those days, United States, my dad remained there the entire war.

[00:02:05.01] MARK FRANKLIN: So you were on Honolulu--

[00:02:07.16] JAMES LASSWELL: Yes, sir.

[00:02:07.46] MARK FRANKLIN: --Pearl Harbor? You were an infant, you were a baby, but you were--

[00:02:10.36] JAMES LASSWELL: Way too young to remember, three months old. I was born in September.

[00:02:14.30] MARK FRANKLIN: And your dad's one of the silent heroes. One of those heroes that can't talk about being a hero.

[00:02:18.15] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, he can now. NSA just opened a museum that highlights his activities, and they named a building after him.

[00:02:26.95] MARK FRANKLIN: Oh, wow.

[00:02:27.62] JAMES LASSWELL: So it finally came to pass long after he and my mom died.

[00:02:32.28] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you go back to Honolulu after the war?

[00:02:34.56] JAMES LASSWELL: Oh, yeah. I've been back there dozens of times. I was stationed there for three years when I was in command of USS Safeguard.

[00:02:48.81] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, when I was young, I didn't grow up in Honolulu. I left when I was a couple of months old, and I grew up in San Francisco area, the East Coast area.

[00:03:02.70] MARK FRANKLIN: So you didn't go back right away after the war ended?

[00:03:04.84] JAMES LASSWELL: No, not until I was in the Navy. Well, we probably went through there en route to Japan. My dad was stationed in Yokosuka as CO of the Marine barracks there in 1948 through '50. So I'm sure we passed through Hawaii.

[00:03:24.52] MARK FRANKLIN: Where did you graduate from high school?

[00:03:26.70] JAMES LASSWELL: Point Loma High School here in San Diego. I left Point Loma High School and went to the Naval Academy directly.

[00:03:34.75] MARK FRANKLIN: So you went your Navy academy graduate?

[00:03:36.58] JAMES LASSWELL: Yes, sir.

[00:03:37.20] MARK FRANKLIN: So what led you in that direction? Was it your dad's service?

[00:03:39.85] JAMES LASSWELL: Yes sir, completely. From the day I was old enough to remember remembering, I wanted to be a Marine officer. And I spent my life dedicated to that very concept. While I was at the academy, I took three weeks of my leave time and went to jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia, and I loved it.

[00:04:08.02] The only thing that kept me from going in the Marine Corps was along the way I had a midshipman cruise on a destroyer out of Mayport, Florida, lived with a bunch of bachelors on a beach there. I had the time of my life. So somewhere along the way, as my dad said, I got smarter than he was and went into the Navy.

[00:04:31.51] MARK FRANKLIN: What year did you graduate from the academy?

[00:04:33.36] JAMES LASSWELL: I graduated in 1963 in June. Immediately, my first ship was here in San Diego, USS Hoel, some call it Ho-el, but DDG-13. I came aboard as a first lieutenant.

[00:04:53.80] I remember my first preference card still thinking about-- I was a young bachelor, I'd been to jump school and I heard of an outfit called ANGLICO, which were parachute drop into enemy or near enemy territory and did gunfire liaison. So I immediately put that on my preference card.

[00:05:21.38] MARK FRANKLIN: Well, let's get back up to the academy, what was that like?

[00:05:23.84] JAMES LASSWELL: The first year was difficult. I have radiant personality. I'm always smiling and that's not something you're supposed to do. So I attracted a lot of negative attention. Fortunately, my grades were OK. I had a good time there, and I graduated.

[00:05:48.75] I remember hearing about Vietnam late in the time frame, I think Kennedy had been elected. And what crossed my mind is, hey, this war is going on in Vietnam, and I'm going to get into the service and the war will be over and I'll be just like my dad and be missing out on these things. So I was nervous that somebody was going to end the war before I got a chance to get in and do my thing. Led me to hurry up, get in.

[00:06:20.54] And when I was a bachelor, filling out my preference card, didn't mind the Vietnam thing. Later I was married with a couple of kids, and so Vietnam was not high on my list.

[00:06:36.19] MARK FRANKLIN: When you came out of the academy, what was your rate? In the Army, we would call it your branch. What was your rate?

[00:06:43.71] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, I was a surface warfare officer and I was an ensign 01. I immediately became first lieutenant after-- first lieutenant is the guy responsible for keeping the ship clean and painted, not like 02. And then I went to school and became a gunnery officer on the ship.

[00:07:07.95] Love guns. I've been shooting since I was almost six years old. And I just loved the guns on the ship. So that was my great assignment.

[00:07:21.28] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you get any additional training, you mentioned jump school?

[00:07:24.10] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, I did jump school at the academy, gunnery officer school on USS Hoel to take over as gunnery officer. The guns we had then were five inch 54s, not horribly reliable. I did have a really sharp petty officer. Remember him well today, GMG2 Perry, who kept those guns working and enabled us to do a lot of gunfire support missions off Vietnam.

[00:07:54.99] Mentioning Vietnam, our first deployment, Vietnam was still ongoing in spite of the fact I was worried it'd be over. We had TACAN on the ship and we were a missile ship. TACAN, tactical air radar navigation. It's essentially a little beeper that tells planes how to get to where you are.

[00:08:19.41] And so we were stationed up in the northern Tonkin Gulf near the Haiphong Harbor in a job called PIRAZ, its primary identification radar advisory zone. Planes coming out of North Vietnam would be vectored to our TACAN over the ship, and we'd make sure they weren't followed. JAMES LASSWELL: That was '63, the first trip.

[00:08:54.64] With a long trip across the Pacific. People just don't recognize how big that ocean is. As I said, we got stuck there and in the northern SAR, which is search and recovery, PIRAZ. And basically we were looking for MiGs that would jump on the tail of returning fighters, or in one case we had a guy that was shot and had to ditch his plane. We picked him up out of the drink. That was our job as search and recovery, northern SAR.

[00:09:30.07] MARK FRANKLIN: Now did you actually engage these enemy aircraft?

[00:09:33.70] JAMES LASSWELL: No, I did not.

[00:09:35.71] MARK FRANKLIN: Was the ship capable of doing that?

[00:09:37.33] JAMES LASSWELL: Oh, yes. We had--

[00:09:38.44] MARK FRANKLIN: What did they have?

[00:09:38.89] JAMES LASSWELL: --the five inch 54 guns and we had Tartar missiles. And the engagement we had with the enemy there was further south. We were sent down to South Vietnam and we did gunfire support called in by a liaison officer on the beach, shooting at targets they pointed out.

[00:10:04.19] So we bounced back and forth between being the PIRAZ and SAR ship down to gunfire support.

[00:10:13.32] MARK FRANKLIN: Now those guys calling in fires from the beach, that's ANGLICO, that's what you wanted to do. Did you ever get a chance to do that?

[00:10:19.14] JAMES LASSWELL: No, I never did. I spent all my time in ships in the gun side. I did work with a lot of them, but I never did actually get on a beach to do that. I did spend time in country we'll talk about later.

[00:10:42.92] JAMES LASSWELL: It was on a ship. And we didn't have much involvement in or access to Vietnam. I do remember we went into Da Nang. Our CO, who was a little prissy, got really upset because the adviser that came aboard wasn't going to get rid of his sidearm, and he didn't like that very much.

[00:11:10.01] So we spent a couple of days in Da Nang. We left Da Nang during the evenings and came back in during the days. But very little exposure at that time to anybody ashore.

[00:11:26.72] MARK FRANKLIN: What were your initial duties and did you perform these same duties during your whole tour, or did that change over time?

[00:11:32.65] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, as I said, when I started I was first lieutenant and my duties essentially kept the ship clean, painted, and all pretty. And I stood a lot of deck watches and that was--

[00:11:49.95] MARK FRANKLIN: Describe that duty, what does that duty entail?

[00:11:51.88] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, officer of the deck. I'm on the bridge with a team of folks. I started as junior officer of the deck, And of course, after a while moved up to that officer of the deck position. Essentially, you are in charge of the ship, while the CO is not on the bridge.

[00:12:12.51] MARK FRANKLIN: So pretty much all the decisions, you're making.

[00:12:15.07] JAMES LASSWELL: Yes, sir, and running the ship.

[00:12:16.92] MARK FRANKLIN: And running the ship. Big responsibility.

[00:12:19.47] JAMES LASSWELL: It is. I mean, it takes most junior officers a year and a half or so of standing watches to get qualified at various levels. Now, my first qualification was officer of the deck independent steaming, without other ships around. And then you qualify to be officer of the deck in fleet steaming, where you have other ships close aboard, where you're obviously a little bit more challenged.

[00:12:55.31] JAMES LASSWELL: This is a brand new ship, USS Hoel had just been recently commissioned. I had a nice stateroom and I was pretty happy with it. Food was excellent. Interestingly enough, every ship I served on had award winning mess decks and/or wardroom. And so I never went for lack of good food.

[00:13:24.94] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, I still get together with folks from USS Hoel today. In fact, last week I visited-- one, two, three, four of them back on the East Coast when I went back to the opening of that NSA museum I discussed. So we got together, had lunch.

[00:13:45.82] Frequently we do an occasional Zoom call where I'll set up a Zoom conference and several of my shipmates from USS Hoel and the later ship USS Frank Knox. And frankly, quite a few of my company mates at the Naval Academy.

[00:14:09.16] MARK FRANKLIN: So you stay in touch?

[00:14:10.45] JAMES LASSWELL: Stay close in touch.

[00:14:12.25] MARK FRANKLIN: Now you're an officer, but did you make friends or form relationships with folks from other socioeconomic backgrounds, other races that you may not have had not joined the military?

[00:14:24.01] JAMES LASSWELL: Yes. As an officer, we were encouraged not to mix and mingle, but you get real close to some of these guys you work with and you had a lot of respect for them. And so it's always good to have a lot of friends. One of the things I tend to tell people is friends come and go, but enemies accumulate. So you want to have as many friends as possible.

[00:14:53.54] MARK FRANKLIN: How much time did you have to yourself? Any time for recreational activities?

[00:14:57.62] JAMES LASSWELL: Frankly, when you have a job on board the ship and you stand two watches a day, you're pretty busy. When you come into port, for the two ships where I was a bachelor, I always had a place in South Mission Beach and lived down there very happily as much as I could.

[00:15:26.69] MARK FRANKLIN: How about any specific memories of the popular music at the time?

[00:15:30.79] JAMES LASSWELL: Popular music at that time, I'm not big on too much popular music. I really did fall in love with folk music. Bobby Dylan, Joan Baez. I can recall having a tape recorder, reel to reel tape recorder, where I had a ton of their music. And I used to play all the peace music before we did shore bombardment. It got us ready for the business at hand.

[00:16:01.82] MARK FRANKLIN: I hadn't heard that one before.

[00:16:08.54] JAMES LASSWELL: When I was on USS Hoel, near the end of the tour, I had a just wonderful department head. And he kept telling me that I needed to go to destroyer school, which today is called Surface Warfare Department Head School. And I was maybe not real happy with the Navy at that time. And I was thinking maybe I should just get out.

[00:16:35.25] And then he also talked to me about postgraduate school. So I put both of those on my preference card, erased the ANGLICO. And sure enough, I went to department head school next. As I left USS Hoel, the last memory I have of leaving Tonkin Gulf, I got a flash message talking about the Frank Knox running aground at practice reef.

[00:17:04.58] And then we went to Yokosuka and we used to have a drink there called Knox on the Rocks. And sure enough, I got to destroyer school. I did really well at destroyer school, and I selected a job as weapons officer on a destroyer out of San Diego. And wouldn't be surprised at all when I came up, I'm going to be weapons officer on Frank Knox.

[00:17:32.47] That was interesting on one hand, but the second hand is the other two line department heads were classmates of mine from the Naval Academy. One was Rear Admiral Denny Conley, and the other was Captain Jerry Harkin. We were good friends and it turned out to be one of the better wardrooms I'd ever served in.

[00:17:54.27] We got along as the department heads, we just did amazing work together. We took that ship from having been grounded and being rebuilt in Yokosuka to winning the Arleigh Burke trophy for the most improved ship in the fleet and won the award.

[00:18:15.82] MARK FRANKLIN: When were you on the Knox, from when to when?

[00:18:17.01] JAMES LASSWELL: '66 to '67.

[00:18:20.11] MARK FRANKLIN: '66, '67. Did you deploy to Vietnam on that ship?

[00:18:23.56] JAMES LASSWELL: Yeah, we deployed once on that. Most of my time on Frank Knox was getting the ship restored. When I showed up, sonar dome was cut off and the whole forward section of the ship was filled with foam that they had to use to float it off the rocks.

[00:18:45.70] So we spent a lot of time getting it ready. We did our work up and got ready for sea and we got training. With Frank Knox, we did a lot of gunfire support. We deployed initially

off South Vietnam. I remember we did a two day mission most nights where it was called H&I, harassment and interdiction fire.

[00:19:16.98] They picked a certain square mile area where Viet Cong were operating and just had us spend all night shooting random rounds in different parts of--

[00:19:30.69] MARK FRANKLIN: Describe how that mission would come about? Who would call it in and how would you get the instructions to fire and where to fire?

[00:19:36.88] JAMES LASSWELL: We got a naval message from the guy on a beach there, and he ended up giving us coordinates of a very significant area and just said lob rounds in there every random couple of minutes. So basically-- we always called it H&I, harassment and interdiction, but the people it was harassing was the guys on the ship, because all night long-- and when you fire a round on that ship, the whole ship feels it.

[00:20:06.84] MARK FRANKLIN: Does it?

[00:20:07.38] JAMES LASSWELL: And so it's pretty intrusive. So we did several nights, maybe 500 rounds, we had to replenish.

[00:20:17.37] MARK FRANKLIN: In one night?

[00:20:18.31] JAMES LASSWELL: Oh, no. In the two nights.

[00:20:20.43] MARK FRANKLIN: But still, over two nights, 500 rounds.

[00:20:21.88] JAMES LASSWELL: Yeah, but remember, the ship had three mounts, two barrels on each side. Six barrels. And then later following that work, we went up north. There were two basic operations that we were involved in. One was called Operation Sea Dragon, and that was essentially uncontrolled fire into North Vietnam.

[00:20:53.22] So the ship would go in, turn broadside, expose our six barrels. I remember my commodore, I really loved the guy, Commodore Ward Cummings, who was later killed in a plane crash, was just a wonderful guy. But he and I always talked about my guns and I just loved the gunners mates and how well they functioned.

[00:21:18.31] So the first time we did a shoot, we turned broadside to the beach. I ordered a rapid salvo fire, which essentially means as soon as all six barrels are loaded, it goes off.

[00:21:32.68] MARK FRANKLIN: Simultaneously?

[00:21:33.43] JAMES LASSWELL: Simultaneously. So you're putting six rounds of about almost 60 pounds shell projectile toward the beach, 360-70 pounds.

[00:21:44.99] MARK FRANKLIN: Any particular target or is this harassment?

[00:21:46.49] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, they gave us targets to shoot at. And the interesting thing there was naval guns on the ship, the five inch 38s, have about a nine mile range. The guns the North Vietnamese had, it's not fair, were about 15 miles. So as we were evacuating, they got another five to six miles shooting at us.

[00:22:12.94] I still have a tape today of about 110 rounds exploding close aboard to the ship. And I remember the first time we did that, I mentioned a rapid salvo fire and the commodore took me aside and said, Jim, I thought you guys were really hot shooters. I didn't hear very many shots fired. So I said, OK, I got this story.

[00:22:40.20] So I went to the gunner's mate and said, OK, this time we're going rapid continuous fire, which basically means every time there's a round in the barrel, it goes off. And of course, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. And I don't know if we fired more or less, but the commodore was just super happy. I also threw in a couple of white phosphorus rounds, and so he was excited that we had secondaries.

[00:23:07.59] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you ever get any battle damage assessment on your ship?

[00:23:10.83] JAMES LASSWELL: Later they came back because, I mean, it was unsupported. I think they would have had folks fly over and do recce missions and they would give us some sort of battle damage assessment. But like I said, the last time, the last one we were on, as we turned outward from the beach, the only mount I had left to bear on the beach was mount 53, two barrels aft.

[00:23:41.56] It was shooting, we heard a tremendous explosion in the ship and 53 reported they had taken a hit. Well, we were outside of the gun range. So I went running down to the mount to see-- outside of our gun range-- and I run down to the mount to see what had happened.

[00:24:03.16] And it wasn't really a hit. What had happened is the recoil cylinder had cracked and the recoil fluid that absorbs the recoil from the gun shooting had completely emptied. And so last time they shot, it went against hard metal and destroyed the gun mount.

[00:24:27.42] MARK FRANKLIN: Nobody hurt?

[00:24:28.28] JAMES LASSWELL: Nobody hurt. Gun was pretty beat up, we had to get it replaced.

[00:24:33.57] MARK FRANKLIN: So that was one of those times that the North Vietnamese actually were able to get to you?

[00:24:38.70] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, they got to us. They didn't hit us, but we hit ourselves, so to speak. JAMES LASSWELL: The other engagement we had was I was just getting off watch and we had gotten a report that a Nasty class PT boat had been abandoned right off the beach about seven, eight, nine miles off the beach, North Vietnam.

[00:25:12.56] We went up to find it, got close aboard. I jumped aboard with my first class gunner's mate, GMG1 Lonke, and we jumped aboard this PT boat in the middle of the night. And it was, of course, dead in the water, had no lights or anything. And we jumped inside, immediately checked to make sure it was watertight. We didn't want it to sink on us.

[00:25:45.17] And we had battery flashlights. So basically everything looked OK and they had evacuated it. I was unfamiliar with the operation, in those days that was called Operation Phoenix. Army Special forces, including one of my classmates, and CIA, went up to North Vietnam, would take senior leaders from North Vietnam, take them down for interrogation.

[00:26:17.12] They had apparently drawn fire and evacuated that boat. Our ship came close to board. I and one of my gunner's mate, GMG1 Lonke, jumped aboard, verified that it wasn't going to sink on us right away, and then basically spent the night trying to make sure we could do something with it.

[00:26:46.05] MARK FRANKLIN: Now you mentioned battery operated flashlights, too.

[00:26:49.20] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, that's how we saw what was going on inside the ship and knew it wasn't going to sink immediately. And then while I was at destroyer school, I learned a lot of Morse code. And I ended up spending most of the night, I think Lonke got a little bit of sleep, but I was topside sending code to the ship.

[00:27:11.49] Are you OK? Yes, I'm OK. Are you OK? Yes, I'm OK. How is the boat?

[00:27:17.48] Boat is OK. So we did that for a whole lot of time. And then the sun came up in the morning and we got a chance to tour around the boat.

[00:27:27.86] What was interesting to me-- and very interesting-- was we got up on the fo'c'sle near the gun mount and there was a satchel charge placed, surrounded by a bunch of C-4 and a whole bunch of ammunition. They had tried to scuttle the ship and blow it up. So we felt pretty good that that didn't go off in the middle of the night. And we promptly threw all that stuff over to the side.

[00:27:57.72] Later that day, they ended up sending a boat over with an engineman. And the engineman got us started. So we ended up getting the boat going. It's kind of exciting for me. a young lieutenant, has his own little PT boat speeding out of the Tonkin Gulf. So we went south, did that for almost a day, and then ran out of gas. We ended up hooking it up, towed it into Da Nang.

[00:28:32.08] I got helicoptered off. And then we put a crew there from the beach on board and turned that over to the Phoenix guys. So that was my excitement there on Frank Knox. We used our guns a lot and I got some good excitement. Now, no good deed goes unpunished.

[00:29:03.76] So from there, I went straight to Naval Postgraduate School where I enrolled in a curriculum of undersea acoustics called engineering acoustics, essentially the propagation of sound in the sea, sonar, and those kind of things, and really expected that my next job would be

in that area. Well, while I was at graduate school, I was notified that I'd been selected to be the XO of Logistics Support Base, Binh Thuy in Vietnam.

[00:29:41.16] I called the detailer and asked what is LSB and what is a Binh Thuy? And he didn't know, but he said, you've been personally selected for this because of your record. And I said, OK. So the day I left graduate school, headed to San Diego to go to the pre-Vietnam training SERE school and other things, I was notified that my job had been changed to senior adviser of Intermediate Support Base, Nam Can.

[00:30:19.20] I didn't know what that was either, but while I was at school, they told me they had taken a big Ammi pontoon off the beach, built a patrol boat repair facility on it, and then called it Sea Float. After that, they moved it ashore, called it Solid Anchor. They built a fence around it and hosed it down with Agent Orange. And then called it the ISB Nam Can.

[00:30:50.71] So when I got into country, I was supposed to go to Nam Can and I learned about what they called in-country detailing, which is some guy who wanted that job is already in country, took it. And when I got in they put me in a BOQ and assigned me to NSA, Naval Support Activity, Saigon. I was not happy with that. That was a desk job.

[00:31:18.32] Although the desk job came with a lot of interesting travel. My job was assistant AcToVLog officer, Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese of Logistics. So my role was to go to all the logistics bases, all the Navy bases in Vietnam, assess their readiness to be handed over to the Vietnamese. As you recall, in those times, that was '70, '71 time frame is when we were handing stuff over to the Vietnamese and moving out of the country.

[00:31:56.63] MARK FRANKLIN: That was Vietnamization.

[00:31:57.85] JAMES LASSWELL: Yes, sir.

[00:31:59.33] MARK FRANKLIN: So you were part of that?

[00:32:00.62] JAMES LASSWELL: I was.

[00:32:01.93] MARK FRANKLIN: Your job then was to assess the logistics capability?

[00:32:05.72] JAMES LASSWELL: And then it was really interesting. They said, OK, go to this base. How do I do that? Well, you just go down to the Tan Son Nhut Air Base and find a plane that's going there. And some days it was a helicopter, some days it was Air America, the CIA stuff. Some days it was, who knows what.

[00:32:29.67] So I got to travel all over the country. That was kind of interesting. A couple of interesting things is a lot of these bases were floating pontoons and being on the water, near the water, at sunset they would start throwing grenades in the water to dissuade any swimming sappers.

[00:32:55.01] And they would always get the new guy coming aboard and watch him real close to blink check him to see what happens when that first grenade went off. So that was exciting there. They would also shoot lily pads that were coming down in case there was a sapper there underwater.

[00:33:16.42] So I did that for a while and finally got an audience with the admiral, I think it was Admiral Bob Salzer who was then in charge, and told him that, hey, I was told that I was coming here to command a base, and now I'm just running around doing adjutant type work. And I'd really like to command a base. And I don't know what happened, but they relieved the CO of this base down in the delta called Vinh Long.

[00:33:58.14] I asked Intermediate Support Base Vinh Long. So the admiral, through his aide, who was a friend of mine, asked me if I'd be willing to take that. And I went down. I was the CO of that base for about two months until I turned it over to my Vietnamese counterpart. Now, the interesting thing about assessing these bases when I was in Saigon is I got to brief the chief of naval operations of the Vietnamese Navy and all his staff.

[00:34:31.89] So I had only been at the base down here at Vinh Long for about a month, a little less than a month, and my counterpart tolerated me. But everything changed the day the CNO came down, visited the base and instead of going straight over to my counterpart Dai uy An, came straight over to me and said, Jim, how are you doing? I haven't seen you in a month or so.

[00:35:00.10] And I immediately gained significant face in the eyes of my counterpart, who now paid a lot more attention to me. We turned the base over to the Vietnamese. When I got there, there were 75, maybe close to 80, including a River Patrol Division and the logistics guys.

[00:35:25.13] When I left, there were 13 and they were all advisers on the logistics side. All of the advisers from the gunboat side had transitioned out.

[00:35:41.22] MARK FRANKLIN: How many Vietnamese now are taking over?

[00:35:44.30] JAMES LASSWELL: There were several hundred. JAMES LASSWELL: I have very good impression of the Vietnamese. They were willing to learn. A lot of my counterparts didn't have much aloha for that. But I watched these guys. A car would break, they'd pull it over the side of the road, get underneath it and do an engine overhaul on the car.

[00:36:13.40] They would do the same thing in the base. Once we taught them how to do the work on those boats, I found them to be really excellent folks. I think we only have one problem there. And I remember this, we had a nice little bar and a wardroom mess type thing. We paid and bought food and we all ate well.

[00:36:38.93] But I was sitting in the bar drinking one night and a very disgruntled Vietnamese sailor came in with an M16 and started shooting holes in our roof. And I guess his magazine was out, and I was in a good position at the corner of the bar, and I was able to disarm him. And then two of my guys jumped on him and we turned him over to the CO of the base.

[00:37:04.89] The CO just went nuts, locked him in a Conex box in the center of the courtyard there for about a week. And it was pretty hot. I mean, that's the one thing that's consistent about Vietnam, even in the wet, rainy, cold season, it's hot.

[00:37:26.69] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, the Bronze Star was an aggregation of the work I had done in Vietnam, the in-country tour. The Navy Commendation Medal was as a result of our gunfire support activity and in particular the rescue of that PT boat.

[00:37:52.11] MARK FRANKLIN: PT boat, yeah.

[00:37:53.33] JAMES LASSWELL: So I got an achievement medal and two commendation medals for that, all with the combat V.

[00:38:05.42] MARK FRANKLIN: Describe the leadership above you during your tours on the Knox and then when you were in country in Saigon.

[00:38:13.19] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, in Saigon I really enjoyed working for the admiral that I did. He was a really sharp guy. I didn't spend that much time. I had a boss, but he and I were on the road separately, distinctly. And so I never spent much time there.

[00:38:39.68] When I got to the base as CO, I essentially reported to the admiral at MACV-- or the admiral at NSA and the general at MACV. And I found everything to be easily done. Pretty much you are on your own, if you needed help, you asked for it. And I learned early on, don't ask for a lot of help.

[00:39:15.10] On the Frank Knox, the CO that took over after we got the ship rebuilt was one of the best skippers I ever worked for, Jim Baker, who since died. And we became very good friends after the Navy. I played bridge with him and I played bridge with two or three of my COs. I love to play cards.

[00:39:43.73] You asked about friendships, I know I'm not supposed to do that, but I used to play poker and in a chief's mess, the goat locker. But I liked playing poker and bridge. So anyhow, did Frank Knox and then went in country Vietnam. Following that, I was a little bit upset about being sent back to Vietnam.

[00:40:16.41] And I remember seeing a detailer in Vietnam who was saying, well, I don't know if we can find anything really good for you with your record. I said, well, last time I talked to you guys, you said I had a great record and I was going to Vietnam. He said, oh, yeah, that too. And the next thing you know, they came back and they offered me a job, or they detailed me to a job as CO USS Safeguard, which was a diving and salvage ship, ARS-25.

[00:40:47.94] I enjoyed that, it was really challenging. It was in the '70s time frame, wasn't the best time to be in the military. And we had a lot of unrest, racial unrest and other things. I did work for a commodore then who had been a submariner and had a fire on his submarine at depth, and they fought the fire, bringing it up to the surface, got the fire out. This guy was obsessive compulsive about fires.

[00:41:26.22] He ended up commandeering a derelict ship from the mothball fleet that he filled with wood and oil. We towed it out. They would set it on fire, turn it adrift, and we'd have to come alongside, grappling hook to get alongside it and pull that ship in, and then get in, fight the fire, and then dewater the ship.

[00:41:55.50] Interesting, we did that exercise probably four to five times. And with a lot of help from the boss. The commodore was certainly sitting over my shoulder barking at me. Interestingly enough, while we were there off Haiphong Harbor, one night I got a call, a radio message. XO came in and woke me up and said, there's a minesweeper, USS Enhance, on fire in the islands.

[00:42:31.55] And if you look at Haiphong Harbor, they've got these little rock islands all over the place. Now, we were there, frankly, as part of Operation END SWEEP. We had mined the harbors and they had helicopters pulling mine devices to get rid of them. And this minesweeper was obviously there. Minesweepers in those days were made out of wood, and that wood caught afire, and there was oil and smoke and what have you.

[00:43:05.74] Commodore couldn't have done anything better than get us ready for that. We pulled up alongside of that in the middle of the dark. This thing was dead in the water, no lights, no nothing. We grappled it, threw pumps aboard, the team of guys we had for damage control party went aboard, pumped a lot of water onto the fire. Now I know you're Army, so you probably don't recognize the fact that ships don't like water on the inside.

[00:43:37.96] MARK FRANKLIN: That's not supposed to be there, right?

[00:43:39.21] JAMES LASSWELL: Yeah, exactly. But you got to pump a lot of water to get the fire out. Well, that was Step One. Step Two is you got to get rid of--

[00:43:46.21] MARK FRANKLIN: Pump the water out.

[00:43:46.76] JAMES LASSWELL: --pump a lot of water out. Well, that was almost an all night evolution. We finally got the fire put out and got the ship ready. We towed it out of the harbor, turned it over to a fleet tug, and it was hauled away.

[00:44:12.51] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, that was a great day, just to see everything come together and have it work. I mean, you're talking about navigation team at night without a lot of navigational aids getting alongside a dead-in-the-water ship and saving it. That was one of the Navy Commendation Medals for that. And the ship also earned and deserved a Meritorious Unit Commendation, which is a big thing for a ship.

[00:44:50.61] Two or three other things. There was a helicopter crashed in the harbor. We went down-- dove for that. I really give great credit to my divers because they had big snakes in the water there and they were cousins of the cobra, and I just don't like snakes. And those guys had to go digging around.

[00:45:23.55] The admiral who was on the carrier wanted the rotor couplings to see what caused the crash. We were able to recover that. Later we recovered a stern gate from an LST anchor, and chain from a ship that let it get away. And then we ended up spending a lot of time in Da Nang as standby salvage, waste all day at pier, go to sea at night, back at the pier.

[00:45:58.75] And I got detailed to go up and pull a Swift Boat that had run aground off the harbor. Turns out the guy who was coordinating that exercise from the beach was one of my roommates from when I lived in Mission Beach. So it's really a small world in this Navy.

[00:46:27.31] JAMES LASSWELL: A good thing about memory and age is you tend to forget the bad stuff. I mean, there were certainly difficult-- where you had a couple of fights aboard. And as I said, in those days, any time you have a fight interracial, you had to submit reports up the chain of command, and they would send people down to check your culture and climate of the ship. So I never liked those assist visits.

[00:47:04.92] JAMES LASSWELL: Oh, I love the Aussies. One of the trips we took on another ship that I was XO on just before I retired, we went down and did joint exercises with the Australians. And they're just the greatest hosts and the most wonderful people you could ever hope to meet. I also did joint operations, both on different ships and when I was a contractor, with the Taiwan Air Force.

[00:47:39.45] And like I say, I like those guys. We had a lot of good times together. I didn't really have any contact with any of the folks I knew in Vietnam afterwards, only the people on board ship.

[00:48:01.53] JAMES LASSWELL: We did letters and we did audio tapes. It took us a while, but we were smart to figure out that you had to number the letters and number the audio tapes, because if you got them out of turn, you wouldn't understand what was going on. Today you got email and video chat. It was nothing like that.

[00:48:31.77] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you tell them much about what was going on when you would write back or do your audio tapes?

[00:48:36.06] JAMES LASSWELL: Not so much. My wife at the time was not a Navy type person. She tolerated my Navy habit and so we didn't spend a lot of time dealing with that.

[00:48:52.45] MARK FRANKLIN: How about news about what was going on back home? Did you receive much of that?

[00:48:55.87] JAMES LASSWELL: I did. You got a lot of the negativity that was coming out. And I remember that was right when Nixon was getting in a rut and there was a lot of difficulty with the nation supporting the length of the war in Vietnam.

[00:49:17.00] MARK FRANKLIN: How did that affect you personally?

[00:49:18.94] JAMES LASSWELL: That didn't really have much effect on me. I was there to do what I had to do, and none of what was going on there seemed to have any interest to me. I was asked a couple of times, what was it like when I came back?

[00:49:42.51] JAMES LASSWELL: Interestingly enough, I flew back into an Air Force base, Travis Air Force Base, and shifted into civilian clothes and then just came down to San Diego. San Diego is a Navy town. There wasn't any issues. I never experienced any issues. I know a lot of my contemporaries did, but from my point of view, it was completely transparent.

[00:50:15.77] MARK FRANKLIN: So you didn't experience any of that?

[00:50:17.34] JAMES LASSWELL: No, sir.

[00:50:18.59] MARK FRANKLIN: So tell me about coming home. Who met you? Talk about that journey coming home after your final tour in Vietnam.

[00:50:25.22] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, there was my wife and my kids. I remember I missed my kids a lot when I was gone. I remember that was really exciting. I met my wife in Hawaii, and then she flew back and I took the ship back separately, and then saw my kids when I got home.

[00:50:55.62] MARK FRANKLIN: Good reception?

[00:50:56.68] JAMES LASSWELL: Great reception.

[00:50:58.35] MARK FRANKLIN: How about other friends, family?

[00:51:01.78] JAMES LASSWELL: Yeah. I mean, all my friends pretty much were military.

[00:51:09.09] MARK FRANKLIN: Now, did you stay in the military after Vietnam or--

[00:51:11.19] JAMES LASSWELL: Yes, sir.

[00:51:11.73] MARK FRANKLIN: --did you make it a career?

[00:51:11.99] JAMES LASSWELL: I did 20 years. I was commissioned in 1963 and 20 years to the day I left the Navy.

[00:51:23.76] MARK FRANKLIN: What did you do afterwards?

[00:51:24.73] JAMES LASSWELL: I became a defense contractor. I started back in the Washington, D.C. area and worked for a company there. Then moved out to San Diego, met and married my next wife, and she and I set up a defense contracting company here in San Diego, which I only recently sold. So I've been doing Navy or Navy support work for pretty much all my life.

[00:51:57.67] MARK FRANKLIN: What kind of contracting?

[00:51:59.34] JAMES LASSWELL: Engineering, IT, program management.

[00:52:03.54] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you have any trouble readjusting to life after Vietnam?

[00:52:05.74] JAMES LASSWELL: No, sir.

[00:52:06.90] MARK FRANKLIN: The military helps with that, I think, when you stay in.

[00:52:10.53] JAMES LASSWELL: Being in the military, having a job, it made it simple. Transitioning from military to being a contractor was pretty straightforward for me.

[00:52:22.08] MARK FRANKLIN: How much contact have you had with your fellow veterans from the ship? And do you get together, or what kind of contact do you have?

[00:52:29.49] JAMES LASSWELL: Yes. Like I said earlier, the guys I knew on USS Hoel, that was a long time ago, but we stayed close friends. Zoom has helped. And email has been very useful, keep us in touch. Frank Knox, the line department heads and a couple of the division officers stay in very close touch.

[00:53:02.73] The Duluth, I'm really only in touch with one guy. That was post-Vietnam. He was one of my department heads. And Safeguard, I really have no associations with. JAMES LASSWELL: Well, it grew me up, I mean, you get exposed to a lot of things. That was my first exposure to drug use.

[00:53:31.14] MARK FRANKLIN: Was that on board ship?

[00:53:32.16] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, my first real exposure was in Vietnam. There was a lot of marijuana that was available there. I'm such a-- I'm not a choirboy, I wasn't really--

[00:53:47.22] MARK FRANKLIN: More of a Boy Scout.

[00:53:48.19] JAMES LASSWELL: --Boy Scout, somewhere in that range. I really didn't even know what grass smelled like. And so little by little, I became accustomed to that. There was a lot of difficulty in the ranks during that time frame. I saw a lot of that later as CO, Safeguard. The McNamara 100,000 guys and the racial divide was really difficult then. But it all prepared me for what's next.

[00:54:31.41] MARK FRANKLIN: Have you thought about your experience in Vietnam and how it might affect the way you think about troops coming home off the battlefields today?

[00:54:38.25] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, I'm just so pleased nowadays. I mean, I go to a fast food drive-thru and ask for a military discount, I get thanked for my service. And that seems to be second nature to everybody nowadays. And I'm really thrilled to see that folks have learned

from what happened post-Vietnam, where they blamed the warriors for the decisions of the politicians.

[00:55:09.81] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah. blame the warriors for the war.

[00:55:12.67] JAMES LASSWELL: Yeah. And It's anything but. The warriors are just doing what they're told to do. And we should thank them for that.

[00:55:21.06] MARK FRANKLIN: What do you think that war meant to you and your generation?

[00:55:25.74] JAMES LASSWELL: It will keep me occupied for between-- when I was gathering up info on this, I figured it was about parts of 11 years of my life were dedicated to, with, or about Vietnam for pretty significant time. It's almost half my Navy career.

[00:55:49.12] MARK FRANKLIN: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today?

[00:55:51.26] JAMES LASSWELL: I don't think a lot of people remember it too much. I have younger daughters today, they don't know much about it. I think people have gotten over the distaste for it, but they still remember it as an abject failure.

[00:56:14.20] MARK FRANKLIN: What lessons did you take from Vietnam that you'd like to pass on to future generations?

[00:56:20.06] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, to me, the lesson is, you got a job to do, you do it the best you can, and you deal with it. I never thought twice about whether it was something I should do or shouldn't do, it was my job to do and I just had to do that. And I think as a warrior, that's what you've got to be able to do.

[00:56:49.00] I learned a lot about leadership. Even though I started wanting to be a Marine, never did that. But I always use the example of the Marines as leaders. Every Marine, every rifleman has a sergeant or a corporal that he reports to that takes care of him. His immediate staff pays him. They give him stuff and he relies on them.

[00:57:25.37] So when that corporal or sergeant says, hey, put your helmet on and get out of that foxhole and go shoot that guy, he doesn't have to think twice. He just does what he's told because he knows his corporal or sergeant or lieutenant, whatever, is doing the best things for him. So I think I learned a lot about leadership.

[00:57:54.62] JAMES LASSWELL: It's impressive. I know there was mixed feelings about it when it first came out. I was living in D.C. at the time and I've gone there a couple of times. I've looked up names of folks I knew, classmates and friends who died. I can't say much more about it.

[00:58:23.44] JAMES LASSWELL: I've heard a little about it. Some time ago I got a-- it was at a NDIA meeting and they talked a lot about commemorating the Vietnam veterans and recognizing them.

[00:58:41.27] MARK FRANKLIN: What are your thoughts on that?

[00:58:42.47] JAMES LASSWELL: Well, I think they should. I was not totally happy with everything I had to do in Vietnam, but there was a whole lot of guys that had a whole lot worse time to deal with. They lived in hell. And they suffered greatly. Some didn't make it back. And so the bottom line is, I think we owe them a debt of sincere gratitude.