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Period 3

Charles Eugene Thompson  
U.S Navy  
Years Served 1967-1971  
2017



Charles Eugene Thompson

On March 3rd we interviewed a U.S. Navy vet named Charles Eugene Thompson, a man who served our country for four years. He traveled to many places around the world but he mostly served in Vietnam. Gene was born in Compton, California on December 22, 1944, even though his family lived in Gardena, California due to the fact that there was no hospital in his town. He had a full education all the way through to a printing college when he was drafted for the U.S. Army. Instead of being forced into the Army he decided to sign up for the Navy instead.

Before he joined the Navy, his education was from kindergarten up to a two year community college at LA Trade Tech. In his free time when he wasn't in school, he worked as a printer at Times Mirror Press, Los Angeles to pay his bills. He never had any intentions of joining the military, and was married before the due date for the draft. He met his wife in 1962 and married her in 1965, she was the younger sister of one of his buddies who later joined the National Guard. Even though he was married he was still hit by the draft, which he later found out was a mistake. Instead of just joining the Army, he decided to go enlist in the Navy before he was forced to join anywhere else.

Boot Camp lasted for 13 weeks and he recalls it being one of the hardest experiences of his life, especially due to the fact that he had little to no communication with his wife throughout

this time besides a few letters. Once he completed boot Boot Camp he made sure to always have a picture of his wife in his wallet. Once completed he decided to specialize in photography for the Navy. While in Photo "A" School, in Florida, he used 16mm film and he learned many different techniques and requirements in order to properly capture a scene. On weekends he would go off base to spend what little time he had with his wife, they would go down to the beach and have bonfires due to the lack of money provided by the military.

He was stationed to the "Combat Camera Group Pacific" fleet in Nas North Island, where he spent time in Hawaii, Midway, Guam, Philippines, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Yap, and Palau. During his time in Vietnam he spent 28 months in total, and participated in five separate tours. He landed in Danang, Vietnam to film the airbase and the troops, During his very first night there the base came under mortar attack and he had to be flown out and relocated to Sai Gon. The terrain in Vietnam consists of a lot of trees, hiding spots, very humid and hot weather that would often lead to some Marines with dehydration due to shortage of supplies to hike through the forests and islands of Vietnam.

In 1968 Gene spent time at the DMZ in Korea filming the negotiations for the release of the crew of the USS Pueblo. The ship was taken by the North Koreans in International waters. He later was assigned with the PBR's (Patrol Boat Rivers) in the Mekong Delta, which he would be on board taking photos. On the very first boat he was on the skipper required him to be armed, so he handed him a M79 grenade launcher. Though when they were on board they had commands to not fire on anyone alongside the rivers, even if they were fired at, incase they were confused friendly infantry. He also worked alongside The Sea Wolves up in the helos, there were

multiple occasions where he was literally being held out of a helicopter by someone so he could film.

Later on down the line he was asked to record and follow the operations of SEAL Team 1. They were assigned to capture a North Vietnamese general, which he was to record. On their way back on the boat two of the SEALs threw him overboard. They then circled back and those two men jumped in and pulled him back to the boat. Gene and those two men were the only ones of all the SEALs to not get wet during the operation, and their saying was “If one of us gets wet, we all get wet.” Even later down the line he was then stationed to an operation that had to do with the Navy’s nuclear submarines at Subic Bay, Philippines. Soon after arriving he was arrested by the Mio Marines because the commander forgot to call in and give him and his team clearance. He got sent back to his original base in which his General apologized for his mistake he made.

When he came home he landed in San Francisco, and many of the people advertising peace were throwing food and other items, and even spitting on the soldiers coming home. Vietnam was not a popular war by any means, many soldiers came home to a country against them and what they had done. He even told us throughout most of his life he hasn’t really talked about being a Vietnam vet because many people have negative connotations towards them. Now through modern technology and Facebook he has learned that many people he had known in his life also fought or served in Vietnam, but had never talked about it back then due to how unpopular the war was.

Gene is quoted to have said “I am very fortunate to travel the world and different countries with my Navy Team,” Along with “ I am 72 years old, I am still alive, and I thank God

for being by my side during the good and bad.” Gene is a very down to earth and humble person, everyone should strive to follow those same morals. We personally want to thank everyone in the armed forces and people associated with them for fighting for our rights, freedom, and liberty.