

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 472-003**

**Interviewee: Nathan Bemis**

**Interviewer: Connor Bemis**

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**Project: Veterans Experience Oral History Project**

Connor Bemis: All right. This is my oral history project. I'm interviewing Nathan Bemis, who was a Navy veteran in between the Korean War and the Vietnam War. So, thank you for being here today. Starting off, what made you join the Navy?

Nathan Bemis: Well, I had had a few car accidents, and so I was getting right to the end of where I had one more accident, I would lose my driver's license. So, I decided I've got to join one of the services. I've got to join the Marines or the Army or the Navy or the Air Force. I thought, 'well, if I join the army, I'll end up in a ditch, in the mud, in the dirt and getting shot at. Well, if I join the Marines, I'm going to end up in the same place—in a ditch, in a hole, in a mud hole and getting shot at.' So I said, "Well, if I'm aboard ship in the Navy, then I go down with the ship. And I thought, 'well, that's a lot easier than dying in a foxhole somewhere.' So wasn't a war at the time, but it was in between Korea and Vietnam. Vietnam, evidently, they knew it was coming. So, this friend of mine said, "Nathan, let's go into the Seabees." And the Seabees is where they build buildings and houses and things like that. "Let's go in on the buddy plan." His name was Bob Condray (?), and we went and joined together in the Seabees. So, we went into the Navy, and they swore us both end to be the Seabees.

Well, when we went to boot camp—he went to boot camp with me—and we spent two months in boot camp. Went all the way through boot camp, and then they started giving us tests on the things that we should know or shouldn't know and I didn't do very good. So, I didn't go into the Seabees. But he went into the Seabees, and I didn't see him 'til about 10 years later after he'd gotten out of the service and after I'd gotten out of the service. So, we went to boot camp together, and then I went into the ship called the USS Rochester. I joined the Navy to be in the Seabees, but I didn't get that. They told me I would, but I didn't end up getting that. They just put me aboard ship, which was okay for me because I was in the Navy and I enjoyed the Navy very much. I'm glad to this day that I joined the Navy.

When I went aboard ship, I was aboard two ships. One was the USS Rochester, and the Rochester is a heavy cruiser. Now, a heavy cruiser has eight-inch guns on it—about eight inches—that means the barrel was eight inches around. The battleship had 16-inch guns, but I was on a heavy cruiser with the eight-inch guns. Well, when I went aboard the USS Rochester, we went out of San Diego, would go back up to Long Beach, and then back down to San Diego—back and forth between the two. Then they decided they're going to decommission the USS Rochester. They're going to put it in mothballs. So, we went out to sea, and when we went out to sea, we went up the coast—up California and all the way Washington up—as we went out to sea, for some reason they decided to fire those all those guns at the same time. So, they told everybody to stand up against the bulkhead, and then when they fired them all at the same

time, the ship rolled right straight up in the air like that on its side and all the sailors were laying on their back, laying down on the bulkhead like that. Then they came back down like that and slammed into a water and just shook that whole ship to pieces. I mean, it was impressive. It really scared me, but I figured they knew it was gonna happen, so that's why they did it. I don't know why they did it, but that's what they did. But, boy, it rattled everything—rattled your brain and rattled inside. I mean, it shook you. Not only was the ship shook, but you were shook.

Then we went on up into Bremington [Bremerton], Washington, with the USS Rochester. So, we started to decommission it, put it into mothballs. I was on a five-inch gun, and that five-inch gun, the barrel is five inches around when they fire that five-inch gun—the barrel, five inches around. All right. So, I chipped paint and red leaded paint, and put that thing in a moth ball. But then I didn't sleep aboard that ship. There was another ship that I had to walk over to and sleep and eat on that other ship. So, I slept over there and ate over there, and then come back and kept working. I was there for almost a year, putting that thing in mothballs aboard the USS Rochester. I can't remember the ship I was on, but just a small ship. The bunks were seven high. The bunks were seven high, and I was on the top bunk. I remember having to climb all the way up to the top and sleep on that top bunk. So, there were six guys under me, which was made it pretty crowded. I didn't really care for that, but I knew it was going to be temporary, so I just went ahead, went with the flow.

Then as soon as that ship was decommissioned into mothballs, then I was stationed aboard another ship called the USS Lexington. I was stationed aboard that ship. The thing about the Navy—there aboard the Lexington was all, everything that you own, was in a locker about 20 inches wide and 3 feet high. Everything you owned had to be put in those lockers—shoes and everything in there. You had to keep all your stuff inside that locker, and you had a lock that you kept on it. Then the bunks there, the bunks were three high—one down here, one the middle and one at the top. In the daytime, the bunks folded up like that, folded up like this. So, they were down like that in the nighttime, and then they folded up like that in the daytime, so you could clean the floor and everything around them. I didn't. Somebody else cleaned the floor. But I was stationed there right above the anchor. So, every time that the ship laid out—put out the anchor—which was several times, that anchor chain was about five inches thick, huge chains, and when it went down that anchor weighed tons. It'd make all this noise going down and “foo foo foo foo foo,” boy, it made a tremendous noise, and I was right above that anchor chain. That's what it was.

When the planes took off of the ship, there was a catapult—a steam catapult—which was right above our bunk—right above us. So, when that steam catapult went off at night, it would make this tremendous noise, “Bang!” right in the middle of the night. Of course, I was sleeping underneath of it, so every time they shot a plane off of the ship, it was right under, it was right above me where that catapult went off. But the thing about it was when I went—the ship would go somewhere, I got a chance to—it wasn't like port and starboard when you went off and put on civilian clothes and walked over with civilian clothes on or in your uniform. Then my whole outfit would go, and only one or two guys would stay aboard ship because they really

didn't need those gunners to do much—just check all the magazines whenever you was on duty and had to stay and check the magazines. When I went aboard the Lexington, the first place we went is we went on a cruise out for six months—we'd go out for six months. The first place we went was to Japan. We went to Hong Kong, went to Hong Kong, and I bought a suit in Hong Kong. We spent, oh, four or five days there in Hong Kong, which I really enjoyed, because we got to go on the beach all the time. I'd go with the chaplain, and the chaplain would take us out to different places to see in Hong Kong, so I went with him a lot and I really enjoyed that.

When we went to Hawaii, the ship stopped in Hawaii, and the chaplain would take us on some tours. So we got to know the chaplain real well because he'd set up a tour and we'd be able to go with the chaplain on these tours in Hawaii all over the island and see different things like that. I really enjoyed that, and that was very enjoyable. Then the ship went to the Philippines. Spent several places down in the Philippines. So, I got to see Japan, Hawaii, and the Philippines on that particular cruise. Then after about a year, then we come back to San Diego, and we stayed in San Diego a while. Then the ship, they decided to take the ship all the way down around the Horn and down to Pensacola, Florida. We couldn't go through the canal. We had to go all the way down and around the Horn [Cape Horn]. As we went down and went around the Horn, we crossed the Equator. When you crossed the Equator, if you've never been across it before, they give you a card because you're crossing the Equator and it's a Moss Back card. I kept that card for many years, but I lost it eventually. But it's called a Moss Back. So when you go across the Equator, then they have these initiations—all the stuff you have to do—because you're the first guy that crosses the equator. They put all the trash and all the garbage in a big old round thing and you have to crawl through it to the other end and all this garbage in between, and that's the initiation for being a Moss Back. Then you've crossed the equator.

But it's really, really hot down. I wasn't used to the heat that was down there at the Equator. But I was pretty young. I was 19 then—19 and 20. Then the ship went down, hit all those ports going around the South America—hit a bunch of different ones. One that I remember a lot was Acapulco. We went to Acapulco, and a bunch of us guys went over there on the beach in Acapulco and fell asleep on the beach and got a sunburn that was really bad. [laughs] Oh, man, was it bad! But they didn't do anything to us. They just said, "Hey, you guys shouldn't have done that." But we did. Anyway, we spent several days there. I enjoyed that part of seeing all those different ports and everything, and I took a lot of pictures. I had a camera, and every time we'd get into port somewhere, I'd take a picture. Many a time the ship would be cruising down through there, and you'd look over the side of the ship and on this side would be 10, 20 porpoises like that right beside the ship. I got a bunch of pictures of porpoise. Those porpoise would run right beside the ship for miles, right beside the ship going just like that right beside the ship. Got a lot of pictures of that, which I really enjoyed that.

Then a lot of times the aircraft carrier would have a lot of fuel, and it would fuel what was called a tin can—it was a small, ship is tin can. But we would put lines across to them and give them more fuel because we had a lot of fuel aboard ship. They would give those other ships a lot of fuel—Navy ships out there and give them fuel. All these lines were going across and

everything, and I got to watch that and got a lot of pictures of it. I really enjoyed that. Every time I went to a new port, I would get a picture of something, and lots of times you were told not to go out of bounds. But lot of times I would go out of bounds because I was by myself and I would do what I wanted to do. I knew I wasn't supposed to go out of bounds, but I figured, 'well, I don't think they can catch me.' I'd go out of bounds, but you weren't supposed to go out of bounds but I did. One time, I'm in Japan and I'm going out of bounds, and I see a whole bunch of women working—whole bunch of women digging a ditch. I could tell they were all women. So, I went up pretty close to them, and I started to take pictures of them. When I did take pictures of these women digging in the ditch, I couldn't understand what they were saying, but I knew they were cussing me out. Oh man! I knew they were cussing me out. I thought, 'ooh man, this is a mistake. They don't want me to take their picture.' But I'd already taken several pictures, so I said, "Too late now." I left there and went back in bounds again. Of course, I seen a lot of different things and different places because I'd go out of bounds a lot. Knowing that I'm by myself so nobody can tell on me, and nobody would catch me because I made sure that I got back in bounds without getting out there and getting in trouble out of bounds. But that's why they don't want you to go out of bounds, because you might get in trouble going out of bounds. They had certain places that you had to not go.

Aboard ship, when I was on duty, I would go and I had to check all the magazines like that. I had to crawl down to the bottom of the ship where all those magazines were at—way down on the bottom. Climb down this great big ladder that was 40 or 50 feet high down to that magazine, and I had to pull and check the lock—make sure it was locked—climb back up and go over to the other magazine, go down and pull the lock. I had to check about 25 or 30 of those aboard ship all the way around. Make sure that they were all locked. That was just what you had to do because you were a gunner's mate.

Then as being a gunner's mate, I had to take a .45, set the .45 on the table, and master the .45—take it apart, put it back together. They give me a certain length of time. You have to take it apart, put it back together, take it apart, put it back together. So, I took it apart and put it back together many, many times. They blindfolded me and said, "Okay, now you've got to take it apart and put it back together blindfolded." I took the .45, took it apart and put it back together blindfolded, which it was encouraging to me because I knew that I could take that .45 and do it blindfolded. That was part of being a gunner's mate, because that's what I was aboard ship is a gunner's mate.

Then on the five-inch gun, I was stationed on that five-inch gun for three years, about three years. What I did on the gun was—a lot of brass on a five-inch gun—I had to shine all the brass on that five-inch gun. Tons of brass. I had to shine all the brass, and I had to keep everything greased real good because they had a lot of places there where they'd fire that gun and I had to be there in case something went wrong with the gun. It was my job to make sure the gun would fire. I didn't have to fire it. They some more guys in my division that would fire that gun, but I had to be there to make sure nothing went wrong with the gun because that was if it went

wrong, it's some I didn't do it right. Didn't keep it clean or didn't keep it up where it's supposed be.

I had to mop the deck every day. I had to mop that deck. I had to get up before I ate, go out, and mop the deck all the way through. Then clean all salt water off of it—clean it off. We'd take and tie a rope to that mop and hang the mop over the side of the ship. It was about 100 feet high. Hang that mop over the side of the ship, and let it wash off down there in the salt water, then bring it back up and clean it and mop the deck again. Clean it off, mop that deck. I had to mop it every day before I ate breakfast. As soon as I got the deck mopped real good in the morning, then I went back, changed clothes, put on my nice shoes and everything and dressed up for inspection. So, every day we'd have an inspection, but I had a set of shoes for the inspection and a set of shoes for mopping the deck. I mopped the deck for almost three years. [laughs] Every day I'd get up and mop that deck on that aircraft carrier. There were four five-inch guns—two in the front, one on this side, one on the side and two in the back. When they fired those guns, I had to be there when they fired that five-inch gun, and there'd be an airplane that was dragging this here dummy. It was just a big old thing that they shot at. So the airplane was way out here and the dummy was up here and they had to shoot that dummy to see if they could hit that dummy. So when they practiced it, when they practiced, they shot at that dummy—not the airplane, but at that dummy—because they were getting ready for airplanes to fly in. That five-inch gun was to shoot at those airplanes flying in at it, because that's what happened in World War Two. A lot of that took place. So those five-inch guns were there for that purpose.

Then when we got her going around the Horn, now as we went around the Horn, the seas there were really bad seas. The seas were like 40 and 50 feet high. So when they went into a wave, here's a wave that's coming over the top of the flight deck—coming over top of the flight deck when they went into it like that. It was like the ship was just barely moving through that part of the ocean because of the heavy seas it was going into. Just barely moving. They was under full power, but the seas were so rough against the front of the aircraft carrier that eventually they made it. But everybody was pretty scared because they said, “Hey, don't go out on that gun deck. You stay inside. Don't you go out there because the waves are coming over top of the flight deck,” which was pretty scary, really. It actually scared us and scared me anyway.

Finally, when we got over on that side, then we went into Pensacola, Florida. In Pensacola, Florida, we were stationed there, and then we were chasing—new pilots were training in how to land on an aircraft carrier. So, the USS Lexington would train those pilots for coming out and learning how to land on an aircraft carrier. It was the first time some of them had ever done it, so they were just learning it. One night they were landing on the aircraft carrier, and a pilot come in there and he was too low and he hit the fan tail and demolished that airplane. Just demolished it when it hit the fan tail. But it shook the whole ship. We said, “Man, something happened.”

They said, "Well, we know what happened. That pilot didn't break the deck. He hit the end of the fantail," what's called the fantail and that was the back of the ship. So, that happened.

Then another time, they landed this guy, that airplane would come in for a landing like that on that aircraft carrier, and they had a hook on the plane. The hook would drop on the end of that plane and catch those wires. There were four wires there that that hook was supposed to catch. Then if it didn't catch any of them, then he was to put the coals to it and take off again and come around and try again and do like that. Well, this one pilot didn't get the power put to it, and the plane went up just like that and turned upside down and landed in the water and sunk immediately. He didn't get out. I mean, it sunk just immediately. Just like that, man, he was down. It's gone. Another guy did the same thing, but his plane went out like that. You could see him shoot out of the top of the airplane like this, see. He was in a seat, and the seat would shoot out of the airplane like that. Then the parachute would open up up there. But just before the plane hit the water out, out he would come on like that and that plane would hit the water. But you could see he's coming down and they would stop the ship and go out and pick him up.

Then one night at of sea, we're going at sheet, some guy jumped off the end of the fantail. Some sailor jumped off the end of the fantail, and he got a "Dear John" from his girlfriend. So, he was discouraged and jumped off the end of the fantail. When he did that, we were going 20 knots or more, and so they circle around like that to see if they can find him. They don't find him. He's gone. He jumped off the end of the fantail. He's gone like that. They go around, look for him and stop and put out a little boats to see if they can go find him. They don't find him. He's gone. He's down. Sucked into the screws down in the bottom of the ship—sucked him all the way down. He never came up I don't think. But if he came up, they couldn't find him. It's at night. He jumped off at night. To find that guy at night was just pretty near impossible to find him. But I don't think they found him. I'm sure they didn't because they didn't announce that they found him.

Things like that had happened—happened aboard ship. But I never got shot at aboard ship. Nobody ever shot at us. But in Pensacola, we had had to make some repairs, and then we go up the eastern coast of the United States. We'd go up the eastern coast and go up there and go all the way to New York City and go into dry docks and do some work on a ship at dry docks. I got a chance to be in New York City, which I enjoyed seeing all the different things in New York City. It was different—a different place. Altogether different. But back in 19—I joined the Navy in 1960, and I got out 1964. I got out in 1964. When I got out of there, my ship went back to Pensacola and started training pilots again. By that time, I've got my three years in. So, I put three years and 11 months and 29 days and nine hours, and I walked off the gangplank and I got out of service. I got out of service in New York City. I said, "Well, I can go home to Colorado, or I can go down to Pensacola." I decided to go back to Pensacola because I love Pensacola. I thought 'I can just get out of the service and go back to Pensacola,' because I really loved that area and loved the church I was going to.

CB: So, how close to the Vietnam War was your division from going to Vietnam?

NB: Okay, now, I was so close to the Vietnam War that when I got ready to be discharged in two weeks, my ship was going to Vietnam—in two weeks. I got off that ship two weeks before that ship went to Vietnam. Two weeks—I missed Vietnam by two weeks. That's pretty close. That's pretty close. Some of my friends—Cecil Ford (?) was one of my friends aboard ship, and Cecil Ford was a first class cook. He was a cook aboard ship. He actually ended up retiring from the Navy. He spent a certain amount of years, several years in the Navy. He went to Vietnam, and they put him aboard one of those little boats that went up those Vietnam creeks and went up those little rivers up there—and he went up. Me being a gunner's mate, I would have done exactly the same thing. If he was a cook and he went up, a gunner's mate, that's exactly what would have happened to me, and then who knows what would have happened. Somebody said, “Are you going to ship over?”

I said, “I'm not going to take any chances of going to Vietnam. My ship's going to Vietnam. I'm not about to ship over. I'm getting out of the service.” I loved it. I liked it. I enjoyed the service, and it was enjoyable to me. I thought it was a great blessing for me to grow up and learn how to take care of myself. I don't know if that's a good thing or not, but I did enjoy that part of the service.

When I got discharged, they discharged me in New York City, and I went back to Pensacola. But I highly recommend a guy joining the service. Some would say, “What do you think about joining the service?”

I'd say, “Join the Navy.” Some guys like the Marines. Some guys like the army. One of my brothers, Glenn, he joined the army. He went in the army, and he liked it. He said he really liked the army. I had another brother that went in Air Force, and he said he really liked the Air Force. He really liked it. Then I have another brother that joined the Navy with me—right after me. He joined the Navy a year after I did. He joined the Navy and went in to boot camp, and then he was a patrol—well, like a policeman. He's like a policeman. He was in that for a while. Then he come aboard ship with me. So, he was stationed aboard the Lexington with me. We spent a little time together in Lexington together. He got out a year after I did. I can't remember what he did. I think he went back to Colorado. I think he went back to Colorado when he got out of the service. I stayed in Pensacola.

CB: Did he end up going to Vietnam, too?

NB: No, he didn't go to Vietnam. Now...I don't know. He was in the service, and he was aboard the Lexington, so I don't know whether he went to Vietnam or not. I don't know that. That I don't know. I was so glad to get out of the service that I kind of forgot what happened to Gary, because I was so glad to get out of the service. The service is not bad, but it wasn't for me. I wanted to go to Bible school, and so that's why I didn't stay in the service, because I want to go to Bible school. That's why I didn't stay in. When I did, I got out and went to Bible school.

CB: Who are some of the most influential people you met during your time in the Navy?

NB: Ah, okay. I had four friends. Roger Wetzel (?)—he was one of my friends, Roger Wetzel. Mike Napier (?), and he was another one of the guys that I ran around with. Cecil Ford, he's one. These guys still call me about once a year. Roger don't, but Cecil calls me about once a year and Mike Napier calls me about once a year. There was about five of us altogether, and we'd do things together. We'd go to church together, and we'd go to missionaries together. Some of those guys I've kept up, well, like Cecil Ford, I've kept up with him since we got out of the Navy, since he left the Navy. Every time I go to Denver, I see Mike Napier. When I go to Denver, I usually contact Mike Napier. He pastor's a church down there in Denver, Colorado, and been there for several years. I usually go see him and go to his church from there. They was a great influence on me for staying out of the bars and staying away from that crowd that got drunk all the time. I used to drink before I joined the Navy. I used to drink quite a bit. But soon as I got in the Navy, I quit drinking and quit going to bars. I quit all that because I didn't want to go down that life anymore. Lot of the Navy guys get drunk and go to bars and everything. I didn't do that because I had friends that didn't do that. My friends helped me to keep me from going down that road.

CB: How do you think your time in the Navy shaped you into the person you are today?

NB: My time in the Navy—how it affected me and my time in the Navy? Well, it affected me in the Navy to where I decided in the Navy, I was not going to go down a certain road. I decided these guys go over, get drunk, mess up, and mess around with women, and that's not something I wanted to do. I thought, 'I do not want to do that.' So right in the service, a guy give me a gospel tract. He give me that gospel tract, and I got saved on that gospel tract. As soon as I got saved, I quit drinking and I quit doing all kinds of stuff—smoking and doing all that stuff. I stopped it. I really didn't like it, but I did it—be one of the crowd. But I stopped it. Once I stopped it, my whole life changed. Then because of that, I have stayed that away, and then I ended up going to Bible school and then ended up pastoring a church. I've been preaching for 55 years. I've been preaching a long time. Fifty-five years is a lifetime. I've been preaching longer than you've been alive. So, it changed my life tremendously, but it was the Lord did that. I mean, the Lord saved me and changed me. But the Navy helped me in that I had the right kind of friends in the Navy. That made a lot of difference in my life, because when you have the right kind of friends, they affect you in a good way or they affect you in a bad way. Friends can be good or bad depending on what kind of men they are. Same with women. There're good women, and there's bad women. A good woman is worth a lot. A bad woman is—they're a dime a dozen.

CB: All right. Well, that's all I have for you today, so thank you for sharing your story with me.

NB: Okay, Connor.

[End of Interview]