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Oral History Number: 472-007
Interviewee: James D. Holmes
Interviewer: Hailey Fink
Date of Interview: September 7, 2019
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Hailey Fink: So, what's your name?

James Holmes: James D. Holmes.

HF: Okay. When did you join?

JH: Join the Navy?

HF: Yes.

JH: July 1951.

HF: Did you pick the Navy for a certain reason?

JH: I didn't—

HF: Did you choose the Navy for a certain reason?

JH: You know, I think I chose the Navy because my brother was in the Navy in the Second World War and I think that's the reason I joined the Navy.

HF: How long were you in for?

JH: Four years. From July 1951 to July 1955.

HF: How was your life before the Navy?

JH: Well, I was born into a family of very poor dirt farmers, and I plowed a mule from the time I was eight years old until I was 15 years old. Daddy bought an A Farmall [tractor], and I drove that Farmall then until I joined the Navy in '51. I was very happy to get away from that farm.

HF: Then when you joined, where did you go first?

JH: I went to San Diego to the Naval Training Center in San Diego, and there's where I took my boot camp. Now, it was during the Korean conflict, and there were so many joining the service that the Marines had a base Camp Elliott out in the desert. There were so many recruits that

they moved a lot of us from the Naval Training Center to Camp Elliott out in the desert, so I really took my boot camp out at the closed Marine base at Camp Elliot.

HF: In the middle of the desert?

JH: In the middle of the desert. Hot. Oh, hot! So that was quite an experience. Believe what I'm telling you.

HF: When you got to San Diego, how did you feel when you got there?

JH: It was a total shock because I had never been...I was at Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and maybe, maybe I'd been in Tennessee. But to leave the farm where the next neighbor was like a mile away, going out to San Diego was the most beautiful scenery I ever seen because we went by train all the way from Macon, Georgia. We went to Chicago because down in Texas was flooding, so they had to take us on the northern route and go out through the Rockies and I never seen anything like that.

HF: So you got the pretty view?

JH: Oh my god, it was so beautiful. It was so beautiful.

JF: What was the hardest thing you had to do in boot camp?

JH: The hardest thing I had to do is the marching. Let me tell you about that. When we arrived, there were just buses and buses and buses. When you got off the bus, they formed the company. So, when you got off the bus, they had a company's already being formed. The company I got in was Company 748. All of us Southern boys got off and we lined up, and the next bus that came in was all the Northern boys that came in. There were six lines of boys. Three lines was from the South, three lines from the North, and we fought the Civil War over during boot camp. So, our company, because of that, was so split up. We were out on the grinder, that's where we marched. That's what they called it—the grinder. We'd have to go around and pass the review in front of the officers to see if we were marching properly. Well, we'd get in front of the review stand, and either the Southern boys or the Northern boys would skip a beat, and we'd go through with three lines in one step and three lines in another step. We'd do that about eight or ten times before they would correct themselves, and we'd go through like we should. It was quite an experience for me. Everything went well. We had classes every day and marched maybe for three or four hours a day, and we did the rifle ranges and all of that. But I want to tell you now, I truly enjoyed the Navy. I'm not saying it now because I'm an old man. I truly enjoyed the Navy and active boot camp—

You got another question?

HF: How long was your boot camp?

JH: Supposed to have been nine weeks. They set us back two weeks to get them feet going in the right direction, so I really had 11 weeks of bootcamp. [laughs] But when they set us back two weeks, everything got corrected very quickly.

HF: Did you ever get deployed?

JH: Yes, I did. Let me back up a second here. Because of farming I had to quit high school in the 9th grade to help Daddy farm. Now, I had a burning desire—I don't know why, but I had a burning desire to get more education. So, as soon as boot camp was over, you get a leave to go home. Well, I went to the education office and I signed up for then for the [unintelligible] courses to get my GED [General Education Diploma]. Then I left and went home and spent the time at home and went back to San Diego, and they transferred me up to—I can't remember the name of the city where they sent me to board ship. I went aboard the ship, the USS Pollux (AKS-4), and that was in December. That's the first Christmas I ever spent away from home. We were there for about three weeks, and then we left and headed for Japan, so we made a stop in Hawaii. Boy, was that a shocker. How beautiful that was for an old country boy. Then we left Hawaii, and we headed to Japan. We were running—I don't understand—why, but we were running under radio silence. We got to Yokosuka, Japan, and the Red Cross came aboard as soon as we docked. My daddy'd had a heart attack, so they took me off the ship, took me up to Yokohama, and they flew me back to the States. I came home, and I got the farm ready to go. I think it was Saturday afternoon—my daddy's sister had cancer and she was dying and in Florida. So, Daddy wanted me to bring him to Florida, and I couldn't do it. Senator George [Walter F. George] of Georgia only lived nine miles at Vienna, Georgia, from us, and Daddy knew him and he was home. My orders stated that no command could change my orders except my command, which was the USS Pollux in Japan.

My dad said, "Why don't you go down and talk to Senator George and see what he could do."

I don't even know what a senator is. Honestly, I don't even know anything about government. So, I ride down there, it was a Sunday morning. I got there about 9:30 or 10:00, and he was sitting out on his screened-in-porch. I got out, and he knew who I was so he invited me in. We chatted for a few minutes. He said, "What can I do for you?"

I told him that Daddy wanted me to go down [to Florida]. He took a yellow pad and he started writing on that yellow pad. Before we were done, he said, "Take it down to Western Union and tell them I said to send it day letter." I still don't know what a day letter [expedited full-rate telegram] is.

So, I took it, went down to Western Union, and I said, "Senator George said to send this day letter." Okay, so, they took it, and Monday I got a message that there was a message for me at the Western Union. I go down to the Western Union and pick it up, and it said, "James D.

Holmes, 4203572, request for 10-day extension is approved," signed by the Secretary of the Navy. Let me tell you that was big stuff, let me tell you—

HF: Did you save it?

JH: I think it's here somewhere. I looked at that thing, and I'm a stupid little farm boy. I said, "My order says nobody can't approve a leave," so I went to the phone and I called the recruiting office in Macon. There was a JG [junior commissioned officer] that answered the phone, and I told him who it was and my serial number. I said, "I'm on emergency leave, and my order says nobody can approve extension except my commander," I said, "but it's signed by the Secretary of the Navy." I could hear that lieutenant, JG, on the other end, to this day laughing at a stupid Georgia boy.

He said, "Holmes, if you have a telegram that's signed by the Secretary of the Navy, you go where you want to go and you don't worry about it."

Okay, I took Daddy down. Get back and I go out to Treasure Island, San Francisco. I get to the gate on the bus and we get to the gate; the Marine comes aboard and looks at our orders. He says, "Holmes, follow me. Get off the bus."

We go into the little guard shack there, and I said, "Why you taking me off?"

He said, "Well, you've been over the hill for ten days."

I said, "No, no, no. I haven't been over the hill. I've got approval."

He said, "You got approval? Show it to me."

So I pulled it out and handed it to him. Read it, "Secretary of the Navy."

He said, "I do not have to take you up to the OD [officer on duty]. You just go ahead on the bus, and when you get up there you knock on the door and you go in."

I go up there and knock on the door, "Come in." Tell him who I am, and he says, "I got orders down there for the guard to bring you up here."

I said, "Sir, I'm not over the hill."

He said, "Right here on my paperwork says you're over the hill for ten days."

So, I handed it to him, and now there's people coming in. There was like three or four lines of people lined up—guys that was coming back in from being transferred. Well, he took me out to that line, took me right up to the front of that line, and he says, "Holmes is next and when you

sign him in, you send somebody with him and show him where his bunk is.” They put me on the golf cart and took me over. They didn't do nobody else like that.

HF: You got special treatment.

JH: Oh! I got my room. Then I had to go back to Japan. They put me on the Breckenridge—it's a troop ship—and we had probably, I don't know, I believe I remember like 6,000 Marines and guys on there. Lord knows how sick them people were. But I went back to my ship and then we—

HF: Sick? Like how sick?

JH: I'm sorry?

HF: Sick like how?

JH: Seasick.

HF: Oh... [laughs]

JH: Oh! You couldn't even go up and down the ladders were so slick with [makes a puking noise] on it. They'd even be in the chow hall eating, and they'd just spew right across the table. It was just everywhere, everywhere! But I made it back. We went up near Korea and came back down to Yokosuka. We went down to Sasebo, Japan, and I did some touring of Japan on the weekends, because the train service there was very, very good. I enjoyed Japan. Then we came back to the States, we went into shipyard and did some repairs on the ship, and then we went back to Japan. I was on the Polyps for two years.

HF: So you met back up with your original—

JH: Yes. Then we were on our way—Let me tell you, the telegram I had put in my file, so I was trying to get a transfer to the East Coast, but because of Korea, they wouldn't transfer. Everything was going to the West Coast. So I filled out a—to be transferred to the East Coast because I didn't want to get out of the Navy, but I wanted to be closer to my parents because of my dad. So, I submitted it to my chief. Disapproved it. The Warrant—Engineering Warrant Officer disapproved it. The commander disapproved it. Now, it goes to the captain. It was one evening, probably about 6:00, the carrier came down and said, “Holmes, put on your day dress, the captain wants to see you upstairs in his office.”

I put on my day go up there, and the captain chats with me just for a little while. He says, “Everybody's disapproved this request. I'd like for you just to withdraw it.”

I said, "No, Sir, I want you to send it on through." He asked me about three or four times, and I said, "No."

Then he said to me, he says, "Holmes, I'm going to do something that I very rare do. I'm going to approve this request."

Well, it left the ship, and I think it was like three or four days later, they got a message back aboard ship that Holmes, so and so and so, would be transferred this date no later than 14:00 hours, I believe it was, to Treasure Island for trans-shipment to San Diego to board the USS Shasta (AE-6) homeport Norfolk, Virginia. Then we went around through the Panama Canal, and we got to Norfolk, Virginia—it was about December timeframe. We went up to Newport, Rhode Island, went down to the Caribbean on the shakedown cruise, came back, went up to Earle, New Jersey—ammunition [weapons station]. They loaded the ship—I was on an ammunition ship. Then we came back down to San Diego...I mean, to Norfolk. Then in January, the ship got orders to go on a goodwill tour of Europe. So, we left—the fleet did. We left, and we went to a lot of ports that the military had not been in since the Second World War.

The first place we went was Algiers, Algeria, and let me tell you that was the most terriblest place I had ever been in all the days of my life. We couldn't even go over unless there was like four of us that would agree to spend time together. We were there for—probably we were there for about three or four days, and it was getting probably about 8:00, 9:00 at night, and I was on liberty over—and the emergency whistles on the ship started blowing. That means, "We're leaving. You better get your butt there fast." We run, and when we go through the gate, they were hollering, "Get on any ship you can get on. Get on any ship you can get on." I made it to my ship, and we pulled out of there and went to Naples, Italy. I really, really enjoyed Naples, Italy.

HF: Why didn't you like the other place?

JH: Oh, it was terrible. They didn't have no sewers except open sewers, bathrooms right—well, they had just a thing with a curtain on it and you just walked in, and everything just went down the sidewalk, or right alongside the sidewalk. The people—if you raised a camel, if there was ten kids or adults and you raised the camel, it was an evil eye, they disappeared. They just totally hated us. So we go to Naples—

HF: And you liked that?

JH: I enjoyed Naples very much. Then we went to Toulon, France. Oh my god, what a beautiful, a beautiful place. Then we went up to Cannes, France, on the Riviera, and we went to Santa Margherita, Italy. Oh, I just fell in love with Santa Margherita, Italy. Let's see, I can't remember some of the other places. But anyway, we were there for six months, and then on the way home we came back to Cartagena, Spain. I wasn't a drinker. I went out and saw the countryside or something. Me and my buddy, we went to the huge park, children everywhere, and there

was a grandpa there holding a little—I guess probably about a year and a half old or something, and a little girl. Man, what a pretty little girl that was, so me and my buddy took that little girl and grandpa. We spent more money on her clothes that day than her daddy made in a month. Then we went back to the park and ice creams, the carts, you know? There the ice creams are only like two cents apiece or three cents apiece, so me and him went out and got to these carts. These kids lined up, and we bought ice creams for those kids. Then we took her daddy and her grandpa [begins to cry], and they met us, and we took them to dinner. Then, we were leaving, and the last time I saw them they said, “Bye, bye, Americans—Americanos,” that’s what they called us.

Anyway, I still have pictures of the little girl and grandpa and all of them. Then we came to the States, and I took my GED and passed it and my scores was high enough to go to college. So, I came out and got discharged, and the state of Georgia hired me for about six months. I was the assistant manager of the state farmer's market in Cordele, Georgia. Then I surveyed for the state, and then I went to DeVry Tech in Chicago for a year and got my FCC license and a radar certificate. Then I came back, and I went to Southern Tech, which was is a unit—then it was a unit of Georgia Tech—and that's where I got a lot of my education there. Then I graduated and I was the chief engineer of the radio station in Warner Robins for a year, but it didn't take me long to find out that there was no money in the radio station. So, I went with the Air Force, with the electronic precisionment lab, and then I was put in charge of the radiation lab, so I was in charge of the radiation and all of our radiation sources was from the Energy Commission. I went to a lot of schools, and the last one I went to the professor—or the guy that was going to teach it—got sick and there was the first time that the computers came out so you could measure it. I went to [unintelligible] Air Force Base, and I taught the class. I got a great, great certificate from [unintelligible] to the two-star general in Warner Robins. That was a big deal. So, that's my story.

HF: I like it.

JH: Is that good enough?

HF: Yeah. I have one more question. When you came back, was it hard to get back into civil life?

JH: No, no, not at all

HF: Really?

JH: Not at all. Everything just worked great for me, you know. No problem at all. I came back, I wasn't back home probably two or three weeks before I had a job. No, no problem at all.

HF: Easy peasy lemon squeezy?

JH: What?

HF: Easy peasy lemon squeezy. You don't have any PTSD or anything from being overseas?

JH: No, no, no, no. I have nothing. No, none.

HF: Nice!

JH: Yeah, everything went great. Everything went great.

HF: What do you feel when someone asks you, "Thank you for your service?"

JH: I feel great. Proud. [begins to cry]

HF: Good. I like that.

JH: I'm proud of what I did. [cries].

HF: I'm proud of you.

JH: Thank you. No, I'm very happy I went in. I'm glad I served. I enjoyed every day of it.

HF: Do you ever talk to your old comrades?

JH: Oh yeah, I've got several, but now let me tell you, a lot of my buddies is passed on. But I still have one of my good buddies who worked for me up in Virginia. We'd go up there once while; he raises oysters on Chesapeake Bay. He was a plumber. Arlene and I'd go up, and we'd visit with him for a few days. Yeah, we're still in touch. One of my good buddies just passed away. He lived in South Carolina, and I just found out about, oh, probably a couple months ago, his wife called. Oh yeah, I kept up with them. I went to ship's reunions. Of course, everybody's getting older, but I remembered all of them and they remembered me. Yeah, we had a good time. Had a good time.

I enjoyed it. I repeat, I enjoyed the service. I enjoyed the Navy. But I wasn't cut out to be a full-time. I had bigger things in my brain than being in the military. I'm not putting the military down, not at all, because I truly enjoyed being in the Navy. But there was just something, something, inside of me that I knew that I was going to the top. I believed that with all my heart, and I did.

HF: Heck yeah.

JD: An old country boy.

HF: Went all the way to the top.

JD: I even negotiated, which never came to be, but I even went to Vietnam and negotiated for the State Department some of the peace agreements that McNamara [Robert McNamara] negotiated. So, I was—I don't know how to say it, but I put it the way I said. I was pretty high on the totem pole in Washington DC. with the senators and Congress. My really, really good friend was the Secretary for the majority of the United States Senate for 16 years, and then he was elected as the Secretary for the Majority. Most of the time when I went in, they'd send the limousine out and pick me up. Most of the time he wouldn't even let me stay in a hotel. He's got four sons and all of them graduated—no, Tom didn't graduate. Three of them graduated from West Point. Stan, their dad, graduated from West Point. We were at one of the sons' weddings. We were invited to West Point, Arlene and I was, to attend the wedding. But I dealt with the very, very top of this nation for a lot of years, and they'd come to our house for dinner.

HF: Really?

JH: Yeah, yeah, they'd come down. The most we ever had at one time was 32. From Washington DC.

HF: Came where?

JH: To my house for dinner.

HF: In Georgia?

JH: No, in Montana. They'd come to Montana. But about every four to six weeks, we'd have anywhere from 9 to 15 at our house for dinner. The most we'd ever had was 32. Arlene had gone to town to get her hair fixed, so I called my meat cutter and I said, "Joe, I need 32 porterhouse steaks. Arlene's gonna come by in a little while. Tell her we're going to have guests."

So Arlene went by, and Joe said, "Mrs. Holmes, come over here I need to talk to you. Mr. Holmes called and said for me to cut 32 steaks."

Arlene said, "Oh, my god." Anyway—

HF: [laughs] Good thing she got her hair fixed.

JH: Yeah. But what we did, we had a grill set up and they grilled their own steaks. Everybody would get them a steak and go out and grill it themselves. They'd would come in, they'd sit on the floor. They'd be sitting on the floor all around. The table would be full, and we'd all sit and laugh and talk. The kids would join right in with everybody—

Unknown Speaker [likely interviewee's daughter]: I want you keep it on [refers to recorder]

HF: It is on.

US: I've got a question now. I don't remember, what brought you to Montana?

JH: AFCO 9?) Corporation. I came out as a general manager of a division for AFCO.

US: Did you go right to Glasgow, [Montana]?

JH: Yeah.

US: I remember meeting—now I can't remember. I was a little kid. [unintelligible]—

JH: Tom Judge.

US: Tom Judge with you.

JH: Yeah, he used to come to the house about every month maybe and visit and have lunch. Visit or something.

US: I remember being able to tour, walk inside one of the big Boeing airplanes with a spiral staircase.

JH: 747, yeah.

HF: Really?

US: Those are a couple of my big memories.

JH: I remember inviting schools and Boeing would be very kind, and they'd bring bus loads out. When they'd come in, I'd always have the fire trucks and the police cars escorting them with the sirens down. I'd give them a tour through, the kids, because they'd never seen anything like that before. It was a great time. It was a great time.

HF: What was it like on the boat, like with the big waves? Were you ever scared?

JH: Well, there were two times on ship, on the USS Pollux, when we were just out of Japan and a typhoon hit us. It was a very, very terrible, and we went all night and part of the day. The bow would go underwater, you'd come out, and when the bow would come out, the propeller or the screw—what we called the propeller—when it would come up, that ship it just felt like it was going to tear all to pieces there. But, that's the only one that I was in.

Then on the USS Shasta (AE-6), we was on our way, and we were loaded. We had, I think it was like 5,000 tons of bombs and ammunition and everything. We hit a big storm going across the Atlantic, and these 500-pound bombs and 200-pound bombs—they broke loose down in the hull. Of course, they didn't have a fuse in them now, but for, oh my god, for probably 15 hours they would "bum-bum-bum bam!" against the wall on the ship. Then they would go "bum-bum-bum bam!" against the ship all night long and part of the day. Let me tell you, that was a scary time for me. But that was the only two instances that I remember that I was frightened, or everybody was, because it even broke tables loose that was welded to the floor because we were rolling so bad. I'm not too sure that everybody on that ship wasn't scared. Jim Holmes was.

HF: [laughs] Well, anything else you want to say?

JH: No, I think that's about it.

HF: Well, thank you for doing this for me.

JH: You're welcome. Now, I'm glad I did it. I got into it.

HF: [laughs] Yeah, I like it.

US: I just like always listening to your stories. Listening to your stories or anything you have to say, to tell, to share. I like listening.

HF: Now it'll be on record, so hopefully you didn't say anything—

US: Top secret.

HF: Hopefully, you didn't say anything top secret because we know.

JH: Oh no, no, no. In the Navy, I didn't have any top secrets. That was after I got out of the Navy when all of that came along. No, no, no secrets. No.

[End of Interview]