

NATE HOWARD, SR. NAVY “FROG” UDT DIVER

NATE: My name is Nathaniel Howard, Senior, N-A-T-H-A-N-I-E-L, first name, and Howard, H-O-W-A-R-D, Senior.

PRODUCER: Tell me what branch of the service you were in, what you did, and what years were?

NATE: I was in the United States Navy. I enlisted coming out of high school in 1956. I retired in 1975.

PRODUCER: That's enough for the slate.

Let's start at the beginning. Where did Nate Howard, Senior, grow up? Where'd you go to school? How'd you end up in the military?

NATE: I was born in the state of Arkansas, lived in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. This is largely agrarian area, lots and lots of farming. I am the second of 12 children, and of course graduating from high school, my options were very limited, so I entered the military shortly after high school.

I chose the Navy mainly because my dad was a World War II veteran who served in the Navy as well. Quite a contrast to the Navy then, my Navy as it is now. The contrast, 1956, fast forward to where we are now. Decided to stay in and the rest is history, you might say. Made a career of the Navy.

Initially when I joined the Navy I was a hospital corpsman and I worked at Naval hospitals for the first half of my career. I was a surgical technologist as well as what we call a tissue bank technician.

The first part of it is general surgical duties and assisting with surgeries of various specialties in the hospital. Progressed to the tissue bank, which is the - how should I word this - sterile post mortems of donated tissues from cadavers.

It was two processes there was the procurement and the processing. The procurement was when we would get the tissues that were going to be processed for later transportation. Then once we did that there was the restoration and the preparation of the body to do to funeral homes to be prepared for the families and the funeral that would follow.

After working in that for a while, I did get a little burned out. That kind of work is not very exciting.

That was followed by a short period of duty. You know the Navy furnishes medical support to the Marine Corps so that Navy corpsman, doctors, nurses, chaplains who operated with the Navy, but we take care of them in that aspect.

I served at Camp Lejeune, the 2nd Medical Battalion. I had one experience that was not so pleasant there in that I was one of the people that participated in what was later called the insurrection that occurred in the Dominican Republic when the dictator there by the name of Trujillo was assassinated.

We were assigned to go in and put down a junta that was threatening to take over the islands. It was reported, and I don't know if it was true or not, that Fidel Castro was behind it, and we were not going to let him or his influence get a hold in San Domingo.

Following my stay with the Marines, I chose not to go back to the hospital and something else had caught my interest. That was deep sea diving. I applied and was accepted to the Naval School of Diving and Salvage. It's six month long school that included instruction in all aspects of diving: hard hat, scuba, shallow water diving.

In my particular case, I [inaudible 00:05:20] special instruction in the recognition and treatment of diving accidents because I became a deep sea medical technician as well as a first class diver.

PRODUCER: What year was that, about? When you went into the special program?

NATE: I went into diving in 1965, and it was a six month long program.

PRODUCER: How on earth did you ever think you had the interest or talent or ability to be a diver? Isn't that kind of an unusual occupation?

NATE: It is, and there was no particular reason other than I was looking for something that was a little more adventurous. As I said, I'd spent considerable time in a hospital environment. I knew that I didn't want to go back to the hospital environment.

I was more or less led to something outdoors or something with some excitement, an element of excitement, you know. That's how.

At the time, the Navy was interested in applicants for deep sea diving, particularly from a medical perspective. Again, I applied and was readily

accepted. There were certainly times when I went, "What have I got myself into now, here?" But I persevered and graduated from the diving school.

My initial assignment after diving school was on what's called a submarine tender. There are divers there whose duties are to tend, that is the term applied, so to of take care of submarines when they come back and they're alongside the pier.

We'd do inspections on the hulls, checking for paint loss and so forth, you know. Certain drains would have to be plugged off from underneath ... Certain things we would have to do depending on what was being done while they were there. We took care of all of that including, in some instances, changing the screws if they had pits in them and was causing vibrations and what have you and it was determined that they need to be changed. Some could be rectified in the water, while others required replacement. We did screw replacements and all kinds of things of that nature on submarines.

PRODUCER: [inaudible 00:08:07] not a lot of African American divers at that period of time. Were you [inaudible 00:08:13]?

NATE: You're absolutely right. In fact there was only one other African American in the class with me, and we both made it through. There's a high attrition in this particular school as well because of the physical requirements.

As fate would have it, I guess you could say, I ended up actually going back years later to be the first African American instructor at that diving school.

PRODUCER: So were you a strong swimmer? Is that a silly question to ask?

NATE: It really was one of my weak points, because again, going back to my early beginnings, we didn't have those privileges back in Arkansas. There were swimming pools, but not for us. We did, at one time, get a swimming pool in our community, but by that time I didn't get to use it very much.

After going there as an instructor, as I said, I was not, by some, very well received. Being the first, it's always hard. One guy that was there with me has got, and he's dead now, but you may have seen the movie. His name was Carl Brashear, and he was the first black Master Diver in the Navy. The movie was entitled "Men of Honor" and I don't need to go into the ordeal regarding ...

PRODUCER: That was Cuba Gooding, Jr.

NATE: Yeah. Well, I was there when Carl made Master Diver.

So there are other highlights. I guess swimming was not a strong point. As a matter of fact it was almost my downfall.

PRODUCER: I imagine you worked really hard at that if that was something you had to ...

NATE: Exactly, and sometimes you had to be careful because everyone ... There's a certain breed who tend to be instructors at these kind of schools, and they're pretty hardcore. A lot of responsibility, and like I said, swimming was not my strong point.

There was a requirement, as I recall, before ... In the scuba classes, the first classroom sessions where you learned all about the equipment, how to conduct yourself in the water and the use of the equipment and so forth, and it ended up at the end of two weeks. The first week was all in the classroom, then we started to go to the pool.

There was a swimming requirement in the pool. It required, oh geez, what was the requirement? It was many, many, many laps around the pool, and at the end of the swim, you had to in place tread water for 15 minutes.

I did the swim, far from the first to finish, and started cramping up while treading water. I started to move over to the side of the pool, sort of try to give my legs a break, and the instructor standing there was saying, "Doc, can't do that."

So I said, "I'll be okay, I just need to take a slight break. My legs are cramping."

He said, "You quit?" and I said, "No, I'm getting some cramps in my legs and I was moving over."

I would reach for the side of the pool, and he would take his leg, put it on my shoulder and push me back, and I'd go under. Come up.

"How you doing, Doc?"

Said, "I really need to take a break. My legs are cramping."

I start moving back over, he say, "You quit?"

"No."

"Well, get the hell back from here, then."

I started to take it personal. That went on for a little bit, and as it turns out I was huffing and puffing and spitting water by the time the 15 minutes was over.

He came over, I was like [wheezy breathing 00:13:37] on the side of the pool, and he kneeled down and he said, "Let me tell you something. You of all people should know the importance of this." He says, "In another week, you're going to get in this boat and we're going to go out into the open water." He says, "Once you're out there and you have this same problem, the only thing you have to lean on is you. You won't have the sides of this pool."

What he said was true, but I was still taking it personal because of the way he handled it in the water. He was not a diver who was very friendly. He was always very stern, and I just did not take to it very well.

As the time went on and I started to really get into this business, I found what he said was very true. I started to look at him differently. It sort of taught me a lesson that sometimes it doesn't pay to prejudge, you know.

In fact, I guess I would go so far as to say that there were times when I really reflected on what he said because what he said was true: That sometimes it is you and your capacity to persevere under adverse conditions. That set me sort of in the right direction to realize that every Caucasian is not necessarily out to get you, so to speak. He could have pushed me to the limit and I never would have continued.

PRODUCER: I remember one place, it was about 30 or 40 feet deep. You had to take all your gear off ...

NATE: "Ditch and Don".

PRODUCER: ... take your mask off, [inaudible 00:16:07], and then you have to put it all back on, pull that mask. Do you remember some of those initial open water dives when they had to do that?

NATE: Oh, absolutely. It's called "Ditch and Donning". The last day in the swimming pool was called Hell Friday. That was the day when the instructors got in the water with the students. Their objective was to get you to quit if that was in you. They only wanted the ones who had the stamina to stick it out.

They'd come by and knock your mask off, shut your air off. It was a buddy system where you and a buddy had to work together and correct whatever it is that they screw up. Between the two of you, you had to correct it and you couldn't surface.

One of the things was "Ditching and Donning". That was a single exercise where you had to go down exactly like you said, take off all the equipment, come up and blow and go. Come up and take a breath, go back down, get the respiration

for your air, get your equipment back on all without assistance. Some of it was challenging. It was very intriguing. Some of it was exciting. But there were times when, if you were not strong, Hell Friday would get you.

From there, of course, is when we started to go into the open waters and do various projects. As time would progress you'd get into more and more things that was required in order to pass the course.

PRODUCER: You said you were assigned to do some open water stuff and this was involving, I think you said, submarines? Where was that located?

NATE: That was in San Diego, California. That was a Naval facility there that had what's called submarine tenders. These are ships that tend the submarines when they come alongside after being deployed. They stay there for a period of time before going back out. It's a period of maintenance and so forth that can be conducted, has to be conducted while they're there before they are deployed again.

That is where I was when I got the call that the Special Operations group that was over in Coronado which is across the Bay from where I was in San Diego needed somebody right away medically.

There was a group that was already deployed, and I was asked if I would take that assignment. I thought about it long and hard.

PRODUCER: By the way, what year was that, about?

NATE: This was in the later part- Well, early '67, 1967.

The way things were working then are quite different than today. Medical corpsmen with my qualifications also served with Special Forces in support of them from a medical perspective, and we were few in number. I was asked if I would help out because for some reason the group that was already deployed, something occurred and the medical person that was assigned had to come back.

I accepted and I went. This is where I joined with UDT11, from special warfare there at Coronado. They were already in country and I had to catch up.

PRODUCER: So let me, for folks who don't know what UDT means ...

NATE: Underwater demolition team.

In those days, the frogs, as they were affectionately known, were well known. They were in the Korean War as well as the Second World War. They were very

active in recognizance and just other kinds of activities that involved underwater surveillance as well as other actions by specially trained people.

The way it was then is that the Seal Team, what is known as a Seal Team now was in the very early stages. They were small in number and they were more focused on the next level, I guess you should say, of this kind of warfare.

There were times when the Seal Team would need more people and they would ask for volunteers from UDT to move over to the Seal Team, and you'd go from a Frog to a Seal. Sometimes they would come back but generally once you went to the seals you more or less stayed with them.

That was the progression. The demand for the type of things that Seals were doing started to grow to the extent that a lot of things that UDT was doing could be encompassed into what the Seals was doing, just added to it, and that's how the Seal Team came about.

There are no more Frogs now. It just evolved into what is now Seal Team and it takes in all of those duties, including ... Well, even UDT had some who were jump qualified. You'd also go to jump school as well and do jumps into the water from the aircraft, chopper or plane or whatever.

As I said, UDT is no longer in existence. It's all Seal Team now.

PRODUCER: You said you were sent off to Vietnam right away.

NATE: Right away. I was there long enough to get some indoctrination, then I flew out and joined the unit that was already in country. It became very interesting because, as I said, it was all happening very quick. As soon as I got in country, things started to happen. The calls started to come in and we got active.

One of the early encounters was, we were based in Da Nang, Vietnam, and that's about half way up the coast from Saigon or the Mekong Delta, or on up to Dong Ha, which is just a few miles from North Vietnam. We were on call and various kinds of requests was made for our services that included a lot of travel.

On one assignment, I went all the way up to roughly 15 miles or so from North Vietnam. It was interesting because we was in a C130 coming back, we were so close to the North that when the plane took off, the bank was so steep that you almost fell out the seat.

So they told us it would be- hold on -- because we didn't want to get close enough to draw any fire.

I also would be on stand-by for other kinds of events. I was there because of a request for something, an assignment that Navy EOD unit was doing, underwater ordnance disposal and so forth. I went up and stayed up there with them for a short stay.

Scared me to death. There was a lot of activity up there. At night, sometimes, there was a couple of aircraft that had names according to their function. There was Puff -- Puff the Magic Dragon-- and the Jolly Green Giant. They shoot with tracers, and sometimes at night, the sky would be lit up. They would be doing their thing and you would see these tracers going up and you'd think all hell had broken loose. Interesting.

I lay there sometimes, and I'd say, "Geez. How in the world did I end up here?" Those are the times that you just somehow drew strength and did what needed to be done.

One other assignment that come to mind is, there's an old town called Quang Tri. In order to get to Quang Tri, there was a river, the Cua Viet River, and the Marines were in a heated battle up in Quang Tri and they needed supply vessels, small supply boats to get supplies up to them. We were asked to go in and give them boat lanes for small craft to get to the Marines up in Quang Tri, and this was a hot bed.

One of the things that we do is that kind of work at night. We go in and we have people trained in the operation of electronic equipment to survey the bottom and to get the depth and so forth to establish these boat lanes. We were escorted by Marines. They were on each side of the river to protect us, because some of this work was done during the daylight hours as well. It was urgent and we needed to get it done.

We had some tracked vehicles that was on the side as well with armored personnel on board. Lo and behold, I guess about half way through it, the tide started going out and the tracked vehicles couldn't move, and here we are sitting ducks out there in the water trying to do a survey. So that was pretty anxious. Pretty anxious.

In fact, that night there was reports of an ambush up ahead and we were not too far - within a hundred yards or so - from suspected ambush. That made it very tense because the amtracks couldn't move. We did have support from the Marines on each side, but those were rather anxious moments. We had to stay there until the tide came back in.

That's an example of a little excitement, if you will.

PRODUCER: [inaudible 00:29:00]

NATE: They were in the area, yes. But when we saw them, they were not involved with us. We were just in the area. There was a time when I was up in Dong Ha with the EOD unit. They were there in the area where I was. Yeah.

PRODUCER: Tell me about an underwater demolition mission that you might have gone on... because you said earlier, if you made contact with the enemy, you weren't doing your job...

NATE: I wouldn't necessarily say you're not doing your job, but to some extent you would have failed because a lot of what we did we didn't want to be detected.

Some of the surveys, for example, there was an area where the Marines wanted to make a landing from a vessel and go ashore. We would go in at night and through various techniques come away with what's called an onion skin to give to the authorities establishing the lanes to avoid any navigational hazards so that once the Marines disembark the vessel and headed in, we would have enabled them to do so without us, of course.

That's all done at night through various techniques which I had to learn. One of the techniques of course was you finish what you were doing. We had high speed boats with a special technique that involved a snare. We had to line up and this boat would come through and a certain technique that you had to employ to get picked up. If you missed the pass, they may or may not come back for you, so that was very important that you knew what to do, when to do it and knew where you were supposed to be. Otherwise ...

PRODUCER: [inaudible 00:31:19]

NATE: You have the high speed boat, and attached to that boat is a rubber boat sort of like a kayak type boat. Within that boat is one of the strongest men that you had because you need the strength.

When the boat starts to approach, all the guys in the water supposed to line up and be ready for pick up so when that boat comes through, when it approaches you, you start kicking and get as much of your body as you can out of the water, at least up to your waist out of the water and get your arm up into position.

It's the job of the man in the boat that, when you get your arm in that hook, you reach up and you grasp, and his job is to use the momentum of the boat to pluck you out of the water into the rubber boat. You hit the rubber boat and it's your job to jump into the speed boat.

You have to do that and get out of the way because in a moment he's at the next guy. You've got to be out of that rubber boat into the next boat by the time he gets another guy.

You've got to keep that sequence going, so it requires timing and all of the training, literally, that you put into this, it comes to fruition when you're in this kind of situation.

PRODUCER: How many men would be in a squad then?

NATE: It depends on the job. It could be six or eight, or it could be... Well, there was only 14 in my group.

There were other responsibilities that was not in the water so at any given time you'd have three or four people that may not be actually in the water but doing something else. There's people in the boat, you got to have safety people, stand-by swimmers and so forth.

I was in the boat most of the time because I was the medical person. If anything went wrong, they needed me. I didn't need to be out in the water someplace.

That's really about it. They really stressed that because if you're in a situation and you miss and you got to turn around and come back on a second pass to get someone, you're jeopardizing everybody else. That's a call that had to be made depending on circumstances.

We never had to leave anybody but conceivably, you know, say if you were taking on fire and you were trying to get out of range and just get out of dodge, so to speak, the last thing you want to do is to turn around because somebody missed their pass, jeopardize everybody on the boat.

Those are really kind of exciting but very dangerous situation.

PRODUCER: Did you ever have any situations where you had to take a team underwater into a harbor where the North Vietnamese off-loaded some of their equipment and maybe blow up harbors by putting explosives in?

NATE: No, I never did have that experience. Some of the other things, though, that was very interesting is that on one occasion, a South Vietnamese diver was down at 80 feet. Something happened. We're not sure if he saw some marine life or something excited him. He came straight to the surface, and that's a no no. Upon reaching the surface, he was symptomatic and the symptoms that he presented were such that was easily diagnosed as what's called air embolism, which is very, very dangerous.

PRODUCER: With the bends.

NATE: Yeah, it's a form of the bends, but it's air embolism really. He was unconscious. I was called because I was the only qualified person to go in the chamber and treat him. I was escorted to the only re-compression chamber that was there.

I took him in and requested that a physician be sent to the sight immediately, preferably a diving medical doctor. There wasn't one in the area, so here I am sitting in this chamber at 165 feet, which is the treatment depth for air embolism.

Got a measure of normalization of his symptoms to some extent. The maximum time that you stay there is two hours, and you started to assume that whatever symptoms are still present are probably not going to be relieved. In other words, you haven't compressed that bubble to the extent that the symptoms have gone away. Of course, that indicates that it's probably irreversible, particularly in cases of neurological involvement.

Long story short, the doctor that came had no diving experience. We had what's called a double lock chamber, and the outer lock can be used sort of like an elevator where they can isolate where I was from the outer lock, put the doctor in that chamber, pressurize it until it equals the pressure in the inner chamber, I could open the door and he comes in, so that's what happened.

After two hours at 165 feet, I don't remember the exact depth we were when he finally got there and was in the chamber. I brought him up to date as to what had happened and so forth and he did an examination.

Very hot in there, as you can imagine. At some point in time, he said, "Well, I'm going to go out now. You've done a wonderful job, and I'll be available on the outside for any questions you may have. I don't see that there's anything more that I can do here."

I said, "Well, I understand what you're saying, but you can't go. You committed. You're going to be with me for the duration," which was two or three days in duration just to get back to the surface because to try and come up any faster we'd put ourselves in jeopardy because you spend two hours at 165 feet, you become saturated and you're going to end up in the same condition that he was in.

I explained all this to him, but he says, "Let me talk to the people outside the chamber." He tell them what he wanted. "There must be, I'm told I got to stay here, there must be ..." and I saw them start laughing on the outside. They were going [snicker sound 00:38:50].

To make a long story short, for a while there he was not very cooperative. He was making demands. He wanted to talk to the Admiral, get somebody on the phone that knows what the hell is going on here and all.

I finally got him settled down. I just confronted him. I said, "Now look, we're in this together, like it or not. Any grievances, any actions that you want to take, once we're out of here feel free to do so, but I'm going to be very blunt: You ain't going anyplace, so settle down, try to relax and we'll make the most of it."

He was really irate. He did not sit down. I had requested some things to be sent down to me inside the chamber and I proceeded to tell him what was going on with the embolism and why it is that there's nobody, I don't care who you going to call, that's going to bring you out at this time. You got to be desaturated the same as this person showing the symptoms and so do I.

He finally settled down, and after it was all over and we were outside, he came and apologized and said he understands now and that I was 100% right and so forth.

I said, "I understand your position. That's why I tried the best I could to explain it to you and it wasn't what you wanted to hear so you weren't receiving very well what I was saying. You didn't accept what I was saying. In fact, I should be the one that's pissed off because you didn't think I knew what I was talking about."

He said, "That's not the case, and again, I'm sorry. I just couldn't fathom being there all this time, and the heat was just ..."

I said, "I was in the same situation."

We made it through that. Never did find out- I had him transferred to, there was a Naval hospital not too far from Da Nang, which where we were operating from. We took the injured fellow there and the last time I checked on him, he was still in the hospital, had shown some progression but still had some neurological deficits that were questionable as to whether or not they would ever be cleared up.

On another occasion at that same location, there was a German hospital ship that was there. There was a little area between the Naval hospital at Da Nang and Camp Tien Sha where we were operating out of, there was an area called China Beach. It was sort of a recreational area. When people had time to get there it was pretty safe. There were a number of people who got off of the hospital ship and were actually getting a little r and r in there swimming and you know. This German nurse got out a little bit too far, got caught up in the surf zone and the guy that was with her could not rescue her.

It just so happens that we were passing on this vehicle that we had called a duck, which has the capacity to just go off land right into the water. They held us and we diverted and went in to rescue her. Just as we were getting to her she started to flounder and go under.

We had one of the best swimmers that I've ever been around. I mean, the guy was really good. His name was [Ako 00:42:50]. Ako was a native Hawaiian and he was like a fish in the water. Spent his life mostly in the water. He grew up in the water, so to speak.

They were saying, "We got to get her. She's going under. She's going under."

I remember very vividly Ako stepped up to the front of the duck and he said, "I'll get her," and the guy that was in charge was saying, "Hold on, hold on, let's try to get in a little closer."

He said, "I'll get her," and he was gone, and when he came up he had her.

I took her to the- We took her on board and I said, "She's got to go to the hospital." We took her to a hospital in Da Nang and sure enough the x-rays showed water already in the lungs, but after being in the hospital for a while, she was all right. I don't know from that point forward how she fared because there was some water in her lungs, but that got a lot of press.

That was exciting, I guess you could say, because you can imagine all the people gathering on the beach wondering if we were going to be able to get her. Then once we did, to bring her back and they actually saw her and saw her being taken away and everything. Everybody thought she was gone. It was very gratifying to see that she made it through that experience.

Yeah. Exactly, in fact you have a picture there of me sitting on the pier with another fellow in scuba gear. That's what's called a deep water pier. As the story goes, this is where ships would- Da Nang was mostly a supply area and supply ships would come in with all kinds of things that they were bringing into theater.

On this particular occasion, we were unloading pallets of beer. They had the straps that they would attach to the pallet, lift it from the hold in the ship up onto the pier, and the straps broke on one of these. The whole pallet of precious Budweiser hit the water and just splattered all over the place on the bottom. They called us and wanted to know if it was salvageable, if they was still intact. Although we knew that it couldn't be recovered, we had the task of going down, looking it over and telling them. Of course, we did that and informed them that, forget about that one. It's all over the place down there. The whole pallet just collapsed, and it did.

They said, "Okay, appreciate you guys coming and doing this for us now."

So from time to time, we would come back and get a few of those things off the bottom. We wouldn't want to leave that navigational hazard down there, you know. Throughout the rest of the time that we were in country, from time to time we would find that we'd be there for some other assignment or whatever and just check to see if it's still intact.

That was very interesting. Very interesting.

PRODUCER: How deep was it?

NATE: Probably about 40 feet or so.

PRODUCER: Not that deep.

NATE: It wasn't that deep. That was very interesting.

PRODUCER: So you guys had beer for the duration.

NATE: Yeah, that would be a fair statement. That was one of the most difficult things that I ever had a part of, and it was a small part.

Because there was a Naval hospital in the area, from time to time I would have the occasion to go over there. I was told that if I had any free time and I wanted to come over to the hospital to help in any way, feel free to do so.

Sometimes I would be taking somebody over there for a physician to see for an ailment or something of that nature. Whatever the reason, I would go from time to time.

This one particular time, I was over there when what they call incoming casualties were abundant. There was a pretty heavy firefight taking place not too far away and we were taking on casualties pretty fast.

I asked if there was anything I could do to assist. They said, "Yeah, do you know anything about triage? We need help in triage." That's where you separate the severity of the casualties according to class so the ones that are minor, so to speak, are the ones that you see first. The ones with life-threatening situations are being seen, but there are some who obviously probably won't make it. Sometimes you're the one making that decision because there's a colored tag that you put on them and that's the way they proceed in the treatment process.

Some you just take immediate action. If there's a loss of blood, maybe a tourniquet or some action that you could take to lessen that until we can get to them and so forth. But if somebody's there, they've taken a direct hit and just a dire situation, they're last to be seen because you make the determination that there's nothing we can do for this person. Try and make them as comfortable as possible.

PRODUCER: What colors were the tags, by the way?

NATE: Well, let me remember. I believe red tag would do you in, and then I think green was the first to be seen, and there was a number of colors there. But boy, when you put, say, a red tag on somebody, you're virtually making that decision. Even though you recognize that there's nothing you can do, but you're the one putting the tag on.

It's something. Like I remember one kid, he had taken a direct hit in the stomach and he was still talking but he was not aware of the severity. When he did come to the realization that he was really, really struggling and he felt that he wasn't going to make it, and he started telling me things to say to his mother and so forth. Rough. Really rough. I wasn't ready for that situation.

It's things like that that can really get under your skin.

PRODUCER: Did you ever see that kid's mom, or send a letter to that kid's mom?

NATE: No. I was just there for a while and I said, "I can't go back there again."

In less than a year, I came back. I think it was December 14th or 15th, something like that, of '67. Went over the first of the year.

For the most part, it was a mixture of excitement mixed in with a bunch of anxious moments and so forth. The bright side is that there were 14 of us and 14 came back, so we got through it all without losing anybody. It was something to be proud of.

Another element of the work that we do is classified, so I won't go into particulars, but we had special submarines that was attached to us, or we were attached to, that had underwater launch capability, which means that you go on-board a submarine in their lock-out chambers and they are equipped to get you out of the submarine at depth at a general location.

You have the boats, the radios and what have you that goes out with you to the surface and you proceed from there to an assignment. At a given time, the

submarine comes in and the scope comes up. You latch onto it and it drags you out to sea and comes up and take you back aboard.

PRODUCER: That's still classified to this day?

NATE: I don't know, son, but I'm not going to comment on how that works, the particulars of it, you know, but essentially that's pretty much how it works.

What we'd do was we'd get out there, and I won't comment on it.

PRODUCER: I'm sorry, I suspect most of these 14 guys, nobody signed up for a second tour.

NATE: Oh no, quite the opposite. They would stay there for a career. Once you say Seal Team -- On occasion they may go back to the regular Navy, but I would say by far they remain a Seal until the time they get out of the Navy or retire.

PRODUCER: I mean a second term in Vietnam or in country.

NATE: They go in and out several deployments. A good friend of mine had gone, I don't know, four or five times, had seven purple hearts. He was a medic as well, and he'd come back and five or six months or so he'd put his name on the list to volunteer for the next deployment.

There were guys that were like that. They became acclimated, I guess you could say, to the environment. Liked the challenge and so forth, and made several trips back.

I was not one. One time around was more than enough for me.

What really shook me up, I came home in December of '67, and the second week of January, '68, the guy that relieved me was buried at Fort Rosecrans there in San Diego up on the hill there at Point Loma.

PRODUCER: What happened to him?

NATE: He was on a reconnaissance assignment and the boat that they were on took a direct hit and he was decapitated. You think that doesn't get your attention. Wow. How close. A few weeks and it could have been me.

We were UDT11, relieved by UDT12. My relief and the CO, commanding officer, of team 12 was killed in the same hit. That just makes you cringe.

PRODUCER: There but for the grace of God ...

NATE: Exactly.

PRODUCER: San Francisco was often where a lot of people arrived. Did you encounter any of this public uproar over this war as a Vietnam vet?

NATE: Sure. It was not just San Francisco. It was all over, but yes. It was not popular in a lot of places to wear your uniform off the base. You had to wear civilian clothes. It just was ...

It was a bad time to go and fight for what you believe is right and try to uphold the tradition that the military has held for so many years in our society, helping those in need of help and if need be doing whatever, militarily, you can to help the situation that threatened the well-being of this country and so forth. It seemed that nobody appreciated it.

I was never in a group that was spat on, anything like that, but those kinds of things really, really make you just feel nauseated, you know. It was a bad time for us. It really was.

I never was involved in any particular incident myself, but as a group we were never, you know. It wasn't something that you delighted in talking about because there were so many people that didn't appreciate it.

PRODUCER: You obviously were still in just in the service when Saigon finally fell to the North in '75. How did those images of people [inaudible 00:59:00] off the roof of the embassy and all those helicopters and the carriage being pushed off in the water. You must have had quite a reaction to it after you've been there so close.

NATE: I didn't understand it, to tell you the truth. I didn't know the philosophy insofar as what those made the decisions, so I really felt bad about it. It seemed that everything that those of us who had participated in the war effort was almost for nothing. It was very, I don't know. It was just something that you never thought would happen, the way that it went down. When it did, you didn't really know why we did what we did and didn't do more in that area, but the old saying about hindsight, you know. If you're not there and you don't know the real story, it's difficult to really comment on it. It was not something that you took kindly to seeing.

PRODUCER: When you look back on that most of a year you spent in country, what's your overall memories of that experience, that place?

NATE: It was something that really gives you a different perspective on life as well as the beauty of being an American and living in a place like America as compared to, say, Vietnam. The differences, so many things that we take for granted. Some

would say that the least of us have so much more than the average person in those situations. Having had that experience, you can appreciate what you have a hell of a lot more.

There are people there that, I mean, it's just extreme poverty. The little shacks that they have to live in, the lack of food, something as simple as sanitary water. Those kinds of things that we take for granted every day they go lacking.

That, to me, is why I started collecting fish. Like I say, we do underwater explosive functions and the shock from the explosives, if they're, depending on how close the fish are, but it would rupture their bladder or their lungs inside and they would float to the surface so there's nothing wrong with them being eaten.

I used to get those fish and coming back, particularly if we were on a duck, as we would pass and I'd see people I'd tell them to slow down and I'd take and pull up a fish and give it, and they were very thankful, particularly kids. Occasionally we would stop and give them the fish.

You see people with so little and you wonder how in the world do they make it? In this country you have people with so much and still don't appreciate it, and that contrast is really something that most people here would never understand because most people in our society will never be in that situation. Not to say that we don't have poor people in need in this country, but even the poorest in this country have much more than a lot of those people.

PRODUCER: Did your parents live long enough to see their son become a Navy frog man?

NATE: Oh yes.

PRODUCER: What was their take on that whole situation?

NATE: They wondered where on earth did I get this idea and never imagined it [inaudible 01:04:07]. Very happy when I came back from Vietnam. Yeah. Very happy.

I just used it as a springboard, I guess, because there wasn't a lot of, as I alluded to earlier, a lot of excitement in welcoming back the veterans from Vietnam.

When I was offered my choice of what we call shore duty where you come off of arduous sea duty type experiences overseas and so forth on ships, you get a chance to sort of catch a break, so to speak.

The only thing available because there wasn't a large demand for people with my specialty, one of the places that they did utilize my talents was at the diving school, so they asked if I'd like to go to an assignment as an instructor at the diving school, and I said absolutely.

I went through instructor training. Twenty-six of us in the class and I finished number one. I was hot to trot to get there and get going. Went to the diving school. First and foremost I recognized that I was going to be the first African American on the staff, and there was some resentment.

Overall I was well-received and I just had an excellent experience there. I taught physicians, students, including foreign students. I trained state police in diving and so forth. Matter of fact, I did lot of state police from Maryland State Police trained there. District of Columbia and other states as well as foreign countries would send people there for training.

PRODUCER: What town was that school based out of?

NATE: At the time it was in Washington, D.C., down at the Navy yard in Washington, D.C. It has since been moved to Panama City, Florida. It's no longer in existence in Washington. Somebody in their infinite wisdom decided that the world's leading deep sea diving school ought to be located near some deep sea water.

The Anacostia River, the deepest I ever dove in the Anacostia River was between 110 and 112 feet and that's down near the bridge at, nice bridge down out 301 where you go over into Virginia. As you approach that bridge that was in the area down there, that was over 100 feet and that's where we used to take students, in fact, down there to dive. That's the deepest we could find over 100 feet down in that area.

PRODUCER: You certainly had an amazing career and experience, starting from that young kid from Arkansas.

NATE: Oh yes, yes. I guess because of my performance and acceptance at the diving school, I was asked- There was a research facility in its infancy at the Naval Medical Research Institute in Bethesda, which is now Walter Reed on Wisconsin Avenue. They were getting ready to launch an extensive program there because the Navy was well into what's called saturation diving, which takes it to the next level. I was asked if I would be interested in taking a position there after retirement, and I did so. I stayed there for a number of years. That was very, very interesting.

PRODUCER: This is the oxygen rebreathers?

NATE: All kinds of experiments. Mostly what's called saturation diving where you can go to extreme depths over long periods of time and the process of developing decompression techniques. They was using active duty divers as subjects. Active duty and civilian as well as foreign physicians. All these minds coming together to evolve these techniques. I was part of the staff there, and we went as deep as 1000 feet and kept people down there for a whole week. The problem is decompression, developing safe ways, dependable ways to get them back to the surface, and that's what the research was all about.

I enjoyed that work. Very tedious work, though, you know. When you have people that deep, you have to be very vigilant and have a well-trained staff. You need people who are well-versed in what's going on and certainly they had those people. I was a part of that and that was very interesting work.

They, too, have now moved to Panama City, Florida, adjacent to the dive school. Sort of a symbiotic relationship that goes on there.

I had probably two careers that I liked because I stayed in the research element once I came off the active arena, and that was very rewarding.

PRODUCER: [inaudible 01:10:53] like to thank you for sharing your story, and I'd like to thank you for what you did over there as well. Thank you for coming in and being part of this.

NATE: Thank you for inviting me. I hope that something I've said would shed some light on some of the good things that's happening in our military services. I think it's worthy of appreciation by the general public, and certainly, thank you.