

John Kitchens  
Air Force Sergeant  
1964-68  
Navy Torpedo Man 2nd Class  
1968-1972  
Interviewed by: Matthew Anderson

### My Vietnam: John Kitchens' Story

My dad was a WWII veteran who died at Oakland Naval Hospital in 1953, so I always had the military in the back of my mind and when I graduated had no intention other than going into the military. I enlisted three days out of high school in 1964, here in Sacramento. When I joined, though, my mom was so scared of the Navy that she talked me into joining the Air force.

I went into boot camp June 14, 1964, at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. I was scared to death. I was petrified. It is a different type of atmosphere than anyone who's never been in the military could ever deal with. Everything that enters your world is via your, DI, drill instructor, a very imposing character. Within a relatively short period of time, two to three weeks, you get into a routine, and once you're into that routine it's simply the way it is. Three or four weeks into it you're doing things you never believed you could do.

We went to Fort Huachuca where they were running these huge maneuvers. In 1965 the Army had asked the Air Force if they could borrow a few cooks. The problem was they say 'Yeah, you can have these cooks,' the youngest most inexperienced. We had never cooked outside of a mess hall, and had no idea how to set up a field kitchen. So they sent us to Fort Lee, Virginia, in a two week intense course on how to run a field kitchen. This came back to haunt the eight or the nine with the fact that on our specialty was that we were cooks see combat, which meant we knew how to cook in the field. I had a little 'C' saying I was certified to cook in the field which meant up front. That's the reason I went to Cam Ranh Bay, that's the reason I went over for a long tour.

In 1965 I was assigned a TDY, temporary duty assignment, to Cam Ranh Bay. Myself and seven other men from my unit went over while they were building Cam Ranh Bay. We lived in tents and I was there for three months. I was a cook. I absolutely hated it. I absolutely despised doing what I was doing. But that's what I was told to do. I wasn't even nineteen years old. We would get shelled and I was scared to death the entire time I was at Cam Ranh Bay, and I never went off base.

I was assigned to Vietnam again and went back in 1967 for a long tour, 13 months, again as a cook. I went to Tan Son Nhut. It was the main airbase outside Saigon. For 13 months I never left the base inside of Vietnam. We were shelled, but after a while I got used to it. If I heard explosions in the background I knew in my ear set there was a distance and I didn't worry about it. My ear picked up when they got closer. When they got closer I got concerned. We did have a shelling and there were some fragments from it that we all got kind of showered with, but that was no big thing. I was a cook, I was never a boony rat, I was never out there in the swamps, swamping or anything like that. But it was a very scaring experience knowing that somebody out there was trying to hurt me: all I was trying to do was serve breakfast.

I got out of the Air Force on June 14, 1964. I remember two days before I got out there were two kids who just joined, just come out of boot camp. I looked at them, shook both their hands, and said 'I have been waiting for you for four years.' They were my replacements.

I enlisted to serve a second term with the Navy after the Air Force. Navy Boot Camp, in San Diego was different from army boot camp. Navy Boot Camp was harder for a newbie, but it was easier for me because I knew what to expect. It was more like, from my perspective, a Boy Scout Camp. Definitely more intense, more training, but I was there because I wanted to be there as opposed to most everyone else who was there because they wanted to avoid the draft.

I was aboard two submarines while I was in the Navy. I was aboard the USS Catfish and the USS Black Fin, as a torpedo man. On the USS Catfish, I got emergency leave because my oldest daughter was born. The day after my daughter was born I shipped out. We were supposed to be out on a short deployment, but ended up spending double the time we were supposed to there. We went in to the Shanghai area for Spec Ops. Basically we were a spy ship. I had no idea what we were doing. There were some 'spooks' aboard and they were listening, trying to hear all the traffic the Chinese were doing. It was a great thing on the submarine; we reversed our day and night. We were a snorkel boat and what we did is we went in and did our spying during the day. We would go in closer to shore to listen. At night we went away from shore, surfaced, put our snorkel up, recharged our batteries, and that's when all our activity was.

We went down south to Subic Bay. Our boat was never designed for what we were requested to do, but we went into Da Nang at midnight and picked up some seals. I don't know what their rank was, I don't know what their names were, I don't know what their mission was, I don't know where they went, I don't know what they did, I don't know if they succeeded, and I don't know if they got out alive. All I know is we went up the coast, and

about three or four days after they came aboard, they went out the forward escape hatch. When we came back to Suvic Bay we were given a ribbon and a couple other things and told we could never speak of this again. That was interesting, because I came back with three ribbons, and I had no idea how I got them.

Getting out of the Navy was different from the Air Force. I got an early out and had been accepted to San Diego Police Academy. It was anticlimactic, there was no ceremony, I just said goodbye to the guys on the boat, and sent my papers in.

My companions while I was in the service were the best friends, the best people, the closest friends I have ever had in my entire life. My best friend in the Air Force was the best man at my wedding, and I have actually stayed in contact with several of them. The friendships in both the Air Force and the Navy, especially in the Navy, were unbelievably close, closer than any brother. The very confined spaces caused an intensity of a relationship. I depended on that man to do his job because if he didn't I would die.

After I got out of the Navy I was a policeman in Oakland for two years. One day it dawned on me, I was 28 years old and I had never been a civilian. I was seeing less of my wife as a police officer than I was in the Navy. So I resigned, came back to Sacramento, and went to Sacramento State. I graduated age at 31 with a degree in History and the intention of being a teacher. Unfortunately, I had two kids, a house and a wife, and they were starving. The money simply wasn't there to get my teaching credential. So in 1977 I happened to knock on a door, and I have been an Insurance Adjuster/Investigator ever since.