

Herbert J. Gibson

Born: July 12, 1944
In Lake Forest, IL
Died:

Period of Service: Viet Nam

Sources Monument, B10 F2,
Svc questionnaire, JG, J Gay
interview

Enlisted October 1, 1962 in Coast Guard at Cape May, NJ.

Trained at Cape May and Groton, CT, Flushing, NY in basic electronics. Stationed at Coast Guard base Milwaukee, CG LORSTA NOMAIKE, Calumet Harbor LB Sta, CG Cutter Hamilton Boston, CGC Basswood, Guam. Served in US Trust territory during Viet Nam period for six years.

Medals, Service and Good Conduct. Released March 7, 1969

Joined American Legion Post 402 in 1969. Was Commander of the Post in 1976.

Was mail carrier for many years. Owns Gibson's West Harbor Resort.

His parents were Frank Gibson and Pearl Irene Cornell (m 1/2/1937).

Married Marianne Hansen who had been adopted.

See interview following.



VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Herb Gibson

Conducted by Mr. John Gay

October 12, 2010

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This is John Gay on October 12, 2010 on Washington Island, at my home on Green Bay Road. We're talking to Herb Gibson about his career in the military. So, Herb, I guess we'll start with what you were doing prior to going in, when you went in and where you took your training,

Life Before Entering the Military

Basically, I grew up on the Island, here. I graduated high school and decided it might be a possibility to look at a career in the service. I specifically picked out the Coast Guard because of knowledge of the Coast Guard in the area, and it seemed like a good direction for me to go out of high school.

The Coast Guard is really pretty present on the Island. There are a number of Coast Guard people, and we have a station nearby.

Right. And that was the exposure that we'd seen. We'd also seen the fellows from Kewanee – the fellows who stayed at our resort where I grew up. So that was an influence on my picking the Coast Guard.

And also thinking it might be the opportunity for a career of sorts – or grow into that – when I enlisted in 1962.

Entering the Service; Basic and Advanced Training

So you enlisted down in Kewanee?

It was Sturgeon Bay where I went through the signing-in business. It was October, and the boot camp was lined up for Cape May, New Jersey.

And that took 12 or 13 weeks?

It was 12 weeks, then the graduation week. So it was a 13 week ordeal, and went through the holidays that first year.

What did they specify in boot camp?

As I recall it, it was trying to sort out the enlistees and where they could best use their abilities for the mission of the Coast Guard. Unfortunately, I was directed – with my own doing – into the electronics because of the fast advancement potential.

Did you have to do a lot of swimming?

As far as the boot camp, there was a lot of swimming, a lot of drill with the row boat – rescue at sea type of thing – quite a bit of the knot-tying and seamanship type things that would be applicable shipboard. The book part of it was to sort out your ability

mechanically – engine-wise – or possibly electronics. And that was, by my own choosing, where I went – the Coast Guard school for electronics.

How many people were in your class in boot camp?

It was a barracks, Oscar 50. That was the name of the company and was about 60 men in a bay and there were two bays, so over 100 men in the company. And we went through the 12 weeks and the graduation ceremony at the end in the 13th week. It seemed to me, if I recall, it was over 100 still in the company.

A few washed-out, then.

Yes. And there were some Reserves, but the majority were enlistees who were going through the boot camp.

What were your enlistments? Four years?

Four year enlistments, initially.

And the electronics school – they said you could go to the electronics school?

They said I had enough background from my previous high school training to be eligible to sign up for the Coast Guard 24-week electronics school.

Where was that?

That was in Groton, Connecticut.

That's 24 weeks. You're talking almost into mid-summer when it was finished?

Right. It was August when I graduated from the electronics school.

Did they teach you quite a lot there?

I think it was a lot of schematics and theory – basic electronics is what it was. I had to work hard at it, because as we got through the weeks it got a little tougher for me with the math and whatever. At that point – well, I wasn't going to fail; I determined to get through it, but I certainly wasn't top of the class. But wherever I graduated in the group, I think it ended up to be about 20 of the original class. And they get re-phased – the way they set it up back when – and you had to take a section over to see if you passed it. If you failed you were back in the galley feeding the crewmen. But I wasn't about to let myself fail. I got through it about midway in the class.

After that, depending on your status in the class, you got to pick from what was available for a unit to go to, to work. And there was one billet in the Great Lakes in the Ninth District when it came my turn to pick from for after graduation. So I thought I

might as well go back to the Great Lakes and enjoy Lake Michigan or wherever, so I got the Ninth District.

Duty Assignments

So I checked into Cleveland, and eventually was assigned at Base Milwaukee in the electronics repair shop.

So you took care of LORAN equipment?

Well, in Lake Michigan specifically, out of Milwaukee, we covered all the way up to Marinette, Menomonee; we took in St. Martin's at the time. And all the way around the southern end of Lake Michigan.

There's a LORAN station on St. Martin's? (St Martin's Island is north of Washington Island about ten or twelve miles and about halfway to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. It is deserted now but had inhabitants and a light house years ago. Only a lighthouse now.)

No, it's not LORAN. It's strictly RDF's, beacons, small boat radars; whatever radio communications they were using in the different lifeboat stations. That was the responsibility then of the base in Milwaukee. And we'd be out during the weekdays to the different bases.

And you had to check the equipment?

Right. And then you did your routine preventative maintenance, cleaning and that type of thing – adjusting. We went around different times to adjust the transmission level of the transmitters for the RDF's and things that were in use at the time. Of course, everything is so advanced now that that was pretty primitive. It was probably primitive at that point in the 1960's!

But that was our job, basically, and we'd travel around to the different lifeboat stations.

What is RDF?

Radio direction finders. That's what they used in the Great Lakes, anyway, to find their way into the channels.

So you spent your time doing that from late August ...

Until I got orders in November for LORAN duty in the Far East.

So by fall of 1963 you were sent out to the Far East?

It was the first of January, 1964, when I was on my way to Tokyo.

And you landed there in early 1964 and did the same kind of thing?

Well, that was the office for the Coast Guard, if I remember right – commander for the Far East section: COMFESEC – again, to pick what units needed a technician or whatever and what was available. I chose Nomaike, which is on the southern part of the island of Kyushu.

What they were doing there was maintaining an already antiquated kind of LORAN A system. It was a double-master station. We provided the signal for the LORAN system for two slaves. One slave was in Okinawa and one was in Pusan, Korea. That was the ocean navigational aid the Coast Guard maintained and still maintains around the world, of course.

Al Thiele, I think, probably was over there at that point.

We never met over there. When I first met Allen was here on Plum Island.

He used the term ‘slave’ also. He was on LORAN duty out in the Far East. I guess he had to coordinate how the LORAN system was working and things of that sort. As I take it, there’s a main LORAN, and then there are ones that are slaves that bounce off the signal.

Right. And what you need for navigation in the waterways of the world, you need two lines of positioning. So by one station maintaining two signals on any shipping in that area – the China Sea or wherever around that area – could pick up on either of those.

And they triangulate their position? Is that what it is?

And see, like I was saying, it was kind of antiquated already even then and they were moving up to a more sophisticated LORAN, which was LORAN C, and the Coast Guard was maintaining all of those in the world waterways. And that would have been another schooling I could have gone to at the time if I had wanted to pursue that.

Anyway, I was there for a year at the Nomaike post.

All of 1964, then.

Yes.

And what was life like in Japan?

Well, that was the real experience (both chuckle)!

There were 15 of us on the station and we had Japanese helpers to maintain. It had been a World War II TACAN site after the war, so we were maintaining the TACAN equipment for the Air Force and also then the LORAN A for the Coast Guard. But, the TACAN had also been kind of down-scaled. They had Air Force technicians

come around maybe twice a year. Otherwise we did the maintenance on their equipment, and maintained our LORAN A equipment – kept the pulse on the air.

Where was your base? Was that near one of the major cities?

Well, not really. We were really remote down on one of the little peninsulas in the Kyushu. The biggest town was Kagoshima in Kagoshima Harbor. And that was about a three-hour bus ride from where we were situated.

So you really were out there in the wilderness.

Yes. It was an experience for a nineteen-year-old Wisconsin boy at that point. I was all alone when I checked in at the station. I had to catch a plane in Tokyo down to Fukuoka, and that was a bigger base at the northern end of Kyushu. And then, from Fukuoka I caught the Japanese rail all the way down to Kasada, which was basically the end of the tracks. From there I had to get a Japanese taxi down to my little Coast Guard base. By this time I was thinking: Where am I, really! I've got my English to Japanese instructions, and everybody nodding and very friendly and, 'we know where we're taking you; shouldn't be a problem' (both chuckle).

They were pretty courteous, were they?

Oh, they were. And it was a very positive experience. At that point, which was 1964, apparently any problems with the bomb or whatever was sort of settling out a little bit. Because we were really close to Nagasaki there.

I saw a picture just recently – a current picture of Hiroshima. It looks like Las Vegas. There are huge buildings and neon everywhere. It certainly took over after the bomb.

But as far as the people, they were very congenial and helpful. We had mamasans helping out at the base with the barracks. And it was the abandoned Air Force barracks, so it was more facility or accommodations than 15 to 20 'Coasties' needed. We even had a BX there, and on payday they'd come down and sell stuff out of the ship store and turn our money into yen or whatever was going on.

Were you right on the coast?

Yes, right on the coast.

What was the weather like? Was that the southern end?

Southern end! It was almost sub-tropical. There was never snow or anything in the worst of conditions. We did a lot of snorkeling and diving down in the village, and hiking around. We had a little mountain hike close, so we did a little hiking when we got

a chance. But, of course, the big attraction when we got familiar and comfortable was to catch the bus up to the bigger cities.

Did you learn how to eat sushi?

Yes, all of that. And another little thing we did, we'd leave three guys in charge – standing watch and whatever – and we'd go down into the local village of Nomaike and play softball with them, with the local team.

Had they taken that up, then, pretty much?

Even at that point there were into baseball and ball playing really good. It was just a good social intermix of the area. So that was an experience.

They said, 'don't buy the vegetables downtown; wait until you get your military rations.' But it was kind of tempting when we'd go downtown for whatever and in the local little village with the local vegetables to kind of supplement.

Were there any incidents of anyone getting sick as a result?

Not really – not from the food, ever. We had a Coast Guard cook.

Was he Japanese?

No, he was an enlistee – a career Coast Guard cook. He cooked maybe two days a week and made it as lousy as he possible could. At least it seemed that way. But we had a Japanese cook that was helping him; he did the lion's share of the cooking and it was pretty good.

So the Coastie had a couple of years in and he knew how to play the game.

He had a deal.

So you were there a year. And then what happened: It was the end of 1964 and there was a transfer?

Yes. Then you go through the routine and make your request for which district you want to get transferred back to the States. So I went through that procedure. And I said I had kind of enjoyed it, even though it was short, at Milwaukee, and I'd sure like to get back there doing that type of thing. It was good. So I went through Cleveland and got the ninth district, and fortunately I got base Milwaukee again.

That was the beginning of 1965?

That would have been in early 1965, right.

And what did you do there? The same type of thing?

The same type of thing again: Just maintenance on the electronic equipment. Never any watch standing. At the LORAN station we were actually watching the scopes and things. There were signals and other signals, radio communications and those sorts of things; whatever was necessary for the station, and we kept a log watch.

I understand the whole system of LORAN is outdated. Doesn't GPS take care of everything?

Yes, GPS is the way everything is going. So all of that is obsolete.

Did they just dismantle it?

I'm sure. Within two years of when I had been in Japan they turned it over to the Japanese. Even when I was there, there were some demonstrations – May Day – there were a little bit of issues. And I said, “Where am I, really.” That's when Vietnam was getting hot and stuff like that. So, eventually, they did turn over the property and the station to the Japanese to maintain. I'm sure they upgraded the electronics.

So you spent a year in 1965 at Milwaukee?

I came back to Milwaukee and was at Milwaukee through most of the year. Then, in the fall of 1965, they needed an E5 at Chicago at the Calumet Harbor Coast Guard station because they had a radar and the fellow had been transferred or something. So I was shifted down to Chicago doing the same type of work.

Where was the station in Chicago – on the lakefront?

No. The old one was right by Navy Pier and I'd been to that many times. But the one I went to was where they had a forty-four footer with a radar. That was in Calumet Harbor down close to Indiana.

Then I already knew I had something beyond that cooking, and I was just filling in until they could get another fellow down there. So I started out of Calumet going to some schools for the Coast Guard.

What schools were they?

First of all, I went to an electronic counter-measure equipment school up in Norfolk, to a four-week course. That would have been around Easter time or early summer of 1966.

Then I went to another school for sonar equipment in Flushing, Long Island. That was earmarked for the new Coast Guard cutters that were contracted to be built in Louisiana. Then I was fortunate enough, when I was visiting with the officers who were going to be on the Coast Guard cutter Hamilton in New Orleans when it was going to be completed, when we went to the sonar school some of the officers were taking part in the course as well to be in the ASW operations of the new fleet.

Anyway, I got a set of orders to New Orleans after my schooling. So I was a short-timer in Calumet. I checked in the first of August of 1966 to New Orleans.

You were coming up on the end of your enlistment then.

Pretty close. But I had extended my enlistment, because I thought I was kind of still career minded, and they were offering specialty pay to be in electronics. So I was kind of caught up in that a bit. That was a boost in pay, but then you were committed to an extension on your original commitment.

Was that a four year extension?

No, that was three years.

So you wound up with seven years, then.

Well, there's more to the story (both chuckle).

So, anyway, I checked in with the operation in Louisiana and was assigned to the US Coast Guard cutter, Hamilton, and through the resident inspector's office where it was watching the different tests of the new ship. The Hamilton was the first of the new fleet to be constructed. It had a separate contract. There was a contract for three more high endurance cutters – in the long-term replacing all of the fleet of the Coast Guard for high endurance cutters. They were 378's, to replace all the old white ones of the fleet of the old days – they were all obsolete, of the Second World War vintage.

Anyway, I was associated with that, then, in Louisiana at New Orleans until finally the Coast Guard got tired of all the delays and whatnot. They were going to take her as she was and sail her out. Then I became part of the crew.

It was interesting. When I was in the inspector's office I would go around the yard when they were doing new installations of the equipment – the sonar I had gone to school for – the electronic counter-measures equipment for the cold war; secret watch patrols of the Russian radar and stuff. That's what I'd gone to school in New York for. So all these equipment things, as they were being installed in the ship, that's when I was on deck to inspect and meet with the crew as it was accepted.

So if somebody was doing something wrong ...

I'd be the little spy –working around the shipyard in my hardhat, just watching the local Cajuns doing their thing.

So they had civilian help putting these things on?

Yes. At Avondale Shipyards down in New Orleans.

So eventually they said, okay, they were going to take it as is and the last details we'd do ourselves at the Coast Guard shipyard in Baltimore.

So you went up the east coast then.

Eventually, to be homeported in Boston.

When you went up the East Coast, did you cut through the inland waterway or go all the way around the tip of Florida?

We went around Florida and pulled in to Charleston, South Carolina. They outfitted the torpedos and the ammo dump. That's what Charleston was.

Then we went up around the Cape and went around to show off the Coast Guard's new pride and joy a bit. We pulled into the Potomac and went into the tidal basin, and the senators and people were coming on deck. We had a little helicopter deck, so they were shuttling the dignitaries – the VIP's – on and off. And we took some tours of the capital.

Then we continued on to the homeport – the homecoming for the Coast Guard cutter Hamilton. There was a skeleton crew in Louisiana when it was being built, and the rest of the first crew was kind of in limbo waiting for it to get home.

So as we came in we went past New York, waved at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, and Groton, Connecticut was the Coast Guard school where I had gone to school. Then we went up and through the Cape Cod Canal and pulled into Boston. As we were coming into the Boston Harbor they had the fire boats out there ...

A big reception!

Yes. And: Welcome home, Coast Guard Hamilton and crew; you're finally back where you belong! It was a kind of fun experience again. And the Playboy Club was on the dock. The welcome home was an open-arm thing.

Then we got organized at home, there. Then, what's the first mission? We've got to go show off our ship at the Intrepid and Dame Pattie – the America's Cup Race. So we went off and we were one of the turning points for the race – this is 1967, off Newport, Rhode Island. So we sat off there and were shuttling dignitaries again. We were setting up closed-circuit TV – that's the type of thing I was doing – for the dignitaries to come and watch the Intrepid and Dame Pattie, America's Cup Race. That was fun.

So we got through that, and where's the next place? Expo '67 in Montreal. So we went up through the St. Lawrence Seaway and for all these young guys who weren't good sailors it was pretty rough. I wasn't a great sailor ...

When you first meet the ocean and the river where they come together ...

It can get pretty stirred up there.

Then we came down the St. Lawrence Seaway and anchored off Quebec City. They had some big festival going, and, of course we were on a tight schedule with no liberty. All of us are sitting.

They brought the dignitaries to you – no need to go out and find them.

No. We couldn't do anything but just stay put, because we could only get to Montreal at a certain time. So we had to stall a little bit. That was tough. We wanted to jump ship and have some fun.

How many people were on the Hamilton?

It was a crew of 150.

That's a lot of people! How long was it?

It was a 378-footer.

That was pretty big.

So, in theory it was all modern at the time – it was 1967 when it was commissioned – so it had air conditioned units. The petty officers in their different divisions had two-man bunks, nice size bunks; full-length lockers, their own bathrooms. And the non-rated parts of the division had a berthing bay for about 30-men. It was set up with three areas of 50, basically, like that. 180, I think, was the actual compliment: 150 enlisted and probably 30 to 40 officers.

Were you kept busy all the time while you were on the ship?

You were responsible for your routine with your equipment, and you also stood watch depending on your rate or what you were involved with. It was just a deck watch if you were in port; equipment watches – there was always a watch schedule.

They never let you get lazy, in other words.

Not so much. But it was not that tough. Sometimes if you were short of manpower you might go to a port-and-starboard thing where you're on one shift and off, and back and forth, and you still had to work the regular hours too. There were times it seemed like it was a hardship, as I look at it, compared to what my watch is now (both chuckle)! I don't know that anybody had anything to complain about. I, just being a young man at that point, didn't recognize the obvious benefit of the travel, the experiences I was gaining.

So you were there for the Exposition in 1967.

Yes. We were anchored there and were on display for the public to come and see the Coast Guard's new ship.

So after that ...

Then I went back to Boston. The final chapter would be when we actually went on duty at ocean station – that's what they were designed to do in the north Atlantic:

they'd sit out there for their 30-day watch. We were being an aid to navigation, iceberg patrol, check out all the Russian radars and things, the sonar equipment and see where the subs were. Those were the types of watches I would have been involved with, and maintenance as well, if I had still been on it that long. But I'm already on it for quite a connection.

The next thing we did, after getting back to Boston and situated, we went to Cuba to play games with the Navy at Guantanamo Bay. So we were on a very hectic drill schedule there checking out all our new equipment and getting all that down to a science so we could fight the Russians out in the north Atlantic or wherever we were headed.

Were you in Cuba very long?

It was about a six-week training thing – refueling at sea, gunnery – the gunners mates were having their heyday with their weapons – and the ASW warfare drills and things like that. There were a couple of little liberty sessions, but it was mostly drilling and checking out all the equipment so that it would be ready for service on the mission of the ship.

So by the end of November, early December of that year I had put in for a transfer – and by this time I was already working on a hardship issue with things at home. So my last thing, I got off the ship in Boston in December and headed out to Guam.

So they flew you across the country?

This kind of just fun – you can see how I'm turning into a non-career man and just biding my time now. I drove out to California and they shipped my car out to Guam (both chuckle). Because the little Coast Guard cutter, Basswood, was stationed out at Guam and went all around Micronesia – went to Okinawa, Taiwan, the Philippines, the Carolinas, the Marshalls, the Mariana Islands – that whole area was the responsibility out of Agana, Guam. And that's where the little Coast Guard buoy tender was that I was assigned to during my last stint.

You didn't sail to all those places, did you?

Yes.

That took a long time!

Quite a bit.

You were on the water quite a lot.

Yes. Back in Guam, when I first checked into the ship it was in drydock. But after that I had 14 months of sailing around the Philippines and the little atolls down in the Marianas.

Did you get down to Johnson Island?

No.

And the Marianas are below that. You got down there?

I never got to the equator. We were close one time – I think by 50 miles one time – and we were trying to get the old man to go over the line. But we had great experiences again there. Basically, we ran logistics and harbor maintenance for the buoys and things – that was the main mission. They had just come from the Saigon River patrol before I got on it, so they worked with the Navy in Vietnam. But I was never in the midst of anything close to battle or anything.

You still had plenty of duties to take care of.

To maintain navigational aids and things.

So that was 14 months?

Yes.

Discharge and Return to Civilian Life

So we're into 1968?

Yes. All of 1968 I was basically over there jumping around. Then when I was released, I came back to California to be released in March of 1969.

Did you have your full seven years?

No. They gave me a six-month early release.

Because you were ...

Because of my sister and her health, and my dad's heart, the business – the family needed the lost son. The lost son was being called in.

So you came back to Gibson's Resort?

Yes.

Lasting Impressions

That's great. So you got in six-and-a-half. That's a pretty full enlistment.

Oh, yeah. And certainly I came out with different perspectives on a lot of things about where I was going – or not.

Well, you already had discipline growing up here on the Island. You certainly needed that just to make out. But this reinforced the idea of responsibility?

The fragility of so many things in the world, and you have to tow the mark to get from here to there if you're really serious about it. That's what the Coast Guard did for me. It gave me a little serious side that needed direction. And certainly being here for over 40 years trying to navigate.

You're doing a good job. Gibson's Resort is as popular as it's ever been.

It's a kind of retreat for so many people to kind of reflect: come and regroup and redirect their own lives, wherever they're coming out of. We hear that. We see the entries in the book, and in the conversations we're fortunate to have with so many people.

I'll bet that's neat. And they come from all over the country, don't they?

Yes.

Well, thanks Herb. This really has been very interesting. I'm glad you spent the time with us and I think we learned a lot about the Coast Guard.

Hopefully that's true. The Coast Guard serves a purpose and I think a lot of people don't realize it. The biggest question I get so many times when I talk Coast Guard is, "What's the Coast Guard doing over there – Micronesia, the north Atlantic, Alaska, Aleutian Islands." They used to have a Loran system.

They probably have something to replace it there.

I'm sure. They wouldn't turn some of those key spots over. They do all that with 30,000 to 35,000 manpower total.

It's pretty amazing when you think about it.

If you chop all that up, everybody is kind of overlapping into small duties I think. I think that's maybe what helped me to survive here.

You've got to be very resourceful.

Yes.

Herb, thanks a lot. I really appreciate the time.