

Harry Harrison

Harry Bowman Harrison was born on August 28, 1941 in Long Branch, New Jersey. Born into a military family he was one of seven children. Raised in a dysfunctional household, he decided to enlist in the Navy right after high school in 1959. Harry served in the United States Navy from 1959 to 1962. Three of his brothers and many of his cousins also served in the military as well. He achieved the enlisted rank of E3, a classified Seaman, he was in the Helicopter Squadron number three, also called HS3. Harry Harrison believed that it was his civil duty being a citizen of the United States to serve his country. Carrying on the Harrison family tradition Harry served as a helicopter mechanic and crewman in his years of service. Although he had never been ever deployed to Vietnam, Harry stayed stateside as the war overseas began to progress over the years. He described his years of service, shared many stories about his experiences and his brother's experience in Vietnam, and shared what it was like to be living in the U.S. while having our country fight a war overseas.



Years In The Navy

In July of 1959, at the age of 17 years old, Harry Harrison went to Camp Moffett in Great Lakes, Michigan. He said "that he got lucky" when he was sent to the boot camp in Michigan because at the time the hardest Navy boot camp was in Maryland, called Camp Bainbridge. It closed down the two years before he enlisted. Harry shared that he had an easier experience at boot camp, mostly

academic and educational. Tasks included: shooting, marching, swimming, running, and housekeeping activities, mostly laundry. After boot camp Harry Harrison was sent to Norfolk, Virginia and was stationed on the Valley Forge, CV-45. This was his T.A.D., temporary assigned duty, which was the station he would always come back to after going out to sea or to other duty stations. When stationed on board an aircraft carrier he would travel five-hundred miles out to sea for a period of ninety days, looking for Russian submarines. His job as a helicopter mechanic was to watch the helicopters perform flight tests in various weather conditions at sea. If the helicopter experienced any mechanical difficulties he would diagnose the problem and fix them. His fleet was stationed out of Norfolk, Virginia. In his travels he visited New York, Puerto Rico, and Europe.

1959: Return of the Space Monkeys

“I was lucky I had a lot of good things, especially seeing the astronauts and monkeys and stuff, and the funny thing was, was the ocean was calm on the first monkey and that they could take someone five miles to turn the carrier around it was so big. But anyway, it came up real slow when we had this big crane, a dolly. They call it, picked the capsule out of the water. They put it on the flight deck and they open the door. And out comes the monkey. And there’s about 100 sailors all standing around us. When the monkey walked across the shoulders of all the sailors looking back, as it was pissed off to say, that was a rotten trick you bastards did to send me into space. And the look on his face, too bad I couldn’t get a picture of it. It was funny, but the other one, they just took him out. He was strapped in. That was pretty cool being there.”

Miss
Baker,
Space
Monkey
(1959)

1961: Return of Astronaut Alan Shepard in the Atlantic Ocean

“I was in the helicopter squadron and it was interesting because we did a lot of other things. My helicopter picked up the first astronaut, Mr. Shepard. And that was on the USS Lake Champlain aircraft carrier. But I also picked up the first two monkeys, my squadron, that they fired and shot into space. And if you go to the Kennedy Space Museum down in Florida, you’ll see the capsule that they used.”



Alan Shepard (1961)

1962: Travels From Norfolk, VA to Puerto Rico

“I had some good times they dropped me off in Puerto Rico on January 19th and picked me up on April 10. I never to this day understand why. If you can realize the aircraft carrier, had five destroyers. Warships protect the two submarines. They pulled up off the coast of Puerto Rico and there’s a naval base there, Roosevelt Roads anchored off they lowered the landing barge. They put one person in it. Me. They took me to shore, dumped me off, and they went back and they sailed off. Then they left me there. They came back in April. I don’t know what that was all about to this day. I did nothing but go around the island drinking and eating and having fun. I don’t have a clue why they singled me out, why they did it or what the hell it was all about.”

1962: Joining The Blockade of Ships During Cuban Missile Crisis

“And the biggest thing I’ll ever know every morning on board ship. The captain would say it all hands man your battle stations. So then they gone, gone, gone. And you go through your drills and they would say, he would always say, this is a drill. But then we were in the Caribbean one day and one morning and we hear all hands man your battle stations. This is not a drill. This is not a drill. They turn the ship around and headed to Cuba. In this, we joined the blockade of ships. That was 1962, so the Russians couldn’t put missiles on Cuba.”



Blockade of Cuba (October 1962)

Seaman Harrison's tour of service ended in 1962. With having been released from the Navy, the United States was only in the beginning parts of its involvement in Vietnam. Harry was supposed to extend his length of service, however with the war starting they released him of his duty. Harry Harrison witnessed first-hand close family and friends being sent over to Vietnam during the draft. He also witnessed the state that our country was in at the time through politics and the media.

Why Were We Really In Vietnam?

Harry Harrison shares his thoughts about the politics and media during the Vietnam War:

"Well, the thing of it is ya know. What do you know about the war and its origin? It's just like news when someone reads a newspaper, you assume it's the truth. I think the truth of it is the theme was that we didn't belong there. The reason why the truth of it was we were only there because Johnson wanted us there. He was president in 1965. He took Kennedy's place and he was reelected. He served for a term and a quarter. He finished Kennedy's term and only won one more election. Then when 1968 came by, they hated him. And Richard Nixon got us out of the war. But the thing of it is, as you only know what the papers are going to tell you, and they didn't want the war, but nobody admitted why we were there and we were there because, General McNamara and Johnson wanted us to be there so they could make a lot of money. We didn't belong there. We had no business being there. Look at Vietnam today its one of our best trading partners."

"And an adviser said, Mr. President, we don't belong there. His exact words were. Nobody tells me what to do we're staying. And he sent more troops over to keep the war going."

“I used to watch the obvious stations, ABC, NBC and, you know. And the thing of it is, is at the time I was young, I was naive. And listened and I trusted them. That was something. I trusted them.”

Impacts of the Vietnam War on Harry’s Friends, Family, and Himself

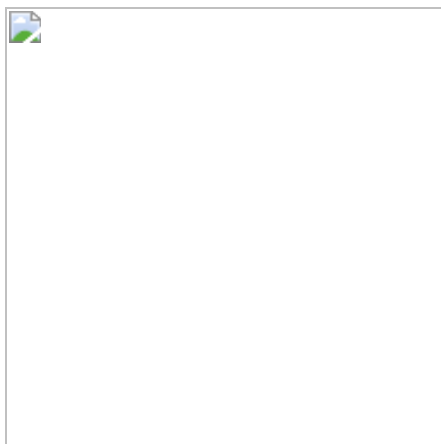
Although not having a personal experience in Vietnam himself, Harry Harrison knew many people fighting in the war. His oldest brother, Richard, stayed in Vietnam longer so their younger brother, Jackie, wouldn’t be sent to Vietnam after being drafted. Harry Harrison shares his own thoughts and stories from his brother and close friend in Vietnam.

“I’m trying to think of who said that famous statement. I regret that I have one life to give my country. If I could go back at my age today, 78, I’d go fight for this country, for you and all. I would do it. I would give my life up.”

“My brother, Richie. He is deceased now he was in Vietnam and he was shot twice. And then they sent him, I don’t know, specifics, but they sent him to Hawaii to recover. And when he recovered, they sent him back. He got shot again. Then they sent him, to Australia to recover. And he didn’t want our brother Jackie to go over there. So he stayed there. But they gave him light duty at the time. And his light duty was to protect an orphanage there when he was at the orphanage. He was telling me and Richie was a really good guy. He won three college scholarships and his sister, Nancy. Can show you his report card. Ninety eight plus across the board. Calculus, trig, Latin biology, chemistry. Now, no stupid subjects. But he when my father was an alcoholic and then never allowed him to go to college he got drafted. But anyway, Richard, the third time in eight days they put him in this orphanage and a Marine turns around, tells him, Hey Richie you want to shoot him or do you want me to? But he says, shoot who. And here is a little 7 year old boy coming up. And what the Vietcong did was put explosives on the kids and put them inside the orphanage to blow him up.” And the Marines used to shoot him. And Richie said, I’ll never shoot a child in my life for no reason. And then he started having a mental breakdown after that. He would not shoot a child period for any reason.”

“I also had a friend, Richard Belicose. We lived in Middletown. But he had a 57 Chevy convertible. I did a lot of work on his engine. He was happy. And then he went off to Vietnam. He joined and went over to Vietnam. He lost both of his legs and they shipped him to Hawaii to recover. And then he died about a year later. Richie Belicose. Nice kid.”

“It was brutal. It was just horrible. And he said, you know, guys would stay awake for days on end. They just feared it.”



Harry's good friend, Sgt. Richard
Belicose

“You lose your friends and your relatives. War is not nice, it’s necessary sometimes, but it is not nice.”

End of the War

After the build up of a 20 year long war, January of 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed ending the direct American involvement in the war. In 1975 Saigon finally fell to the North Communists thus ended the Vietnam War.

“We didn’t lose. The thing of it is as. There was so much animosity about us being there and the people were really speaking up, and so basically what we did was we got out. That’s when they overran Saigon.”

Life After Service and the War

Harry Harrison's term of service ended in 1962. His squadron was going to keep him for longer, but they didn't extend his tour of service due to the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. After receiving an honorable discharge from the Navy, Harry Harrison returned back home to Long Branch, New Jersey. He moved around working many jobs including at Red Bank Radiator and Atlantic Glass, installing glass in houses, windows, windshields, and so forth. All during this time the war was still going on and America's involvement in the War increased each year. Harry started working as a manager at Sears in 1964. On June 10, 1964 he met a woman named, Cassandra Syno, who he would later marry in 1967. In September of 1971 they had a son together named David Reese Harrison. At the time minimum wage was only seventy-five cents an hour, with having to support a family Harry decided to take his mechanical skills elsewhere and start his own business. In 1973, Harry started his own mechanic shop for cars named *Harrison Automotive* in Hazlet, New Jersey. He ran his shop for eleven years until 1984. In 1985, he took a break from being a business owner and was a teacher at Keyport High School, teaching automotive repair. In 1986 desperately wanting to open up another business Harry started another shop named *Poplar Mechanics* in Port Monmouth, New Jersey. He owned and ran the business for eighteen years, until 2004. In 2005, he was officially retired and decided to move to Mays Landing, New Jersey where he currently resides today with his wife. Harry Harrison is now 78 years old and has two sons and four grandchildren.

