

ALABAMA VETERAN TOMMY FANCHER:

“When you tell people you were in the Navy during Vietnam, they naturally picture a big ship out in the ocean somewhere. That really wasn’t the case when I served.” Words from Vietnam veteran Tommy Fancher, born in Fourmile, Alabama, in Shelby County.

Before joining the Navy in 1962, Tommy was pretty much an average Alabama boy who liked to hunt and fish around the Cahaba Heights area where he grew up. After enlisting, he was sent to Vietnam where he joined one of the most dangerous and respected assignments in the war. He became part of the Navy's river patrol division, or, as they called themselves, a river rat. During Vietnam, the river rat's job was to manage river traffic, scout and engage enemy troops on and along the rivers.

"We may have called ourselves 'river rats,' but there were plenty of times when you're out in the middle of a river when 'sitting duck' would've been a more appropriate name," says Tommy.

The river rat's life meant countless excursions into enemy territory, booby traps, leeches, and plenty of firefights along the rivers. Eventually, Tommy earned command of his own boat, a task which, while honorable, was devastating at the same time. The firefights took their toll.

Tommy recalls, "We had some brave men on my boat, I wish they were all here to tell their stories."

After Vietnam, Tommy was bestowed the honor of being appointed Presidential Yacht Captain for presidents Nixon and Ford.